ALL ALONG THE WATCHTOWERS:
Photographs of Manzanar at Gunpoint, Framed in Barbed Wire

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In the grand history of the twentieth-century American government, Executive Order 9066\(^1\), mandating the mass relocation of anyone of Japanese decent to several internment camps through the United States, a fear-driven action taken in response to the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan. It ranks high as one of the most disgraceful uses of policy; not only to the ideals of democracy, freedom and justice, but towards a minority group that had earned the right to be protected under these social and political values. Sweating and laboring in the names of these concepts upon their arrival onto American soil, this great injustice barely is a question in a trivia game show, and certainly not given a major coverage in American history textbooks it deserves. The Japanese internment usually takes up a paragraph in the dense, abundantly tragic chapter of World War II.

The internment story is best told in memoirs, collective essays and photographic journals, by those whom experienced the pain and brave enough to write about it, or even an outsider like Ansel Adams, a photographic journalist that was the one of the first allowed in an internment camp, Manzanar, to take pictures of inside the compound. Adams’s took a photographic account of everyday life in Manzanar, later comprising them into several books, one in particular *Born Free and Equal*. Photographs by Ansel Adams\(^2\) illustrate the experience of living in the conditions of Manzanar, its climate, housing and security, the birth of an economic and labor force in a detention center void of the normal resources and employment opportunity, health care administration created


by a makeshift staff within the community, the use of mass media as a tool of self-expression and outlet of information to the world inside, as well as outside, of Manzanar, community interaction and its activities generated to assimilate a life to resemble the one they once had, and finally, the enduring Japanese spirit under submission, false accusation and tragedy by a nation they want to join that views them as the enemy.

In the range of these photographs the view of the rows of barracks, craggy mountains and desert landscapes decorate the scenery, the proclaimed “new home” for all Japanese interns, via Executive Order 9066:

“It was an unusual city. There were armed guards on towers with machine guns and searchlights, and barbed wire, and row upon row of barracks. But it was an American city, populated by American citizens, though only a handful of Manzanar’s residents had come voluntarily.”

An unusual city it was. Rows of shoddy barracks, in sharp parallel lines across the desert sand in these photographs were the homes and headquarters of outsourcing. In a desert climate area reaching over one hundred degrees in summer and sub-zero temperatures in the winter, the photograph of an aerial view of Manzanar shows a city that was subjected to this desert wilderness. Originally, Manzanar was known as Owens Valley Reception Center until it was taken over by the War Relocation Authority, which gave Manzanar its name. The idea behind the design for a barrack was to provide temporary housing for soldiers in time of war, which although the Japanese internment was supposedly intended to be short-term, however these “matchstick” houses turned out to be a long-term living

\[3\] Ibid.
\[4\] John Armor/Peter Wright *Manzanar* (Time Books 1988), xi.
\[6\] Ibid.
\[7\] Manzanar Historical Website [online book]: Historical Abstract - http://www.nps.gov/archive/manz/hrs/hrst.htm (date accessed March 2007)
situation for the several thousand Japanese Americans detained for upwards of a few years, forced to weather the conditions of the Sierra’s climate. Moreover, the space allotted was mostly overcrowded, sometimes dividing family members.\(^8\)

Adding to the “low-par” living construction, security also was another condition to be weathered, looking again at the landscape photograph with guard towers and barbed wire creating Manzanar’s hostile borders\(^9\). Manzanar was incased in barbed wire fencing, with a total of eight watchtowers, with rifle-armed personnel surrounding the perimeter. The U.S. Army accounted for very few personnel, due to the war. Mostly Caucasian males, most of which lacked significant experience in law enforcement, completed the security staff. Fortunately, these unqualified men whom may have just signed on for security detail to administer torture to the supposed nation’s enemy were replaced by adequate men with a solid security enforcement background.\(^10\) Though who can say that professionalism served as a stable buffer for racism and hatred, in fact this may have been an easier way to sweep accounts under the rug.

While in the scope of Adam’s photographic works none show a direct mistreatment of the internees, past memoirs and historic narratives illustrate accounts below the surface\(^11\). One case of Manzanar’s most infamous public demonstration, an “unruly protest” of the unjust imprisonment of the leader of the Kitchen Workers Union, Harry Ueno. Ueno was imprisoned without justifiable evidence to prove him guilty in the beating of a community group leader of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL).

