What Would You Bring?: Living the Japanese-American Internment Experience

GRADE LEVEL: 4-8

INTRODUCTION

On December 7, 1941, Japan bombed Pearl Harbor. The next day, the United States and Britain declared war on Japan. Two months later, on February 19, 1942, the lives of thousands of Japanese Americans were dramatically changed when President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. The order designated the West Coast as a military zone from which “any or all persons may be excluded.” Although not specified in the order, Japanese Americans were singled out for evacuation, and between 1942 and 1946, nearly 122,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry were evacuated and relocated on the west coast of the United States.

This lesson uses a variety of primary documents to explore the impact of these events on individuals and their ways of life. These include: two letters from Louise Ogawa, a high school student in California whose family was forced to relocate to various internment camps; two watercolors by Estelle Ishigo, a European-American artist born in Oakland, California, who chose to be interned in Wyoming’s remote Lone Heart Mountain Relocation Center with her Japanese-American husband rather than be separated; and two photographs by renowned photographer Ansel Adams, who documented the experiences of Japanese Americans in Manzanar, an internment camp in California now operated as a National Park Historic Site.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

From March 1942 to 1946, the U.S. War Relocation Authority (WRA) had jurisdiction over Japanese and Japanese Americans and ordered them to evacuate their homes in California, Oregon, and Washington. “Evacuated” families left behind homes, businesses, pets, land, and most of their belongings. Taking only what they could carry, they arrived by bus and train to assembly centers—which had been hastily constructed on such facilities as race tracks and fairgrounds. Here they awaited reassignment to “relocation camps.”

The WRA operated ten camps in remote areas of California, Utah, Arizona, Colorado, Wyoming, Idaho, Texas, and Arkansas. Although official government photographs were careful not to show it, these facilities were fenced with barbed wire and guarded by armed soldiers.

The majority of Japanese-Americans interned — nearly 70,000, or almost 60% — were American citizens. Many of the rest were long-time residents who had lived in the United States between 20 and 40 years.

The order to prepare for the move left little time for packing, selling household goods, or locating safe storage for precious personal possessions. Allowed to take only what they could
carry, Japanese Americans heading for the camps left behind toys, precious heirlooms or other personal treasures. Family pets were sometimes also abandoned or, if lucky, left with neighbors.

"We were told to take only as much as we could carry in our two hands. How much could you carry in your two hands? One big suitcase...well, how can you really manage with a big stuffed suitcase?"

With thousands of residents, internment camps inevitably became communities where families carried on with the details of daily life, adults worked, and children went to school. Most lived in barracks that were cramped and small. Privacy was hard to find as entire families lived in one room; sometimes cloth partitions were used to try to create separate spaces. Meals were group activities as well, served cafeteria-style in mess halls, and bathrooms, or outhouse latrines, often served up to a hundred people at a time.

In December 1944, President Roosevelt rescinded Executive Order 9066, and the WRA began a six-month process of releasing internees and shutting down the camps. In August 1945, the war was over. By 1946, the camps were closed and all of the internees had been released to rebuild their lives.

THEMES: evacuation, internment, personal possessions, living conditions, discrimination

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Students, following this activity, will be able to:

1. Obtain historical data through the use of primary source images and documents.
2. Describe elements of Japanese-American internment during World War II, through discussion and writing.
3. Develop a sense of historical understanding of the internees’ experiences during Internment.
4. Learn that artists use elements of art to convey messages.

NEW JERSEY STANDARDS

STANDARD 6.1 (Civics): All students will learn democratic citizenship and how to participate in the constitutional system of government of the United States.

STANDARD 6.2 (Civics): All students will learn democratic citizenship through the humanities, by studying literature, art, history, philosophy, and related fields.

STANDARD 6.3 (History): All students will acquire historical understanding of political and diplomatic ideas, forces, and institutions throughout the history of New Jersey, the United States, and the world.
MATERIALS

- Chalkboard or white board on which to record student responses.
- Appendices A through F, primary source letters, watercolors and photographs for analysis (provided at the end of this lesson plan).
- If teachers opt to complete the follow-up activity, the excerpt about packing from Estelle Ishigo’s unpublished memoir, “Lone Heart Mountain” (provided as Appendix G).

DETAILS OF ACTIVITY

Part 1: The Things of Everyday Life (15 min.):

Ask the class to describe a time in their lives when they have moved or have left their homes for a length of time.

