

Generations of Japanese Americans were scarred by WWII internments

By Anita Creamer, Sacramento Bee

In the spring of 1942, Donna Nakashima's father came home to Florin on leave from the U.S. Army to help his widowed mother gather the family's belongings – one suitcase per person – as they prepared for wartime incarceration.

Renowned photographer Dorothea Lange captured the moment. A uniformed Ted Miyata stood alongside his mother in the strawberry field she rushed to harvest before segregation orders aimed at Japanese Americans forced the family from their home.

Seventy years later, consider the stark generational changes forged by wartime trauma.

Nakashima's late parents – the children of immigrants who were forbidden by law to become American citizens – were part of a generation that came of age during the war, many of them imprisoned behind the barbed wire of internment camps because of their Japanese heritage.

But her own two children think of themselves as American, not Japanese American. And so does she.

"I don't know my culture," said Nakashima, 50, a state analyst who lives in Sacramento. "But that's how my parents raised us. They didn't speak Japanese at home. They only spoke English."

On Feb. 19, 1942, with a frightened nation still reeling from the Pearl Harbor attacks two months earlier, Franklin Delano Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which led to the internment of almost 120,000 Japanese Americans during World

War II. Two-thirds of them were native-born American citizens like Nakashima's parents.

More than four decades would pass before a congressional commission found that the imprisonment accomplished no national security purpose and was, instead, based on what the commission called "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership." By 1990, former internees began receiving presidential letters of apology and reparation checks.

Today Japanese American educators and researchers say that the community's third generation – the Sansei, most of them born after the war to parents who had been imprisoned – has inherited a complicated generational legacy that has played out in the Japanese American culture ever since the days of camp.

"A lot of what people experience in adulthood can be traced back to the trauma their parents passed on intergenerationally," said Satsuki Ina, 67, a psychotherapist and retired Sacramento State professor who was born to Nisei (or second) generation parents at the Tule Lake camp in Northern California.

Through her research, which culminated in an Emmy-winning PBS documentary, "Children of the Camps," she discovered that post-traumatic stress scarred the lives of Nisei and their Sansei children in the years after they were released from camp.

Read the whole story