\(^8\) Peter Wright/John Armor, 85.
The crowd of unarmed protestors fell under tear gas and security opened fire into the crowd of unarmed internees without direct orders. The assault left several people wounded, a few internees even died. More accounts of abuse exceed beyond the ill-fated protest, for instance being forced to work in the harsh desert heat to the point of massive heat strokes. Some internees were forced to bury dead community members, subjected to blatant physical and psychological abuse.

With these near unbearable physical and emotionally jarring conditions, healthcare existence would stand as an immediate issue. The photograph of nurse Aiko Hamaguchi in the nursery raises the notion; in this haphazardly constructed community under the scrutiny of security and desert climate, a health care system must have been in play to ensure welfare of the Manzanar community. Dr. Goto, a physician in Manzanar states how exactly health care had been administered, and by whom:

“So far we’ve been lucky—only two men in the hospital, and nothing much serious there...We’ve had a few cuts and sprains and a lot of blisters—after all, you expect that when you try to make sagebrush cutters out of good lawyers and accountants.”

The health care service system was under the direct supervisory of an American doctor, yet the staff; doctors, dentists, nurses and more, were entirely composed of internees from Manzanar, some of which suffered from ailments themselves. Beyond problems the makeshift staff, the photo of nurse Hamaguchi also illustrates tools and conditions of the

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15 Peter Wright/John Armor, 105.
health facilities as well. In the photo, we see incubators, a lab coat, stethoscopes and other various items that one would expect to find in a hospital station. The nursery itself appears to be immaculate, no doubt due to the Japanese feeling of the importance of impeccable hygiene. Though remarkably clean, the space appears tight, with the only source of light appearing to be coming from a window. These clues raise a deeper question of not only inadequate staff, but what tools did this staff have to implement proper health care. As it turns out, much like the staff, equipment was few and far in between. The WRA supplied them with the very basic necessities, once again leaving the fate of survival of the Manzanar internees at the hands of its ill-prepared community.

The need for medical services became enormous, right from the birth of Manzanar almost nearly to its close; the Manzanar health section “provided a full array of public health services in conditions that were sub-standard.” Localized health care, this includes cases such as colds, or routine check-ups, all took place inside of Manzanar, while anything requiring surgery, or terminal illness (i.e. cancer), these patients were directed to Los Angeles County Hospital. With what provisions this makeshift staff worked with, health care administration remained on a semi-decent coverage; though in mortuary services, none were provided, and only a small percentage of autopsies were performed due to, again, lack of appropriate staff.

Looking again at the photograph of Nurse Hamaguchi holding the baby to the mother in front of the glass partition, the question of generations, the difference between

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19 Ibid.
20 Ibid.
each and the survival, begs to be asked.21 In the Manzanar population, two major
generation groups can be classified called Issei, or “first generation” and Nisei, “second
generation.22 Issei, immigrated to America directly from Japan, often the elderly and only
composed one-third of the Manzanar population. Issei’s offspring, Nisei, were born here
in the United States, some even in detention camps; make up the rest of the population in
Manzanar. Given the age difference, and deeper knowledge of American language and
culture, Nisei had an even greater desire to be citizens of America. This was done to
honor their families and predecessors reared who them in this nation. Nisei were
incredibly strong and skilled workers, who lost everything due to the Executive Order
9066, including businesses, homes and possessions23. Even stronger than the Nisei’s
desire to assimilate into American life was the resistance of said goals, along with great
suspicion from the American government that this was the most problematic group within
the Japanese community:

“…I feel that they (American citizens of Japanese decent) present a
difficult, if not more difficult, problem than the enemy alien…In
addition to the family traits and the patriotism of their native
country of Japan, you have racial characteristics…which cannot be
obliterated from these persons, regardless of how many
generations are born in the United States.”24

Japanese-American’s interest and want for gain in America was seen as a threat or a
maneuver to attack, not a product of international ambition or enterprise. A specific
group within Nisei received the harshest of accusations and discrimination called the

21 Ansel Adam’s Photographs of the Japanese Internment:
22 Peter Wright/John Armor, 69.
23 Ibid, 70.
Kibei. Kibei were Japan-born and attended schools in Japan before crossing over into the United States. This was most unfavorable during the time of the internment, fearing this group may have been instructed to assimilate into American culture in hopes to launch an attack on American soil. Nisei, Kibei included, were major advocates of education, in fact Nisei believed that it was vital the Japanese spirit.

