

## Excerpts from *Farewell to Manzanar*

Background: Author Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston was 7 years old when her father, a fisherman in Ocean Park, Calif., was taken away without explanation by the FBI immediately following the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Several months later, his family learned he was imprisoned in a federal prison in Fort Lincoln, N.D. Jeanne, the youngest of 10 children, was interned with her family in Manzanar, a bleak, barren camp of tar paper shacks in California's Owen Valley desert. The following is an excerpt from the book *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston.

Mama knew they were taking all the alien men first to an interrogation center right there on the island. Some were simply being questioned and released. In the beginning she wasn't too worried; at least she wouldn't let herself be. But it grew dark and he wasn't back. Another day went by and we still had heard nothing. Then word came that he had been taken in to custody and shipped out. Where to, or for how long? No one knew. All my brothers' attempts to find out were fruitless.

What had they charged him with? We didn't know that either, until an article appeared the next day in the Santa Monica paper, saying he had been arrested for delivering oil to Japanese submarines offshore.

My mother began to weep. It seems now that she wept for days. She was a small, plump woman who laughed easily and cried easily, but I had never seen her cry like this. I couldn't understand it. I remember clinging to her legs, wondering why everyone was crying. This was the beginning of a terrible, frantic time for all my family. But I myself didn't cry about Papa, or have any inkling of what was wrenching Mama's heart, until the next time I saw him, almost a year later...

Papa never said more than three or four sentences about his nine months at Fort Lincoln [military fort where those of Japanese ancestry were sent before being relocated to the camps]. Few men who spent time there will talk about it more than that. Not because of the physical hardships: he had been through worse times on fishing trips down the coast of Mexico. It was the charge of disloyalty. For a man raised in Japan, there was no greater disgrace. And it was the humiliation. It brought him face to face with his own vulnerability, his own powerlessness. He had no rights, no home, no control over his own life. This kind of emasculation was suffered, in one form or another, by all the men interned at Manzanar. Papa's was an extreme case. Some coped with it better than he, some worse. Some retreated. Some struck back...

### [Arriving at the camps]

We rode all day. By the time we reached our destination, the shades were up. It was late afternoon. The first thing I saw was a yellow swirl across a blurred, reddish setting sun. The bus was being pelted by what sounded like splattering rain. It wasn't rain. This was my first look at something I would soon know very well, a billowing flurry of dust and sand churned up by the wind through Owens Valley...

We had pulled up just in time for dinner. The mess halls weren't completed yet. An outdoor chow line snaked around a half-finished building that broke a good part of the wind. They issued us army mess kits, the round metal kind that fold over, and plopped in scoops of canned Vienna sausage, canned string beans, steamed rice that had been

cooked too long, and on top of the rice a serving of canned apricots. The Caucasian servers were thinking that the fruit poured over rice would make a good dessert. Among the Japanese, of course, rice is never eaten with sweet foods, only with salty or savory foods. Few of us could eat such a mixture. But at this point no one dared protest. It would have been impolite. . . .

After dinner we were taken to Block 16, a cluster of fifteen barracks that had just been finished a day or so earlier—although finished was hardly the word for it. The shacks were built of one thickness of pine planking covered with tarpaper. . . . Knotholes gaped in the uncovered floor.

Each barracks was divided into six units, sixteen by twenty feet, about the size of a living room, with one bare bulb hanging from the ceiling and an oil stove for heat. We were assigned two of these for the twelve people in our family group; and our official family "number" was enlarged by three digits—16 plus the number of this barracks. We were issued steel army cots, two brown army blankets each, and some mattress covers, which my brothers stuffed with straw.

[Revolt]

During that first summer and fall of sandy congestion and wind-blown boredom, the bitterness accumulated, the rage festered in hundreds of tarpapered cubicles like ours. Looking back, what they now call the December Riot seems to have been inevitable. It happened exactly a year after the Pearl Harbor attack. Some have called this an anniversary demonstration organized by militantly pro-Japan forces in the camp. It wasn't as simple as that. Everything just came boiling up at once.

In the months before the riot the bells rang often at our mess hall, sending out the calls for public meetings. They rang for higher wages, they rang for better food, they rang for open revolt, for patriotism, for common sense, and for a wholesale return to Japan. Some meetings turned into shouting sessions. Some led to beatings. One group tried to burn down the general store. Assassination threats were commonplace...

I was too young to witness any of it. Papa himself did not take part and he kept all of us with him in the barracks during the day and night it lasted. But I remember the deadly quiet in the camp the morning before it began, that heavy atmosphere threat of something about to burst. And I remember hearing the crowds rush past our block that night. Toward the end of it, they were a lynch mob, swarming from one side of the camp to the other, from the hospital to the police station to the barracks of the men they were after, shouting slogans in English and Japanese.

"Idiots," Papa called them. "Bakatare. They want to go back to Japan."

"It is more than going back to Japan," Mama said. "It is the sugar [rationed in the camps]. It disappears so fast..."

"What do they think they will find over there?"

"Maybe they would be treated like human beings," Mama said.

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Excerpted from *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston. Copyright 1972. Bantam Books reissue edition.

Commentary #3: Pick three quotes from the excerpts above. Explain the meaning and significance of each quote. In what ways do the quotes you chose illustrate the challenges (physical and emotional) faced by those living in Japanese Internment camps during WWII?