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REVIEWS

A Pilgrimage to Manzanar

BY RENEE BARRERA



FIGURE 1. Monument located in the cemetery, Manzanar National Historic Site. Photo by the author.

Pilgrimage to Manzanar

A caravan of cars drives up Interstate 395 carrying around one hundred and fifty people to a place that is located somewhere between Lone Pine and Independence, California. The site they are looking for is Manzanar. On this day in December 1969 the group embarked on the first annual Manzanar Pilgrimage. The following is a review of the annual pilgrimage that has been held every year after that first cold day in December 1969.

In December 1941, the United States government declared war on the Empire of Japan after the attack at Pearl Harbor. In February 1942, the United States government issued Executive Order 9066. With this order, the military was authorized to create military zones from which they could exclude anyone, including aliens and citizens. Following the creation of military zones along the western half of Washington, Oregon, the entire state of California and the lower-third of Arizona, 110,000 men, women and children were forced to leave their homes for indefinite incarceration in remote, military-style camps operated by the War Relocation Authority. The mass removal and incarceration of Japanese Americans during the war came with no due process, and was later determined unconstitutional by the courts. The federal government concurred when Congress published its report identifying racism, wartime hysteria, and a failure of leadership as the causes for the civil rights abuses against Japanese Americans. President Reagan signed the 1988 Civil Liberties Act and apologized for the wrongs committed in the past. Congress continues to approve funds to support research and preservation of the history of this chapter in American history. Manzanar was the first of ten War Relocation Authority camps to be built, and remains one of the most well preserved and most thoroughly interpreted of the 10 sites that held Japanese-Americans during World War II.

Manzanar National Historic Site sits at the foot of the Sierra Nevada Mountains just north of Lone Pine, Ca. The original sentry post, one of the last remaining original structures, greets visitors as they turn off of Highway 395 and onto a dirt road. Driving, visitors immediately notice numerous signs that indicate where the police station, administration building, and other structures once stood. The largest building

on the site is the original gymnasium, returned to the site for use as an interpretive center, gift shop, and theatre. An auto tour is the most convenient way to see the site that spans a square mile. Visitors can drive and follow the map to the different markers that guide them along the route. In the main, these markers indicate where buildings once stood, but sometimes the visitor can see archaeological remains, such as concrete foundations, stone walkways or even rock gardens. The National Park Service has a replica of the mess hall and a barrack that give visitors a chance to see what some of the buildings were like and to imagine what it might have been like to live in Manzanar during the war years.

The 42nd Annual Pilgrimage began on Friday, April 29, but the main events were held on Saturday, April 30, 2011. The site opens at dawn, but the interpretive center opens at 9am. The interpretive center had an annual art show that showcased art from Henry Fukuhara and other artists that participated in his Manzanar artist workshop. The art on display was a mixture of watercolor and oil paintings. These pieces of art represent the artists' interpretations of life in Manzanar and the scenery of the Owens Valley. One painting in particular used the majestic Sierra Nevada Mountains as the backdrop, with Manzanar Camp in the foreground. It was striking because it gives the visitor a sense that amidst all the beauty there was a scar on the landscape called Manzanar.

In the Interpretive Center the video *Remembering Manzanar* is shown every thirty minutes. This video explains the events leading up to the wartime confinement of Japanese Americans and some of the ways this experience is remembered. The video ties together historic images with the memories of former internees about life before, during and after the war. Also shown in the video, is the propaganda the U.S. government showed to the American people about the "relocation" of Japanese Americans during the war. Visitors are invited to think about the meaning of this wartime violation of the Constitution and the ways it might be avoided in the future. After watching the introductory video, visitors can tour the museum. There is a replica of the guard tower in the middle of the museum, along with a small replica of the barracks where

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families lived. Pictures, videos, exhibits and a slide show all tell the story of the Japanese American experience during the war years. There is also a huge paneled wall with the names of all of the individuals who were incarcerated at Manzanar.

On the day of the Pilgrimage, like every other day this national historic site is open to the public, children can participate in the Junior Ranger program. Children who wish to participate complete activities in a booklet (separated into age-appropriate tasks). The activities guide the kids through an exploration of the museum and the site as a whole. Once completed, children turn in the booklet, and a ranger swears them in as official Junior Rangers. As Junior Rangers, children pledge to help protect historic sites, to remember what they learned at Manzanar, and to help others learn the story, too. They receive a button and patch to show that they were now official Junior Rangers.

The Pilgrimage program is held on Saturday afternoon at the cemetery, which is located at the western edge of the park. Near the cemetery there are booths set up for selling commemorative t-shirts, and most importantly, the National Park Service provides water to help visitors stay safe in the intense afternoon sun. The crowd that had gathered for the pilgrimage was diverse. There were former internees, young and old, Hispanic, Caucasian, African-American and Muslims all gathered together for the program.

