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UNTOLD STORIES DISCUSSION GUIDE

**SUE KUNITOMI EMBREY AND  
MANZANAR NATIONAL HISTORIC  
SITE**

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## Sue Kunitomi Embrey and Manzanar National Historic Site

On December 7, 1941, the Japanese Air Force attacked the American Naval base in Pearl Harbor. Sue Kunitomi, a Japanese American teenager living in Los Angeles, heard the news on the radio.

It was around lunchtime when the radio announced the bombing of Pearl Harbor. My mother was making lunch next door and // she said, "That's not true. They can't do that." She was very, very upset. And she said, "What's gonna happen to us? They're gonna take us all away." She felt that right away, because she was not a citizen.

Then she said, "They'll take ALL of us away." And my brother said, "No, WE'RE American citizens. They won't take US." And she said, "You don't know that." —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

Mrs. Kunitomi's worst fears were soon realized. By nightfall, 2,192 Japanese had been arrested. A series of proclamations issued later in December 1941 declared non-citizen Japanese, Germans, and Italians "alien enemies" and laid down regulations governing their behavior (Tours 2; Daniels 87; Burton 29–30).

Anti-Japanese sentiment grew rapidly, typified by an editorial in the *Los Angeles Times*: "A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the eggs are hatched — so a Japanese American, born of Japanese parents — grows up to be a Japanese, not an American." On January 2, 1942, Henry McLemore, a Hearst syndicated columnist, wrote:

I'm for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior . . . let 'em be pinched, hurt, hungry . . . let us have no more patience with the enemy or with anyone who carry his blood. Personally, I hate the Japanese. — Henry McLemore (Tours 3)

### **Executive Order 9066**

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War to "prescribe military areas . . . from which any or all persons may be excluded" and to "provide for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary . . ." On March 2, Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona were divided into two such military areas. Within a few months, Japanese American immigrants living on the west coast and their American-born children — citizens of the United States — had been removed from their homes and relocated to internment centers, known informally as "camps." They lost their homes, their businesses, their pets, their friends, and most of their belongings. (Burton 30–33; Shumaker).

In April we were told to start packing; that we had to be evacuated. And I thought, "Oh, my gosh, we have this grocery store, and we have our house with all our furniture, and we have our cars." We just left everything behind. . . . Overnight we were completely impoverished, not just in terms of money, but in our whole life. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker; Levine 23)

In all, more than 120,000 Japanese Americans, over two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were incarcerated in ten camps, located throughout the western United States. The only cabinet-level officials in the Roosevelt administration to oppose the camps were Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, who sought to end them as soon as possible, and Attorney General Francis Biddle (Daniels 88; Armor xviii).

### **Manzanar**

The camp to which Sue's family had been assigned was Manzanar, located 212 miles northeast of Los Angeles on the site of a former Spanish settlement in Inyo County. At its peak, Manzanar housed a population of over 10,000 evacuees, held within a one-mile-square enclosure. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire fencing and overlooked by eight guard towers. Its layout was based on a modified military "theater of operations" plan, with families housed in 36 blocks of 20' X 100' barracks, separated into four to six units, depending upon family size. Construction was minimal, designed to meet the requirements of low cost and rapid fabrication, and conditions were harsh. Even in late spring, the nighttime temperatures routinely dropped below freezing. In the summer, temperatures rose above 110 degrees. And, as one internee described it, "The main thing you remembered was the dust, always the dust," created by a land that was artificially made barren (Tours 6, 15-16; Armor xi, xiii).

Eventually, the people of Manzanar made the camp into a home – gardening, organizing dances, and going to school. They held citizenship ceremonies, never forsaking their new country, despite feeling forsaken themselves. Their young men enlisted in the army, joining an all-Japanese regiment, the 242<sup>nd</sup>, which would become the most highly decorated unit in the history of our nation. And, late at night, a few of them crawled under the fence to fish the trout streams of the High Sierra.

We never had permission to go, we just snuck out of camp by ourselves (and tried) to avoid the guard towers. It was pretty exciting to get out of the camp. To be sneaky to get out of the camp was one challenge, and then to go fishing was another challenge! –Sets Tomita, Former Internee<sup>†</sup>

### **Leaving Camp**

Following a Supreme Court decision in December of 1944, detained Japanese Americans were free to return to their West Coast homes. Internees had to leave on their own and those with assets of less than \$600 were given one-way train or bus fare, associated meals, and \$25.00 for expenses. Many evacuees found their boarded up homes vandalized and their goods stolen. When the Kunitomi family returned to Los Angeles, they found their home and grocery store demolished (Last Witnesses 175).

For years, Sue didn't spend much time thinking about camp. She worked as a political activist, married, had two children, and went back to school for bachelor's and master's degrees in education. Then, in late 1969, a student driving Sue home from class at UCLA's Asian American Studies Center invited her to join a group on a pilgrimage to Manzanar, nearly 27 years after she'd left. The invitation came in the midst of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and the Free Speech movement, and Sue – although she was an activist on campus – had never confronted her memories and experience in the camp. She accepted. Thus in December 1969 – on the coldest day of the year in Inyo county – Sue began what would become a lifelong journey to

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<sup>†</sup> Unless otherwise noted, all interviews conducted by Roger Sherman, 26 Apr 2008.

understand what happened at Manzanar and to bring public attention and recognition to the site.

