

Central Coast: Past, Present, Future

Margaret Cooper's story is memorable, important



By Mark James Miller, June 11, 2017

Margaret Cooper's story, like the stories of all the other persons of Japanese ancestry who were interned during World War II, must be remembered. If we forget, we risk letting it happen again.

Margaret was in sixth grade, living in Mountain View, on Dec. 7, 1941. She had never heard of Pearl Harbor. Neither had anyone in her family. But they all knew, after hearing of the events of that "day of infamy," their lives were going to change.

The change was not long in coming. On Feb. 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which enabled the Secretary of War and the U.S. military to "exclude" from designated military areas "any or all persons" they felt necessary to exclude, and to provide the "transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary to accomplish the purpose of this order."

For Margaret's family, this meant being taken by train in March 1942 from their home in Mountain View to the racetrack at Santa Anita in Los Angeles, taking only what they could carry, and to remain there for the next six months. While Margaret and her family were housed in a none-too-comfortable barracks, others were made to live in stables where the horses had been kept. Her aunt, eight and a half months pregnant, soon gave birth in the stables. Margaret recalls seeing her infant nephew for the first time as he lay in a lettuce crate.

"This is no way to treat a newborn baby," she thought. The searchlights near the Santa Anita camp disturbed her sleep, and she remembers being guarded by soldiers with rifles and fixed bayonets.

The Los Angeles Times saw the plight of the internees differently.

"Japanese Here Begin Exodus," it reported on March 22, 1942. "Uprooted by the grim requirements of war ... the voluntary evacuees evinced little emotion," as they were taken away, a fact the newspaper attributed to "traditional Oriental stoicism."

Margaret and her family were sent by train to the camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, one of the 10 camps built to house the 117,000 detainees. During the three-day journey they were ordered to keep the shades of the windows pulled down, so no one could see what the train was carrying.

Behind barbed wire, with no running water, the family had to adjust to their situation, and while they remained close, the fabric of the family was strained. Margaret recalls people asking, “Why are we being singled out? Why aren’t Italians and Germans being interned?” Deep down they knew the answer: Germans and Italians are white. As actor George Takei said, “We happened to look like the people who bombed Pearl Harbor.”

Life in the camp was not terrible but it was not pleasant either. They had to eat in a mess hall, and while there was enough food it was not always desirable. “Too many rutabagas,” she says. The detainees created a skating rink, played baseball, and even put a library together.

Margaret now lives on the Central Coast, and was good enough to come to my English 103 class in April and share her story with my students. She is a small woman, barely 5 feet tall, but she is filled with life and passion. Her story, like so many others, is more than just words. It is a living testament to what can happen when people forget what is best in themselves and give way to fear and prejudice.

Her story must be remembered because if it isn’t, the door is left open for it to happen again.

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