

# **schools behind barbed wire**



During World War II the United States government undertook an unusual educational enterprise—teaching students who were imprisoned behind barbed wire by order of the president of the United States “an understanding of American ideals, institutions and practices.”<sup>1</sup> This undertaking was an outcome of Franklin Roosevelt’s Executive Order No. 9066 of February, 1942, which required all people of Japanese descent living on the Pacific coast of the United States to move to internment camps, called “relocation centers,” in the interior of the country. Because the blanket order applied to children as well as adults and to United States citizens as well as aliens, over 70,000 of the more than 110,000 evacuees were California residents, and the majority were American-born Nisei (second-generation Japanese).

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This article developed from the author’s new book, *All Deliberate Speed: Segregation and Exclusion in California Schools, 1855–1975*, copyright 1976 by The Regents of the University of California, printed by permission of the University of California Press.

The bureaucracy of the War Relocation Agency (WRA) which operated the camps—eventually numbering ten and scattered throughout the United States—thus found itself responsible for the education of more than 25,000 Japanese-American children, most of them former students of California public schools. Almost overnight, the WRA had to create an educational system equivalent in size to that of a small city. By the very nature of the relocation, that system was completely racially segregated.

In these camps the great mass of California’s Nisei students experienced school segregation for the first time. Once before, in 1906, San Francisco had tried unsuccessfully to force Japanese pupils to attend an “oriental school” originally established for Chinese students; however, Japanese parents stoutly refused to obey such a segregation policy and withdrew their children from the public schools. When the parents subsequently informed Tokyo newspapers about the dispute, the resulting publicity precipitated a diplomatic crisis between Japan and the United States.

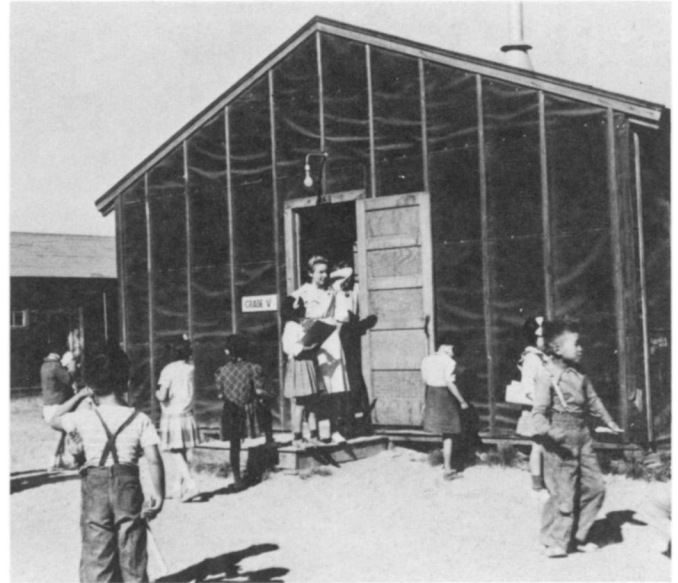
*Remote Modoc County's Tule Lake Relocation Center (left) became a "segregation center" for troublemakers, "renunciants,"—and 3,800 schoolchildren. Wood and tarpaper construction characterized most camp buildings, including the classrooms for these fifth graders.*

Finally, President Theodore Roosevelt intervened by forcing the San Francisco School Board to re-admit the Japanese to public schools.<sup>2</sup> (Chinese students, however, continued to be segregated.) After this experience, few other California communities openly attempted to follow San Francisco's lead in segregation. Only four small Sacramento County school districts ever enforced a formal segregation policy against Japanese after 1906.<sup>3</sup>

By 1930 about 30,000 Nisei children were attending integrated California schools, and by that time the Japanese-American students had achieved an impressive scholastic record. Their parents had been among the best educated immigrant groups ever to arrive in the United States; not only did they have long experience with public education in Japan, but they also strongly believed that schooling promoted economic and social well-being. Motivated by such values, in 1930 the average Californian of Japanese ancestry over twenty years of age had completed twelve years of education—considerably more than the general population. In fact, Dr. Reginald Bell of Stanford University found that in California's secondary schools, Nisei pupils achieved significantly more grades of *A* and *B*, and fewer grades of *C*, *D*, and *F*, than white students.<sup>4</sup> According to Dr. Harry Kitano, furthermore, California teachers had formed a stereotype of the "ideal Japanese child and his wonderful cooperative parents." Indeed, one Los Angeles educator proclaimed, "We always like to have one or two Japanese children in our classes as an example to the other children. . . ."<sup>5</sup>

With this background, the WRA firmly believed from its first days that the education of Japanese-American children, who began arriving at the relocation centers in late March of 1942, should continue uninterrupted. To that end, school programs and facilities were hurriedly slapped together during the summer months of 1942. By September eight of the original ten camp schools were in session.

