

Life at the Manzanar Camp for Japanese-Americans in WWII

By National Park Service, adapted by Newsela staff on 02.15.17

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TOP: Japanese-Americans were forced to live in barrack homes at internment camps like this one in the United States during World War II. MIDDLE: A typical interior scene in one of the barrack apartments at this center. BOTTOM: Guayule beds in the lath house at the Manzanar Relocation Center. The guayule plant was a natural source of rubber, which was needed for the war effort. Photos by: Dorothea Lange, courtesy of U.S. government.

Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941, led the United States into World War II. It also radically changed the lives of 120,000 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry living in the United States.

The attack intensified racial prejudices and led to fear of being sabotaged and spied on by Japanese Americans among some people in the U.S. government, military, news media and public.

In February 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the secretary of war to establish Military Areas and to remove from those areas anyone who might threaten the war effort. Without due process, meaning fair treatment through the judicial system, the government gave everyone of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast only days to decide what to do with their houses, farms, businesses and other possessions. Most families sold their belongings at a significant loss. Some rented their properties to neighbors. Others left possessions with friends or religious groups. Some abandoned their property.

These Japanese-Americans did not know where they were going or for how long. Each family was assigned an identification number and loaded into cars, buses, trucks and trains, taking only what they could carry. The Japanese-Americans were transported to 17 temporary assembly centers in Washington, Oregon, California and Arizona, and from there were moved to relocation centers. By November 1942, the relocation was complete.

Relocation centers looked like prisons

Ten war relocation centers were built in the remote deserts, plains and swamps of seven states: Arkansas, Arizona, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah and Wyoming. Manzanar, a camp in California, was typical of the camps.

About two-thirds of all Japanese-Americans at Manzanar were American citizens by birth. The remainder were noncitizens, but many had lived in the United States for decades and had been denied citizenship by law.

The first Japanese-Americans to arrive at Manzanar in March 1942 were men and women who volunteered to help build the camp. On June 1, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) took over operation of Manzanar from the U.S. Army.

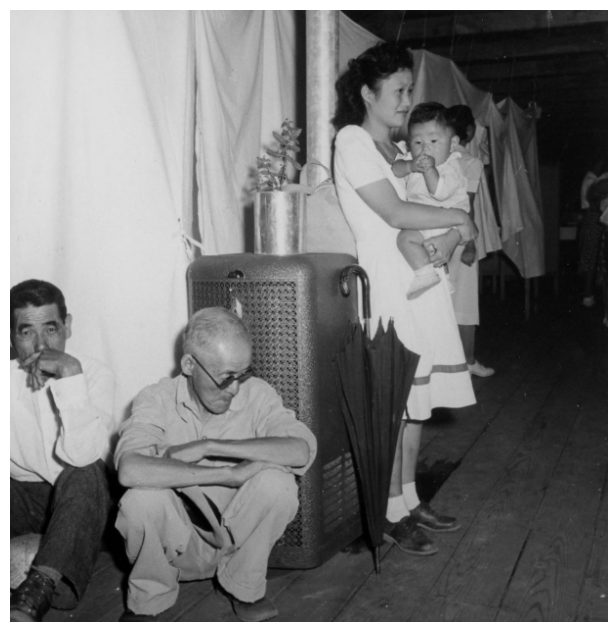
The 500-acre housing section was surrounded by barbed wire and eight guard towers with searchlights. It was patrolled by military police. Outside the fence, military police housing, a reservoir, a sewage treatment plant and agricultural fields occupied the remaining 5,500 acres.

Crowded housing, no privacy

By September 1942, more than 10,000 Japanese-Americans were crowded into the camp. They shared bathrooms, a laundry room and an eating area. A tiny "bedroom" was shared by eight people, and its only furnishings were an oil stove, a single hanging light bulb, cots, blankets and mattresses filled with straw.

