

## College Nisei Students: The Advanced Guard to Acculturation

Fumio Robert Naka, Frank Kaoru Inami, and Toshiko Okamoto are typical of the several thousand Japanese American Nisei students who relocated from internment camps to attend colleges outside the West Coast during World War II. Born to Issei parents, each grew up in or near Japanese neighborhoods, attended American schools, and were U.S. citizens. Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor and with the implementation of Executive Order 9066, they found their lives changing in ways they never imagined possible. Their experiences were shared during interviews conducted by the Institute for Asian American Studies at the University of Massachusetts in 2011.

Naka was attending the University of California in Los Angeles when his studies were interrupted by the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. When he and his family were sent to the Manzanar War Relocation Center in California, Naka was resigned to finishing college after the war. This changed when the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council and the American Friends Service Committee arranged for him to attend the University of Missouri. This opportunity came with mixed feelings from his Issei parents, but his mother argued, "...If he stays here, he's as good as dead." She recognized that his options at camp were limited, so it would be better to leave and continue his education. There were several other Nisei students who attended the university, but none were singled out as being different. Naka noted the Midwest was isolated from the events of the war, so the atmosphere was "very benign." In 1945, he went on to the University of Minnesota where he began teaching.<sup>1</sup>

Inami grew up in Madera, California, with his parents who were farmers. He was enrolled at the University of California in Berkeley when his family was interned at the Jerome

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<sup>1</sup> Fumio R. Naka, interview by Paul Watanabe, *Institute for Asian American Studies*, Berkeley, California, October 22, 2010. <https://openarchives.umb.edu/digital/collection/p15774coll5/id/65/rec/10>.

War Relocation Center in Arkansas in 1942. Inami heard about the Student Relocation Council and applied to leave camp to attend school. He experienced a delay in obtaining a security clearance when his high school principal wrote a letter expressing his views that Japanese Americans were a security risk and should be kept in camps. Once he was cleared, Inami went to Illinois Tech in Chicago and did not experience any discrimination outside of camp. In fact, many of the students were Jewish and sympathetic to his background due to Hitler and the European concentration camps. Inami went on to volunteer for the Army where he was assigned to the Military Intelligence Service and later fought in the Korean War.<sup>2</sup>

Okamoto was a high school student in Seattle, Washington, when her family heard about the attack on Pearl Harbor while at church. Okamoto explained her parents' cooperation with their evacuation to the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho by stating, "The Issei always did what the government told them." She eventually left camp to attend school at the Latter-Day Saints Business College in Salt Lake City where she lived with a Jewish family. She later returned to Seattle and found employment in a hospital as a medical record librarian. Okamoto believes the United States has become more tolerant of foreigners and other races. Although she was not interested in testifying for the Redress movement, she did listen to the many stories. She personally refrained from talking about her experience because, "It was something that was done and over with." This changed over time as she recognized the importance of speaking out to prevent internment from ever happening to other minorities.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Frank K. Inami, interview by Paul Watanabe, *Institute for Asian American Studies*, Berkeley, California, May 10, 2011. <https://openarchives.umb.edu/digital/collection/p15774coll5/id/45/rec/5>.

<sup>3</sup> Toshiko Okamoto, interview by Paul Watanabe, *Institute for Asian American Studies*, Berkeley, California, May 14, 2011. <https://openarchives.umb.edu/digital/collection/p15774coll5/id/83/rec/16>.

Although the three interviewees admitted to having shaky memories, they mostly remembered their college relocation experience as positive. Like many of the Nisei generation, they moved into American society and went on to have productive lives, while successfully pushing back the racial barrier for other Japanese Americans. Generations later, what remains is a shadow of injustice that should never be forgotten.

There are many sources available on Japanese internment that provide a historical background on the events that happened before, during, and after World War II. Not until recently do scholars address the impact of bigotry and internment on Japanese American culture during those periods. For one area in particular, little is written on how the college Nisei students became the driving force in accelerating the acculturation of Japanese Americans as they moved away from their close ethnic communities into American society. While early sources appear to be neutral or mildly critical of Japanese American treatment, recent sources are more condemning.