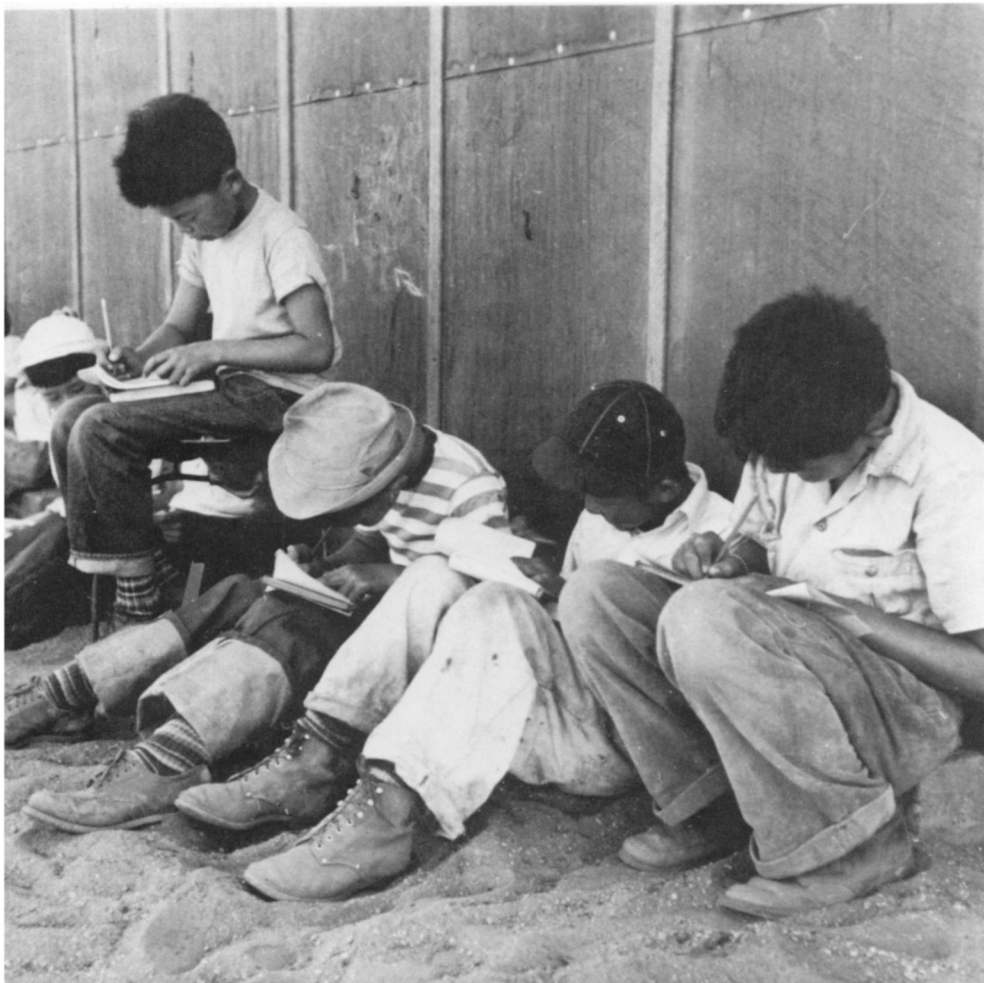
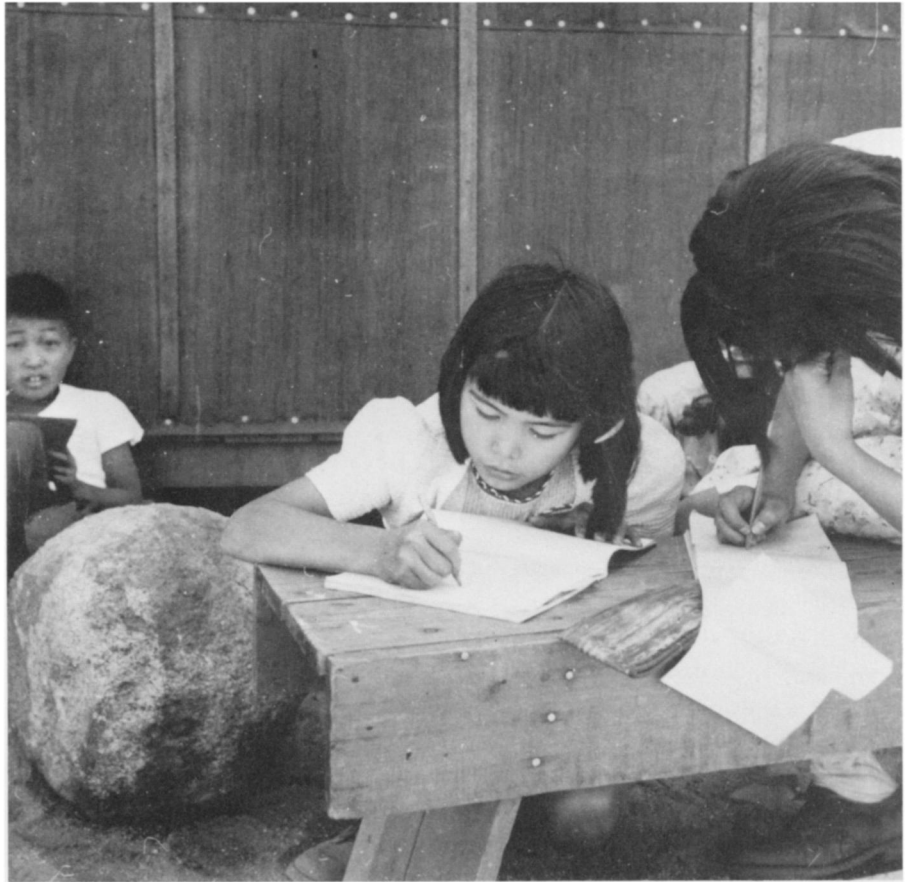
In the new schools, however, normal operations were