In the confines of Manzanar, with numerous internees with skills and education backgrounds, these citizens began put these skills to use. The group effort came together despite the odds to create an internal economical and commercial arena in the detention center. This becomes clearly illustrated in the photograph of Japanese men working in a warehouse, Manzanar’s employment and enterprise was a manifestation of the internees own devices. Manzanar detainees had become the sole proprietor of its community goods and merchandise, even employment, causing the creation of the Manzanar Cooperative. The sole purpose of the Manzanar Cooperative “was to supply members with goods and services of high quality at a minimum cost and establish methods of working together, whereby people can solve their economic and social problems.”

The Manzanar Co-op and WRA drew up a licensing agreement, on which this organization should run. This left the WRA in supervision control and completely responsible for all buildings, training and financial services. It was not until 1943 where evacuees had complete control over the cooperative. Manzanar Co-op was constructed under the ideals and principals of any other business venture, inclusive of paying rent and

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25 Ibid.
fees, which in this case the acting landlord was the American government.\textsuperscript{28} Even before the co-op had manifested into a legitimate business, occupant’s barracks had opened up as stores. From this small foundation of personal and economical ambition, the co-op began to grow, opening up merchant shops and the like.\textsuperscript{29}

Manzanar Free Press, a local publication also run and operated by internees, became a prime candidate for business expansion for advertisement and mail order business. With the growth of a substantially large business organization, an appointed business government was vital for the continuance of success of the co-op. In the photograph of the men in the warehouse, you see a man speaking with an employee. This man gives way to the idea that management and order was in place in order to assure the assurance of success in the cooperative. Manzanar Co-op was governed by a congressional body, followed by a board of directors; including a general manager, assistant manager, treasurer and comptroller.\textsuperscript{30} At the height of the cooperative, its employment reached over seven thousand, including both men and women. Not only in Ansel’s collection \textit{Born Free And Equal} do we see these community members as acting employees, other collections by Ansel further illustrate the creation of gainful employment.\textsuperscript{31} In 1942, Manzanar Cooperative had already reached over three thousand dollars in profit; by the time nearing the actual close of Manzanar in 1944, Manzanar Cooperative had become a one million dollar a year business.\textsuperscript{32}

\textsuperscript{28} Peter Wright/John Armor, 98.
\textsuperscript{29} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Peter Wright/John Armor, 100.
Manzanar had steadfastly become its own town, with its citizens working laboriously to capture a life they had once known, a story that is beyond inspirational. Leaving a down-trodden community to its own devices, the need to express and report the affairs of said community is vital, which in the picture of Roy Takeno, editor of the Manzanar Free Press, reading a copy, shows that the interned in Manzanar had a tool of self-expression.\textsuperscript{33} Though surely limited and censored, Manzanar Free press reported the on-goings, opinion, hardships and news of Manzanar on a large scale. Picture of Roy Takeno, glancing at a copy for the Manzanar Free Press,\textsuperscript{34} gives way to the idea that the interned had a medium source in which to communicate and relay news and words of their community, run by a credible and experienced source to act as the main voice. In one Takeno’s editorials, he has summed up exactly how representative his voice was, and the staff of the Manzanar Free Press, in attempting to accomplish not only for the community, but outside of the compound as well:

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“Greetings to you for a Victorious New Year, people of America; from your kindred 50,000 citizens inside the barbed wire fences. We send you greetings, we who have been lodged by circumstances of war inside these Relocation Centers in the deserts of the West. In three months, we will have spent two years in the centers. The tragic experiences of evacuation, the business losses of the evacuees, the unwarranted hatred engendered by some people because of our hereditary kinship with the Asiatic foe—these we will write off our ledger…In seeking to resettle and re-establish ourselves in our prospective trades, businesses and professions, we realize the unwisdom of trying to force ourselves upon people a people who view us with suspicion…We are prepared to shoulder our share of further sacrifices. We will not shrink…[Some] who have already left are contributing to our embattled nation’s war effort in Europe and the South Pacific…We ask you, the American people, to try us on our own merits,
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\textsuperscript{34} Ibid.
realizing it is one of the characteristics of the country we love to appraise its people by the contribution they can make toward the total welfare of the nation.”35

