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Apology, Payment 48 Years in Making

■ **Reparations:** In Little Tokyo, Justice Department officials present five centenarians with checks for mistreatment suffered in internment camps.

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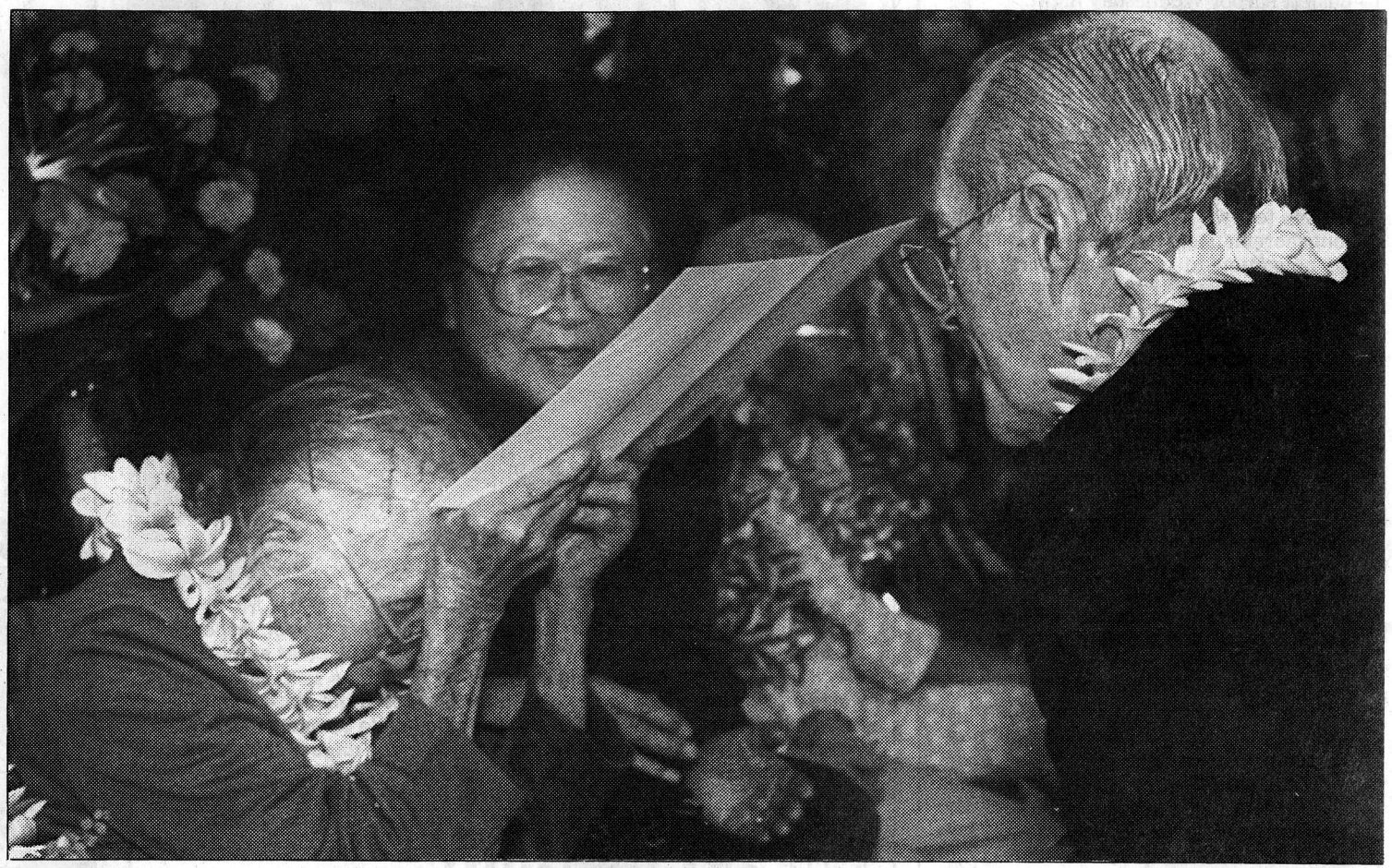

KEN LUBAS / Los Angeles Times

"This is something I never expected," said Teru Noda of her $20,000 payment presented by Assistant Atty. Gen. John Dunne.