not easily maintained. In Manzanar, located 300 miles from Los Angeles in the Owens Valley east of the Sierra Nevada, classes opened in "unpartitioned recreational barracks without any lining on the walls or heat of any kind." Within two days a cold wave combined with dust storms at the center had forced the schools to close until the barracks could be lined and stoves could be installed.<sup>6</sup>

Initially, moreover, severe shortages of textbooks, instructional equipment, and even furniture plagued the fledgling schools. According to a WRA report, "In the first weeks many of the children had no desks or chairs and for the most part were obliged to sit on the floor. . . ."<sup>7</sup> Originally, the WRA had anticipated that the state would officially recognize schools in the two California camps, Manzanar and Tule Lake (in northeastern California's Modoc County), as part of the regular California school system—and therefore make the facilities eligible for state textbooks and financial aid. This arrangement, however, was soon ruled illegal by State Attorney General Earl Warren. Thereafter the Manzanar and Tule

*Although employed by the WRA, Dorothea Lange photographed the grim school conditions, including outdoor classes in the everpresent dust at Manzanar before classrooms were completed in 1942.*



Lake schools, like those in other western states, remained under federal control. Although the Los Angeles Board of Education donated thousands of used books which helped relieve textbook shortages, the schools never gained sufficient instructional materials and equipment, particularly for shop and laboratory classes.<sup>8</sup>

Camp schools also suffered from a shortage of qualified teachers. At first, the WRA determinedly set out to hire only people who were eligible to obtain teaching credentials in the particular state in which the camp was located. By 1943 the agency had managed to secure 557 white teachers and about twenty-five Japanese evacuee teachers, but the WRA never attracted enough qualified faculty to the desolate camp sites. Hundreds of evacuee teaching assistants had to be hired to help in the classrooms.<sup>9</sup>

Despite shortages of equipment and teachers, by the spring of 1943, schools were in full operation at all camps. A total of 25,585 children were enrolled in the system, 10,893 of them in elementary schools (grades kindergarten through six). Of the two California camps, Tule Lake had the largest enrollment, nearly 3,800 students, while Manzanar had about 2,100. In addition, the WRA opened extensive adult education and nursery school programs at all camps.<sup>10</sup>

**A**ll internment camp schools were planned in accordance with the best precepts of “progressive education”—as understood by WRA bureaucrats.<sup>11</sup> Lester Ade, agency director of education, defined the main purpose of the schools as preparing students “for reabsorption into normal community life and for return to outside schools.” With an eye to the future, the WRA took pains to insure that its schools were accredited by the states in which the centers were located and that full college preparatory curricula were established at all

camp high schools. Ade ambitiously envisioned that the schools would become community centers, a “background for community participation of various types . . . an institution with which people were familiar, and which served as a connecting link with the cherished past. . . .” With these goals in mind, the WRA encouraged formation of local Parent Teacher Association chapters and established parental advisory boards, but at the same time the camp authorities firmly maintained actual control of the schools.<sup>12</sup>

