By Clara Breed

When her Japanese-American patrons were sent to internment camps after the attack on Pearl Harbor, San Diego children’s librarian Clara Breed wrote the following article for The Horn Book.

A little more than a year ago, libraries in California, Oregon, and Washington were swept clean of some of their most enthusiastic borrowers — Americans whose parents, grandparents or great-grandparents happened to emigrate from the wrong country, Japan. They were not a large part of the population. There are only 135,000 Japanese in the whole country, and only 100,000 were living on the West Coast. Of these, two-thirds were American-born and therefore citizens; one-third aliens who under our laws could never become citizens.

The older generation, the Issei who were born in Japan, we knew only as one knows the vegetable man at the corner grocery or the gardener who comes once a week to cut the lawn. They spoke English badly, and since we did not speak Japanese, most of us conversed with them in a kind of one-syllabled baby talk, raising our voices higher and higher as if increased volume would bring increased comprehension. They were quiet, respectful, law-abiding, and patient; they worked hard and uncomplainingly, paid their taxes, and raised large families of well-behaved immaculate children. We knew very little of their thoughts or dreams or loyalties.

Even the younger generation, the American-born Nisei, were not well known to many people, because they lived in tight little communities held together by economic and social walls as difficult to scale as Jim Crowism in the South. In San Diego 2500 Japanese were concentrated in the downtown district and in Logan Heights, on the “wrong side” of Broadway, or lived in farming communities. They used only one of San Diego’s thirteen branch libraries, attended only three of our forty-three elementary schools. This same segregation has always been true of the Chinese population.
Librarians and educators probably knew the Japanese Americans best, for they were students and readers, spending long hours at the library bent over encyclopedias or searching through the Reader’s Guide for the last elusive bit of material for a term paper. Brought up in a tradition of respect-for-elders, their manners were in sharp contrast to the rest of high school youth. How much their intelligence was sharpened by discrimination is hard to estimate, but they often took high scholastic honors and were popular enough with their fellow students to hold student body presidencies. A high proportion went to college where they studied art, engineering, law, or medicine. A high proportion showed creative talent — in art, in literature, and in aeronautical engineering.

Taste in reading is always an individual matter, but in general they preferred quality to trash. A vivid memory is of slant-eyed little boys reading Anglo-Saxon classics — Beowulf and Robin Hood and King Arthur. Alice in Wonderland, however, was a puzzle to them; they did not have that kind of humor. Older girls read the career stories with the same interest that other girls brought them, and all the boys were aviation enthusiasts. Noticeable was a marked avoidance of stories laid in Japan, which contrasted with the Chinese children’s deep interest in stories with Chinese backgrounds. McNeer’s Prince Bantam, Lafcadio Hearn’s Japanese Fairy Tales, and the Williston collections would have gathered dust on the shelves if other children of other racial backgrounds had not read them. Only a few older girls read Sugimoto, and only one girl in my fifteen years of experience with Nisei sought out not only the Daughter of the Samurai, but Baroness Ishimoto’s East Way, West Way, Kiyooka’s Chiyo’s Return, and slender volumes of Japanese poetry. The rest of the young people turned their backs firmly on the land of their
ancestors; they felt no identity with it; they considered themselves American, and they were American in everything but looks.

The gulf that always exists between foreign parents and their American children was accentuated in the case of Japanese Americans because of a too-wide age difference between the generations. Fathers were old enough to be grandfathers. This was because Japanese emigration to this country was at its height in the early 1900s, but the men who came to this country then had to wait to earn money enough to send to Japan for their wives or “picture brides,” so they were middle-aged before they had children of their own. One college girl wrote from a relocation center that evacuation had given her a chance for the first time in her life to become acquainted with her father.

Although the children were sent to Japanese school four days a week after public school was over, they went reluctantly and seem to have learned as little as possible of the Japanese language and traditions. If they visited Japan, they felt out of place and disapproved-of by their relatives, uncomfortable and ill at ease, awkward in speech and manners, and they returned to the United States with deep thankfulness to be home again.

One other cause of polite but nevertheless real and deep disagreement between the generations was the fact that the young people, educated in American schools, had no sympathy with Japan’s war with China. The older generation, goaded by sons who believed that everything the United States did was right and everything Japan did was wrong, were driven either to defend the Japanese policy or to attempt to explain it, or to point out skeletons in U. S. A. closets — the enforcement of the Open Door policy on Japan by Admiral Perry’s guns perhaps, or a certain change in government in Panama maneuvered by Theodore Roosevelt to expedite building of the Panama Canal. This was so delicate a subject that in many families it could not be discussed at all.