The Pilgrimage may have been started by a contingent of Japanese Americans, but it has become quite diverse in its following, especially since the tragic events of September 11, 2001. A group called CAIR, (Council on American Islamic Relations) has made the pilgrimage an annual event. This group has been in a unique relationship with the Pilgrimage because of the unjust way Muslims were treated after September 11, and the immediate efforts of Japanese Americans to steer the American public away from wartime hysteria and racism. Many Japanese Americans knew firsthand how it felt to be treated and discriminated against in the context of World War II. September 11 gave a new generation of Americans from diverse backgrounds reasons to view the pilgrimage as an event that not only memorializes events of the past, but serves as a

time when the public can reaffirm their commitment to prevent similar forms of racism and wartime hysteria from happening again.

The program begins with a performance by the UCLA Kyodo Taiko Group. This group is made up of students from UCLA and they played the traditional Japanese Taiko Drums. At every Pilgrimage there are recognition awards given out. They are named in memory of Sue Kunitomi Embrey, who was the person that formed the Manzanar Committee and fought hard to get Manzanar recognized as a historic site.



FIGURE 2. UCLA Kyodo Taiko performs *Encore*. Photo by Gann Matsuda, “42nd Annual Manzanar Pilgrimage/Manzanar At Dusk 2011 – A Personal Reflection.” *Manzanar Committee*, May 1, 2011. <http://blog.manzanarcommittee.org/2011/05/01/3628/#more-3628> (Accessed May 4, 2011).

The keynote speaker this year was Mako Nakagawa. Nakagawa has been working hard to eliminate euphemisms that have cloaked the real meaning behind the Japanese American wartime experience. During the war, the government used words like “non-aliens” to talk about the “evacuation” of citizens, and talked about “relocation” to camps that they called “relocation centers.” Even after the war, people have called the program that incarcerated 120,000 Japanese

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Americans “internment” despite the fact that only the Department of Justice can “intern” enemy aliens in wartime, and yet 2/3 of those 120,000 individuals incarcerated without due process were American born citizens. In 2010 she was the principle author of the “Power of Words” resolution adopted by the National Japanese American Citizens League last summer.¹ This resolution calls for the use of terms like “forced removal” instead of “evacuation,” and “incarceration” instead of “internment.” By using more accurate terminology, it will be easier to avoid the racial biases that led the government to sponsor, and a vocal minority to support to massive assault on the rights of citizens and resident aliens as if these measures were benign acts. Replacing wartime language like “pioneer communities” with “imprisoned populations,” for example, makes the constitutional violations that occurred more clear.

Honored at the pilgrimage were major civil rights figures within the Japanese American community who died over the past year: Frank Emi, leader of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee; William Hohri, redress activist and author as well as supporter of the draft resisters; and Fred Korematsu, principle defendant in the Supreme Court case that challenged the wartime exclusion of Japanese Americans from the West Coast.

¹ National JACL, “Power of Words,” <http://pnwjacl.org/documents/R-2PowerofWordsresolution-Adopted.pdf> (Accessed May 4, 2011).



FIGURE 3. 2011 Pilgrimage with cemetery monument and Sierra Nevada mountains in the background. Photo by Gann Matsuda, “42nd Annual Manzanar Pilgrimage.”

After the keynote speaker, the roll call of the camps began, where former internees from each camp was invited to stand behind their camp’s flag for a processional to the cemetery where the interfaith ceremony would be held. As the procession of the flags entered the cemetery, the rest of the guests followed and were given a single flower. The interfaith service is held in front of the monument that has become an iconic symbol of Manzanar. Representatives from various religions, including protestant faiths, Buddhist and Islamic leaders joined together to honor the dead. The Buddhist monks then asked everyone to light some incense, and place their flower on the monument. After the interfaith ceremony, pilgrims are invited to join in the Bon Odori. This a traditional Japanese dance done in a circle and everyone joins in.²

² To watch a video of the Tanko Ondo Bushi as performed by pilgrims to the 2008 Manzanar Pilgrimage, see: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TV4p-Zs4vU8> (accessed May 4, 2011).

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FIGURE 4. Interfaith ceremony. Photo by the author.



FIGURE 3. The UCLA Nikkei Student Union's Odori group led the traditional Ondo dancing. Photo by Gann Matsuda, "42nd Annual Manzanar Pilgrimage."

Renee Barrera

The Manzanar Pilgrimage is a powerful experience. My family and I went to it for the first time in 2010, and I was moved by speakers and by the efforts of those who worked so hard to make Manzanar a national historical site. There have been many obstacles such as prejudice and ignorance. Manzanar has given me a new perspective on how to view people and life, by showing me that no matter how tough things are one should always look past the bad and make the best of the situation. As I was standing at the monument surrounded by the Sierras and the sun beating down on me I felt for that instant how the internees must have felt and with this vastness of land spread out before them. I hope that no one ever has to go through what they did and the only way is to never forget.

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Renee Barrera is a Public and Oral History Major and will be graduating in the Spring of 2012. She will be continuing her graduate education at University of California, Riverside or University of California, Los Angeles. Renee's goal is to work for the National Park

Service either in Wyoming or Montana as a Park Ranger, and she would like to thank Dr. Lyon and Dr. Long for their encouragement and support.

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