For the students camp schools encouraged a full range of activities. Student government (“to permit participation in the democratic process”), athletic and debating teams, drama, art, and music programs all functioned as they might in any large American school system.<sup>13</sup> In an account of school life at Manzanar, for instance, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston recalled that in the camp’s high school yearbook, *Our World*, pictures showed “school kids with armloads of books, wearing cardigan sweaters and walking past rows of tar paper shacks. You see chubby girl yell-leaders, pom-poms flying as they leap with glee. You read about the school play called *Growing Pains* . . . the story of a typical American home . . . with Soji Katamayer as George McIntyre, Takuda Ando as Terry McIntyre and Mrs. McIntyre played by Kigako Nagai. . . .”<sup>14</sup>

The contradictions between the progressive ideals taught at these “typical” American schools on the one hand and the realities of camp life, barbed wire, and armed guards on the other did not escape Nisei students. When school opened at the camp in Rohner, Arkansas, in September, 1942, a student chalked the words “Jap Prison” on the tar paper wall.<sup>15</sup> Young people, particularly Kibei (American-born children educated in Japan), formed protest movements against both the WRA administrators and those Japanese American Citizens League leaders who cooperated with WRA authorities. Their protests intensified in 1943 after the government distributed questionnaires which in effect asked evacuees

to declare allegiance to the United States. Most camp residents willingly signed these loyalty oaths, but several thousand refused and were transferred with their families to Tule Lake, the California camp which became a “segregation center” for “renunciants” and other “troublemakers.”<sup>16</sup>

The new status of Tule Lake, marked by massive movements of people in and out of the camp, continually disrupted its educational program. Some of the most militant “renunciants” pulled their children out of WRA institutions and began independent Japanese language schools. They elected a board to run these schools and instituted a major campaign to persuade other Tule Lake parents to send their children to the new institutions.

Unlike earlier Japanese language schools in California, the Tule Lake institutions sought to prepare children to return to Japan after the war, and one was appropriately named “The Greater East Asia Co-Prosperty School.” At the beginning of 1945, language school enrollment at Tule Lake peaked at 4,300, while the WRA schools claimed only 2,300 children, although there were many dual enrollments. By the summer of 1945, however, a reaction against the militant leaders apparently set in among Tule Lake parents, and language school enrollment began to drop. Responding to this pressure, the Japanese school board became more cooperative with camp authorities, and the Greater East Asia school was re-named the Tule Lake Language School. Nevertheless, after the war, more than 2,000 Tule Lake residents reaffirmed their original objective and chose to be repatriated to Japan.<sup>17</sup>

As fears of a Japanese invasion waned in the last years of the war, the WRA began encouraging evacuees to leave the camps and resettle in areas outside of the West Coast zone. Accordingly, WRA schools provided students with information on the resettlement program to take home to their parents, and adult and vocational courses were organized to prepare residents for the end

of camp life. By early 1945, approximately 3,000 children of resettled parents had left camp schools, and the total WRA school enrollment by the end of the spring semester of 1945 was about 5,000 less than it had been in the fall of 1944.<sup>18</sup>

In fact, the success of this resettlement program, together with the impending end of the war, convinced WRA officials not to reopen the schools in September, 1945—except at Tule Lake. Some parents protested this decision, claiming that they needed many months to resettle or return home, months in which their children would be deprived of valuable education.<sup>19</sup> Student opinion, however, was probably best expressed by a photograph in *Valedictorian 1945*, Manzanar High School’s last yearbook, which showed a hand squeezing wire cutters clamped on a piece of barbed wire.<sup>20</sup>

In retrospect, camp schools and the rhetoric concerning community participation and democratic ideals can be viewed as flagrant examples of institutional hypocrisy. The facilities, equipment, materials, and probably many of the teachers were second-rate at best. Even so, at least one alumnus, Professor Harry Kitano of the University of California, Los Angeles, believes that this first experience with segregated schooling stimulated Nisei students in some ways. For the first time these young Japanese Americans had a chance to be the “big man” or “most popular girl” on campus. Experiencing this prominence allowed them to develop the self-confidence and assertiveness that had been stifled in regular public schools. Some good teachers, too, provided genuine learning experiences for their students. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston remembers a Manzanar teacher who was “probably the best teacher I’ve ever had—strict, fair-minded, dedicated to her job. Because of her, I was, academically at least, more than prepared to keep up with my peers.”<sup>22</sup>

The return of the Nisei to California public schools after World War II was frequently a difficult social, if not educational, process. But throughout the state, it was a

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*The WRA attempted to maintain a semblance of regular public school activity and ceremony in the camp schools. Behind barbed wire, a Topaz junior high student addressed her graduating class in 1943, and Tule Lake drum majorettes performed to raise money for a 1944 school yearbook.*