"One of the hardest things to endure was the communal latrines, with no partitions; and showers with no stalls," said Rosie Maruki Kakuuchi, who was sent to Manzanar when she was 15 years old.

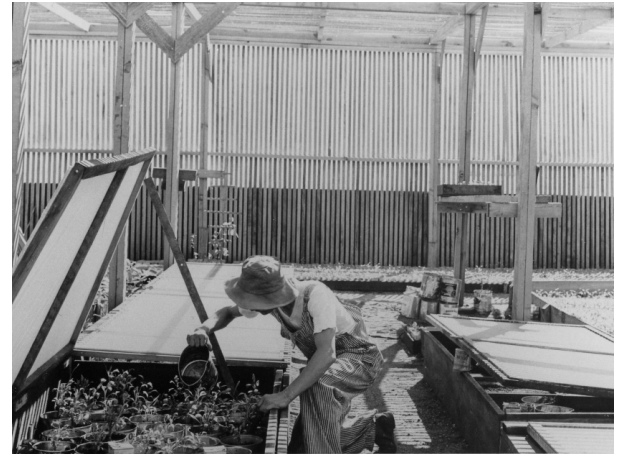
Those imprisoned attempted to make the best of a bad situation. They established churches and clubs, participated in sports, music and dance, and even published their own newspaper, The Manzanar Free Press.



Most prisoners worked in the camp. They dug irrigation canals and ditches, tended acres of fruits and vegetables, and raised chickens, hogs and cattle. They made clothes and furniture for themselves and supplies for the military, and they worked as mess hall workers, doctors, nurses, police officers, firefighters and teachers.

Some restrictions were lifted

As the war turned in America's favor, restrictions were lifted and Japanese-Americans were allowed to leave the camps. Church groups, service organizations and some camp administrators helped find sponsors and jobs in the Midwest and the East. From all 10 camps, 4,300 people received permission to attend college, and about 10,000 were allowed to leave temporarily to harvest sugar beets in Idaho, Montana, Utah and Wyoming.



Some 11,070 Japanese-Americans were processed through Manzanar. The last few hundred prisoners left in November 1945, three months after the war ended. Many of them had spent more than three years at Manzanar.

About 5,000 Japanese-Americans were serving in the U.S. Army when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor in 1941. The U.S. military soon called for another 5,000 volunteers from the mainland and Hawaii. In January 1942, however, Japanese-Americans were classified as "enemy aliens," and were not drafted again until 1944.

Protests and tense times

Emotions were intense during 1942 as the United States entered the war and Japanese-Americans were moved to the relocation centers, and various protests and disturbances occurred at some centers. At Manzanar two people were killed and 10 were wounded by military police during the "Manzanar Riot" in December 1942.

Tensions intensified in 1943 when the government required internees to answer a "loyalty questionnaire." They were asked if they would serve in combat and if they would swear unqualified allegiance to the United States. Some older internees who answered "no" because they were not allowed to become U.S. citizens were sent away to a maximum-security segregation center.

Chronology

1869: First known Japanese immigrants to U.S. settle near Sacramento, California.

1913: Alien Land Law prohibits Japanese non-citizens from owning land in California and imposes a three-year limit on the leasing of land.

1924: Immigration Exclusion Act halts Japanese immigration to U.S.

1941: U.S. enters World War II after the Pearl Harbor attack on December 7.

1942: Executive Order 9066 authorizes relocation and/or internment of anyone who might threaten the U.S. war effort.

1943: U.S. Army forms 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a segregated unit for Japanese-Americans.

1944: Supreme Court upholds constitutionality of evacuation based solely on national ancestry while separately ruling that loyal citizens cannot be held against their will.

1945: World War II ends with Japan's surrender on August 14, and the Manzanar War Relocation Center closes on November 21.

1952: Walter-McCarran Immigration and Naturalization Act allows Japanese to become citizens.

1988: U.S. Civil Liberties Act grants a \$20,000 payment and an apology to 82,000 former prisoners.