

Gaman [Life Interrupted]



Gaman is a richly-layered performance of contemporary dance, art and music filled with challenge and courage, sorrow and joy, confinement and liberation. The exquisite artists of CORE Performance Company, under the Artistic Direction of Sue Schroeder, collaborate with renowned visual artist, composer and writer creating a universal experience from the historical – the World War II Internment Camp experience. Ten camps operated by the War Relocation Authority were in the western United States, including 2 in Arkansas, Rohwer and Jerome, and were the forced home of nearly 120,000 Japanese. Honor the universal found in this history through this tender, uplifting recognition of their experience.

More information about the WWII internment camps:

During World War II, 120,000 Japanese Americans and native-born Japanese were relocated from the West Coast and forced to live in internment camps for the duration of the war. Almost two thirds of these prisoners were American citizens, born and raised in the United States. Half were children.

In the entire history of the internment, no Japanese or Japanese Americans were ever charged, tried or convicted of espionage or aiding the enemy.

So how could this happen? How could *American citizens* be summarily rounded up and imprisoned for several years without trial? And could it happen again?

In our exploration, we found that a mixture of fear, racism, sensationalized media, and pressure from politicians coalesced to allow this great violation of civil rights.

Despite discrimination and setbacks, many Japanese immigrants in the early 20th century had built their own businesses, farms and communities by the start of World War II. The majority of these immigrants and their American-born children identified as Americans.

When Japan launched a surprise attack on Pearl Harbor the morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese communities were stunned, saddened, and anxious about their futures.

They had cause to be. That night and for several weeks after, civic leaders in Japanese communities in Hawaii and on the West Coast were rounded up by the FBI, suspected for positions they held rather than anything they had done.

Many of these men were taken from their families in the dead of night, without explanation, to Department of Justice camps scattered across the country. These were separate from the ten camps in which the rest of the Japanese community would eventually be held, and men imprisoned there did not see their families again for months or even years. Three of the DOJ camps — Crystal City, Seagoville, and Kenedy — were located in Texas. Prisoners included Japanese Americans arrested by the FBI, members of Axis nationalities residing in Latin-American countries, and Axis sailors arrested in American ports after the attack on Pearl Harbor. About 3,000 Japanese, Germans, and Italians from Latin America were deported to the United States, and most of them were placed in the Texas internment camps. Twelve Latin-American countries gave the United States Department of State custody of the Axis nationals. Eighty percent of the prisoners were from Peru, and about 70 percent were Japanese. The official reasons for the deportations were to secure the Western Hemisphere from internal sabotage and to provide bartering pawns for exchange of American citizens captured by Japan. However, the Axis nationals were often deported arbitrarily as a result of racial prejudice and because they provided economic competition for the other Latin Americans, not because they were a security threat. Eventually, very few Japanese ever saw Latin America again, although some Germans and Italians were returned to their Latin American homes. The majority of Texas internment-camp prisoners were Axis nationals from Latin America.

“My dad was taken away by the FBI. And I still remember that night when it happened. And these men, believe me, were like ten feet tall. I could see the fear in my mom’s eyes, and my father. They tore our house upside down, they went through everything. And then they took my dad and they said to him, ‘All you need is a toothbrush and a comb.’ And out the door they went, and we never saw him again after that, for two years.”

- Besse Masuda, interned as a child at Rohwer Relocation Center in Arkansas.

False rumors claiming enemy activity off the coast were published by profit-seeking newspapers. Debate surfaced regarding the cessation of individual rights in the name of national security, something those of us living in a post-9/11 world can appreciate today:

“A great many American citizens, every American citizen in fact, is often called upon to submit to some infringement upon rights... We have to be tough, even if civil rights do take a beating for a time.” – The San Francisco Chronicle, February 21, 1942

Though the Justice Department and Attorney General Francis Biddle opposed mass removal of Japanese citizens and non-citizens, military and West Coast political leaders who advocated for internment won out. President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, authorizing the Secretary of War to prescribe certain areas as military zones from which any or all persons could be excluded without trial or hearing. The order did not specify Japanese Americans, but they were the main group to be imprisoned as a result.

In the following weeks, a series of 108 exclusion orders removed all persons of Japanese ancestry—U.S. citizens and aliens alike—who lived in the western halves of Washington State, California, Oregon, and parts of Arizona.

Families only had a week to **ten days to pack** their belongings, sell their businesses and homes, and get their affairs in order. Though outwardly calm and orderly, anxiety was common, as families did not know where they would be going, how the government would treat them, or how long they would be gone.

Profiteers took advantage of desperate Japanese Americans, offering them pennies on the dollar for the cars, houses, farms and other belongings they had to sell quickly. Families were given tags with ID numbers and were allowed to take only what they could carry, which had to include their own plates and utensils for use in the camps. Many wore multiple layers of clothing so they could “pack” more, including their finest:

“Everybody was dressed in their Sunday best. After all, either you wear your clothes or you throw it away.” – Frank Yamasaki

“Only what we could carry was the rule; so we carried Strength, Dignity, and Soul”.