One-hundred-year-old Teru Noda leaned back in her wheelchair Friday morning and let loose a rush of laughter that had been 48 years in the making.

Above her head, Noda gingerly waved a check from the United States government—a partial payment for the three years she spent in a desert internment camp during World War II.

On the blue slip of paper, printed next to an inset of the Statue of Liberty, were the words, "Pay to the Order of: Teru Noda—$20,000."

At a ceremony in Little Tokyo—one of nine taking place throughout the nation—Justice Department officials presented Noda and four other centenarians with reparations payments and a letter from President Bush apologizing for the government-sanctioned mistreatment they suffered during a time clouded by the hysteria of war.

Several of the recipients and their families spoke about what the government's acknowledgement meant.

"This is something I never expected," Noda said in Japanese as her fingers stroked the presidential apology. "I'm happy to have lived long enough to actually see this."

The demand for a public apology made by some Japanese-Americans garnered little public attention until a national convention of the Japanese American Citizens League in 1978, when redress organizers attached a dollar amount to their call for an apology, said John Tateishi, who for 10 years was director of the National

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REPARATIONS: Payment, Apology 48 Years Later

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Coalition for Redress and Reparations.

"It was strange," Tateishi said. "Until we put a money label on the request, there was very little regard for what the issue was about."

Activists who lobbied for redress legislation said that, of the 120,000 people interned, half were alive when the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 became law. The act was approved after 12 years of intense lobbying by Asian activist groups, war veterans and politicians. The payments are to be made over three years, with the oldest victims receiving payment first.

"If anyone feels bitterness today, it's because so many people who were in the camps died before the apology was issued," said Jimmy Tokeshi, director of the Pacific Southwest District of the Japanese American Citizens League. Tokeshi's father was interned at Heart Mountain Camp, Wyo.

During congressional hearings in the 1980s, accounts began unfolding about U.S. soldiers who rounded up whole communities of Japanese-Americans and herded them into 13 desert camps to live in tents or rickety shacks made of tar paper and corrugated tin.

"Most *hakujin* [white people] don't understand about what happened to us," said Tommie Tanaka, 68, of Oxnard. "Or at least they don't understand in real detail."

Tanaka, a native of Los Angeles, attended the ceremony with her husband, Shigeo, 67, and her mother, Uno Takeda, 100, with whom she was held captive at the Gila River camp in Arizona.

Shigeo Tanaka, who was also born in Los Angeles, said he was in the first group to go to Manzanar Camp in Central California in 1942.

"It was on Easter Sunday, I believe," Tanaka said.

He remembered having less than two days to secure his belongings on the lucrative farm in Ventura County he managed. "We sold the crops and the land lease for 10 cents to the dollar," Tanaka said. "We took what few things we were allowed and left all of the farming equipment in the garage. When we got out of the camps five years later, we had to work on land that we used to own. It had been sold to a white farmer.

"When we went to look for our tractors and equipment, it wasn't in the storage shed. There were two Japanese families living there [in the shed] instead. . . . We had nothing and we were making only 40 cents a day. We ended up living in the little garage with the other families."

