

“BREAKING THE WALL OF SILENCE ... REDRESS NOW!”

Introduction

The decade long struggle for redress during the 1980's, was based on the desire for justice by the Japanese American community! Americans of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast of the United States were removed from their homes and interned during World War II. One hundred and twenty thousand individuals, of whom two thirds were native born citizens, were shorn of all their rights, which were supposedly “guaranteed” by the Constitution. For years, surrounded by a shroud of silence, fear and guilt, they were at last emboldened and awakened by the civil rights movement of the 60's that swept through the South and the political activism spawned by the opposition to the war in Vietnam. Finally breaking through this wall of silence, individuals within the Japanese American community began pushing for an investigation into the internment and also calling for a dialogue!



The call for redress was brought to life during the Presidency of Jimmy Carter, during which a commission to exam the issue of the mass incarceration of Japanese Americans was approved. Former internees charged that racism, economic greed, war hysteria and fear had come together to provide the basis for the mass imprisonment of an entire ethnic group!

The idea of a “study commission,” which evolved into the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) attracted controversy from the beginning. The Japanese American Citizens League, a longtime civil rights’ group which took leadership on this issue at the time, seemed torn between its’ more conservative leadership and dissident individuals within the organization. The conservative leadership indicated that they felt more at ease with the idea of a process that might result in some sort of an educational study and a fund. The dissidents, challenging the “old guard,” saw real redress taking the form of monetary payments. Those who favored monetary compensation were buoyed by a survey conducted by the leading Japanese American

newspapers in Los Angeles, the Rafu Shimpō, whose readership overwhelmingly supported the idea of monetary payments.

The idea of a commission holding hearings, now stirred a mixture of concern and excitement within the community. Concern because of the possibility of a “whitewash,” and excitement due to the fact that the truth might finally come out, the fact that the internment was more a matter of racial hysteria and economic plunder than it ever



was a matter of national security! It spawned grass roots movements in various Japanese American communities where it was seen as a chance to challenge the government’s account of the internment and by doing so regain their sense of dignity! Many were also those who admittedly lacked confidence in the intentions of the “old line” leadership of the JACL, who some blamed for cooperating with the government in the internment process.



This, then, is the story of the “grass roots” effort for redress, which mobilized a wide variety of people to struggle for this cause. It chronicles the effort of how a people fought to tell it’s own story and how it sought to have justice given to those who were wrongfully incarcerated.

Grassroots volunteers, Jim Saito and Rich Oishi at an NCCR information table!