

WWII Japanese Internment Camps: Using Primary Resources

See a lesson plan related to this material on the Wisconsin Historical Society website.

Background Sheet



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The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 resulted in the United States declaring war against the Axis Powers (Germany, Italy, and Japan). Many Americans feared that information was reaching the Japanese through individuals of Japanese ancestry living in the United States, especially on the West coast. This resulted in increased hostilities towards people of Japanese ancestry.

In February of 1942 President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 establishing military zones on the West coast and authorizing the removal of citizens of Japanese descent from these designated areas. To assist in the relocation the War Relocation Authority (WRA) was created. Both Nisei (United States citizens with immigrant Japanese Parents) and Issei (Japanese immigrants) were forced to evacuate their homes and relocate to camps inland. They could only bring what they could carry and had to leave many possessions and property behind. Individuals were divided between ten camps located in California, Idaho, Utah, Arkansas, Wyoming, Arizona, and Colorado.

The camps all had a similar structure with barbed wire and guard towers surrounding the perimeter. The camps operated like a small town with schools, hospitals, theaters, newspapers, and consumer enterprises operated by the detainees. With four or five families assigned to a barrack, the facilities the people were forced to occupy were crowded with little privacy. The barracks also lacked cooking and plumbing facilities. Food was served cafeteria style at the mess hall while bath, toilet, and laundry were shared by a block of barracks of approximately 250 people.

The detainees were encouraged to be productive and work but were restricted in their mobility outside the camp. Other activities forbidden in the camps were Japanese language schools. Many Japanese Americans remained imprisoned until 1944 when they were allowed to return to the homes they left years before.