

FACT SHEET

In 1940, 126,947 persons of Japanese ancestry lived in the 48 United States. The percentage of Japanese Americans in the U.S. was only one tenth of one percent of the total population. In Hawaii (not yet a state), 158,000 persons were of Japanese ancestry. They comprised 37 percent of the island population.

Of the over 126,000 Japanese Americans living in the U.S., 112,353 lived in the west coast states: Washington (14,565), Oregon (4,071) and California (93,717).

Except for a very small number of individuals who were in state hospitals or state institutions, all Japanese Americans living in those three states were first sent to temporary assembly centers and later transferred to permanent concentration camps located in the states of California, Idaho, Arizona, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, and Arkansas. The length of stay for the internees ranged from a few months to four years (March 1942 to March 1946). In contrast to the almost all of the Japanese Americans living on the West Coast who were incarcerated, only 1,118 persons (one percent) of the Hawaiian Japanese Americans were evacuated and interned despite the fact that the islands were 2,500 miles closer to the war zone.

Over two of every three of the 112,353 Japanese Americans evacuated from the West Coast were American citizens because they were born in the U.S. The other 29% were older persons who had immigrated from Japan in the late 1800s or early 1900s. Many of these older persons would have become citizens except for the fact that they were not permitted to become citizens. Discriminatory legislation against Asians forbid them from citizenship. The discriminatory legislation was repealed in 1952.

No wholesale evacuation was directed toward German Americans or Italian Americans although the United States was also at war with those countries during World War II.

Despite rumors and false reports, not a single case of sabotage or espionage was brought against Japanese Americans in the United States. The only persons accused, tried and convicted were Caucasians.

Constitutional rights and civil liberties of Japanese Americans were simply ignored and violated. Contrary to the basic idea that a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty, Japanese Americans were considered guilty until proven innocent. They were considered disloyal although there was no evidence to support that notion. They were not charged with any "crime." There was no trial held. They were simply evacuated and incarcerated because of their ancestry!

Internees were given a week or less to sell all of their homes, businesses and belongings or to find someone to care for their precious possessions. Millions of dollars were lost by the Japanese Americans during the process. Redress compensation of 20,000 per former internees was finally authorized in 1989 when a redress bill was signed by President Reagan. The check was accompanied by a formal apology.

The concentration camps were labeled "Relocation Centers" by the government. The camps were not death camps like those in Europe operated by the Nazis. The camps were surrounded by barbed wire, had guard towers with search lights, were patrolled by armed soldiers, and the internees were highly restricted in their movement from the camps by governmental regulations. As it became apparent that the internees were not a threat to anyone the guard towers and armed patrols were abandoned. The barbed wire fence surrounding the camps and governmental restrictions remained until Amache was closed in October, 1945.

With the passage of time, the internees eventually established a community atmosphere with schools, stores, churches, newspaper, medical facility and services, recreational programs, and a farm program to make the camps as self sufficient as possible. Some internees left the camps to serve in the military, go to colleges on the east coast and midwest to complete their education, or to leave for jobs on farms and factories.

This tragic wartime mistake happened because of at least nine reasons: 1. racial prejudice, 2. fear, 3. greed, 4. ignorance, 5. media distortion and inaccuracy, 6. political opportunism, 7. public apathy, 8. one very ambitious and prejudiced Army officer (Bendetsen), and 9. a preoccupied President (Roosevelt).