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Japanese Internment Camps

By Dave Frank

Racism toward Asians developed in the US as a result of Chinese immigration during the 1800's. Many came first during the California gold rush, then as laborers for the building of the railroads. Congress passes the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882 essentially shutting off Chinese immigration for the next 60 years.

In 1885 the first migrants from Japan arrived in Hawaii. Significant immigration from Japan began in 1890 with a census of 2039 in the US with half in California. 25,000 [sic] more arrived during the 1890's and 125,000 during the peak immigration 1901-1908 and then 10,000 per year until the Immigration Act of 1924 barred further immigration from Japan. A total of approximately 300,000 Japanese entered the US from the end of the Civil War until 1924 compared to 30 million other immigrants during this period. This Japanese immigration was referred to by journalists as the "Yellow Flood".

Many of the Japanese were engaged in agriculture and owned small businesses primarily in California (LA area) but also in Oregon and Washington. The Japanese in the US are classified by the following terms.

Issei are Japanese born in Japan.

Neissi are 2nd generation Japanese born in the US.

Sensei are 3rd generation Japanese born to Neissi.

Tension on the West Coast toward the Japanese developed due to Japan's expansion into China which also strained relations between the US and Japan.

December 7, 1941 Pearl Harbor

Local authorities and the FBI began rounding up 3,000 people considered dangerous alien enemy. 1,300 [sic] of these were Japanese living in Hawaii and the West Coast. Fear of sabotage and fifth column activity resulted in declaring the West Coast a theater of war.

FDR signed executive order 9066 on February 19, 1942 which gave the military the authority to evacuate all Japanese from the states of California, Oregon, Washington, and the territory of Alaska.

On February 25, 1942 evacuation of areas begins. On March 18, 1942 the WRA (War Relocation Authority) was established with Milton Eisenhower as director.

This was the agency that handled the evacuation and establishment and operation of the camps. Eisenhower resigned 3 months later and eventually wrote that the internment of the Japanese was wrong.

The Japanese were first sent to temporary detention centers from March, 1942 – October, 1942. Some were race tracks like Santa Anita, and other were abandoned Civil Conservation Camps, migrant farms, ranches, and livestock facilities.

From there they were sent to detention camps such as Manzanar, Heart Mountain (WY), Preston and Gila River (AZ) and Jerome (AR).

Internees began returning to the West Coast January 2, 1945. The last camp closed March 20, 1946. A total of 120,000 Japanese were interred with 2/3 of them U.S. citizens.

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Justice Department Internment Camps

Twenty-seven U.S. Department of Justice camps were used to incarcerate 2,260 dangerous persons of Japanese ancestry taken from 12 Latin American countries by U.S. State and Justice Department. Most were interred at Seagoville and Crystal City, TX; Ft. Missoula, MT; Santa Fe, NM; and Kooskia, ID. German and Italian aliens from Central and South America, as well as the U.S. were also kept there. Seventy percent of the Japanese aliens came from Peru.

The official reason was to secure the western hemisphere from sabotage and to provide bartering pawn for the exchange of Americans captured by Japan. In reality, they were deported arbitrarily due to racial prejudice or economic competition, not because they were a security threat.

When the War ended the Japanese were left with nowhere to go. Peru would not take them back. A few were sent back to Japan, but the majority of them resisted being sent back. In 1947 the U.S. government finally let them settle in the U.S.

Token money was introduced in September 1943. Workers were paid 10 cents per hour and, in addition, each family was allotted 6 dollars per month. The tokens could be used at either the Japanese Union Store or the German General Store.

Three types of tokens were produced for the camps. The Seagoville camp had three red fiber octagonal shaped tokens in denominations of 5 cent, 25 cent, and one dollar. The Crystal City had two types of tokens issued. The first are grayish brown in color and round in shape. They come in denominations of 1 cent, 5 cents, 25 cents and one dollar. They do not have the Crystal City printed on them. They say Dept. of Justice I & N Service.

These tokens were also thought to have been used at Ellis Island. The other type has Crystal City printed on them and were produced in denominations of 1 cent, 5 cents, 1 dollar, and 5 dollars. The 1 cent through 1 dollar are red and round. The 5 dollar token is green and round. These are extremely rare. Some people think that the gray brown tokens are just the red ones that have lost the red coating, but this is impossible since that [sic] have different designs.

A new Crystal City token was recently discovered. Like the Seagoville tokens it is red and octagonal, but says Chrystal City Internment Camp clothing token. The back says 5 cents. Neither Internment camp collectors or Texas token collectors have ever seen this type; perhaps it was a pattern that somehow entered circulation. [sic]

Seagoville closed June, 1945 and Crystal City closed November, 1947.

Please refer to *A Guide Book of United States Coins 2012* by R. S. Yeoman for pictures of the tokens.