- Who made the decision to leave?
- What did they take?
- What did they miss?
- How did they get along in their new situation?

Next divide students into six groups and assign two groups to each of the following questions.

1. What do you own? Write a list of all your possessions (including things like toothbrushes, underwear, etc.).

2. Whom do you spend time with? Write a list, by name, of all the people you enjoy spending time with, or people you see regularly (family members and other relatives, friends, classmates, etc.).

3. How would you describe your daily routine, things you do regularly on a weekly or daily basis (include what, where, when, with whom do you do these things)?

Part 2: Hard Choices—What to Pack (20-25 min.)

Now ask students to imagine that they were going away but haven’t been told where, how long or under what conditions. If you have not done so already, divide students into small groups and let them know they will be exploring three of the questions they just answered in more depth. They will also need to make some hard choices.

Ask each group to consider all three sets of questions below. Out of the list of goods created by the class from Question #1 of this activity, which goods would students most like to bring with
them and why? Remind students they have to travel light—these things will need to be carried (in other words, they have to be relatively small—no beds or television sets!).

Provide each pair of groups the following questions to help guide their decisions. For those two answered Question #1:

What would you take?
How would you feel?
Was it difficult/easy to decide what to bring with you?
How would you feel about the things you had to leave behind?

Next ask students to consider the list of people developed in Question #2, and imagine that they will not be able to see any of those special people again:

What would you do?
How would you feel?
How could you try to stay in touch?
Who will you miss the most and why?

Finally, groups answering Question #3 should think about their homes and how they live, and consider that their new “home,” the one they just prepared to pack for, is one room, where all of their family must live:

How do you feel?
How does your room feel/smell?
How do you feel about living in this room?

Part #3: Historical Context (25 min.)

Up to this point, students have not been provided with the historical context for their decisions. Briefly summarize the information about Japanese internment provided in the introduction and historical context sections above. Explain that these were not abstract questions, but real dilemmas faced by people of Japanese-American descent between 1942 and 1946.

Have students remain in their group and use primary documents to compare the kinds of objects and style of life they imagined in Parts 1 and 2 of this activity to what Japanese Americans actually experienced.

Two of these documents (Appendices A and B) are letters written by Louise Ogawa, a high-school student in California who, with her family, was sent to live in a Japanese-internment camp in 1942. While she was there, she wrote a series of letters to Miss Breed, her former neighborhood librarian. The two groups that focused on Question #1 should use these primary documents should pay careful attention to what Louise writes about using and needing. What kinds of things does she ask Miss Breed to buy for her? How do such items compare to those things that students said they would have brought with them in Part 1 of this exercise?
Two of the other documents are photographs taken by professional photographer Ansel Adams (Appendices C and D). The first depicts the Tjo Miatake family’s living room at Christmas-time, and the second a line for lunch. Students who answered Question #2 should use these sources should count how many family members appear in the first photograph, and compare the size of their living room to students’ own homes. They should also consider in what circumstances they stand in line and how they would feel if such lines were required for every meal, for bathroom and shower use, and at laundry facilities. The second photograph, Appendix F, also provides a good sense of the size of buildings in the Manzanar internment camp. How large do they appear? How would students feel if they were unable to leave this camp to go elsewhere?

The final two documents for this exercise (Appendices E and F) are watercolors painted by Estelle Ishigo, a European-American artist born in Oakland, California, who chose to be interned in Wyoming’s remote Lone Heart Mountain Relocation Center with her Japanese-American husband rather than endure separation. Her paintings reflect the struggle of many families to stay together despite hardship. Students who focused on Question #3 should use these primary sources should make lists of the objects Ishigo paints inside and outside an internment barrack. Ask them to consider whether this feels like a “home,” and why or why not. What emotions do they think the artist was trying to convey?

Part III: Concluding Discussion (10 min.)

Ask each group to share a summary of their particular primary document and how it helped them understand the experiences of Japanese Americans during internment. Record student input on the board.

Follow-up Activity: Pack Your Suitcase

Read the excerpt from Estelle Ishigo’s unpublished memoir “Lone Heart Mountain” describing Japanese Americans packing for their voyage, available as Appendix G.

Then ask students, “If you had to follow these orders today, what would you pack?” Students will then write a detailed list of the items they would take based on Ishigo’s memoir. Their list can include additional items, but their suitcase or parcel must remain light enough for them to carry it.

