



## Episode 019 – “Everything But Their Dignity: Japanese Americans in Post-War Burbank” (transcript)

### Introduction

You’re listening to rememBURBANK, a podcast featuring stories from the history of Burbank, California, produced by the Burbank Public Library. Check out our collection of historic Burbank photos at [burbankinfocus.org](http://burbankinfocus.org).

### Announcements

A picture is worth a thousand words. So why not preserve your most precious photos? The Burbank in Focus department at the Burbank Public Library offers a scan day several times a year in which you can get your images scanned and saved to a thumb drive. This is great for preservation and offers you the ability to share them digitally with relatives or friends. Sign up now for next month’s Scan Day and have our expert digitize your treasures. Appointments are limited to 15 images per session. While you’re at it, if you have photos of Burbank people, places, events, buildings, etcetera please consider sharing your images with the library’s repository! Cultural heritage isn’t found only in libraries and museums. It’s found in homes where family mementos are preserved and photos are cherished. Help capture important parts of our community’s heritage and preserve it for future generations. Shared photos may be published on Burbank in Focus, a digital library of historic Burbank images hosted by the Burbank Public Library, and donors will receive a flash drive with digital copies of their photos.

### Story

The fourteenth amendment of the United States Constitution states that, “All persons born or naturalized in the United States and subject to the jurisdiction thereof, are citizens of the United States and of the state in which they reside. No state shall abridge the privileges or immunities of [these] citizens. Nor shall any state deprive any person of life, liberty, or property, without due process of the law.”

If only this amendment had been adhered to, we may not have taken part in the shameful imprisonment of our own citizens tried only by the color of their skin. United States internment camps are often just a footnote in the history we’re taught. But their impact was huge in California, Los Angeles County, and even here in Burbank. In early 1942, just a month after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, California officials began voicing their concerns about the Japanese Americans who lived in the state. They wanted them rounded up and secured. The

Los Angeles Mayor at the time, Fletcher Bowron, went so far as to fire all city employees of Japanese lineage declaring that they must have a secret loyalty to the Japanese Emperor. What ultimately ended up happening was the forced imprisonment of more than 110,000 people, two-thirds of whom were United States citizens. These people had committed no crime, broken no laws, but they were stripped of their rights, nonetheless. An internal memo to Herbert Hoover from the Attorney General Biddle revealed, "The necessity for mass evacuation [was] based primarily on public and political pressure rather than on factual data. Public hysteria and in some instances, the comments of the press" influenced the government's decision to act.

Those imprisoned were of two groups: the Issei and the Nisei. The Issei were Japanese immigrants who had come to America to find better lives. But unlike European immigrants, they could not become citizens because the Naturalization Act of 1790 limited citizenship to those who were considered free white people. The children of the Issei were the Nisei and they were born in the United States, and therefore, automatically United States citizens who should have been protected by their country, not villainized. The Nisei were by written accounts just average Americans who loved baseball and hamburgers. Yet fifteen concentration camps popped up over California within a matter of weeks. The two in Los Angeles County were at the Santa Anita Racetrack in Arcadia and the Pomona Fairgrounds. The internees were told that they could only take 'what they could carry.' They lost their property, homes, farms, businesses, and livelihoods. They were imprisoned for up to three years.

In early 1945, the evacuees began to be released from the camps. But they had nowhere to go. Their homes were no longer theirs. The War Relocation Authority, or WRA, as it was generally referred to, was a federal agency created in 1942 to supervise the evacuation and relocation of the Japanese Americans whom the army removed from the West Coast during World War II. During 1943-1944, the WRA's mission gradually shifted from constructing and managing camps to the opening of regional resettlement offices and assisting Japanese Americans navigate their new realities. WRA officials recruited sponsors who would provide Nisei with jobs or education, and help them find housing. WRA staffers organized social service agencies to assist re-settlers and advocated for them against discrimination. As the Nisei began to come back to Southern California in larger numbers, the WRA saw the need to create temporary housing. They had nothing to come back to and needed government assistance until they could recover their lives.

Now you wonder, what does this have to do with Burbank history? Well, that's what I'm here to tell you. The War Department had approved five Los Angeles County locations for temporary housing and three of them happened to be in Burbank. Now only two of those three would actually be used by the rehoused Nisei. To begin with, the Burbank City Council was adamantly against hosting these temporary housing sites. The City Attorney at that time, Archie Walters, took immediate action to insist that the barracks conform to Burbank's building and health codes, knowing full well that this would create a barrier for the WRA as Burbank's codes had no provisions for temporary housing. A 1945 L.A. Times Article reported, "Irate residents of Burbank joined their City Councilmen at a meeting yesterday in protesting the proposed use of vacated Army barracks in Glenoaks Park as a Nisei relocation center." City Manager, Howard Stites, discouraged use of that location stating that "the Glenoaks site was in the center of

exclusive residential districts with deed restrictions on the property forbidding other than Caucasian residents.” Ultimately, the WRA dropped the third location at Glenoaks Park and only sought the use of the other two. The first location to be used was at Magnolia and Lomita. The WRA repurposed former army barracks and reconverted them to house 200 people. The second site, which was the second largest installation for returning Japanese Americans, was just across the street from the Lockheed Air Terminal on Winona and Hollywood Way. This location had vacated army barracks, too, but the WRA also brought in 76 government owned trailers to accommodate the families. A 1945 Burbank Evening Review article describes the Winona camp, “With planes buzzing continuously overhead, the relocatees are busy fashioning a livable place out of the field formerly used by an army anti-aircraft unit. Men of the camp are laying a sewer pipe to the toilet-trailers which are complete with showers and bathtubs. Women are sweeping up sagebrush and tidying up the insides of the trailers. The trailers themselves are fairly comfortable. Each has two double-beds, one at either end of the trailer. Included are a gas stove, ice box, closets, drawers, and an oil heater. The stoves and ice boxes are not being used as the Japanese are eating at a communal mess hall.” However, a week later, the same newspaper reported that two-thirds of the people housed at the camp can’t afford the 25¢ communal meals served at the mess hall. “When they left the internment camp, each returnee was given \$25 by the WRA” which didn’t last long. Many had trouble finding work because of discrimination. “A majority of the people in the internment camps chose the East for their future home instead of returning to the [West] coast. According to them, equal opportunity and racial tolerance [was] more prevalent there.”