Then came Pearl Harbor. The news was a profound shock to the Little Tokyos. Mothers spent the next few days in tears while they watched their lives crumble around them. Fishermen were arrested as they stepped ashore from their boats. Japanese restaurants and stores were suddenly empty of customers, vegetable markets were deserted, gardeners were told that their services were no longer needed, a fruit market was stormed and wrecked by hoodlums. The Chinese broke out in a rash of buttons and printed signs that dangled ostentatiously from their shoulders reading “I am Chinese,” evidence of their fear that they too might be the victims of mob violence since few people even claim to be able to tell the difference between a Chinese and a Japanese.

There were instances of friendship, too. On December 8th at the Grantville School a Mexican girl named Julietta Buelna chose an assistant to help in the salute to the flag — Ayako Yamada. She said she did it because the war was not Ayako’s fault. A passerby who saw hoodlums overturning bins of fruit and vegetables jumped into the fray to defend the Japanese proprietor, whom he had never seen before, and was injured in the fight.

Day after day more and more fathers were arrested by the F. B. I. and sent east to internment camps within forty-eight hours, so that there was hardly time for a hurried shopping expedition for warm sweaters and woolen socks against the Montana cold. No hearings were held on the Coast because of public hysteria. Arrests were swift and sudden and included everyone who had knowledge of the coastline or waterfront, or who had made regular trips to Japan, or had been a member of a Japanese society. Meanwhile the young Japanese Americans collected money for the destitute, acted as interpreters for the F. B. I. and the immigration authorities, and helped in the alien registration. Their cooperation has been repeatedly praised by government authorities.

The children came to the library more than ever, but they came in groups as if there were safety in numbers. Little Jack Watanabe, whose fat cheeks always reminded us of a chipmunk’s stuffed full of nuts, lost his merriment and became as solemn as an old man, although he still preferred funny books like Augustus and the River and The Five Hundred Hats of Bartholomew Cubbins. Katherine Tasaki no longer danced around the library but walked soberly, and even her Chinese friends — for Japanese children do sometimes have Chinese friends — seemed to share her sorrow.

“We've got to move soon,” she explained. “All Japs you know.”
When the children came to the San Diego library to return their books and surrender their cards we gave them stamped postal cards. “Write to us. We’ll want to know where you are and how you are getting along, and we’ll send you some books to read.” “OK,” they answered with a brief brightening of sober little faces, or, “Oh boy!” It was our review copies we meant to send them, to tide them over until some kind of library service could be established, for no children love to read so much or would miss books so keenly if they were deprived of them.

On the day the Japanese left, we went down to the station to say goodbye and to distribute more postal cards to the children we had missed. The scene was unforgettable. The station was packed, the platform overflowing, but there was no confusion, not a baby cried, not a voice was lifted in irritation or complaint. The boys were all dressed in boots and dungarees and plaid shirts, while the girls with their slender figures managed to look dainty and feminine in slacks. Babies were delectable in soft pink and blue, while one little toddler in trousers and coat of bright red looked like an animated doll. The soldiers, who seemed to have been chosen for their height, towered above the crowd, but their authority was courteous and considerate and one saw in their faces honest American interest in the human spectacle, and sympathy for the participants. Only at the very last, when the procession had filed slowly toward the train, did one old woman break down and sob uncontrollably.

Between April and June the Japanese who were left in the Western States, after the F. B. I. had interned those suspected of subversive activities, were all moved to temporary “assembly centers” where they remained for about six months until the “relocation centers” under the War Relocation Authority were ready for occupancy. Libraries and schools were opened immediately in these temporary centers, the books in many cases being discards donated by public libraries or gifts from individuals or church groups, the librarians and teachers college-trained evacuées. In some cases inter-library loans were set up so that books could be borrowed on such subjects as toy-making, the raising of guayule, or how to conduct a symphony orchestra. In spite of these attempts to provide library service it was hopelessly inadequate. A fourth-grade girl wrote:

We have a library now. But they have magazines like Colliers, Life, Radio Screen, and a few old-fashioned books. I think the best magazine is the Geographic. I am reading Robinson Crusoe right now. Each person is allowed 4 books. I have 3 Look magazines. The only thing I like about them are the questions (Photoquiz). . . . I wish I could see you and the library, and just finish my card. I sure do miss the library.

