

Letter from Rosie: A Son's Return to Manzanar

By Stan Yogi

My mother occasionally talked about camp before she died in 1989. She recalled how Manzanar was not yet complete when she and her mother arrived in the Spring of 1942, the vanguard of 10,000 Japanese Americans imprisoned in that one square mile of scrubby land at the eastern foot of the Sierra Nevada.

She described the flimsy black tar paper covering her barracks home that provided minimal protection from the winter snows and brutal high desert sun. She remembered dust storms that whipped sand through cracks between the floorboards of the 20' x 25' room she and her mother shared.

My maternal grandfather was caught in Japan during the war. So my mother and grandmother, living in Los Angeles when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, faced the uncertainties of Manzanar without him.

As a child, I had seen photographs of the camp--aerial views of endless rows of uniform drab barracks and images of stoic Japanese American families inside their cramped rooms. I knew that the government had forced Japanese Americans into camps like Manzanar and that my parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts were among them.

I visited the Manzanar site with my mother and grandmother in the summer of 1979. A lonely sentry post off Highway 395 was practically the only visible sign that anything of significance had taken place in that forlorn patch of the Owens Valley.

But that summer was a halcyon period before my senior year of high school, and my imagination was not wide or sympathetic enough to appreciate fully what it meant to be incarcerated in a desert prison camp for years without having done anything wrong. My life was too full of possibilities to grasp the turmoil of World War II and the white hot hatred and chilling fear of Japanese that resulted in 120,000 Japanese Americans being forced into camps like Manzanar throughout the U.S.

At 16, I could not comprehend what it might mean to my mother and grandmother to return, for the first time in more than 30 years, to the site of their wartime incarceration.

In the ensuing years, public awareness grew about Manzanar and the other federal government camps. In 1981, a Congressional commission found that the

incarceration of Japanese Americans was the result of racism, wartime hysteria, and a failure of political leadership. After years of organizing and lobbying by former internees, President Ronald Reagan in 1988 signed legislation issuing a formal government apology and redress of \$20,000 to each Japanese American then living who had been incarcerated. He acknowledged that the mass internment was a mistake.

My mother died of leukemia before receiving her apology and check.

My own understanding of Manzanar and its significance grew in the years after my initial 1979 visit. While researching a book I was co-writing on the history of civil liberties in California, I visited Manzanar again in 2006. By that time, the National Park Service had taken over the site and had created an excellent interpretative exhibit housed in the Quonset building that had served as the camp's gym and auditorium. I found my mother's and grandmother's names on a long banner listing all of Manzanar's internees.

I drove around the perimeter of what had been the camp and saw the site of Block 6, where my mother's barrack apartment had been. Bare trees and dry grass covered the area. Nothing remained of Block 6. But elsewhere I walked over the foundation of a communal latrine and saw the holes where toilets once were positioned. I was dumbstruck at the prospect of using a toilet, without any partitions, almost literally cheek to jowl, next to a stranger.

In 2009, the book I co-wrote was published. The mass incarceration of Japanese Americans is a central episode. So my co-author, Elaine Elinson, and I were honored when National Park Service rangers invited us to speak at Manzanar on February 19, 2011, the national "Day of Remembrance." This annual event commemorates the day in 1942 when President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing the military to remove people from any part of the country, and setting into motion the forced removal of Japanese Americans from the west coast.

The shortest route to Manzanar from the San Francisco Bay area where I live is through Yosemite, over the Tioga Pass to Mono Lake (with its surreal tufa columns), and then south on Highway 395 for 100 miles, paralleling the Sierra Nevada. During the winter months, however, the Tioga Pass is closed. So to make the day-long journey to Manzanar, Elaine, my partner David, and I left Oakland on a Friday morning and drove through unrelenting rain in the Central Valley to Bakersfield, where the sky cleared and we stopped for a hearty Basque lunch at the Sheep Growers Restaurant. Then we climbed up the lush green rolling hills of the Tehachapi Pass and wound down to the rocky Owens Valley.

Dusk turned to evening and snow began falling by the time we arrived in Lone Pine, the small town 10 miles south of Manzanar where we were staying. The following morning, we awoke to brilliant blue skies and the snowy Sierra Nevada rising from the desert floor a few miles from our motel.

The Owens Valley near Manzanar feels Biblical. The desert rubs up against the mountains. I wondered if the landscape reminded my mother of the similar terrain around Salt Lake City, where she was born and lived as a child.

A few miles south of Manzanar are the Alabama Hills, a favorite spot for directors of Hollywood Westerns because of its resemblance to the dramatic vistas of the Southwest. Boulders that look like the backs of sleeping dinosaurs fill the area. Photos and posters from some of the films shot in the Hills adorned the walls of our motel.

But my mother never saw that abstract and alien landscape. She was not allowed to leave Manzanar during her three years there.

We arrived at Manzanar an hour before the first of four presentations Elaine and I were scheduled to deliver during the weekend of our visit. The morning air was cold and dry. The dedicated rangers who had invited us to speak, dressed in their olive green pants, crisp shirts and signature wide-brimmed hats, enthusiastically greeted us and gave us a tour of the impressive exhibit space and the “back office,” where cubicles were stacked with administrative papers and documents about life in Manzanar.

