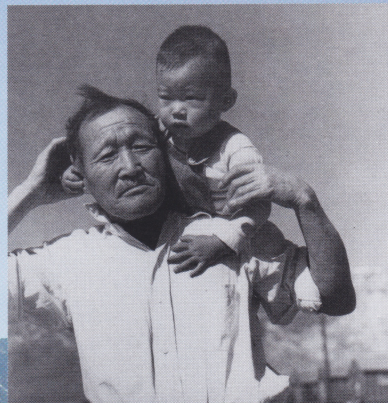


PLANTING SOLACE

The Manzanar Memorial obelisk, which was built and funded by camp incarcerated, is a tribute to those who passed away during the forced incarceration. The Japanese Kanji characters translate to "Soul Consoling Tower." Photo credit: Jeanne Ferris



Japanese American grandfather and grandson incarcerated at Manzanar. Photo: Dorothea Lange

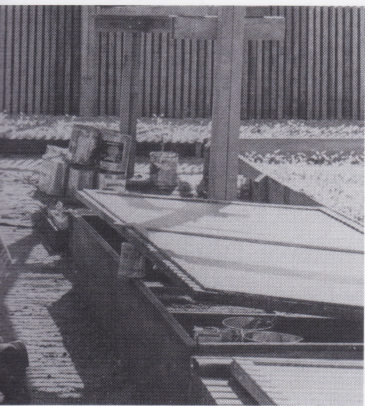


Incarcerated Japanese American tending a bed of guayule (*Parthenium argentatum*). Photo: Dorothea Lange

Remembering the Ancestors at Manzanar

by **JEANNE FERRIS**
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The perpetually snow-capped Mt. Williamson is the second tallest mountain in both the Sierra Nevada Range and in the state of California, towering at an elevation of 14,379 feet. Further north alongside Highway 395, the Inyo Mountain is blanketed with creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*) and sagebrush (*Artemisia tridentata*) at lower altitudes and at higher altitudes, ancient bristlecone pine (*Pinus longaeva*) forests thousands of years old.



Creosote bush (*Larrea tridentata*)
Photo: Ron Vanderhoff



Incarcerated Japanese Americans return to Manzanar after clearing the land of brush and weeds. US Army military police guard them. Photo: Clem Albers



Bristlecone pine (*Pinus longaeva*)
Photo: Catherine Capone

Here in the wilderness with a blue sky vast as the Pacific Ocean, the landscape is awe-inspiring but, conversely, invokes a real sense of isolation and mortality. Once hidden and protected by mountain ranges, its “discovery” in the 1800s lured many to exploit its natural resources—including the isolation itself.

In 1942, the majestic Mt. Williamson stood in silent witness when the United States war department hurriedly erected a military installation with eight watchtowers and guns pointed inward between the Owens Valley towns of Lone Pine and Independence. Shortly thereafter, busloads of Japanese American families forced to relocate from Los Angeles arrived daily to disembark behind its four-mile barbed-wire enclosures, sometimes in the bitter cold blackness of night.

You could face away from the barracks, look past a tiny rapids toward the darkening mountains, and for a while not be a prisoner at all.”



Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and her husband James. Jeanne was incarcerated at Manzanar as a child. Photo: National Park Service

In the Beginning

Manzanar “War Relocation Center” housed 10,046 strangers, crammed into 504 barracks with exterior walls made of black tar paper, zero insulation, or interior walls for privacy. The primitive living conditions of perpetually overflowing latrines, stalls without doors, and the suffocating malodor shocked civilian sensibilities much like a soldier’s

basic training. The valley’s sudden winds stirred up biting sands. A silt-like powder ghosted through the buildings’ crevices and knotholes at night, blanketing those asleep and infiltrating their nasal passages.

In *Farewell to Manzanar*, authors Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and her husband James described it as “a different kind of sand.” Wakatsuki Houston lived there at age seven for three-and-a-half years and it took almost 31 years to articulate her experience into an autobiography, and later, a movie.

