

GATHERING VOICES TO SPEAK FOR REDRESS

Bert Nakano and I were put in charge of finding people to testify at the Commission Hearings in Los Angeles. It wasn't an easy task by any means. We had to find former internees willing to present personal testimony to the members of the Commission in an emotionally charged atmosphere, after years of silence and denial by both the government and the internees. This explosion of accusations, bitterness and sorrow, which characterized the Hearings about to take place in Los Angeles, was completely alien to the character of the Nisei, who had reveled for years in thinking of themselves as the "quiet Americans." And yet we had to find people to do it. To complicate matters, a written transcript of the testimony had to be submitted beforehand to the Commission before one would be granted time to speak. As can be expected, the takers were few. The weeks went by and we managed to find only around six brave souls willing to testify. Bert and I were at our wits end with the Hearings in Los Angeles drawing ever closer. Even offering to help people write and submit their testimony was met by an awful silence. In desperation, we had no choice but to ask everyone attending one of our NCRR meetings to submit a request to testify, even though some were Sansei and were born after the camps. The JACL reported that their response was slow also and we were faced with a potential disaster of nationwide hearings on the internment, with only a handful of internees calling for justice! All Bert and I could hope for was some sort of miracle. Then the dam of silence finally broke! A week or so before the deadline to file, I went to our workshop, which we put together to help people submit their testimony and found it crowded with about eighteen Nisei and Issei former internees. Seated in that little room and hurriedly calling other NCRR volunteers for help, we worked all through the afternoon and into the evening helping people put their proposed testimony in writing. Incredible stories tumbled out, preceding the drama of a roomful of former internees testifying publicly about the trauma and disaster that was the evacuation! The Issei and Nisei who had remained silent for some thirty-six years after their release from the camps were about to find their voices again in the Commission Hearings held in downtown Los Angeles.