Journey Into a Dark Past

Japanese-Americans rally to preserve internment camps
Dateline: MANZANAR, CALIF.
Ernie Takahashi knows his past is around here somewhere. "I think this is it," says Takahashi, 63, as he stumbles through the eastern California sagebrush, his shirt flapping in the high desert wind. He walks up to a small wooden post, pounded into the sun-blasted landscape on the edge of Death Valley. Stenciled into it are the words "Block 27." Takahashi, a Sacramento optometrist, smiles beneath his sunglasses. Until now, he has never seen his first home. He searches for some evidence of his existence on the dusty ground. Above him, the snowcapped peaks of the Sierra Nevadas soar over 14,000 feet. At his feet, there is nothing but sagebrush. "Well, I guess this is it," he smiles, looking back at his wife. "I can't believe it."

The wind was blowing, too, on March 27, 1945, when Takahashi's pregnant mother was taken from this same spot at the Manzanar internment camp to the camp's maternity ward. She and her husband, both Japanese-Americans who had been living in a farming community in California's Central Valley, were among the nearly 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry--most of them American citizens--who were forcibly removed to the camps after Pearl Harbor. Ordered to leave their homes with only what they could carry, they were sent by train and bus to 10 internment camps scattered across remote areas of the country, small cities enclosed by barbed wire.

For years, the internees struggled to survive in these desolate places, not knowing when they would be released. The Takahashis were married in Manzanar in 1944, but when their son, Ernie, was born the next spring, his father wasn't there to meet him. Responding to the wartime manpower shortage, he had been released from camp to take a job at an ammunition depot in Utah. Meanwhile, two of Takahashi's uncles were serving with the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, an all-Japanese-American unit fighting its way through Europe. Takahashi's mother must have appreciated the terrible irony, knowing she would spend the next few months the same way she'd spent the past three years: scraping out a living in Block 27, Building 5, Apartment 4.

Takahashi's experience, lost in the glow of a just war of liberation, is one of the darkest chapters in American history. Eugene Rostow, a prominent legal scholar during World War II, called the internment "our worst wartime mistake." Twenty years ago, the U.S. government officially apologized to Japanese-Americans for the way they had been treated, authorizing payments of $20,000 to each living survivor. But that wasn't the end of the camps' story. During the fight for redress, the Japanese-American community, long known for its stoic silence about its wartime experience, found its voice, pouring its stories into books, plays, and documentaries. Last month, Takahashi traveled to his birthplace on one of several organized pilgrimages to internment sites taking place this year.

As the last of those who remember camp life reach their 70s and 80s, their efforts to commemorate their experience have expanded: Former internees are determined not just to preserve the stories of internment; they also are trying to save the camps themselves. In 2006, President Bush signed a bill authorizing up to $38 million for a grant program to preserve the camps. But nearly two years later, swamped in election year politics, the funds have yet to be appropriated. The delay worries internees and historians alike. Soon, says Lane Hirabayashi, a professor of Asian-American studies at UCLA, "these physical sites are all we'll have left to remind us."
"Military necessity." Decades later, the story of internment stands as the unrivaled cautionary tale of the flimsiness of the Constitution during wartime. On Feb. 19, 1942, two months after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the forcible removal of all ethnic Japanese living on the Pacific Coast. Worried about invasion and convinced that Japanese immigrants might be loyal to Japan, Roosevelt insisted the decision was a matter of "military necessity" (box, Page 34). Anyone with any Japanese ancestry had to register for relocation. The white population stood by unmoved. "If making 1,000,000 innocent Japanese uncomfortable would prevent one scheming Japanese from costing the life of an American boy, then let 1,000,000 innocents suffer," wrote Henry McLemore, a columnist for the Los Angeles Times.