During those years, Japanese Americans endured confusion and

catastrophic losses by President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066, especially since most held U.S. passports, owned residential properties, and paid taxes. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, entire West Coast communities plunged into despairing chaos when they were rounded up as prisoners of war and given an ID tag. They were, in truth, U.S. citizens convicted of espionage without trial and incarcerated in a concentration camp.

The Japanese American families resisted this collective hysteria and instead focused on improving living conditions and practicing their worldview. “Gaman” is a Japanese term of Buddhist origin that means enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience, perseverance, and dignity. This concept touches every boulder, rock, pathway, pond, flower, and tree left behind at Manzanar’s gardens.

Planting Solace

For the Nikkei (American-born children of Japanese immigrants—“second generation” in the U.S.), nature and gardening provided therapy and recreation to ease homesickness, lack of purpose, the unforgiving summer sun, bitter cold, and culturally devoid surroundings.

Three times a day, incarcerated stood outside in long mess hall lines for meals—an experience that inspired incarcerated gardeners, horticulturalists,

and agriculture professionals to beautify the sunbaked dirt and alleviate the harsh environment.

“The most prominent garden encompassed the entire 100 feet around the Block 22 mess hall and included a waterfall and an enormous pond with a bridge,” recalled Manzanar survivor Sue Kunitomi Embrey, as documented in historian Diana Meyers Bahr’s book, *The Unquiet Nisei*. “This was initiated by Harry Ueno, a kitchen worker who felt sorry for the people standing in the desert sun waiting for the mess hall to open. He enlisted the mess crew to build a garden and a pond where they could sit and watch the koi.”

Wakatsuki Houston recalled, “Gardens had sprung up everywhere, in the firebreaks, between the rows of barracks—rock garden, vegetable gardens, cactus and flower gardens.” And, “Near Block 28 some of the men who had been professional gardeners built a small park, with mossy nooks, ponds, waterfalls, and curved wooden bridges.

You could face away from the barracks, look past a tiny rapids toward the darkening mountains, and for a while not be a prisoner at all. You could hang suspended in some odd, almost lovely land you could not escape from yet almost didn’t want to leave.”

Planting for solace eased the heartache during those long three-and-a-half years, while outside the barbed wires

free men and women planted edible victory gardens. In Bahr's account, Embrey shared how internee Kuichiro Nishi cultivated prolific wild roses in what became Rose Park. "In addition to the roses, about 100 species of flowers were planted from seeds the administration helped internees obtain." Embrey recalled. "Other beautifications. . . of the camp included the elaborate Pleasure Park, which later was renamed the Merritt Park, in honor of Ralph Merritt, the director."

Nishi, a landscape designer, along with floriculturist Takio Muto and other Nikkei volunteers, created Merritt Park, the largest of the camp's gardens at 1.5 acres, with bridges, paths, and flowers. In 2008, Nishi's family met with National Park Service archaeologist Jeffrey F. Burton 65 years later to assist with the site's restoration.

Gardens of Resistance

Burton has worked intimately on excavating, preserving, and interpreting Manzanar's gardens since 1993. The excavated gardens include Merritt Park, part of the Hospital Garden, mess hall gardens at blocks 9, 12, 22, and 34, and barracks gardens at blocks 2, 14, 15, 24, and 33.

"Plants were provided by the government, by nurseryman bringing their own stock, through mail order, and by going out of camp to collect whatever they could find and bring back: beavertail [cactus] (*Opuntia whitneyana*), hedgehog (*Echinocereus*), and cholla cactus (*Opuntia echinocarpa*), Joshua trees (*Yucca brevifolia*), blue flag iris (*Iris missouriensis*), broadleaf cattail (*Typha latifolia*), and bristlecone pine trees (*Pinus longaeva*)," he says.

Burton authored a hefty 458-page report of the excavation digs in 2015, *Garden Management Plan, Gardens and Gardeners at Manzanar*, to help

manage, interpret, and preserve the camp. He lists with great care and thoroughness each block and barrack, describing each garden's plants, a summation of plants utilized with rocks and architectural details such as bridges or water features.