One of the biggest reasons Japanese Americans had a difficult time fitting into American society was due to anti-Asian sentiments before World War II. In *Americans Betrayed: Politics and the Japanese Evacuation* (1949) by Morton Grodzins and *Japanese Americans: The Formation and Transformation of an Ethnic Group* (2009) by Paul Spickard, both authors argue that prejudices against Asians, which later shifted to Japanese Americans, formed a basis for the eventual relocation of Japanese Americans despite similar situations with German and Italian Americans. Not only were they an economic threat, but the Japanese looked different from other European immigrants. With his condemnation of internment, Grodzins is forward thinking for his time. Perhaps this is due to his extensive research that spanned before and after internment, giving him a clear perspective. Using a social approach, Spickard notes

that Japanese Americans shared their interests, institutions, and culture to shape their ethnic group which allowed them to unite. This demonstrates the importance of community to the Japanese as they were excluded from American society. Based on the writings of Grodzins and Spickard, it is easy to infer that racism set the stage for internment which basically suspended the rights of Japanese Americans, many of whom were U.S. citizens. *The Japanese American Experience* by David J. O'Brien and Stephen S. Fugita was written in 1991, many years after World War II. Using a social approach, the authors argue how the Japanese American immigrants were initially limited by state and local laws and bigoted attitudes, but they were able to survive and prosper with hard work and reliance on each other. A common thread among these sources is the segregation of Japanese Americans. Americans prohibited Japanese in their own communities which forced the creation of Japanese enclaves in which they maintained their own traditional culture. According to Spickard, this led to a cultural generation gap between the traditional Issei and their children, the Nisei, who were citizens, spoke English, and attended American schools.

After Pearl Harbor, Japanese American culture was thrown into chaos when internment began. Using a political approach, Grodzins provides the reactions of the military, state, and federal government in response to Pearl Harbor. The Supreme Court legitimized the excuse of national security interests to deprive citizens of their civil rights. His book intersects with *Democratizing the Enemy: The Japanese American Internment* (2004) as Brian M. Hayashi argues how the motives of government officials and top military brass went beyond racism, wartime hysteria, and leadership failure, which affected the victims and their civil liberties.

Michi Weglyn provides a firsthand perspective of internment in *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (1996). Based on her camp experience and the

study of national archived documents, she argues incarceration did not occur because of military necessity as claimed by the Roosevelt administration, but because of revenge for Pearl Harbor, racial prejudice, and government mistakes. Weglyn is more condemning of the U.S. government's decisions than other sources due to her own personal experience. She compares the treatment of Japanese Americans to the milder treatment of German and Italian Americans, which is also noted by Grodzins and Spickard. Weglyn sheds light on the differences in generations as she writes of the Issei who took on lesser roles in the camps, the Nisei who became camp leaders, and the Sansei who later participated in protest/redress movements. Spickard also writes of the cultural shift of influence from Issei to Nisei which created a role reversal between the two generations.

The success of Nisei students is reflected in Allan W. Austin's book, *From Concentration Camp to Campus: Japanese American Students and World War II* (2007) where he follows the Nisei into postwar. Like Weglyn, he provides a more personal perspective as he bases his information on accounts from students. He argues that resettled Nisei college students were able to successfully integrate themselves into American society without completely abandoning their ethnic identity. Austin claims that while some students returned to Japanese American communities postwar, others moved away to further acculturation.

Executive Order 9066 issued by President Franklin Roosevelt in 1942 quickly and effectively changed life for Japanese Americans residing on the West Coast. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, resentment, national security fears, and hysteria resulted in the internment of thousands of these individuals, many of whom were U.S. citizens. They were rounded up and transported to assembly centers and then on to one of ten relocation centers located in desolate and isolated areas within the interior of the United States. The camps were set up much like a

prison with guards and barbed wire. Within the camps, families lived together in cramped single rooms and ate their meals in community halls. The conditions were harsh and far from ideal, especially for innocent individuals who considered themselves to be loyal Americans.

The majority of those incarcerated were second generation children, or Nisei, who were born in the United States and, therefore, citizens. Their Japanese parents, known as Issei, immigrated to the United States in search of a better life. They were not citizens and lived in ethnic neighborhoods where Japanese was spoken within their community. The Nisei, on the other hand, were integrated and educated in American schools and spoke the English language. They participated in sports and extra-curricular activities, much like other school children. They identified as Americans, albeit with Japanese heritage. It was, therefore, very shocking to find themselves regarded as a threat to their country.

A few thousand of the Nisei were current college students or high school students who were preparing to move on to college. Those already attending colleges located on the West Coast suddenly found themselves unwelcome. Instead of continuing their education, they faced an uncertain future as they were interned in camps with their families. Eventually, with help from the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, many were able to leave camp for small colleges and universities located in the Midwest and East. This came with mixed feelings as they were forced to leave their families behind and travel to unknown areas outside the West Coast. Although they had no idea how they would be received at these institutions, they were instructed to demonstrate goodwill in the hope of shedding a positive light on all Japanese Americans.