The Roy Takeno photograph shows another point of how did the tool of self expression reached its readers.36 The newspaper appears clean, yet slightly wrinkled from use, but obviously was printed from a machine. On one side, small pictures resembling advertisements decorate the page, likely for the businesses and products from within Manzanar. Manzanar Free Press first started out as a mimeographed, short publication with erratic circulation, eventually growing in length and more regular circulation, three times a week; earning the label as “America’s youngest and one of the most unique newspapers.”37 Again, the Manzanar Free Press is an example of just how the citizens of Manzanar were almost entirely responsible for the welfare and progress of their lives, the Free Press was staffed with only it’s own members of the Manzanar community, completely supported by advertisements of local and outside business, along with subscription sales that was gladly paid for it’s information and show of support of the informative effort and cause. Manzanar Free Press need for keeping accurate information and record of the compounds events coincided with the need for information of life outside Manzanar as well. News from the outside world was composed of articles and clippings from other nationwide publications. Furthermore, the world outside began to read the Free Press’s editorials and reports, giving the nation of America a view of the Japanese American’s story, a story that did not have the tone of an enemy. Self-expression had finally found a way to be told; with poetry and prose from every age

35 Peter Wright/John Armor, 126.
37 Peter Wright/John Armor, 121.
group, news of accomplishments on personal and business levels, coverage of positive and negative social on goings and community outreach and reflection of a message of hope that these internees would not let die, so beautifully put in the front page of an anniversary edition of the Free Press:

“Out of the desert's bosom, storm swept with wind and dust;
Out of smiles and curses, of tears and cries, forlorn;
Mixed with broken laughter, forced because they must;
Toil, sweat and bleeding wounds, red and raw and torn.
Out on the desert's bosom—a new town is born.
Dust clouds, like brown smoke, rise and swirl and blow.
From hidden lairs in icy crags, towering high,
Like hungry pack of wolves, the gale sweeps low,
Fangs sharp and bared, shrieking to the sky.
The guardian peaks emerge, serene and high.
Summer with long, parched nights and days;
And heaven's bowl a shimmering blue of heat;
The thirsty hills are choked. The sun's hot blaze
Before encroaching autumn, once more retreats.
King Winter reigns upon his icy seat.
A year is gone. A quickening in the air.
The desert stirs beneath the freshening rain.
The scent of sage, the wild rose perfume rare,
The tumbling brooks break forth in glad refrain.
Another spring—perhaps new hope, new life again.”

Possibly just as important as the need for self-expression, is the desire and ability to express oneself to a community through involvement creatively, socially and religiously; which the photographs of a gathering and mingling crowd in front of a catholic church paired with Japanese women attending a dressmaking class show us steps taken to do just that, also showing the pursuit of spiritual enlightenment and education. The dress making class photo, instructed by Mrs. Ryie Yoshizawa, seems to

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be taking place in a small confined space, with a group of eager young women conversing and watching Mrs. Yoshizawa construct a dress on an old mannequin. This photograph in particular illustrates clearly the Nisei’s constant pursuit of furthering oneself, even at a creative standpoint. In Nisei’s wants and needs for success as a group, education was a commitment that they intended to keep to themselves that would link them to their goals. Pursuit of education was high not only for the currently academically involved Nisei, but their children, called Sansei, for their hopeful return back into American society.

Again, before implementation from the WRA of a director to begin facilitation of an education system, volunteers for some thousand students had already conducted class. For those who had attended institutions outside of Manzanar prior to the evacuation, diplomas had been mailed to the handful of students who did graduate, making them the first students to actually graduate inside of Manzanar, though by default. When the WRA began to take control, structuring an actual legitimised school system, the original requirement was for all teachers and instructors to be Caucasian, but out of convenience the volunteered Nisei were allowed to instruct in the classrooms. Nisei instructors were only restricted in one area, the language of instruction. All teachers were not allowed to teach any course in the Japanese language, despite the level of English fluency of an internee, or to teach the language itself as a course. Progress of education had been outstanding; grade and skill levels had remained high. Despite the emotional trauma one would expect from losing their past lives and forced

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41 Peter Wright/John Armor, 107-08.
unjust imprisonment, internees would not allow these events to overshadow their desire to be educated.\textsuperscript{43} Outside of the field of academia, course of vocation, adult education courses like we see in the photograph of Mrs. Rylie Yoshizawa teaching dressmaking,\textsuperscript{44} were likely entirely left to personal instruction, depending on its demand and offered for free. These fields of design and merchandise construction help the community greatly, which most good could be bought through the Manzanar cooperative.

