Strength and Resilience: Women of Topaz

BETTER DAYS
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Background Information

Fear and suspicion towards Japanese Americans grew after the attack on Pearl Harbor and the United States' entry to World War II.

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the removal of Japanese Americans from designated military areas along the West Coast.

WESTERN DEFENSE COMMAND AND FOURTH ARMY
WARTIME CIVIL CONTROL ADMINISTRATION
Presidio of San Francisco, California
April 30, 1942

INSTRUCTIONS
TO ALL PERSONS OF
JAPANESE
ANCESTRY
Living in the Following Area:

All that portion of the County of San Angeles, State of California, within the boundary beginning at the intersection of Western Avenue and Redondo Beach Boulevard, northward on Western Avenue to Santa Monica Boulevard and Compton Boulevard to Atlantic Boulevard, thence southerly on Atlantic Boulevard to Artesia Street, thence westerly on Artesia Street to Alameda Street, thence southerly on Alameda to Carson Street, thence westerly on Carson Street to a point at which a north-south line established by Western Avenue intersects Carson Street, thence northerly on said line and Western Avenue to the point of beginning.

Pursuant to the provisions of Civilian Exclusion Order No. 20, this Headquarters, dated April 30, 1942, all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated from the above area by 12 o'clock noon, P. W. T., Thursday, May 7, 1942.

No Japanese person living in the above area will be permitted to change residence after 12 o'clock noon, P. W. T., Thursday, April 30, 1942, without obtaining special permission from the representative of the Commanding General, Southern California Sector, at the Civil Control Station located at:

3422 South Western Avenue,
Torrance, California.

Background Information

This order led to the forced relocation and incarceration of approximately 120,000 Japanese Americans. Two-thirds of those incarcerated were U.S. citizens.

Nearly 11,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned in Topaz, near Delta, Utah.

Santa Anita Assembly Center, April 1942. National Archives.

Women in Topaz

Japanese American women sustained daily life inside Topaz. They transformed bleak barracks into homes, organized schools for their children, and led cultural activities to maintain morale.

Women inside the camp took on roles as nurses, clerks, and teachers. Older women passed down traditions and created support networks to care for children, elderly, and those who were sick.

Tomoe Otsu Tomine
of Alameda, CA.

Mess #23 waitresses at Topaz, Utah.

Densho

Alice Hirai

Alice Hirai was just two years old when her entire extended family was sent to Topaz. Her first memories were of life there.

"I thought it was a normal thing for people to live in barracks."

After the war, Alice's family found community with other Topaz survivors and settled in Salt Lake City. She later became a nurse and started giving school presentations about life at Topaz.

Marii Hasegawa

Alice Marii Hasegawa was born in Hiroshima, Japan. Her family moved to the United States when her father, a Buddhist priest, was assigned to serve Buddhists in California.

They were forcibly confined in Topaz during the war.

Marii spent her life working for peace and fighting for civil rights and organizing protests against war. She led a peace delegation to North Vietnam.

Mary Murakami

Mary’s family was sent to Topaz when she was 14. “They came to our homes and told us we could take with us what we could carry. We sold our furniture and left our valuables behind. Our new life was packed in a suitcase.”

When Mary's oldest brother was drafted in 1944, her parents weren't allowed outside the fences at Topaz to say goodbye. “The image of my parents on one side of the fence and my brother on the other side is still sharp in my mind.”

Miné Okubo

Miné was an artist who illustrated the *Topaz Times* newspaper and taught art lessons to kids and adults in Topaz.

She drew over 2000 sketches documenting her time in Topaz, depicting the crowded and difficult conditions with humor and honesty.

In 1946, Miné published these illustrations in a book titled *Citizen 13660*.

Teachers at Topaz

Some Utah women came to Topaz as social workers and teachers. They helped to establish Topaz High School and the Topaz Art School.

They offered education and mentorship to students determined to pursue learning and build community despite their unjust imprisonment.

Eleanor Sekerak photo collection, Topaz Museum.

Eleanor Gerard Sekerak

Eleanor taught at Topaz High School and encouraged students to pursue their dreams despite difficult conditions.

She bought caps and gowns for Topaz's first graduation ceremony. Several students remembered feeling that "she was a person who really cared."

Eleanor documented life at Topaz through her photos. (cameras were forbidden for prisoners)

Eleanor Sekerak photo collection, Topaz Museum.

Wanda Robertson

Wanda Robertson from Fountain Green, Utah became the principal of the elementary school at Topaz.

She refused to use the government's dehumanizing term of "enemy aliens" for Japanese American prisoners, instead calling them "residents."

Wanda recruited other adults to teach her students about their specialties, including a memorable lesson about climatology where kids learned to forecast the weather.

Eleanor Sekerak photo collection, Topaz Museum.

Mothers of Topaz

When their sons were drafted out of Topaz for combat duty in the military, some mothers at Topaz organized a collective protest. They supported their sons' willingness to serve their country but objected to the government's denial of their citizenship rights.

'Mothers of Topaz' gathered more than 1100 signatures on a petition for President Roosevelt. Even under difficult circumstances used their voices to advocate for equal civil rights.

Activity: Topaz Quilt Squares

Throughout history, quilts have served as practical household items but also as storytelling tools, especially among women.

As a class, we'll create a quilt representing the stories from Topaz.

You will each design a quilt square representing the experience of a woman at Topaz using symbols, colors, and imagery to represent your woman's emotions, experiences, and acts of resilience.

Satsuki Ina holds a quilt her mother received from a stranger while incarcerated at the Tanforan Detention Center in California in 1942.