

Lessons Learned from the Japanese-American Internment Camps

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120,000 Japanese-Americans were imprisoned because of their racial background. After the attack on Pearl Harbor life for Japanese-Americans took a turn for the worse. Executive Order 9066 took people of Japanese ancestry and put them into internment camps. Conditions in the camps were prison-like. Their livelihoods were swiftly taken away as they lived under harsh conditions, losing their freedom and various traditions.

In February of 1942, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. This stated that there would be an evacuation of all people who were deemed a threat to national security from the West Coast to the relocation centers farther inland. National Security officers saw people with Japanese ancestry as a threat because they feared that the Japanese would be disloyal to the U.S. and help Japan sabotage American property. The Executive Order 9066 led to the internment of most all people of Japanese descent from the West Coast of the United States.

The Japanese-Americans soon began to see evacuation flyers all around their towns. The lucky ones had two weeks to leave their houses and their livelihoods, unlike others who had a mere three days. A total of 120,000 Japanese-Americans were imprisoned and around 8,000 Japanese-Americans moved east to prevent being put into internment camps. Two-thirds of those interns were Nisei (Japanese-Americans born and educated in the US or Canada). Many had to sell their businesses, homes and belongings for less than 25% of their actual worth. One woman

sold her twenty-six room motel for only \$500. People had to say goodbye to their most all of their belongings in a very short amount of time.

Japanese-Americans were taken by buses, cattle trucks, and trains to assembly centers before they were sent out to more permanent camps. The assembly centers were usually built on fairgrounds and horse racing tracks, where families would often stay in dirty horse stables and live under harsh situations. Once the more permanent camps were partially created, the Japanese-Americans were divided and sent out to the different camps. There they would help build the small barracks they had to live in.

The internment camps had around thirty to forty blocks of barracks housing with an average of 18,000 people in each camp. Most barracks were divided into four rooms. Each room had to hold around eight to ten people, and privacy in the barracks did not exist. Many families were housed together, while others had to share with strangers. Barrack living was substandard with steel cots, army blankets, and mattress covers. Rooms were made of pine planking and tar paper, which left open space between the ground and the walls, allowing cold air and rain to easily come into the living areas. The housing was prison-like and inhumane.

In the Japanese-American internment camps, the internees created a community to make their lives a little better through this rough time. The camp administrators constantly promoted Christianity, as Shinto and Buddhism were highly restricted and often prohibited. Children were expected to go to school and get an education. Some camps schools had sports teams that

students could participate in. Adults worked, earning twelve to fifteen dollars a month for about forty-four hours of work each week. The camps were very self-sufficient. Guards watched their moves twenty-four seven and barbed-wire fences surrounded the camps.

In Japan elders were traditionally treated with the utmost of respect. This is not the case in Japanese-American internment camps. American-born Japanese were treated better than the Japanese immigrants because the American-born were more integrated with the hakuji's (white people's) customs. The camps had sharpshooters watching people constantly. This treatment didn't waver throughout the camps' lifetimes.

Life after the Japanese-American internment camps was harsh. Many families had nothing to return to for they had sold or left everything when they entered the camps. Many people were racist and would hang up signs saying that no one wanted "Japs" in the community. After the camps were closed 5,766 Nisei (people of Japanese descent that were born and raised in the U.S. or Canada) gave up their American citizenship. In 1988 the U.S. Congress tried to apologize for interning the Japanese and Japanese-Americans by giving each surviving internee \$20,000 each. The surviving appreciated the gesture but wanted a more sincere apology because \$20,000 didn't make up for their lost livelihood, houses, businesses, and all the other ways the Japanese-American internment camps had ruined their lives.

As a nation, this was a very dark chapter in our history. We did not realize that by taking away the freedom of our own citizens, we were greatly harming our own democracy. We need to

continually remind ourselves of these past mistakes so that we will not repeat them. Freedom is what makes our country great! We often deny these freedoms out of fear and because of racial discrimination. Even today when we are afraid, we are too quick to deprive larger numbers of certain racial groups of their freedoms to "protect" our democracy. The lesson that we have learned, but continually need to relearn, is that we cannot violate people's rights and preserve our democracy.