CHAPTER 2

BACKGROUND TO JAPANESE AMERICAN RELOCATION

Japanese Americans Prior to World War II

The background to Japanese American relocation extends to the mid-19th century when individuals of Chinese descent first arrived in the Western U.S. to work as mine and railroad laborers (Appendix B). Discrimination against the Chinese arose soon after because of economic (i.e., unfair labor competition) and racial (i.e., claims of racial impurity and injury to western civilization) concerns. Because a significant portion of California’s population was Chinese (i.e., approximately 10% in 1870), California played a key role in this discrimination. In 1882, U.S. President Arthur signed into law the Chinese Exclusion Act that effectively ended Chinese immigration to the U.S. until 1943 when the U.S. was allied with China in World War II (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997).

Individuals of Japanese descent began to emigrate in significant numbers to North America’s West Coast in the late 19th century (Appendix B). They came primarily because of the “push” of harsh economic conditions in Japan and the “pull” of employment opportunities in the U.S., partially created by the loss of the Chinese labor force (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997). Most of these first generation Japanese or Issei settled in California, Oregon, and Washington where they worked in the agriculture, timber, and fishing industries. In California alone, the number of Japanese immigrants increased from 1,147 in 1890 to 10,151 in 1900 (U.S. Census Office, 1895; 1901). The total Japanese American population in the U.S. increased dramatically from 2,039 in 1890 to 111,010 in 1920 (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943) (Figure 2.1).

Many of the Issei progressed over time from being railroad, mine, and logging labor to farming leased or owned land. As Japanese American populations grew and as they controlled more agricultural land, their successes re-kindled anti-Asian sentiment that had existed since the influx of Chinese laborers in the mid-19th century. For economic, racial, and cultural (e.g., dual citizenship desires of some Japanese Americans, Japanese language schools, foreign religion, and ethnic organizations) reasons, the first prominent anti-Japanese activity began in 1900 with a labor-organized, anti-Japanese protest in San Francisco (Appendix B). Anti-Japanese articles in the San Francisco Chronicle, the formation of the Japanese Exclusion League, and segregation of Asian schoolchildren in San Francisco further sparked anti-Japanese sentiment. News of anti-Japanese sentiment and school segregation in California reached the Japanese Government thus straining relations with the U.S. President Roosevelt, in an attempt to smooth relations, proposed that San Francisco School segregation would end and California would refrain from passing more anti-Japanese legislation if the U.S. could restrict Japanese immigration. The resulting 1907 “Gentleman’s Agreement” between the U.S. and Japan limited male immigrants to the continental U.S. but permitted wives, children, and parents of Japanese already in America to
Figure 2.1. Persons of Japanese descent in contiguous United States, 1900-1940. Data from U.S. Army–Western Defense Command (1943, p. 400).
enter the country from Japan (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997). In addition to creating an impression that Japan had deceived the U.S., this agreement resulted in the formation of Japanese American families. A key outcome of these families were second generation Nisei who were U.S. born, hence U.S. citizens. By 1940, of the 112,985 Japanese Americans living in Arizona, California, Oregon, and Washington, nearly 64% were born in the U.S. (i.e., Nisei) and were less than 30 years old (Figures 2.2 & 2.3). Conversely, the majority of those more than 30 years old were born in Japan (i.e., Issei). Thus, the most common demographic patterns among the Japanese Americans were Japanese-born parents and American-born children (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943).

Figure 2.2. Japanese American population in United States prior to World War II. Data from U.S. Army–Western Defense Command (1943, p. 80).

By 1913, anti-Japanese sentiment was such that the state legislature passed the Alien Land Law that prevented those not eligible for U.S. citizenship from purchasing land or from engaging in leases longer than three years (Appendix B). The California Alien Land Law was further
strengthened in 1920 to prevent aliens from leasing lands. This law also sparked similar legislation in other western states (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997). The U.S. Congress responded to the perceived economic threat by enacting the Immigration Act of 1924 that effectively ended Asian immigration (Daniels, 1974). Despite the fact that no major anti-Japanese legislative initiatives passed between 1924 and the start of World War II, anti-Japanese sentiment remain active during this period, especially on the West Coast.