It could be argued that this separation represented the beginning of change in both their culture and their assimilation. While the Issei found themselves at a loss economically,

culturally, and socially, thousands of Nisei students left camps and their families behind to live within predominantly white college communities. Although many experienced freedom and acceptance within these communities, they were burdened by a high expectation to succeed. Carrying the weight of all Japanese Americans, the college Nisei students became the advanced guard for acculturation into American society which created a fracture in family relationships and cultural traditions between the Issei and Nisei generations that would continue to erode with each new generation.

Understanding the differences between the generations of Japanese Americans provides insight into cultural changes that resulted from the role and influence of Japanese generations on family and peers. The first-generation Issei were native Japanese who immigrated to the U.S. The Issei were the natural family providers, family leaders, and influential in the Japanese American community. The second-generation Nisei were born to Issei parents in the United States and, therefore, citizens. Although they were a blend of Japanese and American culture, they were educated in American schools and identified as American citizens. The Kibei were also Nisei but spent some time in Japan during their adolescence, usually for the purpose of education. The third-generation Sansei were born in the United States to Nisei parents, but they would not have influence until much later.<sup>4</sup>

Due to the Chinese that came before them, the Issei were aware of anti-Asian sentiments when they immigrated to the United States. They attempted to reduce resentment by living and working in their own ethnic communities where they participated in activities and formed organizations. They dressed like other westerners and sent their children to American schools

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<sup>4</sup> Robert W. O'Brien, *The College Nisei* (Palo Alto, CA: Pacific Books, 1949), 2.

hoping it would help them assimilate into American society.<sup>5</sup> The Issei worked hard so they could provide their children with a better future. They strongly felt that a college education was essential for the success of their children.<sup>6</sup>

While the Issei generation embraced their Japanese language and culture, the Nisei experienced more acculturation due to their citizenship and education in American schools. The Issei hoped their children's education and language would help them navigate American society, but they also wanted their children to remember their heritage. They sent them to Japanese language schools to learn to speak the Japanese language and learn more about their culture.<sup>7</sup> It is doubtful the young Nisei benefited much from these schools due to the difficulty of the language and disinterest. Rather, it seemed to become more of a social gathering with other Nisei peers. In 1940, one Nisei commented, "I guess I enjoyed Japanese school though I never really learned Japanese, but I made most of my close friends there."<sup>8</sup> In hindsight, this contributed to their struggle with identity as they were still considered Japanese. They felt and acted like Americans but were suppressed by life within their communities where job opportunities were limited.<sup>9</sup> They had a desire to move past the barriers experienced by the Issei generation. Part of their success was due to their culture which dictated they become good students, respectful, and ambitious to repay their parents for their sacrifices.<sup>10</sup> Thus, the willingness of the Issei to educate their children resulted in their immersion and assimilation into American culture. At the same time, this partial acculturation resulted in factions within

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<sup>5</sup> Wendy Ng, *Japanese American Internment During World War II: A History and Reference Guide* (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 2002), 4-5.

<sup>6</sup> Daniel I. Okimoto, *American in Disguise*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Stanford: Stanford University, 1995), 17.

<sup>7</sup> Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (Boulder: University Press of Colorado, 2002), 58.

<sup>8</sup> Unidentified Nisei Student in Harry H. Kitano, *Japanese Americans: The Evolution of a Subculture*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1976), 27.

<sup>9</sup> Harry H. Kitano, *Generations and Identity: The Japanese American* (Needham Heights, MA: Ginn Press, 1993), 29.

<sup>10</sup> Okimoto, *American in Disguise*, 18.



Japanese American family culture. Combined with the upheavals of World War II internment, it accelerated the cultural assimilation of subsequent generations of Japanese Americans.

On the other hand, the Kibei, were torn between Japan and the United States. Because of their years spent in Japan they were considered a larger threat to the U.S government and often rejected by their Nisei peers. As a Kibei high school student in California, Minoru Kiyoto recalls not fitting into any group as she ate lunch alone. Referring to the Nisei students she claimed, “I had not been accepted by that group either, for I was a Kibei. I don’t care what they do, I had told myself. I reacted against them with contempt, becoming more and more attracted to the Japanese tradition that had been the source of so much solace to my soul. In fact, I had begun to take great pride in that tradition.”<sup>11</sup> The Kibei found themselves distanced from the Nisei, who were more Americanized. They had a difficult time fitting in as they were considered more Japanese and had loyalties to both countries. They did not experience American culture as much as the Nisei who spent all their time in the United States. Although they often found themselves alienated, this seemed to make them more determined to acculturate into American society.

With internment, the Issei and Nisei found themselves at odds. Previously the leaders at home and in the community, the Issei found themselves working unskilled positions while the Nisei held leadership positions and better jobs with the camps. As citizens who were fluent in English, the Nisei were favored over the Issei for those roles.<sup>12</sup> With this, a link can be established between internment and the division between the two generations. Camp administrators simply trusted the Nisei more than the traditional Issei who still lived within their old culture. This veered away from the traditional Japanese family hierarchy which dictated that as family head, the Issei father exercised authority and control over his family members.