In the document he reports, "Although it is impossible to be certain what the garden-makers were thinking, many of the gardens at Manzanar appear to exhibit the symbolism characteristic of Japanese gardens. The most basic symbolism of the Japanese gardens at Manzanar is that of identity and culture: the garden-makers are clearly stating 'we are Japanese,' who will continue to honor their traditions in spite of persecution and prejudice."

The tenets of a Japanese garden are evergreen plants; worn, aged materials to suggest a natural landscape; water; and an essential feature including a bridge, with specific placement of rocks and gravel. Small gardens at the doorway of a home are a Japanese tradition that defines the entry from community to home and showcases the resident's artistic expertise.

Wakatsuki Houston described her father's hobby, "Papa used to hike along the creeks that channeled

down from the base of the Sierras. He brought back chunks of driftwood, and he would pass long hours sitting on the steps carving myrtle limbs into benches, table legs, and lamps, filling our rooms with gnarled, polished furniture. He hauled stones in off the desert and built a small rock garden outside our doorway, with succulents and a patch of moss."

Burton estimates the incarcerated planted hundreds of gardens in the one square mile site by the end of WWII. Quite a few of them utilized the California native plants and limited resources outside the wire. The gardens included vegetable plots, raked gravel dry gardens, cactus gardens, showy flower gardens, and ornate rock gardens with stepping stones, fountains, waterfalls, ponds, and structures.

Culled from historical documents, oral recollections, and archives, 26 Japanese American gardeners are credited in his report. Burton adds that no gardens are attributed to women and offers a possible explanation, "Since at least 302 women at Manzanar had pre-war experience in farming or garden occupations, their absence in the record of garden builders probably reflects culturally derived gender-based divisions of labor, rather than lack of strength or skill, but it is also possible that women-built ornamental gardens were under-reported to an unknown extent."

The gardens benefitted incarcerated, as well as Caucasian War Relocation Authority (WRA) employees, who lived on site with their families. "In the beginning there was a depressing monotony to the camp's appearance," writes Arthur L. Williams in his personal memoir, *Reflecting on WWII, Manzanar, and the WRA*. Williams lived at the camp with his parents,

who were among 200 WRA employees on site. “Over time, though, the staff housing area was improved greatly with beautiful lawns maintained by the best gardeners from Southern California—very skilled evacuees. The area was pristine.”

In Jane Wehrey’s book, *Voices from This Long Brown Land: Oral Recollections of Owens Valley Lives and Manzanar Pasts*, former WRA driver and Manzanar resident Nancy Connor Zischank recalled,

“Manzanar was a beautiful little place. Really it was all due to the Japanese bringing the trees down out of the mountains and replanting them.”

Rising Above the Wire

The adjective “quiet” is often used to describe former incarcerated personalities. The mental and emotional trauma from confinement and the crushing economic damage left Nikkei with repressed feelings for years afterward.

In *The Unquiet Nisei*, Embrey shared that “her mother, Komika, wept alone under the apple trees for two weeks after arriving. She never told the family until years later.”

Countering the silence, Embrey earned her moniker “Unquiet Nisei” because she spoke out against racism and became a fierce champion for redress and reparations. In 1969, Embrey founded a committee of survivors, who helped organize the first Manzanar Pilgrimage. She relentlessly fought for the site to receive National Historic status, leaning on good friends like former Los Angeles Mayor Tom Bradley of Los Angeles for assistance. In

1985, Manzanar received the National Historic Landmark designation.

Payahüünadü’s Layers of History

Since time immemorial, the region of Owens Valley is Nümüü (Paiute) and Newe (Shoshone) ancestral land called Payahüünadü, a “place of flowing water.” Long before the barbed wires of Manzanar, the land was stolen and violently taken from the Nümüü who themselves were forced to relocate to Fort Tejon. Three years later, they returned to find their homes appropriated by settlers. Manzanar itself means “apple orchard” in Spanish, a name given by settlers cultivating apples and fields of alfalfa at the height of its agricultural period.

In the early 20th century, the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (LADWP) contained the region’s flowing waters and siphoned them south, causing the surface and groundwater diversion to increase. Land previously wet and stabilized by vegetation grew susceptible to deflation by the wind. As a result, Patsiata (Owens Lake) became a dry lakebed—a contributor to dust storms.