-Lawson Fusao Inada, interned as a child at Rohwer Relocation Center in Arkansas

Everyone of Japanese ancestry in the exclusion zones had to go, including orphans, patients in hospitals, even children who had been adopted by Caucasian families. On their “Evacuation Day,” they were sent by bus or train, under armed guard, to temporary camps. Due to the haste of the mass removal, these makeshift internment camps were built on fairgrounds and horse racing tracks, with many inmates living in the horse stalls, until permanent camps could be built by the War Relocation Authority (WRA).

In May 1942, inmates began transferring inland via long train rides to camps in California, Colorado, Arizona, Arkansas, Wyoming, and Utah. Trains were alternately too hot or very cold, mostly dark, with window shades pulled so that evacuees could not see where they were going. The ten camps were built in desolate areas far from population centers, including dry lake beds, lava fields, deserts, and swamplands.

Many camps were not yet complete when the first inmates arrived, and thus some inmates were put to work finishing the building of their own confinement sites. Camps were surrounded by barbed wire fences and guard towers. Upon arrival, each internee was issued a cot, mattress, and three blankets. Residential barracks were constructed of cheap lumber and tar paper walls, offering little protection from extreme climates. Barrack rooms were illuminated by a single light bulb and heated with a potbellied stove. Eight person families were placed in 20'x20' rooms, with even less square footage for smaller families.

Privacy was at a minimum — barracks had plywood partitions that did not extend to the ceiling, leaving an open space between each family's room, and communal toilets and showers initially lacked partitions and doors. Traditional family life began to break down.

“Of course, when we entered the gate we knew it was pretty vile, I could say. When you entered the gates, and the soldier, armed soldiers standing guard and there's barbed wire fences all around, we thought, “Well, this is it.” And again, I felt sorry for my mother and father...” Tamiko Honda, interned at Topaz War Relocation Center

In spite of the hardship of the mass removal, Japanese and Japanese Americans in the camps built a rich community life. They established grade schools, co-ops, churches, community councils, Boy Scout troops, sports teams, and their own newspapers run by internees.

Though Japanese Americans faced their forced removal with attitudes of “Gaman” (dignity during suffering) and “Shikata ga nai” (It can't be helped), some challenged the exclusion, with three challengers — Gordon Hirabayashi, Fred Korematsu, and Minoru Yasui — taking their cases all the way to the Supreme Court. When the draft was reinstated for Japanese Americans in 1943, some refused military service while their families remained behind barbed wire, while others joined the 442nd Regimental Combat Unit. This all-Japanese American unit became the most decorated unit for its size and length of service during the war.

During and after the internment, many suffered silently with a loss of identity and deep sense of shame. For many, their feelings of fear and helplessness turned inward. Even though they had done nothing to warrant incarceration, they felt that somehow they, or Japanese Americans as a whole, were responsible for being incarcerated.

“I used to feel so ashamed of being Japanese. I envisioned as a child that I was somehow responsible for World War II. I can remember looking in the mirror in the morning thinking, ‘If I could only change these lips or eyes, so that I could fit in. How could I mutilate myself to

look more like everyone else?’ So I had to abandon myself in order to do this, and find ways to make my family wrong or people who look like me wrong, because I felt wrong.”

- ***Richard Tatsuo Nagaoka, interned at Rohwer as a child***

After the last camp closed in 1946, many Japanese and Japanese Americans did not speak of their camp experience with each other or subsequent generations. Over the past several decades, this has changed as former internees and their relatives share their stories with documentarians, archivists, and civil liberties groups.

In considering this historic event from a contemporary point of view, we are struck by the similar emotional and psychological experiences of those formerly interned and minorities in America today. Perhaps this is why Japanese Americans have become some of our nation’s most dedicated advocates and protectors of civil liberties. Organizations such as the Japanese American Citizens League, Densho, the Japanese American National Museum, and countless others, speak out and act when other groups are targeted because of their race, religion, gender, sexuality, or identity. As we confront issues of racial profiling, immigration, and global terrorism, they challenge us to respond with reason, integrity, and compassion instead of fear. They ask us to be vigilant in making good decisions for our democracy during times of extreme duress. And they remind us that our civil liberties are guaranteed only to the extent that we are willing to fight for them, both for ourselves and for others.

For additional information on the incarceration and its relevance today, visit:

Densho: www.densho.org

Japanese American National Museum: www.janm.org

Japanese American Citizens League: <https://jacl.org/social-justice/>

PBS: <http://www.pbs.org/childofcamp/project/remarks.html>

New York Times: www.nytimes.com/2007/04/03/nyregion/03detain.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&

ACLU: www.aclu.org/blog/speak-freely/i-know-american-internment-camp-when-i-see-one For more in-depth information:

For more on the Department of Justice Camps in Texas: www.tshaonline.org/handbook/online/articles/quwby