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<sup>11</sup> Unidentified Kibei Student in Lawson F. Inada, ed., *Only What We Could Carry: The Japanese American Internment Experience* (Berkeley: Heyday Books, 2000), 295.

<sup>12</sup> O’Brien, *The College Nisei*, 45.

Understandably, this reversal in authority and influence would have upset the traditional Issei, but the Nisei seemed to adapt quickly to the change.

Research indicates that one of the largest obstacles to Japanese American assimilation was Anti-Asian prejudice dating back to the late 1800s. The massive migration of Chinese to California during the 1848 gold rush eventually led to a threatened and resentful Euro-American population. This resulted in aggressive acts and restrictive legislation aimed at repressing Chinese and limiting their growth.<sup>13</sup> During this period, smaller numbers of Japanese began to migrate to Hawaii and the West Coast for agricultural work. As the Japanese numbers grew, they took over rural farm work that was previously filled by the Chinese who moved on to urban industrial jobs.<sup>14</sup> Most mainland Japanese immigrants settled in California, Oregon, and Washington, with approximately eleven percent settling in the remaining states.<sup>15</sup> Yet even though the number of Japanese immigrants was small compared to Chinese immigrants, they were still subjected to the same unfounded bigotry.

Euro-Americans viewed Japanese immigrants no differently than the Chinese. During the mid-nineteenth century, anti-Japanese movements were spread by politicians and community leaders who depicted Japanese as undesirable for citizenship. V.S. McClatchy, publisher of the *Sacramento Bee*, stated, “Of all races ineligible for citizenship, the Japanese are the least assimilable and the most dangerous to this country...”<sup>16</sup> These negative views hurt the Japanese for many years and allowed racism to persist, resulting in discriminatory legislation.

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<sup>13</sup> Mark Kanazawa, “Immigration, Exclusion, and Taxation: Anti-Chinese Legislation in Gold Rush California,” *The Journal of Economic History*, 65, no. 3 (2005): 781, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/3875017>.

<sup>14</sup> David J. O’Brien and Stephen S. Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 18.

<sup>15</sup> Allan W. Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus: Japanese American Students and World War II* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2007), 4.

<sup>16</sup> V.S. McClatchy in Ng, *Japanese American Internment*, 8.

In 1906 the California legislature could not legally remove Japanese from the state, so they passed laws to make residency unbearable, hoping to force them out. Restrictions were placed on land ownership. Japanese school children were segregated, and families had to live in segregated areas.<sup>17</sup> Under U.S. pressure, Japan agreed to limit immigration with the formation of the 1907 Gentlemen's Agreement. Later, the Immigration Act of 1924 restricted Japanese immigration to a small amount.<sup>18</sup> Compared to other white immigrants, Asians were very dissimilar in appearance and culture. Thus, Asians were viewed as a threat to American culture, which drove prejudice. Clearly, racism did not happen overnight. It began with the Chinese and was later extended to the Japanese, which created a rich environment for future internment.

Not only did anti-Japanese feelings create cultural and legal barriers for assimilation, but they contributed to support for internment during World War II. Even though there was fear and anger directed at Italian and German Americans, their whiteness and cultural similarity allowed them to blend into American society. This provided an emotional barrier to actions such as mass internment. The Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor resulted in fear and anger, and it was easy to incorrectly focus anger on the dissimilar Japanese Americans. A research poll in 1942 indicated that more than 90 percent of the participants supported the relocation of Japanese Americans who were not citizens. In other surveys, almost half believed that Japanese Americans should not remain in the U.S. but be sent back to Japan after the war.<sup>19</sup> These polls reflect that negative perceptions and prejudices did not lessen but continued to grow over time. This could be labeled as war racism, which was encouraged by war anger and government propaganda. It affected the attitudes of those who had never been exposed to anti-Japanese prejudice.

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<sup>17</sup> Ng, *Japanese American Internment*, 10.

<sup>18</sup> O'Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 10-18.

<sup>19</sup> Donna K. Nagata, *Legacy of Injustice: Exploring the Cross-Generational Impact of the Japanese American Internment* (New York: Plenum Press, 1993), 5-6.

