

Travel and Adventure: An ugly chapter in American history is retold at Manzanar

by Alison DaRosa

INDEPENDENCE, Calif. - It will touch deep into your soul, tangle with your conscience and, most certainly, break your heart.

At least that's what it did to me.

Manzanar National Historic Site - a 1-square-mile plot of desolate, windblown desert on the eastern edge of California's Owens Valley - was established by Congress in 1992 to tell the stories of nearly 120,000 Japanese-Americans forced from their homes during World War II and confined at relocation camps.

Today, Manzanar's Interpretive Center is communicating those stories with haunting, heart-wrenching clarity: "We had about one week to dispose of what we owned, except what we could pack and carry for our departure by bus ... for Manzanar," said William Hohri, a former camp internee.

"It was just like any other community, except we had no freedom and no privacy," Mas Okui, another former internee, remembers.

Rosie Kakuuchi, a shy teenager when she lived at Manzanar, recalls the searing indignity of that lack of privacy: "One of the hardest things to endure was the communal latrines, with no partitions; and showers with no stalls."

HISTORY LESSON

MOVING REMINDER - A stark, white obelisk is the focal point of the cemetery at the former Japanese internment camp at Manzanar, near Owens Valley, Calif. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. TROUBLED TIMES - An image on display at the Interpretive Center at Manzanar shows racial hatred at work during World War II. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. PLEDGING ALLEGIANCE - An image at the Interpretive Center at Manzanar shows Japanese-American children, most of them U.S. citizens, pledging allegiance to the American flag. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. TELLING THE STORY - Visitors walk among exhibits at the Interpretive Center at Manzanar National Historic Site, where they learn the stories of 10,000 Japanese-Americans confined at the internment camp during World War II. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. A FACE IN THE CROWD - Documents from internees are displayed at Manzanar. There is no information on the young man, but Toyo Miyatake, who used the baggage tag, owned a successful photography studio in Los Angeles' Little Tokyo area. CNS Photo by Crissy Pascual. Manzanar was the first of 10 Japanese relocation centers established west of the Mississippi during World War II. It opened in March 1942, a few weeks after President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing relocation and internment of anyone who might be seen as a threat to the U.S. war effort. There were no relocation camps specifically for German-Americans or Italian-Americans. (About 14,000 German and Italian nationals were confined in internment camps during the war. Only a few German-American and Italian-American U.S. citizens were confined; most were the young children of non-citizens living in this country.)

Why were Japanese-Americans treated so differently?

"Historians believe it was racism; Italians and Germans look like most of America," said Manzanar park ranger Richard Potashin. "They'd also been here longer and had political power. How could you intern Joe DiMaggio?"

At its peak, Manzanar had a population of 10,046, most of them American citizens by birth. With nearly 800 buildings, it was, until it closed in November 1945, the largest "city" between Los Angeles and Reno.

All but three of the camp's buildings were sold or destroyed. The largest one that remains - the high school auditorium built by internees in 1944 - has become Manzanar's Interpretive Center.

Pick up a tag when you enter the center - a small baggage tag like the ones tied to internees when they were shipped to Manzanar.

Then take a seat in one of the center's two theaters. A 22-minute video, narrated by former internees, transports visitors into the prison/city where these Americans were once confined.

The center includes a scale model of the camp, built by former internees. There's a replica of a barrack, typically shared by four families. A 17-by-36-foot scrim lists the names of thousands who were interned here. There are dozens of photographic images.

One larger-than-life photo depicts a raven-haired child sitting on the edge of a suitcase, surrounded by mounds of duffel bags. In one hand she carries a partially eaten apple; in the other, she's holding a tiny purse. She's wearing a baggage tag. Photographer Clem Albers captured the far-off look in the youngster's eyes - a look of confusion, uncertainty, yet trust.

That little girl was Yukiko Okinaga. She was 3 years old. She and her mother were following orders to leave their home in the Little Tokyo section of Los Angeles. Yuki, as friends called her, lived at Manzanar until she was 7 years old. Not until leaving did she ride in a car, drink a soda pop or taste her first ice cream cone.

Today Yuki Okinaga Llewellyn is 67, the retired assistant dean of students at the University of Illinois, Champaign-Urbana. Last fall, she returned to Manzanar for the first time since she and her mother left the place in October 1945 with \$25 and a pair of government-issued bus tickets.

"I met people (during the visit) who couldn't believe that our government had done this. They couldn't believe it did this to children," Llewellyn said. "They apologized to me. I was very touched by that."

Llewellyn said she has fuzzy "kid memories" of her time at Manzanar. She remembers the evening she and

other children raided the camp's watermelon patch; she recalls visiting the camp store where her mother worked. She doesn't remember much about the mess hall, "except liquid Jell-O was their treat. I can't eat Jell-O to this day."