If teachers wish to make the experience more tangible, they could bring in a suitcase so students can visualize the actual space available. In addition to creating a list, teachers might also ask students to work in groups to create a three-dimensional pack of their belongings, bringing items from home.
REFERENCES and WEBSITES:


See the following resources for more information about each of the following areas:


Appendix A:

July 15, 1942 Letter from Louise Ogawa to Miss Breed

July 15, 1942

Dear Miss Breed,

Thank you a million times for the delicious candy, soap, and the most interesting book! I was most interested in the book because I have read, Peggy Covers Washington, London, and Peggy Covers News. I enjoy Emma Bughee’s books very much. The books which you so kindly have sent are now scattered all over this camp and I won’t at all be surprised if one of them has entered Seabiscuit’s stable.

I shall never forget that day you visited us. At the sight of your smiling face a big lump formed at the pit of my throat never dreaming I would see you again. I was very glad to see you in the best of health.

The distribution of our second checks began today. It was, of course, my first check. I felt so proud to receive it because I really earned it all by myself. It makes me feel so independent. We receive about 37¢ a day. For 11 days work I received $3.04. I am going to take advantage of your generosity and ask you to go on a little shopping tour for me in your leisure time. Will you please send me the following:

- 2 yards of printed seersucker (something that would look nice when made into a dirndl. I already have 2 striped ones—green & white, red & white—so please do not send striped one.) cost = not over 50¢ a yard.
- 1 1/2 yd. of plain white seersucker. (about same price has printed one)
- Boys 2 Cropper-Jockey shorts—size: 28 waist, store: Walkers
- 1/2 yd. of muslin (going to use it for stiffening)
- 1 small face towel (cheap one is all right) .05 4) 1 card of snaps
- 5 Hollywood curlers 6) 2 shower caps 7) 1 bottle of brown liquid shoe polish—10¢
- 1 bottle of Strip royal blue ink 15¢
- 1 mirror sold at Kress for 15¢

I have enclosed $4.50 in money order. I hope this amount will be sufficient—if not please let me know. I hope I’m not causing you too much trouble. I want so much to repay you for all the nice books, candy, and soap but do not know how I can. In my spare-time, I made this bookmarker. It is made very crudely but I hope you will be able to use it. Please give my best to Miss McNary.

Yours very sincerely,

Louise Ogawa

PS. If there seems to be some money left after deducting the shipping expense I would like to have some Butter scotch balls or Fruit balls or drops. Thank you again.
Appendix B:

September 3, 1943 Letter from Louise Ogawa to Miss Breed

Sept. 3, 1943

Dear Miss Breed,

Thank you ever so much for the iron which I received yesterday. Everyone was overwhelmed with joy when we saw the iron. I have been wondering all night how I can put in words my gratitude. And I always seem to end up by saying “Thank You.” I hope in the near future I will be able to show how much I appreciate everything you have done for me. Thank you from the bottom of my heart. Thank you! I ironed with it last night and it works beautifully. I wanted to write you as soon as I received the iron but I thought it best to wait until I received your letter. I hope you will include every penny you spent to purchase the iron.

Poston seems to be still the same hot, dusty place. With the heavy rainfall we had the other week, the grounds have become a little harder, and the wild grasses seem to have grown a little thicker, to my father's disgust.

As I recall, you asked in your last letter if I applied for leave. Well, I have not as yet. But to my surprise, my Eastern Defense Clearance Papers came the other day. The thing that was so surprising was that I didn’t even apply for it. At the present time, I am trying awfully hard to convince my father that I should go out, but he feels that I should wait a little while. He believes I am too young in mind if not in age. But at the rate I am pestering him, he’ll give in sooner or later, unless his patience holds out! I talk to him so that he says he even dreams of me talking to him of going out. I can just about imagine how he finally said yes, in his dream of course, but this doesn’t satisfy me because it was not in reality. But just you wait and see, I’ll be writing soon saying, “I'm finally going out Miss Breed!” Oh what happy days that will be. But on the other hand, the thought of leaving my father leaves me hesitant.

School is scheduled to commence September 20th. Everyone in the office is kept very busy with registration etc. The office is still being remodeled, but hope it will be finished very soon.