One example of war racism could be found with Attorney General Earl Warren, who in a 1943 Chicago press conference stated, “If the Japs are released, no one will be able to tell a saboteur from any other Jap...”<sup>20</sup> As a politician, his negative comments and disregard for Japanese American civil rights would have influenced the perceptions of others. Another example could be found with the California American Legion which recommended the deportation of all Japanese in the United States at the end of the war.<sup>21</sup> Without a doubt, these unfounded comments were damaging to the Japanese Americans and served to spread racism to American citizens. Nisei students found themselves victims of war racism. Student Frank Inami applied to Illinois Tech but was not immediately released for security reasons. He found that his old California high school principal had written a letter to the FBI stating that none of the Japanese could be trusted.<sup>22</sup> It would have been very difficult to stop war racism from bleeding into local conditions of bigotry. War racism provides one reason why most Japanese Americans complied with internment. They felt a sense of guilt by Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor. After years of racial discrimination and prejudice, they feared retaliation or harm if they did not comply. To not comply would appear they were disloyal to the U.S.

Approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans on the West Coast were sent to relocation centers without proof of disloyalty or crimes being committed.<sup>23</sup> It stands to reason that the Nisei generation was the most impacted by internment as they made up 66% of the internment population.<sup>24</sup> As the upcoming working generation, their futures were suddenly pulled out from

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<sup>20</sup> Earl Warren in Thomas J. Reed, *America’s Two Constitutions: A Study of the Treatment of Dissenters in Time of War* (Madison, NY: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2017), 165.

<sup>21</sup> Joseph S. Roucek, “American Japanese, Pearl Harbor and World War II,” *The Journal of Negro Education* 12, no. 4 (1943): 648, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2292828>.

<sup>22</sup> Frank Inami, interview by Paul Watanabe, *Institute for Asian American Studies*.

<sup>23</sup> National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, *From Camp to College: The Story of Japanese American Student Relocation* (Philadelphia, 1945), 1.

<sup>24</sup> Okimoto, *American in Disguise*, 31.

under them. Reactions varied from confusion to shame as they struggled to deal with the circumstances. In response to Pearl Harbor, one Nisei college student stated, "...I was so embarrassed and felt like crawling under the seat when we heard President Roosevelt's announcement in class. I just felt as if we were inferior and part of the enemy at the time. It was a very bad feeling."<sup>25</sup> In actuality, the Nisei were American citizens and considered themselves to be loyal to the United States. Yet, they felt they would be blamed for the actions of the Japanese due to their heritage. From their perspective, they were the upcoming working generation, and now they faced an uncertain future. It was a difficult situation because they were American but were also brought up in the traditional Japanese culture of their parents and extended family living in Japan. It came down to a choice: they could either maintain strong cultural practices that would segregate their generation from the rest of American society, or they could follow their natural path through their education and cultural assimilation and become more American, thus enjoying the same freedoms of other citizens. Caught between two cultures, the situation would have been traumatic for Nisei teens. They already stood out from other white Americans, and now they would be viewed as the enemy. These circumstances would have created great anxiety for the Nisei, while at the same time pushing them to work harder to prove their loyalty to the United States.

With Executive Order 9066, approximately 2,500 Nisei students were forced to leave colleges on the West Coast. Private and religious organizations, and later the U.S. Government, searched for colleges outside the West Coast who would take Nisei students.<sup>26</sup> However, some of these college turned them down by generating excuses to mask their true motives. These excuses ranged from public sentiment, fear from locals, and war racism. Residents often reacted

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<sup>25</sup> Unidentified Nisei Student in O'Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 44.

<sup>26</sup> National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, *From Camp to College*, 1.

negatively to Japanese students in their community, which most likely was caused by existing prejudices. Occasionally college administrators or their leaders were bigoted in some way. Examples of these reactions could be found at a variety of universities.

At Indiana University, Ora L. Wildermuth, President of the Board of Trustees, supported keeping Japanese out of the university until after the war. The reasons given for this decision were lack of space and military security. Other colleges in Indiana, including the University of Indiana, accepted students without making excuses. Wildermuth was also a segregationist, which strongly indicated that his motives were racial.<sup>27</sup> Segregationists are against the intermingling of different races. Combined with the attack on Pearl Harbor, his segregationist beliefs and potential ultranationalism drove Wildermuth to oppose Japanese American student relocation to Indiana University. Wildermuth, who would not directly state the reasons for his position, borrowed excuses from other colleges to protect himself and to follow popular opinion. Ironically, he had a similar mindset to that of the Axis Powers who held beliefs of racial superiority. His irrational perspective of all non-European Americans essentially implied they were inferior and should not be granted the same opportunities as other Americans.

