

Author shares reality of citizens being imprisoned without a trial during WWII

By Kathryn Reed

“Crimes of the government can become sins against the innocent, especially in the mind of a child.”

“In 1942, all three branches of the government violated the Constitution.”

“Immigrants are often scapegoats.”

Those are some of the thoughts Jeanne Watatsuki Houston shared with nearly 200 people who listened to her speak this month in South Lake Tahoe. She, with husband James Houston, wrote “Farewell to Manzanar” – a story about her three-year internment at the Eastern Sierra “prison” during World War II.

She was a 7-year-old living in Southern California in 1942 when the government started posting posters on telephone poles telling those who were of Japanese heritage to turn up at bus depots and train stations on a certain day. It didn’t matter if they were U.S. citizens.



Jeanne Houston tells her story about being forced to

live in an internment camp
during World War II.
Photo/Kathryn Reed

“We looked like the enemy,” Houston said.

Soldiers with guns herded them onto their transport. While not confrontational, at least for Houston’s family, it was still a military act.

Her father had already been whisked away. He was arrested the first day after Pearl Harbor because he was not a citizen. He had come to the United States with his parents in 1904 when he was 17.

“He was considered a dangerous person,” Houston said. He was a fisherman by trade. Her dad was sent to a federal prison in Bismarck, N.D.

The laws didn’t allow him to become a citizen until 1952.

“There had already been 100 years of anti-Asian laws,” the author said.

And while the United States was at war with other countries at this time, it was only Japanese who were rousted from their homes. Those other countries were in Europe where the people looked more like those in Washington, D.C., who were making the decisions.

It has been 40 years since Houston published the book. It took her more than two decades after being released from what was essentially a prison – not a camp in any sense of the word – to begin writing her story. It was a story that her husband did not know before they married.

“I don’t want others to feel guilty, it is understanding we want,” Houston said.

She realizes this segment of U.S. history is still unknown to

many. People don't realize the government rounded up 120,000 people – 70 percent of who were born in the United States – and sent them to one of 10 internment camps. That is why she continues to tell her story. (The May 14 talk was sponsored by the South Lake Tahoe Friends of the Library.)

“I don't think it will happen again, but I think it could,” Houston said.

Today, Manzanar is a National Historic Site. It's a bit like a ghost town. While Manzanar means apple orchard in Spanish, the dusty outpost in the Owens Valley with decaying remnants of the past and a visitors center with stories of the country's racist act, sits in the middle of nowhere as a reminder of what the government can do to its own people.