One of my girl friends relocated to Cleveland, Ohio, and she wrote and said that she just couldn’t get used to the indoor theaters. In Poston the movies are shown outdoors, under the stars. She kept looking up at the ceiling thinking she would see the stars. While waiting for the movie to begin, everyone looks up at the sky trying to find the Big Dipper etc. I can imagine how much she enjoyed the picture sitting in the soft-cushioned chairs. I never thought I would have friends in Boston, Chicago, Cleveland, Colorado, Arkansas, Utah, Idaho, or Wyoming, but I do now! One of these days, I’ll be traveling all over the United States just visiting friends. I think that’ll be such fun!

Most respectfully,
Louise Ogawa (My best regards to Miss McNary)
Appendix C:

Ansel Adams, Photograph, “Tojo Miatake Family,” 1943

Source: Original neg. no.: LC-A351-3-M-36. Forms part of the Manzanar War Relocation Center photographs, Library of Congress.
Appendix D:

Ansel Adams, Photograph, “Mess Line, Noon” 1943

Source: Original neg. no.: LC-A35-6-M-22. Forms part of the Manzanar War Relocation Center photographs, Library of Congress.
Appendix E:

Estelle Ishigo, Watercolor, “A Home at Heart Mountain,”
December 1942

Source: Dept of Special Collections/UCLA Library, A1713 Charles E. Young Research Library.
Appendix F:

Estelle Ishigo, Watercolor, “Around our Place,” August 1948

Source: Dept of Special Collections/UCLA Library, A1713 Charles E. Young Research Library.
Appendix G: Excerpt from Estelle Ishigo’s Unpublished Memoir, “Lone Heart Mountain”

It was very hard to know what to put in that duffle bag to decide what to take, there was no way of knowing what might happen what we really might need — "one hundred pounds of baggage" read the order — no more. Our furniture was stacked in a corner for men from the government warehouse to take away. Home was gone.

Hollow echos (sic), impersonal and cold, answered our footsteps, slowly, with heavy heart we lifted our bundles, left the door to walk away and report at that ordered meeting place.

Gathered around the church that early May morning were four hundred and fifty of us standing in groups with bundles and baskets piled at the curb. Red Cross women brought trays of hot coffee, but nothing could quell the fear and bitter weeping of some, the dreadful uncertainty of what might happen-what it might be like.

They began loading bundles into trucks, and we saw some of the baggage of those who had not weighed their "100 pounds" carefully left lying in the streets." (page 5)

Here at this new place the rooms were like barns before, — one family to a room. But these barracks, with steps, and little storm poarch (sic) and double flooring for winter time. Inside were just the roofs and rafters with no ceilings, and the rooms were made of eight foot the board partitions and they held a coal stove, cots, two blankets each and a bucket and broom, nothing more: and a great din of voices of all the families rose over the partitions throughout the barracks.
Appendix H: Internment Chronology

September 1, 1939  World War II begins.

December 7, 1941  Surprise attack on Pearl Harbor by the Japanese, America enters the war.

February 19, 1942  President Roosevelt signs Executive Order 9066, giving the War Department authority to define military areas in the western states and to exclude from them anyone who might threaten the war effort.

April, 1942  Louise Owaga and her family are sent to the Assembly Center at Santa Anita Racetrack in Arcadia, California. From there, they are relocated to Potsdam Detention Center in Arizona.

May, 1942  Arthur and Estelle Ishigo are sent to Pomona Assembly Center. From there, they are relocated to Heart Mountain Relocation Camp in Wyoming.

February 5, 1943  The Wyoming State legislature passes a law denying American citizens at Heart Mountain Camp the right to vote. Similar laws were passed by other interior states where camps were located.

February 8, 1943  A loyalty questionnaire is required of all persons over the age of 17 in the internment camps for the purpose of recruitment into the army.

December 18, 1944  US Supreme Court rules loyal citizens cannot be held in detention camps against their will, the first major step toward the closing of the camps.

August 6, 9, 1945  Atomic bomb is dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, Japan, by the United States.

August 14, 1945  Japan surrenders, ending World War II.

September 1945  Arthur and Estelle Ishigo are released from Heart Mountain Relocation Center and return to the Los Angeles area. Louise Owaga moves back to San Diego, CA.

June 1952  Congress passes the McCarran Walter Act, granting Japanese aliens the right to become naturalized US citizens.

1976  President Gerald R. Ford officially rescinds Executive Order 9066.

1981  Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (set up by Congress) holds hearings across the country and concludes the Internment was a “grave injustice” and that Executive Order 9066 resulted from “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

August 1988  President Reagan the Civil Liberties Act, apologizing to the Japanese American internees and offering $20,000 to survivors of the camps.