

A Day of Remembrance: Japanese American Evacuation

By

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A Day of Remembrance is observed annually to honor and remember the Japanese Americans who were forcibly removed from their homes and incarcerated during World War II. The commemoration rests on formal governmental and community recognition: in 2004, the California State Legislature adopted a joint resolution declaring February 19 “a Day of Remembrance” to raise public awareness of the internment of Japanese Americans during the war; since then, the date has been reaffirmed by successive gubernatorial proclamations, including those issued by Governors Edmund G. Brown, Jr. and Gavin Newsom. Recent commemorations have also been supported by resolutions in local governments ; for example, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors adopted a citywide resolution on February 14, 2023, declaring February 19 as the annual Day of Remembrance for the City and County of San Francisco. Across several local, state, and civic resolutions and proclamations that recognize this day, a broad coalition of elected officials and community leaders have repeatedly affirmed the importance of remembrance and education about this injustice.

The history of Japanese American incarceration is rooted in long-standing racial prejudice, economic competition, and wartime hysteria following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Families were given little notice, often just days to dispose of homes, businesses, and personal belongings before being sent to temporary assembly centers and then to inland internment camps in desolate locations such as Manzanar, Tule Lake, Topaz, Jerome, and Heart Mountain. At the peak of the internment, the camps held populations ranging from several thousand to over 18,000 people per site, with a total of ten camps and seven assembly centers across seven western states. Life in the camps was harsh: internees lived in crude barracks constructed of wood and tar paper, often with little insulation against extreme weather. Families were assigned one small room regardless of size, communal bathrooms were shared by dozens, and privacy was minimal. Food was rationed and of poor quality, medical care was limited, and internees had few opportunities for recreation. Most Japanese Americans were incarcerated for an average of three to four years, from 1942 until the final camps closed in 1945. During this period, approximately 4,000 children were born in the camps, while 1,900 people died due to illness, malnutrition, or inadequate medical care. Those who died were typically buried in cemeteries located on or adjacent to the campgrounds, such as the Manzanar Cemetery in

California or the Heart Mountain Cemetery in Wyoming. Several of the camps remain preserved today as historic sites and national memorials, including Manzanar National Historic Site and Tule Lake Segregation Center, while some structures and barracks have been restored for educational and interpretive purposes. Despite these conditions, internees established schools, community programs, cultural activities, newspapers, and places of worship to maintain social cohesion and preserve cultural identity. Nevertheless, the internment caused profound psychological stress, disrupted education, led to economic losses estimated at \$400 million in confiscated property, and fractured communities for generations.

California has been a leader in formally recognizing the history and significance of this injustice. Following the 2004 legislative resolution, the state and its governors have issued annual proclamations reaffirming February 19 as the Day of Remembrance. This institutional recognition reinforces the importance of teaching younger generations about civil liberties, constitutional rights, and the consequences of wartime prejudice. The day also serves as a vehicle for reflection on broader issues of racial discrimination, human rights, and the need for vigilance in protecting democratic values.

Santa Clara County, including cities such as San Jose and Gilroy, has played an active role in observing the Day of Remembrance. Local Japanese American Citizens Leagues, historical societies, and educational institutions hold programs that include panel discussions with survivors, student exhibitions, commemorative ceremonies, and screenings of historical documentaries. San Jose's Japantown, one of the last three historic Japantowns in the United States, serves as a cultural and educational hub for these activities. The Japanese American Museum of San Jose, located in the heart of Japantown, curates exhibit about the internment, the history of Japanese Americans in the Bay Area, and their contributions to the region. Local schools frequently partner with the museum, organizing field trips, student projects, and curriculum modules centered on the history of Japanese American incarceration, ensuring that younger generations understand the human and civic lessons of this period. Museums and libraries throughout Santa Clara County also curate exhibits that feature personal stories, photographs, letters, and artifacts from internment camps. Schools participate in lesson plans and assemblies, often involving descendants of internees, ensuring that students grasp both the historical facts and the broader lessons about civil rights. Community leaders also use observance to highlight the importance of diversity, tolerance, and civic engagement in contemporary society.

Beyond California, the Day of Remembrance has contributed to a broader national understanding of the Japanese American incarceration. It has informed scholarship,

fostered public dialogue, and influenced cultural works including literature, film, and art. The observance complements the work of the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, the Manzanar National Historic Site, and other institutions dedicated to preserving the memory of those affected. Annual events, public ceremonies, and educational programs serve to honor the courage and resilience of Japanese Americans while reinforcing the imperative that such violations of civil liberties never occur again.

The Day of Remembrance stands as both a memorial and a call to action. It commemorates the lives disrupted by forced evacuation and incarceration, highlights the contributions of Japanese Americans to California and the nation, and fosters ongoing reflection on justice, equality, and human rights. Through statewide and local observances, educational initiatives, and public discourse, the day ensures that the history of Japanese American evacuation remains a living reminder of the importance of vigilance, empathy, and the protection of civil liberties in American society.