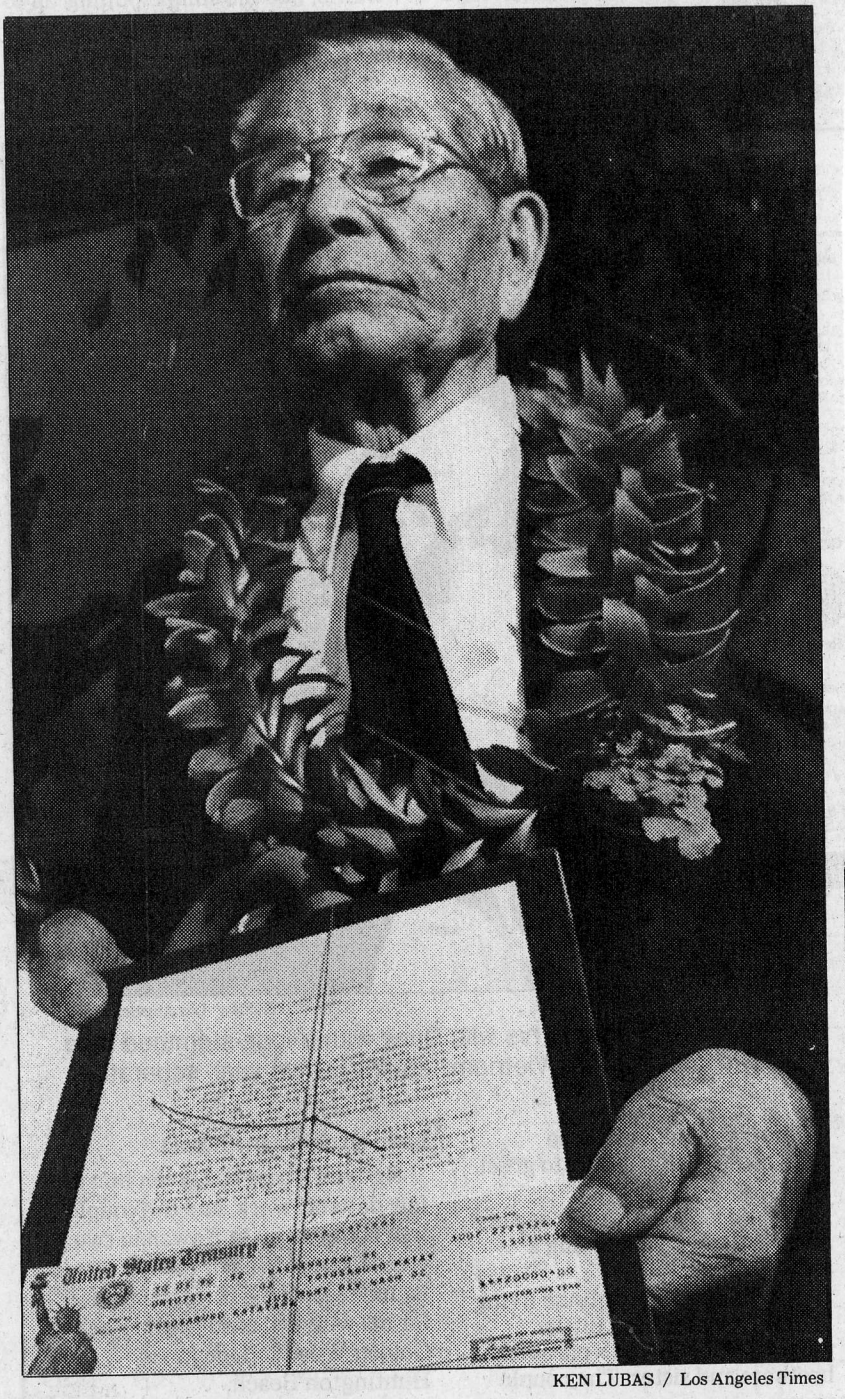
Like many of the first-generation immigrants who were hustled into the camps because political and military leaders questioned their loyalty to the United States, Noda, the reparations payment recipient, is uncomfortable with her memories of camp, said her daughter-in-law, Tomi Noda, 68.

"She never talks about the experience," the younger Noda said.

But the elder Noda seemed free to muse on what $20,000 and the future held for her.

"I'll put some of the money in the bank and some will be for medical expenses," she said.

And with a sudden, startling laugh she said, "The rest can go for my funeral expenses."



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Toyosaburo Katayama, 100, holds his $20,000 redress check and letter of apology from President Bush at Little Tokyo ceremony.