

Japanese-Americans still suffer from internment

By RICHARD ABRAMS
McClatchy News Service

An obelisk sits amid sagebrush in a place called Manzanar. A memorial to a blemish on the American ideal, it honors innocent souls held captive by race hatred and war hysteria.

In the stark and intemperate high desert of Inyo County, on the eastern side of the Sierra Nevada in California, the stone occupies ground that served during World War II as an internment camp for people of Japanese descent. Scripted in language centuries old, its epitaph bears a universal eloquence:

"To console the spirit."

But 44 years have passed, and the spirit aches. Elusive and unhealing, it has affected thousands of middle-aged Japanese-Americans who have been unable to purge themselves of an undeserved guilt.

Sociologists, psychiatrists and historians maintain that Americans of Japanese descent are suffering from symptoms of repressed anger, including a high frequency of heart attacks, hypertension and a depression similar to that exhibited by rape victims.

Many believe the pain is rooted in a 100-year history of prejudice against Japanese in America, which reached its pinnacle with the forced incarceration of 120,313 people of Japanese descent a few months after Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

That discrimination was evoked for Japanese-Americans as late as last week, when the U.S. Supreme Court agreed to decide if the statute of limitations applies to a 1983 lawsuit that asks up to \$24 billion in damages for the approximately 60,000 surviving internees. The Reagan administration is trying to block the suit on the grounds that it was filed after the legal deadline.

The high court has yet to act on an appeal asking that the survivors be allowed to sue for violation of their constitutional rights.

Recent publicity over the issue of reparations is spurring studies on

the historical, psychological and sociological effects of the internment. Results are incomplete, yet findings indicate the trauma is not over.

Dr. Joseph Yamamoto, a UCLA neuropsychiatrist, recently compared data on whites and Hispanics who had been sexually abused with data on 44 Japanese-Americans who had not.

"The Japanese-Americans had similar depression symptoms to those who had been abused," Yamamoto found. "... there is no question that many are carrying an enduring bitter memory."

Eric Saul, a social historian who has compiled 200 oral testimonies of Japanese-Americans who were interned, says his research indicates an alarming trend.

"These people are internalizing great stress and the stress is being evidenced in physical problems, heart attacks and stomach cancer," Saul says. "What the United States government did to these people has resulted in the ultimate victimization: the shortening of human life."

In Sacramento, Christine Umeda heads the Stepping Stones, a mental health outreach program for Asian Americans.

"Like rape victims, many Japanese-Americans have somehow bought into this feeling that they deserved this shameful treatment," she says.

Most affected are Nisei, or second-generation Japanese, born to immigrants who arrived from 1885 to 1907. Because the first wave, known as Issei, married late in life, the majority of their offspring were teen-agers when they were forced into the internment camps.

Sociologists say that as the Nisei have matured, they have been forced to confront cultural contradictions. At the core is a mainstay of Japanese philosophy, called *gaman*, which means to "endure."

Gaman means "we are like bamboo," says Kaoru "Kirk" Shibata, 53, of Sacramento, a native-born American who did time in the camps. "It means we bend, but we don't break."

But the concept of *gaman* and the

internment experience have created deep conflicts for Japanese-Americans. Although psychologists advocate forums where Japanese-Americans can "unload" their anger, pilot programs have failed to attract those in need. Many opt to endure.

Donna Leonetti, an anthropologist at the University of Washington, said middle-aged and elderly Japanese-American men "are suffering physical discomfort which we have been able to link to stress generated by prejudice, deaths in the family or illness during the war."

Leonetti also maintains the Japanese-Americans are suffering "a rate of heart disease about twice as high as men of the same age in Japan, and rates of diabetes about four times higher than Japanese counterparts."

"They are experiencing a body internalization of a major emotional impact," she adds.

Called by the late Sen. Sam Ervin "the most single blatant violation of the Constitution in American history," the internment climaxed a history of prejudice against Asians on the West Coast, much of it spread by newspapers and politicians.

Born as a backlash to the immigration of Chinese laborers in 1882, fear and ignorance gained momentum in the early 1900s with nonsensical yet vehement editorials warning of "the yellow peril."

After Pearl Harbor, the number of those eager to denigrate the Japanese immigrants soared. They included California Attorney General Earl Warren, who in February 1942 told a congressional committee that the absence of sabotage on the West Coast was no proof of Japanese-Americans' loyalty. Those who felt otherwise were living, he said, "in a fools' paradise."

Nine months later Warren was elected governor, and ultimately became U.S. chief justice.

