



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
December 28, 2007

“The exclusion and internment of Japanese Americans during World War II was an injustice felt at the deepest personal level by those who experienced it, but for all Americans, it remains a betrayal of the principles upon which this nation was founded.”

-From “Chronology of Events: 1790-1990;”
compiled by Jewel
Okawachi

On December 17, long-time Albany resident and Japanese internment camp survivor Jewel Okawachi was the featured speaker at the Albany Library’s monthly Brown Bag Speakers series. The room was packed with attendees of all ages, including students from Albany’s MacGregor High School.

Okawachi began her presentation by asking how many people in the audience were relocated during World War II. To my surprise, several hands went up. Just that fact made me realize how important a public library presentation like this is, since it gives community members a chance to not only learn but also to share information and history.

The first part of the talk covered the chronology of the historical events and how that related to Okawachi’s experience. She had a handout she had put together, which she describes as “a very sketchy chronology of events that led up to the evacuation of all

people, both citizens and non-citizens of Japanese descent from the West Coast of the United States.”

The chronology begins on March 26, 1790, when the U.S. Congress decreed “any alien, being a free white person who shall have resided within the limits and under the jurisdiction of the United States for a term of two years, may be admitted to become a citizen thereof...” According to Okawachi, it was this act that was used to deny citizenship to Japanese and other Asian immigrants until the mid-20th century.

Another date is February 23, 1905, when the *San Francisco Chronicle* front page headline read: “The Japanese Invasion: The Problem of the Hour.” This was followed by several editorials against the Japanese. November 13, 1922, brought a United States Supreme Court ban prohibiting Issei (Japanese born in Japan) from becoming naturalized citizens on the basis of race. This ban lasted until

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1952. In February 1942, State Attorney General Earl Warren (later to become a Supreme Court Justice) is quoted as telling a congressional committee that using the absence of sabotage by the Japanese as proof of loyalty was “simply to live in a fool’s paradise.”

On July 20, 1942, the first groups arrived at the Gila Relocation Center, where Okawachi and her parents were confined. This was the beginning of the internment of roughly 120,000 Japanese, of whom approximately 77,000 were American citizens. As Okawachi puts it: “The internment was based on racism and had nothing to do with establishing security measures on the west coast of the United States.”

After reviewing the chronology, Okawachi went into more detail about their life in the camp, which was made up of 27 blocks of barracks. Her

address was 16 2A, indicating block 16, barrack 2, specific location A. Although there was electricity, there was no running water so they used the washroom for bathing. For food, they went to the mess hall. “We had oxtail soup a lot,” she told us, adding, “I don’t know where they got the oxtails.”

‘The internment was based on racism and had nothing to do with establishing security measures’

There were many questions and comments from the audience, including inquiries about mail

(yes, they could send and receive letters) and land grabs (many lost their land, houses and businesses). One older woman, who grew up in the Washington D.C. area, told us she didn’t know anything about the relocation camps until she came to California in the sixties.

All in all, Okawachi summed it up perfectly when she told us, “It was a sad time and we must make sure it doesn’t happen again.”