At Park College in Parkville, Missouri, College President William Young agreed to take up to fifteen Nisei students. In July 1942 the small community of Parkville, led by the mayor and American Legion chapter, protested the enrollment. The President and Board of Trustees decided to accept them regardless of local reaction.<sup>28</sup> In this example, Young courageously rejected popular opinion to do what was right, despite negative pressure from the American Legion and local citizens. This indicated that not everyone followed the status quo of anti-

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<sup>27</sup> Eric Langowski, "Education Denied: Indiana University's Japanese American Ban, 1942 to 1945," *Indiana Magazine of History* 115, no. 2 (2019): 65-115, <https://doi.org/10.2979/indimagahist.115.2.01>.

<sup>28</sup> Harold F. Smith, "The Battle of Parkville: Resistance to Japanese American Students at Park College," *The Journal of Presbyterian History* 82, no. 1 (2004): 46-51, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23336327>.

Japanese and anti-Asian bigotry. Without such support from non-conformist individuals, it would have been difficult for American society to evolve.

The University of Arizona President Alfred Atkinson refused to let the internees enroll in extension courses. He felt that Japanese Americans were no different than those who attacked the United States stating, “We are at war, and these people are our enemies.”<sup>29</sup> Atkinson later gave a different reason, claiming the University of Arizona could not support extension courses during wartime.<sup>30</sup> This was another example of anti-Japanese bigotry and war racism. Like Wildermuth, Atkinson used an excuse to justify the exclusion of Japanese Americans, even though they posed no danger to the area or nation.

Ralph N. Tirey of the Indiana State Teachers College in Terre Haute decided not to accept Japanese American students because he feared a negative reaction from the public. Tirey apparently “believed in world brotherhood, but . . . was influenced by possible reactions in the community [from groups such as the American Legion].”<sup>31</sup> The public often has power to influence the outcomes of local politics and issues. Tirey, like others, simply feared reaction from the public. In reality, fear was a prominent theme throughout history, especially during times of war. It drove individuals to resort to unjust actions that would otherwise not be acceptable during peaceful times. Factors such as existing bigotry, war time racism, pressure from groups such as the American Legion, or fear of local unrest resulted in colleges refusing admittance.

In 1942 a group of religious leaders, university administrators, and later government officials formed what would become the National Japanese American Student Relocation

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<sup>29</sup> Alfred Atkinson in Roucek, “American Japanese,” 647.

<sup>30</sup> Samuel Gubernick, “The Lost Opportunity: The University of Arizona, 1941-1951” (PhD diss., University of Arizona, 2011), 31, <https://repository.arizona.edu/handle/10150/144323>.

<sup>31</sup> Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus*, 77.

Council. Their objective was to arrange for Nisei college students to continue their education at universities away from the West Coast. It took coordination from agencies, acceptance from participating colleges, and battles with opposing bureaucrats.<sup>32</sup> It could be argued that these efforts were driven by a sense of guilt over internment that would be eased by helping the young students. Even so, the council proved to be a positive action during a bleak period in history. At first the process was cumbersome, and there was pressure to certify each student's loyalty and to provide them with a safe environment outside of camp. Undoubtedly, this was a good option for the Nisei students. They had few choices but to remain interned, relocate to a college outside the West Coast, participate in a work program, or enlist in the military. If young teens remained in internment camps, their lives would equate to prison life and stagnation. To stay would mean giving up their educational goals and their individual freedoms. These were both important to young people, and they had no idea when their life would return to normal.

In contrast to the colleges who refused Nisei students, many colleges in the Midwest and East welcomed and accepted the Nisei. Some campuses were traditionally more openminded and liberal. It was only natural that these universities would accept relocated students. Other colleges may have accepted the students out of necessity. For example, many male college students voluntarily enrolled or were drafted into the army, so colleges had to deal with the loss of financial revenue. Without accepting Nisei students to fill these vacant slots, they may have been forced to close their doors temporarily or permanently. Over 550 institutions accepted Japanese college students, which accounts for approximately one quarter of the U.S. accredited colleges and universities. Approximately 100 nursing schools also participated, which was due to a serious shortage of nurses during the war.<sup>33</sup> Japanese Americans still experienced negative

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<sup>32</sup> Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus*, 11.

<sup>33</sup> National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, *From Camp to College*, 1.



feelings, likely due to war racism, but were more welcome in the smaller college communities that accepted them. Perhaps this was due to their size and their limited number of Asian students. It seems racial attitudes in the Midwest and East were less prevalent, most likely attributed to the significantly smaller concentration of Asians in those areas. They had minimal exposure to Japanese Americans and cultural conflict that was caused by prejudices and predisposed attitudes. Still, to alleviate any negative attitudes, the Nisei students would be forced to whiten to make these populations feel comfortable.

