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### Overcoming Internment

The aftermath of World War Two was difficult for many Americans, however there was one group in particular that had a much more challenging set of circumstances to overcome. Japanese-Americans that lived in the west-coast states prior to World War Two had been in internment camps during the war and ended up losing everything. While they had lost everything during the war they were able to overcome these circumstances and become a part of the post war boom that the United States experienced. Even though the Japanese-American community had so many factors against them there were three factors that played to their favor; the Issei generation had overcome similar hardships before and doing it again was less challenging, the Nisei and Issei generations that fought in World War Two had an easier time overcoming racism and finding employment, and the internment camps offered the college age Nisei a way to advance themselves by giving them the opportunity to leave the camps and go to college which gave them a hand up on the after war situation. The history of the Japanese-American community is one that highlights their path to success at the end of the war and shows how these people managed to keep moving forward despite unfortunate circumstances.

The Japanese-American history is one that shows a group of people willing to overcome adversity to leave their mark on the communities that they immigrated to. The first Japanese immigrants came to the United States in the 1880's to better their lives when the situation in

Japan was much less than favorable. Many of those who came to the United States were farmers in Japan who could not afford to feed themselves or their families with the heavy taxes being placed on them in Japan. These people are considered Issei, or first-generation immigrants, they came over to work on the railroads and fill in the labor shortage that was created by the United States laws that prohibited more Chinese immigrants from coming to work. They faced many issues because of their ethnicity and the common belief was that they could not ever assimilate to common American culture and that they were a threat to the white Americans ability to get a job. Despite the hatred they faced daily they quickly rose through the ranks and continued to find work in occupations outside of the initial railroad work they came over to do. Many Issei found jobs in farm work and brought with them knowledge they had acquired in Japan on the farms that many of them had grown up on. They used this knowledge along with dedicated hard work to eventually have their own farms and compete with the farmers they had worked for. Getting these farms was a struggle of fighting laws that prohibited them from owning land because they were “alien” and they found ways to make money selling their product despite many white Americans not wanting to buy from them. Some used this money that they made owning a farm or helping run a farm to open their own grocery stores and set up small towns within the areas that they lived to help support other Japanese-American’s businesses. After they had established themselves in the United States and continued to fight the racism they continued to face daily, Pearl Harbor was bombed on December 7<sup>th</sup>, 1941. The bombing of Pearl Harbor increased Anti-Japanese sentiment in the United States and eventually leading to the signing of Executive Order 9066. The executive order required all people of Japanese ancestry who lived in the states near the west coast to move into internment camps away from the pacific coast where many Japanese-Americans had settled with their businesses. This order was given on February 19<sup>th</sup>, 1942 and by

March many Japanese-Americans had moved to the temporary housing facilities set up by the military. Since there was such a short time from the initial warning and having to move many Japanese-Americans could not get the money they deserved for the parts of their lives that they left behind. Crops and new farm tools that could not be sold were left behind or given away, houses were left empty or rented out for painfully cheap, for those who owned businesses their products were left in their stores to rot or were given away and the buildings themselves often sat empty and ended up vandalized. The loss of all of this income and the loss of their possessions were a hard hit to a group of people that had worked hard for many years to get what they now had to throw away. The executive order was ended in 1944 and it took until 1946 for all of the camps to be closed and for the Japanese-Americans to leave the camps. As the order ended many Japanese-Americans as they left the internment camps had to start over like they had when they first arrived at the United States.

The first generation of Japanese immigrants or Issei had come to the United States with very little if any money and had built themselves a life here through hard work and in the aftermath of internment they went back to doing what they had done in the beginning. Many of the Issei and older Nisei went back to work as farm laborers and in other physical labor jobs like maids, dishwashers, and servants to the richer white Americans. This group had done this work before and had learned from the first time around how to save the money they earned and how to move through the ranks much faster. They were resilient to the Anti-Japanese sentiment that still existed in the United States and for those who chose not to move back to the west coast they faced less extreme forms of racism. Those who moved back to the cities they had lived in on the west coast had to not only overcome the racism but also the laws that were still in place that worked against them regaining the financial stability that they had found prior to the internment.

