Outside Inside

The Pacific Northwest’s Japanese American Internment Remembered

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Although US law at the time prohibited those born in Asia from becoming American citizens or owning land in the United States, in the early 1940s there was a thriving Japantown of over a hundred businesses covering six blocks of downtown Portland. With the outbreak of the Pacific War in December 1941, however, Portland’s Japantown disappeared virtually overnight, never to return.

On February 19th, 1942, it was announced by presidential executive order that all people of Japanese ancestry were to be removed from the western United States to internment camps. Two thirds of the 120,000 men, women and children interned were American citizens born in the US, but were incarcerated solely on the basis of their ethnicity. Many lost their livelihoods and property and most would never return to their homes. Nearly 2,000 died in the camps, and after the war more than 50,000 relocated to other states. 5,000 returned to or were deported to Japan; 3,000 were moved to long-term INS internment camps, and another 1,300 were sent to prisons or mental institutions.

Despite these injustices, the vast majority of Japanese Americans remained staunchly loyal to the United States, many young men in the camps even volunteering to fight for the country that was imprisoning their families. The all Japanese 100th Infantry Battalion had the highest casualty rate of all Allied combat units who fought Nazi Germany in WWII, and for its size, remains the most decorated unit in U.S. military history.

In 1988 Congress passed legislation officially apologizing for the Internment on behalf of the American people, stating that it had been the result of “race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

The studio will be based around the design of interpretation facilities at the two sites where the majority of Oregon’s Japanese American population were interned: the former Pacific International Livestock Exposition Pavilion in downtown Portland, and the Minidoka Internment National Monument site in Idaho. In addition to recollecting these events, questions of identity and belonging in the context of multiculturalism will be central to the project.

Because of preparation for a series of related guest lectures, the studio will not meet on four Wednesdays during the term, but will instead run from 1-7 pm on Mondays and Fridays during those weeks.

Professor Kevin Nute knute@uoregon.edu

Photographs Courtesy of The Oregonian, University of California, California State Library, and the National Archives, Washington, D.C.