Immediately prior to 1941 and America’s direct involvement in World War II, most Japanese Americans were concentrated in California, Washington, and Oregon (Figures 2.2 & 2.4). Of the 93,717 Japanese Americans living in California as of 1940, approximately 55,000 were situated in the coastal regions, especially in the vicinity of San Francisco and the Bay Area, the
Salinas Valley, Los Angeles, and San Diego. About 25,000 lived inland in the Sacramento, San Joaquin, and Imperial valleys. Many of those in the inland areas were engaged in \textit{truck farming} (i.e., raising produce for nearby urban areas). Statewide, individuals of Japanese descent raised approximately 38\% of California’s vegetable produce. Japanese Americans farmed over 220,000 acres in California alone and controlled much of the retail and wholesale produce marketing in Los Angeles (Nugent, 1999). The remaining 13,900 Japanese Americans were dispersed throughout the state. Approximately 4,070 Japanese Americans lived in Oregon, especially along the lower Columbia River, and in the lower Willamette River Valley in 1941. Most were involved in agriculture, produce marketing, and fishing (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). Japanese Americans in Washington state totaled 14,565 at the start of the war. Most of
this population was situated west of the Cascade Range in the Seattle, Tacoma, Green River Valley, Puyallup River Valley, Willapa Bay, and Columbia River mouth areas where many were involved in farming, the marketing of agricultural produce, and fishing. Over 50% of the remaining approximately 14,600 Japanese Americans in the U.S. were concentrated in Colorado, Utah, Idaho, Arizona, Montana, and Nevada where they were often employed by farms, mines, railroads, canneries, timber companies, and by homeowners as cooks and house servants (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943; Nugent, 1999). However, the primary employer for nearly 45% of all West Coast Japanese Americans was agriculture (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943) (Figure 2.3).

Pearl Harbor and its Immediate Aftermath

The Japanese Imperial Military bombing of Pearl Harbor and the subsequent U.S. declaration of war on Japan, drastically changed the fortunes of West Coast Japanese Americans. By the evening of 7 December 1941, President Roosevelt issued a proclamation stating that all Japanese “Nationals” (i.e., non-U.S. citizens or Issei) were considered “enemy aliens.” The rights of these individuals were curtailed by establishing prohibited zones, limiting possession of certain items, and apprehending those individuals considered to be threats to national security.

Approximately 1,500 Japanese American enemy aliens were apprehended and detained beginning that evening (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). Among them were many community leaders. All enemy alien bank accounts and all Japanese bank funds in American branches were frozen at the same time (Burton et al., 2002).

In early January 1942, U.S. War and Justice Department officials met and agreed upon the establishment of prohibited zones around key coastal installations and the exclusion of Japanese enemy aliens from these zones. Subsequently, such zones were established in California, primarily in coastal portions of the state, and included the waterfront portions of San Diego, Los Angeles, and San Francisco. Similar zones were established in Arizona, Oregon, and Washington (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943).

By early 1942, West Coast residents were increasingly fearful because of the success of the Japanese Imperial Navy in the Pacific. Paranoia fueled unsubstantiated reports of nightly signals from the coast to offshore enemy watercraft, hidden radio transmitters, arms stockpiles, and the locations of Japanese residences in relation to key coastal installations such as bridges, airfields, electrical substations, military bases, oil fields, and lighthouses. Residents and government officials alike were concerned about the potential for sabotage by Japanese Americans. The American public was scared and angry, while at the same time, the U.S. Government claimed concern for the well-being of the Japanese Americans. Three separate submarine-based attacks by the Japanese Imperial Navy near Santa Barbara, California, Brookings, Oregon, and Astoria, Oregon further raised West Coast resident’s fears of an imminent Japanese invasion, and the likelihood that Japanese Americans would assist in that invasion. The U.S. Government made the decision to move all Japanese Americans away from the West Coast ostensibly because of the
potential threat to nearby vital military installations, lumber, petroleum, and airplane industries, and harbor facilities (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). However, this decision was made despite the very limited risk seen by the three U.S. Government intelligence arms of the time—the Federal Bureau of Investigation, the Navy Department, and an informal intelligence system that reported directly to the President. None of these groups recommended a mass evacuation of all persons of Japanese descent (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997). Interestingly, no Japanese Americans living in the U.S. were convicted of a serious act of espionage or sabotage during World War II (Burton et al, 2002). In retrospect, the argument of “military necessity” is not valid; rather, Japanese Americans were excluded from the West Coast and subsequently detained in inland relocation centers because of racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and failure of political leaders (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997).