A few of her memories aren't fuzzy at all: "Oh yes, I remember the barbed wire. We were warned by our parents never to go near it. We were told the guards had guns - that they would shoot anybody who went through the barbed wire. But who'd want to touch barbed wire anyway?"

Llewellyn acknowledges she was luckier than many children at Manzanar. "They had an orphanage there," she recalled.

There were 101 orphans interned at Manzanar, ranger Potashin confirmed. "They were segregated in their own area - all children of mixed Japanese-American heritage."

The ranger said he has "never seen any sort of rational justification" for moving an orphanage full of children to the relocation camp.

Llewellyn said that Manzanar affected how she lived long after she and her mother left the camp: "My mother did not want me to speak Japanese - especially in public, even though she did not speak English. The whole impetus was assimilate. Be invisible."

WALK THE CAMP

Beyond the Interpretive Center, Manzanar visitors can join ranger-led guided tours of the grounds. There's also a 3.2-mile driving tour. But the best way to experience the camp is on foot.

The flesh of this one-time city has long since rotted away, but its skeletal remains whisper of what was.

Ramble the 500-acre housing area; small wooden signs show the locations of 36 blocks where 10,000 people crowded into 504 barracks. Try to imagine it. Living here. Eight people in each 20-by-25-foot room. Straw-filled mattresses atop narrow metal cots. A single bare, hanging light bulb. Three years of it.

"We were poor before camp, so we were poor in camp," Llewellyn said.

"People who were rich before camp were rich in camp. With their Sears catalogs they got real furniture - not the government-issue cots like we had. Sears did a wonderful business at internment camps; they delivered."

Beyond the barracks: Eight guard towers. Searchlights. Armed military police. Miles of barbed wire.

Climb the remains of stone stairs; amble over what's left of concrete foundations. Walk through dry dead brush that once was the manicured hospital garden; smell the stench of fetid water in what used to be the garden pond. Near the old laundry, watch a lizard scramble over a rusted washtub.

Feel the hard, windblown heat; taste the dust and sand.

Beyond the haunting heartbreak of this place, see the jagged snow-dusted peaks of the Sierra. So much like

the mountains of Japan. So cruelly close.

At the camp cemetery, note sun-bleached origami, bright blue and green in its folds, tied with faded orange yarn to fencing made of old branches. On one post, touch the shriveled remains of what was once a funeral wreath.

Walk among the few headstones and humble burial sites - most marked with nothing more than tumbleweed and sagebrush. At baby Jerry Ogata's grave, find a small toy tractor. At another child's resting place: a tiny toy car and a handful of change - pennies mostly.

A stark white obelisk, the so-called "tower of memory," rises at the center of the cemetery. On ledges around it are more offerings: a pair of chopsticks, a piece of cracked pottery that once held food at this place, a small frayed American flag.

At the foot of the obelisk, a heavy rock covered what looked to be a few faded pages pulled from a book. I moved the rock to get better look. I found a tattered copy of the U.S. Constitution.

NEVER FORGET

The lesson to be learned at Manzanar is inscribed on a brass plaque erected in 1973, a year after California made the area a historic landmark: "May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism and economic exploitation never emerge again."

It took the federal government a little longer: Nearly 40 years after Manzanar closed, the U.S. Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians summed it up as "shameful history caused by racial

prejudice, war hysteria, and failure of political leadership."

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed legislation for a one-time payment of \$20,000 and a letter of apology to the 60,000 survivors among the 120,000 who were relocated.

Said Llewellyn: "I would like people to come here, to see this. People go to Washington, D.C., to see all the places they think make up this country. Manzanar makes up this country too. It's part of our history. ... You don't have to be on any side of the political spectrum to appreciate that this happened on our soil - that most of the people it happened to were American citizens."

IF YOU GO

Manzanar National Historic Site is open daily year-round. The Interpretive Center opens at 9 a.m. It closes at 5:30 p.m. in summer, 4:30 p.m. in winter. Admission is free. Learn more at www.nps.gov/manz or call 760-878-2194.

When you visit Manzanar, be sure to include a stop at the Eastern California Museum in Independence. The museum features an extraordinary permanent exhibit, created by a former internee, featuring documents, photographs and a wide range of other memorabilia from the camp. Admission is free; donations are appreciated. Open Wednesdays through Mondays from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. The museum is at 155 N. Grant St. in Independence. Learn more at www.ecmuseum.inyocounty.us or call 760-878-0364.

On the last Saturday in April, every year since 1969, the nonprofit Manzanar Committee has sponsored a pilgrimage to Manzanar. Learn more about next year's gathering at www.manzanarcommittee.org.

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