By the end of the war, approximately 3,000 students had left the internment camps for college and 400 graduated from internment high schools.<sup>34</sup> Although this was initially met with mixed feelings from Nisei students, many felt fortunate to escape internment life to continue their college education away from the West Coast. This would not have been possible without the efforts of the National Japanese American Student Relocation Council and from the support and encouragement of their Issei parents. One main goal of the council was to push Nisei students to become ambassadors of goodwill. The purpose of this was two-fold: it would increase the chance of acceptance within college communities for the Nisei and it would promote immigration and citizenship.<sup>35</sup> By completely emerging into white society, they would lessen any suspicions of themselves. If they were productive and well-behaved citizens, they would assimilate into American society and open the door for others to follow. With this in mind, the Nisei students essentially carried the weight of all Japanese people. Due to their unique situation, they faced more burdens than the typical college student. Not only were they dealing with the pressures of adolescence and maintaining good grades, but they were also working towards assimilation while remaining obedient to the first generation. The Issei wanted the Nisei

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<sup>34</sup> National Japanese American Student Relocation Council, *From Camp to College*, 4.

<sup>35</sup> Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus*, 94.

to change the public's perception of all Japanese people. They expected them to do well in college and not resist or cause trouble. In addition, they wanted them to assimilate without losing their culture in the process. Simply said, the Nisei had to find a balance between their parents' world and that of white Americans. While dealing with these stresses, they were alone and away from their families during a time when racism and bigotry were amplified. They had to change themselves to become model Americans. Failing to make a good impression was not acceptable, so they persevered and endeavored to succeed.

The Nisei students gradually began to change themselves to become part of a bigger group. For example, student Yoshi Higa related, "Most of us going to colleges will now make direct efforts to join various activities instead of acting obstinate and retreating into a nut-shell of our own."<sup>36</sup> The Nisei students realized they needed to reach outside their comfort zone and mingle with Caucasian college students. Some found themselves participating in a wide variety of campus activities. This interaction allowed them to find acceptance and friendliness from other students and the college administration. Another example could be found with Sumiko Kanno, a student nurse at Mayo Clinic, who claimed: "I think that you will be glad to know that we are having a grand time, mixing in with all the Caucasian students. They've taken us in their bunch without question, and now we're just one of them. It's a glorious feeling. We work, study and play together."<sup>37</sup> However, while the Nisei students made the most of their experience, they found it came at a cost. Instead of being accepted as they were, they were forced to shed their identity to blend into American society. Doing so would give them the impression they were not good enough as they were, despite already being American. They would have to work harder than other ethnic groups to overcome any cultural or physical obstacles to assimilation. Finally,

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<sup>36</sup> Yoshi Higa in Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus*, 86.

<sup>37</sup> Sumiko Kanno in Austin, *From Concentration Camp to Campus*, 86.

one female student seemed to sum it up best: “I’ve always wanted to be looked upon as an American and I have found it here. They treat me as an American who has gone through extraordinary experiences which they would like me to share. They do not treat me as Japanese American. I hope you understand what I mean by that connotation. Act like an American, feel you’re an American, and talk like an American – people expect that from you and if you feel you’re something different you’re the only one that feels that way.”<sup>38</sup> It becomes clear that the Nisei did not want to be viewed as the enemy, but to be accepted as American. They were compelled to move past the barriers that prevented their parents from assimilating. This would require them to break away from their traditional Japanese communities and roles, which contrasted with later beliefs that assimilation should not displace cultural identity. It was up to the Nisei to move forward to pave the way for all future generations. Not only would this help all Japanese Americans, but it would set an example for other ethnic groups who struggled to assimilate.

As the Nisei college students began to leave camps through exemptions and transfers to other universities outside the West Coast, most found they were able to acclimate successfully. Later, they moved on to careers in these areas.<sup>39</sup> Internment began the migration of Japanese Americans to other parts of the United States. After World War II, the Nisei began to assimilate further into American culture while managing to preserve some of their Japanese culture. Many Issei lost their property and businesses when they were forced to evacuate, so they had little desire to return to the West Coast. Due to their age and the disintegration of their subculture, it would have been impossible for most to recover economically. The Nisei witnessed the struggles their parents faced with both internment and the loss of their livelihoods. It made sense

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<sup>38</sup> Unidentified Nisei Student in O’Brien, R., *The College Nisei*, 91.

<sup>39</sup> O’Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 118-119.

for them to move away from the past towards a new future. With limited options, aging parents were more likely to follow their children to new areas outside the West Coast.