The emotional shock of evacuation was hardest on the young people, who were strong believers in democracy and had never really believed that evacuation could happen to them. The old people accepted it with fatalism, and the children quickly adapted themselves to the longer hours of play and the community living without questioning very much the reasons behind this upheaval in their lives. Emotional tensions, crowded conditions, the lack of work and lack of privacy provoked clashes between pro-Axis sympathizers and the loyal young people who were constantly taunted with the fact that their citizenship was meaningless since it did not guarantee them liberty. High barbed-wire fences, searchlights that played over roof tops at night, the presence of armed guards at the gates, increased the feeling of being in prison. Morale was often at low ebb.

A college graduate wrote:

With becoming accustomed to camp life, I have also been getting unutterably bored. One gets such a feeling of insideness as compared to the life outside. One’s perspective becomes so one-dimensional that there seems to be a timelessness about the time we have been here. There seems to have been no life previous to the one we are now living, there seems to be no future, there seems to be no war…

Two afternoons a week I teach adult English. I have a class of twelve students, half of whom are alien
Japanese and half American citizens who have had their training in Japan. The oldest is 65 and the youngest 15. I teach Americanism in all sorts of ways. No flag-waving because I cannot stand that, but I try to make them face the problems of this war, the cause of it and our part in the war effort. I get quite discouraged and wonder if after all my rhetoric we will find when the war is over that my words were only fine words after all — that this is not a war for the right of little peoples to live in freedom and equality, that the oppression of the minority will always be with us. Whenever I think that, however, I think again, if that happens it will be in some measure my fault, because I did not fight hard enough, and I go on teaching.

The move to the permanent relocation centers took place between October and December. Conditions are still primitive, living quarters crowded, but libraries and schools are now established on a more permanent basis. Books are available for children through the schools, which have small book funds, and through public libraries. A letter describing the Poston Free Library can probably be considered typical of library service to evacueées in ten relocation centers:

The library is in a barrack, 100 feet long and 20 feet wide which is not adequate for a city of our size. The shelves were made from scrap lumber. . . . The books in the library are donations from people in our camp, and . . . from considerate friends. . . . Many of the discarded books were received in bad condition, and a great deal of time was spent in making them suitable for circulation. At present we have approximately 5,000 volumes. Due to lack of material only one book and one magazine is issued per card for seven days with no renewal privileges.

We have a large library membership. In our camp of 10,000 people a total of 3,239 membership cards have been issued to date. Of this group 1,719 are “J” cards issued to those students who have not graduated from High Schools; 1,520 cards have been issued to adults. Because of the lack of recreational facilities, the people of this community are constantly using the library. Last month our total circulation was 6,010.

We have only two sources of borrowing books by special request. The Riverside Junior College will lend books to their former students. The Arizona State Library has consented to let us use a few special books for a limited time. The California State Library has refused to lend us books because we are out of their jurisdiction.

The selections of books in the children and the junior section are satisfactory, but the choice in the adult non-fiction is not adequate, especially in the department of Useful Arts. There is also a definite need for books which deal with current world problems.

Morale in the camps has definitely improved, according to my correspondence. One factor has been the gradual, cautious release of carefully selected young people to attend middle western colleges or to take jobs. This policy deserves the support of all intelligent people, for these young people have committed no crime except to have the wrong ancestors, and their loyalty must be vouched for by at least two Caucasians. The year just past has given the W. R. A. plenty of time to sift the loyal from the disloyal. Carey McWilliams estimates that 80–85% of the young people are loyal.
Another more powerful boost to morale has been the War Department’s decision to organize a Japanese American combat unit of volunteers. To the young people who have lived through this last difficult year without losing faith in America, this seems a vindication of their faith. They want a chance to fight for their country, to fight for democracy, perhaps to die for it.

But what of the future? The W. R. A. is attempting to extend its policy of relocating the Japanese where communities can be found willing to accept them. They are good workers and should be able to contribute substantial help to the war effort. Perhaps they can be scattered over the United States, the Little Tokyos forever broken up. This can only be done if they are accepted as American citizens. They must not only be given a chance to walk our streets, live in our neighborhoods, eat in our restaurants, shop in our stores, and attend our colleges, but they must be given a chance to enter the professions.

There are those who say that Japanese descendants will never be allowed to return to the West Coast. If this is true, California and Oregon and Washington will be the losers, for there are among these Japanese Americans young people of ideals and courage and creative imagination, young people who may some day be great sculptors, great doctors, great scientists. Some of them could help to interpret East to West, and that interpretation will be needed when the war is over.

Joseph Grew, formerly Ambassador to Japan, has said that Americans of Japanese ancestry are an "invaluable element in our population." In a letter congratulating the War Department for its decision to recruit Japanese Americans in a combat unit, President Roosevelt wrote, “The principle on which this country was founded and by which it has always been governed is that Americanism is a matter of the mind and heart; Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry.”
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