Like any community, neighborhood, personal enjoyment and goals are to be expected. The photograph with the crowd gathering in front of a catholic church is an example of the social and leisure aspect of Manzanar. Though life was certainly hard, this did not stop internees at Manzanar to make the best of an impossible situation and find ways for entertainment and enlightenment. Faith is an incredible source of power in times of war, this ideology lead to the construction of Buddhist and Catholic churches, becoming a place to lay their woes at the feet of a higher power and meditate. Religion is also an essential part of Japanese culture, many festivals, also known as “matsuri”, circulate around religious ceremonies and practice. This allowed the internees to express their culture, by holding said ceremonies and festivals, keeping alive the foundation of their upbringing and history with themselves, and future generations, binding the community as a united whole.

The religious community activities allowed the citizens of Manzanar to come together in a social aspect, within the labor and abuse of the harsh desert some fun could be had, turning lemons into lemonade essentially. The community began to break recreation into the departments, like arts and crafts, music, gardening, music and

\textsuperscript{43} Peter Wright/John Armor, 111.
\textsuperscript{44} Ansel Adam’s Photographs of the Japanese Internment: http://memory.loc.gov/ammem/collections/anseladams/ (date accessed: February 2007).
entertainment. Each of these departments held classes or events of enjoyable and therapeutic gatherings for which one could express their culture, create art, learn to play music and even have social functions like block parties and social dances. This was perhaps the greatest accomplishment of all, even with their sole responsibility of media, commerce, education, the burden of creating an “oasis” in the desert did not stop them from the last shred of desire to enjoy life, no matter the challenges and circumstances.45

Looking at the collection of these photographs as a whole,46 all illustrating a community coming together, under the harshest of circumstances, to create a city and a labor force, to be responsible, almost entirely, for the health care and well-being for the “citizens” of Manzanar, but most of all, the enduring Japanese spirit suffering under the shame and accusation from a culture and government that they sought life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness and property. Japanese Americans certainly were not the first minority group kept from this goal, by no means will they be the last, but they join the long line for groups that have fought the hardest for the American dream, always out of their reach due to race, culture and background, of a world where the face of a “true American” is awarded without question to the features that identify with Caucasian, not by merit.

Upon the closing of Manzanar, the then acting editor of Manzanar Free Press Kiyoko Nomura, summed up the entire experience of Manzanar within one editorial, entitled “The Last Step.” Perhaps one of the largest principals of Japanese philosophy is a concept called “ichi go, ichi e”, which translates into “One spirit, one picture.” The

premise behind this principle that every moment, increment of time, is an experience. Regardless of its positive or negative impact, it must be felt and experienced just the same. Also, every experience in life only happens once in your life and it is to be a lesson. This editorial concludes that lesson, which to date the Japanese American will carry with them, never to be forgotten:

“In just three months, Manzanar, one-time “home to more than 10,000 people, will only be a memory—a memory of joy and heart ache, happiness and fear, of love and hate…During these three and a half years we have learned the importance of cooperation, patience, and sympathy in order that others not suffer needlessly. We have made lasting friends among people who face the same problems as we do. They will not be easily forgotten…but now the time has come when we must find a place for ourselves in a normal community, our children must know what life is beyond the barbed wire. They have yet to see the bright lights of the city, traffic signals, streetcars, schools…and a million other things adults have forgotten…But wherever we go, we must begin again with a renewed faith to build for ourselves and those of our heritage a place of security in this great nation so that our children will never be forced to experience the loss and hardships that we have known these last few years.”

Yet while Japanese Americans have taken this valuable lesson of endurance and hope to past and future generations, it still seems that other classes, races and organizations still ignorantly avoid this lesson. No matter the actions of a group, country or government in aggression towards another, this should never overshadow the merits and actions of an individual. It should be by these merits we should measure goodwill and motives, it remains the only fair and accurate way. In comparison to current events, 9/11 is a shining example of America’s reaction to attack. Again using poor and rushed legislation, specifically the Patriot Act, many American citizen’s rights and freedom have been stripped from them, with only motives of fear and suspicions serving as evidence.

47 Peter Wright/John Armor, 129.
With misguided actions such as these, the possibility of another internment still looms.

Like the old adage, history seems to be doomed to repeat itself.
Bibliography