Historians are still awed by the magnitude of the decision. "It was a horrendous, draconian measure," says Tetsuden Kashima, a professor of American ethnic studies at the University of Washington. "There was no basis for true suspicion; there's not a single proven case of espionage. And yet they scapegoated an entire people based on their ethnicity in a way that violates the Constitution." In The Dirty Dozen: How Twelve Supreme Court Cases Radically Expanded Government and Eroded Freedom, published this month, constitutional scholars Robert Levy and William Mello rank the Supreme Court's decision upholding the evacuation order as one of the most egregious in its history.

Betty Abe, who was 15 years old in 1941 and living on her father's vegetable farm near Los Angeles, remembers how suddenly the atmosphere changed after the order. "It was very scary," she says. "People, just like the snap of a finger, their attitude was different towards us." Some whites swooped down on Japanese communities looking for bargains. Cars, silverware, furniture—all were gobbled up for a fraction of their value. Jim Kubota's family asked a white man living in Seattle to take care of their farm, accepting a meager cut in the deal. "If they'd said they wanted it for free, we'd have had to give it to them," says Kubota, 78, whose family was interned at Minidoka.Because Japanese "aliens" were prohibited from owning agricultural land in 1941--while another law prevented anyone born in Japan from becoming a citizen--many families who reported for internment lost everything. Few internees were able to return to their land after the war.

Arriving at hastily built assembly centers, evacuees were unsure what was to become of them. Cameras, baseball bats, even popguns were confiscated. Tens of thousands spent the first spring of the war living in fairground parking lots and livestock pavilions. Hank Umemoto's brother slept in a horse stall for four months at Tanforan racetrack near San Francisco. Some internees worked as cooks, teachers, doctors, and clerks, but administrators capped pay at $16 a month, believing no evacuee should make more than the $21-per-month salary of an Army private. Later, pay would be bumped to $19.

That spring and summer, the evacuees were shipped to the 10 relocation centers built on remote government land, far from cities and the war industry, where they would spend the next 3 <super>1</super>/<sub>2</sub> years. When one man stepped off the bus at the Topaz camp in central Utah, he sank ankle-deep into fine dust."There were MPs all over with guns. What could you do but obey them?" says Abe. The barracks were cramped, with little privacy. The communal bathrooms didn't even have partitions between toilets.

Authorities banned the use of the Japanese language in meetings, effectively disenfranchising many of the older immigrants who didn't speak English. Mess halls served mutton and mashed potatoes, food that many internees, accustomed to rice and vegetables, could barely stomach. The dining halls had another unintended consequence:Because families weren't able to cook their own meals, many stopped eating together. "Once we got to Manzanar, we ate with our friends," says Umemoto, 79, who lived on a vineyard near Sacramento before the war. "We didn't associate that much with our own families." Parents and children drifted apart. "There was no family life in the camps," says Kubota.
Still, life behind the barbed wire came to resemble the world outside it. The internees formed newspapers and police forces. They built schools and auditoriums. High school marching bands practiced in the afternoons. Girls ordered batons out of the Sears catalog. Dressmakers and barbers opened small shops. Manzanar even had its own tofu factory.

Tragedy, though, lurked beneath the surface. Marielle Tsukamoto’s aunt had a nervous breakdown in camp and was institutionalized. Raymond Uno’s father, a World War I veteran, died of a heart attack at Heart Mountain, where he was given a military funeral. "My father was a loyal American citizen who fought for his country," says Uno, 78, a retired district court judge in Utah. "He died a prisoner of war."

The pressures of camp life created a rift in the Japanese-American community. There were a few small-scale riots and strikes as internees pushed back against the guards. In 1943, authorities distributed a "loyalty questionnaire" to every adult in the camps. It asked them to renounce all allegiance to Japan—an act that would leave the first-generation immigrants, who were not allowed to become American citizens, stateless--while also asking them if they would willingly serve in combat. Almost everyone in the camps "passed" the test, but many internees were still appalled. "They rob us of our property," said one, "throw us into concentration camps, knock us down and spit on us, and then invite us to 'prove' our loyalty by volunteering to go into an [all-Japanese-American] suicidal combat team."