The WRA was expected to dissolve in June [of 1946], but over 2,000 people were still living in the emergency trailer camps. Author Kristen Hayashi wrote that “Local staff of the federal agency stepped up efforts to encourage Japanese Americans to move out. The WRA worked to find placements for Winona residents, which included employment with room and board, stays at hostels, or more permanent housing. The WRA decided to convert the Winona site into a long-term facility for ‘distressed families’ with a capacity of 300 trailers or 1,000 people. But in order to implement this plan, all Winona residents had to temporarily move to other trailer installations. More than 500 individuals were forced to move to Lomita or Hawthorne when the Winona project closed temporarily on March 28. The spotlight on this situation called attention to the plight of the most vulnerable returnees to the greater Los Angeles region. In addition to being poor, the majority of those who had no options outside of Winona were elderly, responsible for large families, or single parents caring for young children.”

A former internee and researcher for the War Agency Liquidation Unit, Tom Sasaki visited Winona in the summer of 1946 and “observed: ‘As we entered the camp it gave me an impression of going back into a Relocation Camp.’ Over time, though, infrastructure was added, which caused conditions at Winona to begin to improve and semblance of community life to emerge. An August 1946 report by the Los Angeles County Committee on Human Relations reported that Winona’s 300 trailers were repainted and a residents’ community organization was being formed. 900 individuals remained at Winona, which was nearly at capacity. Students were attending local schools. The population at Winona held steady at about 1,000 into the spring of 1947. The expiration of the Federal Public Housing Authority’s lease in June signaled impending closure of the trailer camp. Advocates for the Winona residents suggested to civic

leaders in nearby Glendale to approve a 10-acre city-owned track for those in need of housing. City officials balked at the suggestion, quipping that the responsibility should fall on the 'federal government who moved the Japanese in the first place.' Winona closed permanently in November 1947 when the Pacific Airmotive Corporation took ownership of the property."

Inspired by the civil rights movement, the younger Japanese American generation of the 1960s began what is "known as the 'Redress Movement,' [which was] an effort to obtain an official apology and reparations from the federal government for incarcerating their parents and grandparents during the war. They [weren't] focused on documented property losses but on the broader injustice and mental suffering caused by the internment. In 1980, under the Carter administration, Congress established a special committee to study the matter. On February 24, 1983, the commission issued a report condemning the internment as unjust and motivated by racism and xenophobic ideas rather than factual military necessity. Internment camp survivors sued the federal government for \$24 million, but lost the case. However, the Commission recommended that \$20,000 in reparations be paid to those Japanese Americans who had suffered internment. [In] 1992, the Civil Liberties Act, appropriated \$400 million to ensure all remaining internees received their \$20,000 redress payments." On the 50th anniversary of the Pearl Harbor attack, George H. W. Bush issued a formal apology from the U.S. government saying, "In remembering, it is important to come to grips with the past. No nation can fully understand itself or find its place in the world if it does not look with clear eyes at all the glories and disgraces of its past. We in the United States acknowledge such an injustice in our history. The internment of Americans of Japanese ancestry was a great injustice, and it will never be repeated."

## News from Burbank

Today's news comes from the July 16, 1946 *New York Times*.

"Nisei Troops Get Truman Citation. President Truman today congratulated the Japanese American 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Outfit for their victories over the enemy and over prejudice. The President stood in a downpour of rain as he made his brief speech from the ellipse at the rear of the White House grounds. About half of the 500 officers and men who returned from overseas with the Japanese American group live in Hawaii. They will be sent to separation centers there, while those living in this country will be discharged in the United States. The Presidential inspection and review followed a parade down Constitution Avenue. Before affixing the Presidential distinguished unit citation banner to the color of the 442<sup>nd</sup>, the President declared 'It is a very great pleasure to me today to be able to put the Presidential citation on your banner. You are to be congratulated on what you have done for this great country of ours. I think it was my predecessor who said that Americanism is not a matter of race or creed, it is a matter of the heart. You fought for the free nations of the world along with the rest of us. I congratulate you for that, and I can't tell you how very much I appreciate the privilege of being able to show you just how much the United States of America thinks of what you have done. You are now on your way home. You fought not only the enemy, but you fought prejudice, and you have won. Keep up that fight, and we continue to win — to make this great

Republic stand for just what the Constitution says it stands for; the welfare of all the people all the time.”

And that’s the news from July 16, 1946.

## End Credits

rememBURBANK was researched, written, and hosted by Carolyn Alves, recorded and edited by Marcos Alves. Funding for the podcast came from the Friends of the Burbank Public Library, a nonprofit group dedicated to promoting books and the library to the Burbank community. The proceeds from their fundraising efforts help fund Library programming and purchase special equipment for the library.

The music you hear now, and at the beginning of the podcast, is Burbank's 1924 official song "In Burbank" by Code Morgan.

You can find shownotes for this episode, learn more about the show, and view historical photos of Burbank at [burbankinfo.org](http://burbankinfo.org).

Thank you for joining us today.