**Executive Order 9066 and Military Exclusion**

President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on 19 February 1942. This order authorized the Secretary of War and his designees to exclude any persons from areas deemed important for national defense in order to protect these areas from espionage and sabotage. Once those areas were identified, the U.S. Government would be in charge of all transportation, housing, food, and other needs of those excluded from the military areas (Roosevelt, 1942; Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997).

Soon after the issuance of Executive Order 9066, Lieutenant General John DeWitt, the military official in charge of the Western Defense Command, issued the first of a series of public proclamations that determined the fate of West Coast Japanese Americans. Public Proclamation #1, issued on 2 March 1942, divided the West Coast into two military strategic areas—Military Area 1 including western Washington, Oregon, California, and southern Arizona, and Military Area 2 that included the remainder of Washington, Oregon, and California (Figure 2.5). Military Area 1 was further subdivided into a series of zones, each with particular restrictions (Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997). With this proclamation, DeWitt encouraged all enemy aliens to evacuate to areas east of Military Area 2. Approximately 4,900 Japanese Americans voluntarily evacuated to inland locations but many soon returned to the West Coast because of hostilities encountered there (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943; Daniels, 1972).

Public Proclamation #2, issued on 14 March 1942, established Military Areas in Idaho, Montana, Nevada, and Utah, and established an additional 900 prohibited zones. Public Proclamation #3, issued on 24 March, established a curfew for Japanese Americans, German Americans, and Italian Americans. However, the proclamation was not enforced on EuroAmericans. Public Proclamation #4 reversed the voluntary evacuation stance established in Proclamation #1 thus required all persons of Japanese descent to remain at their places of residence until further notice because of: 1) increasing hostilities inland toward Japanese evacuees; 2) the need for an orderly,
Figure 2.5. Military exclusion areas and assembly centers of the Japanese American evacuation program in 1942. Adapted from Burton et al. (2002, p. 2).
controlled evacuation in the state of origin; and 3) the fact that inland states would not accept an “uncontrolled Japanese migration.” Exceptions were granted primarily for the purpose of reuniting families (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943; Daniels, 1972; Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, 1997).

**Evacuation to Assembly Centers**

Once U.S. Government officials realized that voluntary evacuation would not work, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9102 on 18 March 1942. This executive order established the War Relocation Authority (WRA), the director of which was to establish and execute a massive mandatory evacuation and relocation program. This program was to evacuate and care—i.e., provide shelter, subsistence, clothing, medical care, education, recreational facilities, and employment opportunities—for over 110,000 Japanese American evacuees (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). This was to be the largest single forced relocation in U.S. history (Burton et al., 2002).

As mandatory evacuation planning continued, it became evident that evacuation and relocation could not occur in one step because of the perceived need for rapid evacuation from strategic areas. Therefore, initial assembly centers and longer-term relocation centers were needed. Assembly centers needed to have sufficient capacity for the expected number of evacuees, be located near concentrations of evacuees in good transportation corridors, have adequate electricity and water to serve evacuees and support staff, and have adequate recreation facilities. Existing structures and facilities were to be used wherever possible because they offered the opportunity for rapid conversion for evacuation centers. As a result, fairgrounds and race tracks were employed for most of the assembly centers (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943).