*The WRA encouraged camp athletic events and allowed the 1943 Topaz football team to play against the white public high school team at Fillmore. Topaz won the game.*





*Evacuees dart from building to building  
as a firmly planted American flag crackles  
in the hot windstorm raising dust from the  
desert surrounding Manzanar. Photograph  
by Dorothea Lange.*



process that occurred in an integrated setting. By 1962 Dr. Kitano found that the assimilation of Japanese American students was proceeding rapidly, with the result that their academic achievement and grade-point average had declined slightly from that of the pre-war years. According to Kitano, "With the breakdown of the ethnic community and increasing opportunities to participate in the broader one, the behaviors of the group are changing from typically Japanese to American. The current Sansei (third) generation offers an example where behaviors are now approaching the American middle class in terms of achievement and social participation."<sup>23</sup>

In the 1970's some Sansei youth are rejecting assimilation and seeking an identity in an Asian American or "Third World" context. But it remains true that no immigrant group has more effectively taken advantage of public school education than the Japanese. While excellence in educational achievement was often gained at great psychological and cultural cost, academic achievement allowed the Nisei to offset to some degree the crippling blows American society dealt them. In this achievement the WRA schools played an important role. Relocation shattered home and family life, but public school life, however fraught with contradictions and hypocrisy, continued in the camps. Education provided a link and an avenue of return to life outside the barbed wire walls.

Back in 1906, during the San Francisco school segregation controversy, Goroku Ikeda of the Japanese Association claimed that Japanese children were "endeavoring to assimilate themselves" and "obtain an education so that they might be good citizens."<sup>24</sup> Forty years later, as they emerged from the internment camps, most Nisei remained committed to those goals.

Photographs are from the Bancroft Library's copies of the War Relocation Agency files at the National Archives, Washington, D.C.

## Notes

1. United States War Relocation Agency, *Education in War Relocation Centers* (Washington, 1945), pp. 1, 12.
2. For accounts of the San Francisco dispute, see Thomas Bailey, *Theodore Roosevelt and the Japanese American Crisis* (Stanford, 1934) and Roger Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice: the Anti-Japanese Movement in California and the Struggle for Japanese Exclusion* (New York, 1970).
3. Reginald Bell, *Public School Education of Second Generation Japanese in California* (Stanford, 1934), pp. 65-67 and Edward Strong, *The Second Generation Japanese Problem* (Stanford, 1934), pp. 199-201.
4. Bell, *Public School*, 37-60; Strong, *Second Generation*, 186.
5. Harry H. C. Kitano, *Japanese Americans: Evolution of A Subculture* (Englewood Cliffs, 1969), pp. 23-24; Gretchen Tuthill, "A Study of the Japanese in the City of Los Angeles," (M.A. Thesis, University of Southern California, 1924), p. 87; Strong, *Second Generation*, 179.
6. United States War Relocation Authority (WRA), *Second Quarterly Report* (Washington, 1942), pp. 17-18.
7. *Quarterly Report: October 1 to December 31, 1942* (Washington, 1943), p. 14.
8. WRA, *First Quarterly Report* (Washington, 1942), p. 27; *Second Quarterly Report*, 30.
9. WRA, *Semi-Annual Report: January 1 to June 30, 1943* (Washington, 1943), p. 30.
10. *Ibid.*
11. Dorothy Swaine Thomas, *The Spoilage* (Berkeley, 1946), p. 37.
12. WRA, *Education Program in War Relocation Centers* (Washington, 1945), pp. 1-2.
13. *Ibid.*, 1, 12; WRA, *Semi-Annual Report January 1-June 30, 1944* (Washington, 1944), pp. 39-40.
14. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (Boston, 1973), p. 87.
15. Edward Spicer, *et. al.*, *Impounded People* (Tucson, 1959), p. 123.
16. *Ibid.*, 180.
17. *Ibid.*, 180, 275; WRA, *Semi-Annual Reports July 1-December 31, 1943*, p. 74; *January 1-June 30, 1945*, pp. 37, 52-53.
18. WRA, *Semi-Annual Reports, January 1-June 30, 1944*, p. 40; *January 1-June 30, 1945*, pp. 37-38.
19. Spicer, *Impounded*, 246.
20. Houston, *Farewell*, 115.
21. Kitano, *Japanese Americans*, 38.
22. Houston, *Farewell*, 90.
23. Kitano, "Changing Achievement Patterns of the Japanese in the United States" *Journal of Social Psychology* (December, 1962), pp. 263-264.
24. *San Francisco Chronicle*, October 19, 1906.