There were those who were able to overcome the hardships of internment very quickly though. In Seattle, Washington in March of 1950 a newspaper article mentions two Japanese-Americans, “Shibayama and Seko had previously purchased the Bush Hotel from an American by paying several thousand dollars in November, 1926. While they have managed the building many years ago, it is a very rare and great pride for the local Japanese persons to manage such a splendid hotel.” (North American Post). The Japanese-Americans in this article had previously owned the hotel until they had to sell it before entering internment. They were able to buy it back after internment in 1950, they had worked exceptionally hard to get the money to afford this hotel again after losing it along with everything else. This situation exemplifies how determined the Japanese-American community was after internment to get what they had had prior to internment back. They were able to work in jobs that they had previously had and save the money from these jobs. This also shows that many of the Japanese-Americans who decided to move back to the cities that they had previously lived in were able to overcome the racism and hatred they faced after internment. The Issei and Nisei who had already been working in the higher up positions of the fields that they were forced back into were able to do their jobs exceptionally well and regain the ground that had been lost because of internment. They also had fought racism prior to internment and were able to become financially secure despite the boundaries that other people tried to force on them and after internment they were just as able to fight those who tried to make their lives difficult. The Japanese-American community were able to use the history of hard work and determination that needed when the first arrived in the United States to push themselves back to the top after internment.

The Japanese-Americans who were interned during World War Two were given an opportunity to prove their loyalty and to get out of the camps. The Nisei and Issei men who were

of military enlistment age were able to volunteer or were drafted into the military. The Japanese-Americans who were interned were given a questionnaire that asked about their loyalty to the United States and their willingness to join the United States military. Those who answered that they would serve in the military and that they were loyal to the United States were put into the Army and sent mainly to the European Theater. The Army divisions that the Japanese-Americans were allowed to enlist in were segregated units. The two units that the Japanese-Americans were apart of were the 442<sup>nd</sup> infantry regiment and the 100<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion. The 442<sup>nd</sup> is the most decorated unit in the history of the United States military. The 100<sup>th</sup> infantry battalion was a Hawaiian based Army Reserves unit that later combined with the 442<sup>nd</sup> and fought with high honors. These Japanese-American units were used throughout the war and were a strong and well-respected force among the other Army units. The other Army units had been saved by the 442<sup>nd</sup>, most notably the Texas unit. They were able to also make gains in areas that other units in the Army could barely even hold the line in. These units returned to the United States with high levels of respect and many different decorations. Joining the Army may have been dangerous and though many felt that they faced a racist community despite serving the country it seems that those who were veterans fared better than some others.

The Japanese-American veterans did not return to a country that completely accept them. Racism was still a concern for many veterans and many faced a hostile environment despite their military service. Although there was racism the United States does have a history of honoring veterans, especially in certain groups of American citizens. The environment for those who had fought during World War Two would allow them to succeed in areas of the workforce that would take their none veteran counterparts much longer. In the book *After Camp* the author discusses this advantage, “Unlike the prewar era, though, numerous Nisei, notably veterans, ultimately

managed to secure jobs outside the community as teachers, cooperative employees, and civil servants. By 1960, the median income of Japanese Americans exceeded the national average.” (Robinson, 46). The history of United States citizens honoring veterans is a long one, especially after World War Two when nationalism was at one of its highest points. The community of white veterans also played a role in helping the Japanese-American veterans become accepted more by the rest of the United States at large. They were able to retell the stories of the 442<sup>nd</sup> Central Postal Directory and how the 442<sup>nd</sup> Central Postal Directory also played a large role in the quick success of the Allies in the European Theater. It also came out at a later point that the Japanese-American veterans also helped decipher information coming from the Pacific Theater and helped the United States in other ways against the Japanese forces. The Japanese-American veterans, especially since a vast majority were younger Nisei, were able to take advantage of the nationalism in the United States to take jobs that would pay well. Since so many of these veterans were young they would have had ample time to rise through the ranks of these jobs and take other opportunities that would give them more options than the older generations that had to start over. The Issei and Nisei that fought during World War Two were given the ability to overcome the racism that other Japanese-Americans after internment had to face more so by using the nationalism in the United States to receive jobs that allowed for them to prosper.