Ultimately, 17 assembly centers were selected, including 13 in California, one in Washington, one in Oregon, and two in Arizona (Figure 2.5). Totally new facilities were constructed only in California’s Owens Valley, and near Parker Dam, on the Arizona side of the Colorado River. An abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps camp was used as an Assembly Center in Mayer, Arizona while the Pinedale, California Assembly Center occupied a former mill site. Substantially new facilities were constructed at Sacramento (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). The two Pacific Northwest sites were established at existing operations—the Pacific International Livestock Exposition facilities in Portland, Oregon, and the Western Washington State Fairgrounds at Puyallup (Burton et al., 2002). Another assembly center at Toppenish in central Washington’s lower Yakima Valley was never completed because of health and sanitation issues. This meant that some Washington and Oregon evacuees were placed in California assembly centers (especially Pinedale). In the longer term, the paucity of Pacific Northwest assembly centers resulted in the dispersal of Washington and Oregon Japanese Americans to several different relocation centers (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943).
The first compulsory evacuation of persons of Japanese descent under Executive Order 9102 occurred on 24 March 1942 when Bainbridge Island, Washington residents were moved to the Owens Valley Assembly Center. Bainbridge Island evacuees had six days to take care of all business matters and dispose of those possessions that they could not physically carry (Burton et al.). Evacuation occurred sequentially through 108 “Exclusion Units,” each of which was a discrete area recognized by distinctive physical or political geography, and included at least 1,000 Japanese Americans. The exceptions to this were those areas where Japanese Americans were widely scattered. In those cases, space, rather than population, was the dominant factor in evacuation. At the height of evacuation, 3,750 evacuees were moved each day. The WRA attempted to keep families and communities together in the same assembly centers, and only failed to do so in the latter stages of evacuation when assembly centers were near capacity (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). All Japanese Americans were clear of Military Area #1 by early June, and out of the California portion of Military Area #2 by early August 1942 (Daniels, 1972). Neither the Washington or Oregon portions of Military Area #2 were evacuated (Burton et al, 2002).

Assembly Centers to Relocation Centers

The assembly centers were established as brief stops en route to longer-term relocation facilities. However, Dillon Myer, head of the WRA following Milton Eisenhower’s resignation in June 1942, also saw the relocation centers as temporary “way stations” for the Nisei as they resettled in Midwestern and East Coast towns and cities. The relocation centers were also “havens of rest and security,” offering protection from racial prejudices and associated violence encountered on the West Coast (Myer, 1971).

The first challenge regarding relocation centers was identifying appropriate sites for them. Initially, none of the inland states wanted the Japanese Americans. Most of the western governors were opposed to relocation of Japanese Americans to their states because of perceived security risks and because of a fear that they would stay in the state following the end of the war (Daniels, 1993; Burton et al, 2002). However, the sugar beet growers of the Intermountain West were very interested in relocating Japanese Americans because of the war-induced labor shortage in the region (Daniels, 1972).

The WRA was to select each of the relocation center sites. First, each site needed to be cleared from a military/national security standpoint (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). Next, the criteria for establishment of relocation centers were that the sites needed to: 1) fulfill the nation’s wartime labor demand by providing “work opportunities in public works, agriculture, production, and manufacturing”; 2) achieve self sufficiency via “adequate public facilities” including roads, railroads, power, and water; 3) ease racial tensions by locating in a remote area where few EuroAmericans lived; 4) avoid sabotage by locating in a remote area far from military industry plants; 5) be located entirely on public lands; and 6) be sufficiently large to accommodate at least 5,000 people (Eisenhower, 1974; Nelson, 1976; Harvey, 2004).
Figure 2.6  The ten relocation centers of the Japanese American evacuation program during World War II. Adapted from Burton et al. (2002, p. 2).
The WRA examined over 300 sites before arriving at the final ten in spring 1942 (Eisenhower, 1974). These included sites in Arizona (Gila River and Poston), Arkansas (Jerome and Rowher), California (Manzanar and Tule Lake), Colorado (Amache), Idaho (Minidoka), Utah (Topaz), and Wyoming (Heart Mountain) (Figure 2.6). Jerome and Rowher were the only sites located in the humid lands east of the 100th meridian. Each was sited primarily on Mississippi River Delta lands owned by the Farm Security Administration. At least one person has argued that relocation centers were located in Arkansas because an influential Arkansas senator wanted to help relieve poverty in the area (Burton et al., 2002). Three of the sites (Heart Mountain, Minidoka, and Tule Lake) were located on undeveloped portions of federal reclamation projects and two (Gila River and Poston) were situated on Indian reservation lands. One (Manzanar) was on City of Los Angeles land while two (Amache and Topaz) were located almost solely on private lands (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). The ten chosen sites have been generally described as:

...godforsaken. They were in places where nobody had lived before and no one has lived since...That these areas were still vacant land in 1942, land that the ever-voracious pioneers and developers had either passed by or abandoned speaks volumes about their attractiveness.

(Daniels, 1972, p. 96)

Notably absent from the represented western states were Montana, Nevada, New Mexico, Oregon, and Washington. Montana and New Mexico each secured a U.S. Department of Justice Internment Center; however, Nevada, eastern Oregon, and eastern Washington had no Japanese American centers of any type.