The U.S. government’s eminent domain superseded LADWP’s land ownership until the War Relocation Authority evacuated Manzanar’s premises. In 1997, LADWP transferred the land to the National Park Service including water at 30.7 acre-feet per year from wells within the Manzanar historic site.

Today, five local tribes are working to honor what is a sacred homeland to their people. In May, the State Historical Resources Commission voted unanimously in support of the tribes’ nomination for listing in the California Register of Historical

Resources and in the National Register of Historic Places. The nomination is now being reviewed at the federal level for the site’s inclusion in the National Register of Historical Places, a designation that would require consideration of tribal and cultural resources in the region and give tribes a pathway to co-management of the 186 square miles.

A 21st Century Manzanar

Under Burton’s leadership today, three gardens located along the driving tour road at Manzanar feature vegetation and water feature restorations in progress: Merritt Park, Block 33 Arai Fish Pond, and Block 34 Mess Hall Garden, where the Japanese characters for the number “34”—山紫園 San Shi En—are inscribed on an entry boulder. Water can be brought to these three gardens easily from a nearby well and orchard irrigation pipeline. Their proximity to each other allows for easy access on a single walking tour.

The site’s restoration and maintenance plan also includes two gardens in the administration area displaying their original historic condition. One garden was originally planted for the white workers with flowers and lawn; the other featured traditional Japanese elements. Over time, the rocks, Joshua tree (*Yucca brevifolia*), and cactus are what remain.

The Children’s Village is another poignant touchstone on the site, as it was the only home across the war’s 10 relocation centers for abandoned and orphaned children. Its restoration will include a restored wisteria gazebo and cherry trees.

Many of Manzanar’s tree species, such as the fast-growing willows and the ubiquitous tamarisks, are either failing, invasive, and/or requiring too



ABOVE: Author Jeanne Ferris and visitors Dan and Kim Ferris walk across the restored bridge at Merritt Park. Photo: Tom Ferris

BELOW: Incarcerated Japanese American families waded in the creek. Photo: Dorothea Lang



Remembering the Ancestors

On November 21, 1945, Manzanar officially ceased operating under the WRA. Forty-three years later, Congress issued a formal apology, passed the Civil Liberties Act, and awarded \$20,000 to each living former incarcerated as reparations for their treatment.

Manzanar survivor and master stonemason Ryoza Kado assisted with many of the gardens imprinted with his faux wood signature, including the rock military sentry posts remaining at the “historic entrance” and a 14-foot white obelisk monument on the cemetery grounds maintained by NPS. According to the Kanji dictionary, the Japanese Kanji character on the obelisk is a literal translation: 慰霊塔 (*I Rei Tō*) and, “soul consoling tower.”

The *I Rei Tō* memorial is now the focal point of a 53-year-old pilgrimage on the last Saturday of April. Each year, Japanese American survivors and supporters use the pilgrimage to honor the 150 people who died at Manzanar, offering multi-denominational prayers and an active pledge to always protect civil rights even in the face of erroneous leadership. Eighty years later, it remains a lesson never forgotten. ■

much water. They will be replaced by drought-tolerant trees similar in appearance.

Regarding Manzanar’s future, Burton adds, “The majority of Manzanar’s gardens would be stabilized and maintained as-is. For these gardens, preservation in their state of abandonment will allow the gardens to evoke the dry, harsh conditions of Manzanar when internees arrived, and the inexorable way the desert has reclaimed the site. Implementation of the *Garden Management Plan* is dependent upon supplemental project funding but could be accomplished with current staffing. Stabilization, regular routine maintenance, monitoring, and staff

training will be necessary to ensure long-term success.”

Despite time and erosion, the integrity and quality of these gardens reflect the Gaman of the people who walked out of this prison camp and had to restart their lives with empty pockets, dreams interrupted, and a bus ride back to nowhere.

It remains a powerful reminder that it does not matter who owns it, just leave the garden more beautiful than when you found it.