

7c – The Rocky Road Home

The end of internment didn't bring an end to discrimination against Japanese Americans. Communities that had rejected Japanese immigrants before the war were in no hurry to embrace internees after their release. After enduring two and a half years of hardship and indignity in the prison camps, some Japanese Americans returned to find their homes burned, their farms in ruins and their possessions gone. The unwelcome former residents were harassed, threatened, even shot at.

Fearful that returning evacuees would try to restart their lives in Oregon, that state's legislature passed an Alien Land Law in 1945 that prohibited Japanese Americans not only from owning land but from operating farm equipment. Anti-Japanese sentiment was particularly virulent in Oregon's Hood River Valley. Following the internees' release, hundreds of valley residents signed full-page newspaper ads stating, "So Sorry! Japs Are Not Wanted in Hood River" and "We should never be satisfied until every last Jap has been run out of these United States."

Japanese families faced a host of other obstacles, too. Stores wouldn't sell them groceries. Barbers refused to cut their hair. Produce distributors declined to sell apples and pears from Japanese orchards. Neighbors shunned them. Children were tormented in school. In a particularly hurtful act, the American Legion removed from a war memorial at the county courthouse the names of Japanese Americans fighting in the U.S. armed forces.

But not every voice in Hood River was one of hatred and rejection. Some voices rose above the clamor of intolerance to offer words of consolation and welcome. Members of the Hood River County League for Liberty and Justice were among those who recognized "the grave injustice" done to Japanese Americans and offered their help to returning families.

The league began an education program to dispel myths about the Japanese and urged local ministers to preach tolerance from their pulpits. League members wrote letters to grocery and department stores and tried to convince them to sell to Japanese customers. They drove produce trucks to help Japanese farmers transport their fruits and vegetables to market. One elderly member of the League for Liberty and Justice was known to march into stores that displayed anti-Japanese signs and shame owners into taking them down.

But it was the small gestures that often meant the most to Japanese Americans. One of the first evacuees returning to Hood River after internment remembers walking into a downtown bank. He was met by sneers and icy stares until one teller, with tears in her eyes, rushed from her booth to shake his hand and welcome him home. Such actions had repercussions. That particular teller was shunned by her co-workers and forced to quit her job. Others were labeled "Jap-lovers" and treated as hostilely as the returning internees. However, these individuals remained committed to reminding Hood River residents of our nation's highest principles.

In the following letter - sent to Japanese Americans upon their return to Hood River - members of the League for Liberty and Justice express their sympathy and support for their Japanese neighbors.

We want you folks to know that there is a group of fair-minded people in the city and valley who have watched with growing resentment and concern, the injustices to which you have been subjected the past few months.

We were probably shocked as much as you were by unreasonable prejudice and vicious actions of certain individuals, and we feel a sense of shame that anything like this could happen in America.

We have organized a group specifically for the purpose of assisting you ... and our numbers are steadily growing. ... Already our influence is being felt, and when ordinarily fair-minded people recover a bit from this war hysteria, they will reconsider their present decisions. ...

Please accept our deepest sympathy and understanding in your present trouble. It is a shameful, unjust and unnecessary ordeal, but we firmly believe that out of it (a trial by fire, as it were) will emerge a better understanding and deeper friendship than we have ever experienced before.

If you should need any help, don't hesitate to call on us. This is the purpose of our organization. We would like to do something, even if it is all too little, to offset some of the wrongs you have endured.

Very sincerely,

Hood River County League for Liberty and Justice
Hazel V. Smith, sec

*This article is reprinted by from the Teaching Tolerance curriculum kit
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