The construction and occupation of these centers was delayed because of the difficulty in meeting the requirements of suitable sites and because of shortages of building materials (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). Construction needed to be economical thus it was not desirable to construct permanent buildings. Speed of construction was also essential as the centers needed to be completed within several months. While typical “theater of operations”-type barracks used for male soldiers in war zones met these qualifications, they were deemed inadequate for Japanese American women, children, and the elderly because they lacked floors and heating units, as well as nearby plumbed restrooms. The ultimate design decided upon was a modified “theater of operations”-type building that was a compromise in terms of efficiency of construction and quality of housing. Because construction at four of the centers was initiated prior to this decision, and because more than one U.S. Army Corps of Engineers Engineering Division was involved in the construction, uniformity in construction styles was not always achieved (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943).

The main part of each center consisted of residential “blocks” that included barracks, a recreation building, a mess hall, and toilet/bath/laundry facilities. Schools and churches were scattered among the residential blocks. Administration, military police, hospital, and warehouse facilities
were typically separated from the evacuee residential section by a fence (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). The entire main part of each center was typically surrounded by barbed wire and had watch towers staffed by armed guards. The area surrounding the central portions of the centers was primarily devoted to agriculture with a key goal to feed the evacuees (U.S. War Relocation Authority, 1943).

In determining which centers to send evacuees to, the WRA attempted to follow these principles: 1) keep families and communities together; 2) achieve a balance between rural and urban evacuees in the same center ideally from the same general area; 3) minimize the climate difference between the homes of the evacuees and the new relocation site; and 4) minimize the distance from home areas and evacuation centers to the relocation centers. Ultimately, 111,155 evacuees were transferred to relocation centers via railcars in approximately 500 person increments (U.S. Army–Western Defense Command, 1943). Interestingly, eight of the ten relocation centers were located in the semi-arid, sparsely populated lands east of the Cascade and Sierra Nevada ranges, and west of 100°W longitude. Conversely, the bulk of the incarcerated Japanese Americans came from the more humid, populated West Coast. Peak populations at the centers ranged from 7,318 at Amache to 18,789 at Tule Lake (U.S. War Relocation Authority, 1946).

Once at the relocation centers, Japanese Americans were encouraged to relocate outside Military Areas #1 and #2 as long as they could find a job, a place to live, someone to sponsor them, and could prove they were not a threat to national security (Burton et al., 2002). College-age students were allowed to leave the assembly centers, and subsequently the relocation centers, to attend colleges and universities outside Military Areas #1 and #2 (Daniels, 1972). Ultimately, a total of 827 evacuees relocated in 1942, 13,073 in 1943, and 15,616 in 1944. Following the lifting of the West Coast Exclusion Order in December 1944, 66,257 relocated in 1945 (U.S. War Relocation Authority, 1946).

**Internment, Segregation, and Isolation Centers**

The relocation centers were one of four long-term ways the U.S. Government imprisoned Japanese Americans during World War II. The others included internment, segregation, and isolation centers (Figure 2.7). Internment centers in Arizona, Idaho, Kansas, Louisiana, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Texas, Washington, and Wisconsin were run by the U.S. Department of Justice or the U.S. Army to house enemy aliens considered to be a threat to national security. Tule Lake became a segregation center in fall 1943 to house those Japanese Americans who were deemed disloyal to the U.S. Government. Isolation centers were operated in Utah and Arizona for those Japanese Americans who were deemed “troublemakers” in the relocation centers. Finally, a group of 65 “outspoken patriots” from Manzanar were temporarily housed at a site in Death Valley, California (Burton et al, 2002).
Figure 2.7. Internment, segregation, and isolation centers of the Japanese American evacuation program during World War II. Adapted from Burton et al. (2002, p. 2, 325-346, 379-416).
The Travesty of Exclusion and Detention

Ultimately, nearly 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced to leave their West Coast homes and move to inland relocation, internment, segregation, and isolation centers. Many spent the next three years of their lives in these centers. This forced evacuation tore apart communities and families, and caused great economic damage to Japanese Americans. In terms of lost homes, businesses, and other personal property, these people collectively lost $4-5 billion in 1999 values. It was not until the 1980s that the U.S. Government formally apologized for the wrongs inflicted on the Japanese Americans and vowed to make reparations (Burton et al., 2002).

References