After the pilgrimage, Sue and a group of others established the Manzanar Committee. The committee began in 1971 as a small ad hoc group under the auspices of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and was formed with a two-fold purpose: to raise public awareness regarding the significance of the Manzanar site and to establish Manzanar as a state historic landmark. Pilgrimages to the site became an annual event, sponsored by the committee, and since 1973 have been held on the last Saturday of each April (Levine 190; Unrau 821).

Sue very rapidly became the powerhouse behind the Manzanar Committee and its activities. Her home was the committee's official address and her telephone the official committee number.

Sue Kunitomi Embrey was really the driving force behind the creation of Manzanar Historic Site. She was very patriotic – not someone whose patriotism was mindless nationalism, but making your country stand for what its constitution says it stands for.  
– Alisa Lynch, Manzanar Chief of Interpretation

### **National Recognition for Manzanar and a National Campaign for Redress**

Throughout the ensuing decades, Sue Embrey, attorney Rose Ochi, and many others fought to have the Manzanar site recognized – first by the state of California and then by the United States as a whole – as a place that should never be forgotten, and a violation of citizens' rights that should never be repeated.

On February 19, 1992, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066, the bill was brought forward in the House and got a roll-call vote of 400 to 13 – a resoundingly supportive endorsement and, for us, the maraschino cherry to top the whipped cream. All that we had struggled for since the 1970s had been won – an impossible dream. – Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 183)

President George H. W. Bush signed the bill into law on March 3, 1992. The 23<sup>rd</sup> annual pilgrimage, held on April 25<sup>th</sup>, brought more than 2,200 participants to celebrate the designation (Tours 36).

At the same time, the community began to discuss more actively how to deal with the violation of their rights as citizens and legal residents. The National Coalition for Redress/Reparations began campaigning for Congressional legislation that would mandate an apology from the U.S. government and monetary compensation. The lengthy and arduous campaign for redress was eventually successful, resulting in 1988 legislation that required a \$20,000 tax-free payment and a formal governmental apology to each of the 80,000 surviving victims (Tours 12; Daniels 161).

### **Manzanar National Historic Site**

The inclusion of Manzanar in the National Park Service system was, in the beginning, somewhat controversial, both locally and nationally. Shortly after the designation of Manzanar, Yale historian Robin Winks weighed in on the debate.

With the recent addition of Manzanar National Historic Site to the National Park System, the public has been introduced more dramatically than ever before to a fundamental debate. Should the national parks commemorate and protect only places and events in which we take pride, or should the parks strive to mark events and places that many agree represent shameful episodes in our national experience? . . . The question is, should we commemorate or should we strive to forget, indeed should we bury from the national consciousness, these fearful times in our history?

. . . Education is best done with examples. These examples must include that which we regret, that which is to be avoided, as well as that for which we strive. No effective system of education can be based on unqualified praise, for all education instructs people of the difference between moral and wanton acts and how to distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable. If this premise is correct, we cannot omit the negative lessons of history. —Robin Winks (22)

In order to bring the lessons of Manzanar into sharp relief for a younger generation, the Manzanar Committee launched a new program, Manzanar at Dusk (MAD), begun in 1997 and now held directly following the pilgrimage program each year. MAD was the brainchild of Jenni Kuida, a young, politically active student who'd been inspired by a similar program at Tule Lake interment camp and by Sue.

Sue was a big role model for me. She was passionate about Manzanar. She was supportive of young people getting the story and, from her early years, she was involved in progressive politics. There's a lot of talk about Nissei who were silent. The word they used is *gaman*, which means, "We are resilient; we can withstand anything—and remain silent about it." Sue was the opposite of *gaman*! She said, "I don't care about what you think. This needs to be remembered!" She was a leader. —Jenni Kuida (Shumaker)

As part of the MAD program, participants break up into small groups, each including a former internee. During the discussions that ensue, Japanese American youth hear first hand—and often for the first time—about the injustices suffered by their grandparents' generation. Americans from other minority groups also participate, sharing their own experiences of being marginalized and stereotyped. Former Superintendent Tom Leatherman encouraged such exchanges. "How the Government treats its citizens—that's our story," he says. "So if we don't have that conversation, we're not doing what we should be doing here at Manzanar."

Alisa Lynch concurs.

A lot of people think of the national parks as the great natural areas and the great recreational areas and we all love the National Parks for those reasons. But I think one of the really neat things about the National Park System is that we also preserve our history and not just the glowing parts of our history, but in some of the newer parks like Manzanar, like some of the civil rights sites, we are actually talking about some of the not so wonderful parts of our history. —Alisa Lynch

For the Manzanar Committee and all who worked to create the site, it has always been about protecting our citizens' rights, especially in times of national crisis.

I wanted people fifty years from now to remember what was there. Although it was a negative place, we wanted to turn it around to be positive, so that people will always remember that America is a democracy. We want to shout to the world that we are a great nation, willing to say that we're sorry about what we did; that we are willing to make the change.

And not only that we are a democracy but that we *work* at it. We work very hard at being a democracy – for all of us, for everybody who lives here. The working at it is the important part. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

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