More than 13,000 Japanese-American men ultimately served in the 442nd regiment. By war’s end, the unit suffered almost 9,500 casualties.

As invasion worries dissipated, in January 1945, the government announced that the internees could return to the West Coast, offering them $25 and a one-way ticket anywhere in the country. Most families didn't know what to do. "We had nowhere to go," says Abe, whose father had lost the lease on their farm when he was interned. Her family, like many others, stayed in the camps until the end of the war, when they were told to leave.

After the internees were gone, the camps were quickly dismantled. By 1947, the Manzanar site had returned to dust. Along with a few stone structures, the only evidence of life there were some rock gardens constructed by the internees and the empty concrete slabs where the latrines once stood.

The internees, meanwhile, were as silent about their experiences as the landscape. "My parents never talked about it," says Takahashi. He took his children to visit Manzanar 25 years ago, but his parents had no interest in joining him. The camp, he found, was a mystery. "There was nothing there," says Takahashi.

The government’s apology in 1988 began to change that. Former internees finally felt they could hold their heads up. "I started talking about it more openly only when my grandkids grew," says Abe, now 82. "They would ask me all these questions, and I began telling them about it. It wasn’t pleasant. It wasn’t pleasant at all."

A desolate place. Conversation slowly turned to action. In 1992, Manzanar became the first camp to be named a National Historic Site, protected and administered by the National Park Service. Jeff Burton, a park service archaeologist, remembers being surprised to find how desolate the place was. "The park just had a plaque; that was it," says Burton. "You could drive anywhere you wanted. People were cutting down trees for firewood; there were cattle all over the place."

The other sites, he wrote in a report in 1999, were no better. The two camps in Arkansas, apart from a few outbuildings, had mostly vanished. Granada and Topaz had their watchtower foundations. Stone sentry posts still stood at Minidoka, along with the fire station. A few buildings remained from Heart Mountain’s hospital complex. The jail at Tule Lake, the camp where "disloyals" who failed the loyalty questionnaire were sent, sat abandoned in a highway maintenance yard.
Burton's findings inspired renewed preservation efforts across the camp system. At Manzanar, a reconstructed guard tower now looks over the camp, as does a WWII-era mess hall. An interpretive center with a state-of-the-art museum opened in 2004. Progress has been slower at the other camps. Bill Clinton declared Minidoka a National Monument, but the site still lacks visitor services. Most of the other camps have been designated National Historic Landmarks. The Tule Lake jail is now fenced in, but local preservation groups, there and elsewhere, are scrambling to fund their efforts to buy land or build museums.

Because the camps were deliberately built in the middle of nowhere, drawing visitors to the sites may be difficult. Still, some are more accessible than others; Heart Mountain, for example, is only about 50 miles from the entrance to Yellowstone National Park. A local group is working to raise funds to build an interpretive center on the site. "When I first heard this [internment] story, it absolutely floored me," says David Reetz, 62, president of the Heart Mountain, Wyoming Foundation. "I had no idea this confinement had taken place right in my own backyard." Reetz, who estimates that more than 80 percent of people he meets "don't know this happened," is determined to leave the site as a reminder.

Japanese-American groups in Washington have been pushing for a more comprehensive preservation plan. The bill signed by Bush in 2006 authorized funds for everything from oral history projects to the physical reconstruction of camp buildings. But funding is still stuck in a House subcommittee, staff members say, caught up in a broader, election-year spending tussle between the White House and Congress. Some political experts believe no appropriations will be made until next year.

The internees, meanwhile, are waiting. Ernie Takahashi, for one, is still hopeful more can be done to protect what's left of the camps while they are still here. "Coming back here was a personal journey for me," he says. "It's a powerful place. You have to see it to believe it." Whether others will be able to make the same journey remains to be seen.