The camps also gave the adult aged Nisei another way to better prosper after the war and that was through the college program. The college program was for recent high school graduates and those who had graduated high school just prior to entering the internment camps. The program was not necessarily initiated by the government though it was obviously backed by the government after educators pushed for the change. As mentioned by an article on college life during internment, “In support of the student relocation from camp to college, educators argued

that it was essential to avoid the waste of human resources brought about by the evacuation.” (James, 158). The college educators in the country started arguing towards the change from camps to college for the Nisei because they not only believed that they deserved to have an education but also because they knew that an educated workforce would be a necessity after the war. These college educators pushed the United States government to plan for the after-war labor necessity and it was quickly picked up by the government as a program that would change the future of the United States. However, it was not just the government and educators that allowed for the success of the program. Ultimately it is the drive of the Nisei to overcome the internment and better their lives that allowed for the program to flourish. Many surveys were conducted during the internment and one such survey that was done right before the end of the internment at the Poston internment camp touches on this drive. The survey shows that, “57% boys and 71% girls said that they had more ambition towards finding a worthwhile vocation after internment and 64% boys and 83% girls said that they were determined to make their way in the world.” (Derrick, 360). The Nisei used the anger that they felt because of internment and focused it towards ensuring that they would come out of the internment stronger and very prepared for the world. They had a strong drive and because of not only being driven but also being given the opportunity to get out of the camps was a pivotal point in ensuring the success of the Nisei.

The college program was an important aspect of the Nisei’s success in the United States after the war not only because they were able to get higher paying jobs but also because they set an example for the younger Nisei. The Nisei who were closer to college age during internment were able to get out by going to college but they also allowed the Nisei who were not quite at that age to see college in a light that was very different from what they would have seen it as prior to the internment. One such younger Nisei is Jim Hirabayashi. He finished high school at

the very end of internment and did not qualify for the college program, his older brother did though. Hirabayashi looked up to his older brother's ability to change his life by going to college and decided that he too would go to college after internment as well. Hirabayashi says in an interview, "So that I guess maybe I was following in my older brother's footsteps, to go to school, to find some profession and to make my way in life. There didn't seem to be any hesitation in my mind about going to college." (Densho). Hirabayashi was one of the few Japanese-American professors at San Francisco State and later became the only Japanese-American to work in administration at the college. If it had not been for his brother going to college he may have not seen it as such an important path to take. The older Nisei carved a path for the younger Nisei to also go to college and better their lives after internment. The college program did not just help the Nisei who directly took advantage of it but it also left an impression on the younger Nisei that the only way out of the struggles of internment was to go to college. The college program created an atmosphere that allowed for the Nisei generation to rise up after internment and overcome losing everything.

World War Two created a complex and extremely challenging time for those who were Japanese-American. They had to overcome racism in their own country and a complete loss of all of the financial security that they had built for themselves. They had a lot of hardships during this time but they had a few advantages in their favor. The Issei and Nisei that were older had already worked in hard labor most of their life and had built their financial security from nothing before and were able to use those past experiences to propel themselves forward much faster the second time around. The Issei and Nisei who were of enlistment age during World War Two were able to fight exceptionally well for their country and use the increased nationalism in the country after the war to their favor and overcome the racism that the rest of their counter parts



still had to fight. The Nisei that were of college age were able to take advantage of a college program that allowed them to get out of the internment camps and better their life's after the war by taking jobs that required a college level degree, this also inspired the younger Nisei to also go to college after internment creating a generation of well-educated Japanese-Americans. The Japanese-American community had many factors working against them, they had a history of hard work and determination playing to their favor though. The Japanese-American community is a stronghold and does not back down or run away from a challenge and this determination allowed them to overcome the adverse conditions that World War Two and internment created for them.

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