

“I am an American”

Carole Hom | The Episcopal Church of St. Martin, Davis

Imagine a nightmare.

What if the government forced you and your family to leave your home to move to some yet unspecified place for an unknown duration?

You have been told that you must take linens, dishes and silverware, clothing, toiletries, and personal effects, but can take no more than what your two arms can carry.

What would you bring?

What if you had less than a week to pack, sell your house or business for a fraction of its value, and settle your affairs?

What if this order applied only to you and people who look like you?

For over 125,000 persons of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast in 1942, this nightmare scenario was reality. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized the forced removal of all persons deemed a threat to national security from the West Coast.

Starting in March 1942, the US Army issued a series of Civilian Exclusion Orders, beginning the forcible removal of Japanese immigrants and Japanese Americans from California, Washington, Oregon, and parts of Arizona. This mass exclusion order was applied only to Japanese Americans, and not to German or Italian immigrants or their American-born children.



Harvey Itano, a native of Sacramento and University Medalist of the UC Berkeley Class of 1942, included biochemistry texts among his personal effects. He later completed MD and PhD degrees and became the first Japanese American member of the National Academy of Sciences, recognized for his research on sickle cell anemia. Photo: Dorothea Lange/ National Archives and Records Administration.

No charges, no hearings, no due process.

Would you go? Would you resist?

Each family was ordered to register, given a number, and allowed one week to report for transport to a short term “assembly center.” Most assembly centers were constructed at fairgrounds or racetracks with structures used to shelter animals – stables, livestock pavilions – that were quickly converted into barracks for Japanese American men, women, and children.

How would it feel to live with all the members of your family in a unit consisting of one or two horse stalls?



Oakland, CA, March 1942. Following evacuation orders, this store was closed. The owner, a University of California graduate of Japanese descent, placed the "I AM AN AMERICAN" sign on the store front the day after Pearl Harbor. Photo and original caption: Dorothea Lange/National Archives and Records Administration.

After months of temporary detention at “assembly centers”, prisoners were removed again to one of ten War Relocation Authority (WRA) concentration camps located in remote desert or swampy areas of the western US and Arkansas. Hurriedly built and surrounded by tall fences topped with barbed wire and guard towers, they consisted of rows upon rows of uninsulated barracks with primitive communal dining, latrine, and laundry facilities.

Our diocese contains the most significant camp among the ten WRA camps: Tule Lake, in the far northeastern corner of California. Tule Lake was unique as the only one of the ten American concentration camps to be converted into a maximum-security segregation center, created to punish Japanese Americans who refused to answer or answered “no” to two poorly worded questions on a loyalty questionnaire. During segregation, Tule Lake was occupied by a 1,000 soldier US Army battalion and ruled under martial law. It also was the site of a little-known mass denationalization and deportation program run by the U.S. Department of Justice.



Persons leaving the camp at Tule Lake were required to show a pass to the men on guard. Photo: Jack Iwata/National Park Service.

Approximately two thirds of the Japanese Americans incarcerated were born in the United States. Approximately one third were children.

No incidents of sabotage or espionage were committed by Japanese Americans, including immigrants, during World War II.

Future newsletters will contain more information about incarceration and the Japanese American residents of the Diocese of Northern California, the “two poorly worded questions on the loyalty questionnaire” and the complex and troubled camp at Tule Lake, and the response of the Episcopal Church.

We plan a deeper look at the Japanese American incarceration and its implications for today in a half-day webinar planned for May 2025. Please watch for information.

Want to know more now? See these resources for a deeper dive:

- [Information about the Japanese Incarceration, from the general to the encyclopedic](https://densho.org/learn/) -- <https://densho.org/learn/>
- [White House Proclamation on the Day of Remembrance, 19 February 2022](https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-10341-day-remembrance-japanese-american-incarceration-during-world-war-ii) – original post removed; proclamation archived at <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/proclamation-10341-day-remembrance-japanese-american-incarceration-during-world-war-ii>

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