Letters from Home:  
Love and Friendship in Times of War

WITH BOOKS AND MORAL SUPPORT, A CHILDREN'S LIBRARIAN HELPED YOUNG JAPANESE AMERICANS ENDURE INTERNMENT DURING WORLD WAR II

By Kathy Brady

Librarians celebrate the power of the written word and its ability to change lives. Whether rallying against censorship or finding the perfect book for a reluctant or burgeoning reader, library professionals have a rich history of helping people through the written word.

There is perhaps no more poignant example of this kind of dedication than the story of Clara Estelle Breed, children's librarian at the San Diego Public Library during World War II. Miss Breed, as she was known to her young patrons, knew and loved the many Japanese-American children in her library's service area. On April 8, 1942, she went to the San Diego train station armed with self-addressed, stamped postcards to give to those children as they, with their families, were sent away to internment camps.

In response to the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, establishing "military areas" on the West Coast from which "any or all persons" could be excluded—the first step in the eventual relocation of as many as 120,000 Japanese Americans from the West Coast to inland camps.

For internees far away from their homes, the delivery of U.S. mail served as a crucial tie to the outside world. Miss Breed received more than 250 letters detailing her young patrons' experiences and day-to-day life in the Poston Relocation Center in the Arizona desert. She treasured these letters and continued to correspond with many of the former internees after the end of the war until her death in 1994 at age 88. Miss Breed gave her cherished collection to one of her correspondents, Elizabeth Yamada, who donated it to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles.

It was because of this generous donation that the world got a glimpse of the powerful relationship between a librarian and "her" children. Digital exhibits, including transcripts of some of the letters, tell Miss Breed's story on Web sites of the Japanese American National Museum (www.janm.org/breed/title.htm) and the Smithsonian National Postal Museum (www.si.edu/postal/far/exhibit.html), and her story was featured on the May 9, 2001, edition of National Public Radio's Morning Edition (www.npr.org/programs/morning/features/2001/may/010509.japanesecamp.html) as well.

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Even in play, the mail was an important part of camp life. Here, first graders play post office at the Manzanar Relocation Center in California.

Although the children were often frustrated by their experiences in the camps, patriotism was a recurring theme in many of their letters. The older boys spoke of their eagerness to enlist, and the difficulties endured were often viewed as contributions to the war effort. After describing the terrible dust and heat in an August 27, 1942, letter, Louise Ogawa wrote, If American soldiers can endure hardships, so can we!

The children spoke of kinship with the American soldiers. On December 23, 1943, Tetsuzo Hirakawa wrote, Now I know how soldiers feel about mail. We certainly crowded around when mail was issued. The joy of receiving and the disappointment of not receiving. Mail was food for morale.

Miss Breed became a master at boosting morale through her own letters and packages. She sent needed items including clothing and household goods, but nothing brought greater joy than the shipment of books. Margaret Ishino wrote on April 23, 1942, I certainly love books and miss going to the library every week, so I decided to write you a letter. . . . If you happen to have any discarded books, Florence and I would certainly appreciate them. Please keep up the good work in teaching children to read books for that is the pathway to happiness.

But far beyond the material goods she sent, Miss Breed let the children know there were still people outside the camps who believed in them. Although the internment camps offered schools and social events, the truth of their imprisonment was hard to ignore. Louise Ogawa wrote, In my last letter, I said the fence was torn down—well, it is up again. . . . We have been told that the reason for the fence building was so that the cattle won't come near our homes. In other words cattle is going to be grazed outside the fence. But as yet we have not seen any. Yes, I think the fence tends to weaken the morale of the people.

The letters provided support not only during the internment but when it was time to go back to a “normal” way of life. On January 14, 1945, Fusa Tsumagari captured the ambivalent feelings of the internees as they faced returning home. The news of being able to go back to California has been accepted with mingled feeling. First of all, we're more than glad that the ban has been lifted, as rightly it should be. Those with property are wanting to go back, but wondering how the sentiment will be. Of course we know good friends like you will be glad to have us back but others who do not know us or understand us may not be glad to see us.

Miss Breed did more than correspond with the children and send supplies. She also served as a public advocate, speaking out against what she saw as a great injustice. In the article “All But Blind,” an essay on the plight of the Japanese-American children, in the February 1, 1943, edition of Library Journal, Miss Breed wrote:

To the children and young people of Japanese ancestry, however, born in this country and educated in our schools, the war came like a hurricane, sweeping away their security, their friends, their jobs, sometimes their fathers into internment camps, and finally, their schools and homes and liberty. . . . Even the littlest children came soberly to the Library to turn in their library cards, explaining, We're moving away soon. "We don't know when. All Japs, you know."