We stored our bags and coats in a small library overflowing with academic studies of the internment camps, Asian American history books, and memoirs of the war years. A former internee had recently donated an antique koto, a long wooden Japanese stringed instrument, and it sat covered on a table along piles of books and papers.

I had brought with me an old photo album filled with images from my mother’s youth: my mother as a 10-year-old standing with friends outside her father’s “Yokohama Tailor” storefront in Salt Lake City; my mother in the school yard of Los Angeles’ Belmont High School just months before Pearl Harbor.

I turned to the section with photos from Manzanar, taken after a ban on cameras in the camps had been lifted. The rangers scrutinized them. Most were images of my mother’s teenage girlfriends—their hair intricately styled in huge curls, sweetly smiling

in black and white glamour poses—glued onto the brittle black paper of the album. In some photos, young women in skirts, bobby socks and cardigan sweaters sit on patches of grass, the barracks in the background the only hint betraying that they were in camp. Others were snapped in one of the many Japanese-style gardens that internees created, small oases of ponds, flowers, and carefully-placed stones in the midst of the desert.

My mother graduated in the Manzanar High School class of 1944. A few pages of her album were devoted to that event: Photos of robed and capped seniors marching down the aisles of the Manzanar auditorium, with family and friends looking on. Autographed senior portraits, like one of a bespectacled friend, signed “Dear Toki” “Sincerely, Sumi, 1944.”

One photo caught the attention of a ranger: my mother in her white graduation cap and gown standing next to a wooden building. He excitedly explained that the photo was taken just outside the building we were in. He recognized the windows.

The time neared when Elaine and I would begin our first presentation. So the rangers took us to the small auditorium where our programs would take place. After checking that the sound system and our Power Point visual presentation were functioning, we sat and waited for the first of the audience members to arrive.

A ranger entered the auditorium and handed me a stamped envelope. Inside was a card addressed to me. Who, I wondered, would be writing to me at Manzanar?

The card, a lovely reprint of an ink brush drawing of bamboo, was from a woman named Rosie, whom I had never met. She explained that she had read in the Los Angeles Japanese American newspaper, the *Rafu Shimpo*, that Elaine and I were scheduled to speak at Manzanar. That article mentioned my mother’s maiden name, Kuniyoshi, and that my mother was a graduate of Manzanar High School’s class of 1944.

Our book had received press coverage before, but no article or announcement had included my mother’s name.

Rosie wrote that in 1941 she had shared a locker with my mother at Belmont High School on the edge of downtown Los Angeles. Mid-year, Rosie’s family moved a few miles east to the Boyle Heights neighborhood, and she transferred to another school. But she was delighted several months later to be reunited with my mother—even if it was within the confines of Manzanar.

I guessed that Rosie and my mother had lost contact in the chaos after Manzanar closed in 1945. My mother and grandmother, two women alone, feared returning to Los Angeles—a hotbed of anti-Japanese agitation. So they moved to Salt Lake City, my mother’s birthplace. In 1950, they eventually settled in Los Angeles. My mother met my father at the West Adams Christian Church, where they married in 1953. A few years later they moved to the Los Angeles suburb of Gardena.

My father died in 1970, just a few years before former Manzanar internees began holding high school reunions in Los Angeles. Rosie, I later learned from a ranger, was a key organizer of those gatherings. I recalled that my mother participated in several of them in the 1970s.

But my mother hadn’t attended the reunions during the late 1980s when she underwent chemotherapy and other treatments for cancer. So I assumed that she and Rosie had not seen each other for years. But Rosie nevertheless knew of my mother’s death. “She left us too soon,” Rosie wrote.

Upon reaching this line, my voice cracked with emotion and my eyes welled. Rosie’s note crystalized not only my mother’s death at age 64 and her absence from my life, but reading the card in the context of Manzanar underscored my mother’s loss of freedom and possibilities because of her incarceration. She had forgone college in order to help support her mother in the years after the war. That was a point of bitter regret when she talked about Manzanar.

Rosie’s note was also a reminder of the 22 years that my mother and I have not had the opportunity to talk about her memories of camp and how it impacted her life, how she would have felt upon receiving the government’s apology and redress, and what she would have thought of Manzanar today. More than 30 years after she had last seen it, the government had turned the place of her wartime imprisonment into a National Historic Site to ensure that a similar tragedy of civil liberties will not happen again.

Rosie’s note was a gift. It was like my mother communicating with me decades after she died, revealing one more piece of information about herself. “Here is my friend from Belmont High. We shared a locker before the war.”

During a break between presentations later that day, I looked through a copy of the 1944 Manzanar High School yearbook that the Park Service had preserved as part of its exhibit. I found my mother’s senior picture. Her head is lifted at an angle, and her smile is serene. I also found Rosie’s senior picture. She had been a class officer. I imagined them as giggling teenagers, listening to the Andrew sisters on vinyl records

and discussing what they would do after the war and what awaited them beyond the barbed wire.

Stan Yogi is the co-author of *Wherever There's a Fight: How Runaway Slaves, Suffragists, Immigrants, Strikers, and Poets Shaped Civil Liberties in California*. (Heyday, 2009)