The accusations of disloyalty proved untrue, and not a single Japanese living in America was ever charged with a crime against the country. The U.S. government found no evidence that the Japanese who had come to the West

Coast to begin a new life were connected to the militarists in Japan.

The accusers ignored another powerful mainstay of the Japanese culture: zealous loyalty to the country that has provided a home — in this case, America.

"It is," explains William Nosaka, a Nisei whose family was interned, "as if you are transferred from one clan to another. In the Japanese custom, your absolute, unquestioned loyalty goes to your new clan. Why couldn't this government understand? Anybody could have told them this."

"I hated those bastards [Japan] for what they did to us in World War II. I still won't buy a Japanese or German car. My God. I'm an American. Why did America turn its back on us?"

On Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving military power to remove those of Japanese descent from the West Coast.

Americans with as little as one-sixteenth Japanese blood were forced from their homes and sent by bus and train to 10 desolate, tarpaper barracks encampments surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers.

Of those sent to the camps, 77,000 were U.S. citizens.

Some West Coast residents were eventually allowed to enter the military (in segregated units) after being forced to take a loyalty oath that to some was so "insulting and controversial" that it caused riots in the camps.

Yet, despite the shame of incarceration, some families sent their sons to die defending the "land of the free."

In fact, the Army 100th Infantry Battalion's 442nd regimental combat team, made up entirely of Japanese-American soldiers, became the most decorated unit for its size and length of service in the history of the United States. It had 4,500 members, 650 of whom were killed in action.

In 1948, a federal commission estimated that the Japanese in America had lost \$148 million in property

alone during the internment, although Japanese-American researchers pegged the figure at approximately \$400 million.

Blaming a lack of documentation by Japanese, however, the government distributed only \$37 million — or slightly more than \$300 per internee.

Four years later — and still subject to segregated schools and occupational discrimination — American-born Japanese were finally allowed to become U.S. citizens.

Thirty years passed before a federal Commission on Wartime Relocation and the Internment of Civilians recommended to Congress and to President Reagan that "Congress pass a joint resolution which recognizes that a grave injustice was done and offers the apologies of the nation."

The majority of the commissioners also recommended payment of \$20,000 each to the surviving internees. But apologies — or money — have not been approved. And attempts at legislation go slowly.

California Rep. Robert Matsui, who was interned with his family, says the reparations bill will be reintroduced next session. Matsui blames a heavy calendar and "divisiveness over the issue" for its failure to get passed so far.

Although there have been restitution efforts in California, they have been geared toward state and local workers who were forcibly removed from their jobs. That, however, constitutes an extremely small minority.

"There was a kind of innocence we lost in those days," explains John Tateishi, who has compiled an award-winning oral history of the detention camps titled "And Justice For All."

Tateishi was 3 years old when transported to the internment camp at Manzanar with his family.

"The Nisei really felt strongly about this country, and they thought the country understood that," he explains. "We weren't prepared for the betrayals and the world we would have to face."

For some, there can be

no redemption. Before the camps were disbanded near the war's end, 1,862 internees had died.

At Manzanar, two youths were shot to death by guards during a riot. At Camp Jerome, Ark., a man braved the shame of being slain by shotgun-toting guards in order to scale a fence and take his own life by jumping in front of a train.

Most of the Issei have died — a majority in their 50s and 60s. Some researchers blame the rich American diet as a factor in coronary disease among the Japanese-Americans. Others explore the stress factor.

The public "has this very exaggerated notion of the success of the Japanese-American," Nishi says. "They have no sense that they are troubled and anxious. In fact, the success of the Japanese-Americans in this country is fragile."

"With the exception of a short burst of steam every now and then, there's a population out there that never, never let (the anger) out," Nishi says. "Without catharsis, what happens to a human being?"

While researchers ponder, racism continues.

Japanese-Americans say the trade deficit has triggered accusations by fellow Americans that Japanese living in this country are somehow responsible.

Recent news accounts have centered around Vincent Chin, of Chinese descent, who was beaten to death with a baseball bat by two unemployed autoworkers in Michigan who reportedly mistook him for a Japanese. The assailants, who blamed Japan for the lagging American auto economy, were given probation.

Although federal prosecutors sought to convict one of the assailants on a charge of violating Chin's civil rights, the charge was overturned this September by a federal appeals court.

"It makes you wonder" William Nosaka says. "After all these years, man hasn't learned a damn thing. He just keeps repeating his own mistakes."