The Nisei had mixed feelings about internment and tended to relate their life to “before camp” and “after camp.” Some were bitter about their experiences while others remembered positive experiences. The ones who were able to relocate to colleges seemed to acculturate further while spreading to other areas in search of economic opportunities.<sup>40</sup> Memory often proves to be problematic when presenting an accurate picture of history. Over time, recollections fade away and perceptions may change with experience. Some Nisei students may have more positive memories because their potential fears and anxieties did not materialize. Instead, they went on to have good lives. Relationships between the United States and Japan also changed over time. Japan is no longer viewed as an enemy, but as a military ally. In addition, trade between the U.S. and Japan has benefitted both countries. Japanese Americans are treated better today, and their economic outcomes have improved. Looking back, it is easier to lose touch with negative and stressful experiences and to remember the positive ones. If the outcomes had been different, more Nisei would be resentful of their internment today.

The fracture of generations continued with the Sansei generation, offspring of the Nisei. They did not learn the Japanese language, which created a communication gap between them and the Issei. Their parents held them to high standards and expected them to perform well in school and socially.<sup>41</sup> Twenty-five years after the war, approximately three-fifths of the Sansei generation married outside their ethnic group.<sup>42</sup> Unlike the previous generations, they no longer wanted arranged marriages for the sake of duty, but instead they looked for loving relationships. They grew up in mixed middle-class neighborhoods, which allowed them to assimilate into other

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<sup>40</sup> O'Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 74-77.

<sup>41</sup> Ng, *Japanese American Internment*, 7.

<sup>42</sup> O'Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 97-99.

areas.<sup>43</sup> Starting in the 1940s, there was an increasing pressure to apologize and make reparations to the Japanese Americans for their loss of civil rights during internment. Supported by activists, this redress movement went on for decades until the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 was passed by Congress. The result was a formal apology and reparations to all surviving detainees.<sup>44</sup> The Sansei, most of whom were born after internment, learned about internment through the stories and behaviors of their parents. Outraged, they became politically active in supporting the Redress movement.<sup>45</sup> It became apparent that many Nisei were hesitant about the redress movement. To support it might stir up old resentments. They wanted a return to stability, so they did not complain about their mistreatment. They simply wanted to get on with their lives. On the other hand, the Sansei had economic stability and did not experience the chaos of interment. They felt the freedom to advocate for redress in a way that their parents and grandparents could not. This allowed them to develop a better appreciation and understanding of the Issei and Nisei generations and their ethnic communities.

In the end, the Japanese Americans were able to withstand the decades of anti-Asian sentiments that stemmed from their physical and cultural differences, economic competition, and jealousy from white Americans. The Issei knew they would not assimilate completely because they were too tied to their heritage and culture, which kept them separated from American culture. However, each generation tends to hold great hope for the next generation. This was no different for the Issei who pushed their children into American society through language, education, and citizenship.

After the attack on Pearl Harbor, the Issei feared repercussions from the United States due to their Japanese ties, but the Nisei believed they were immune to any negative action due to

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<sup>43</sup> O'Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 74-77.

<sup>44</sup> O'Brien and Fugita, *The Japanese American Experience*, 81.

<sup>45</sup> Nagata, *Legacy of Injustice*, 203.

their citizenship. Sadly, the U.S. Constitution which should have protected their civil rights failed to do so, despite no evidence of wrongdoing. At the same time, their fellow citizens failed them too. Few stood up for the plight of the Japanese Americans. On the West Coast especially, the Japanese Americans were once more subjected to discrimination and prejudice as they physically identified with the enemy.

Internment was a hard realization for the Japanese Americans, but for Nisei college students it signaled the end of their dreams. As loyal Americans, they were appalled and humiliated by the events that led to incarceration. The shame of war and internment would forever leave a permanent mark on the psyche of the Issei and Nisei generations. This kept many from supporting the redress movement as they just wanted to leave internment in the past and not bring negative attention to themselves. Decades later, with the Sansei generation, they realized the value of redress as it brought awareness to their situation. They hoped this would prevent internment from ever happening to other ethnic groups.

In hindsight, the Nisei were fortunate for the opportunity to attend colleges outside the West Coast. This allowed thousands of teens and young adults to leave the confinement of camps to reside and attend colleges in interior states. At the same time, it also put tremendous pressure on them as they were encouraged to serve as ambassadors of goodwill in the hope of casting a positive light on all Japanese Americans. In addition, their parents had a high expectation for them to succeed. To fit into these communities, they would be forced to whiten and shed their old identities, cultures, and traditions. The Nisei college students made a conscious decision to follow this path as they truly wanted to be accepted as American.

The positive reception found in many college communities in the Midwest and East gave the Nisei confidence to acculturate further into American Society. However, this came at a cost

as it created a gap between the Issei and Nisei generations as the Nisei evolved to become American. This gap would continue to widen with future generations. Although acculturation is a natural process for all immigrants, internment forced the acceleration of this process for the Nisei college students which in turned opened the way for all Japanese Americans.

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