Information About Japanese Americans in the 1950s

During World War II, the lives of many people of Japanese descent living in the United States were thrown into chaos. In 1942, the U.S. government relocated more than 110,000 Japanese to internment camps because it believed they might be a security risk. Japanese were forced to sell their homes and businesses for a fraction of what they were worth and take only those belongings that they could carry to the camps, where they lived in squalid conditions. Ironically, at the same time more than 25,000 Japanese Americans were fighting in the U.S. armed forces, either in segregated combat units in Europe or in military intelligence work with front-line units in the Pacific. By the closing days of the war, the government had allowed more than half of those who had been in the camps to leave. These people either joined the U.S. armed forces or settled somewhere other than the West Coast. In January 1945, the U.S. government closed down the internment camps, and the remaining Japanese Americans returned to where their homes were before the war. From the end of World War II through the 1960s, the former occupants of the camps tried their best to recover from their losses.

- **Why were Japanese interned during World War II?**
- **What happened to their homes and belongings?**
- **When did the camps close?**

Nearly all of the returnees went home to circumstances quite different from those they had left behind. Most Japanese Americans had little or no money, and they essentially had to start their lives all over again. The majority of Japanese immigrants who settled on the West Coast had become agricultural workers—just before the war, nearly half of the agricultural labor force on the West Coast was Japanese—and some had established successful businesses. After the war, however, they knew it would not be easy to find farming work again. For some, just finding a place to live was a challenge. In places such as Los Angeles and San Francisco, African Americans and Mexican Americans had moved into the neighborhoods where Japanese Americans had formerly lived. Returnees often had to stay in churches and public buildings until they could find housing. Japanese Americans also knew they would not be welcome in many places because of the continuing hostility toward Japan. Some Japanese-American business owners who maintained control of their businesses came back to find them vandalized and much of the merchandise stolen. Some merchants refused to sell to them, and some produce dealers refused to buy from Japanese farmers. In some instances, city officials even delayed or denied issuing them business licenses. Still, there were also cases where neighbors and business associates welcomed the returnees back and helped them reestablish their former lives and reenter their communities.

- **What industry had Japanese been part of before World War II?**
- **What obstacles did returnees face in reestablishing themselves?**

Of those returning from the internment camps, the ones who faced the most difficult time reestablishing their lives were the *Issei,* or first generation Japanese Americans born in Japan who had come to the United States in the early twentieth century. Many Issei spoke little or no English. They often faced open hostility from Americans who still thought of Japanese as enemies after the war. In addition, many Issei were in their fifties and sixties, making it more difficult to start over again in a business or a new job. Still, many Issei did reestablish themselves after the war by working very hard—sometimes at two jobs. Families pulled together to support each other, and many family members took multiple jobs. Gardening was one popular field; professionals and businessmen mowed lawns on a part-time basis to make the money they needed to buy homes, start their own enterprises, and finance their children's education. Many women also worked. Some took jobs in clerical fields, where they became very much in demand; others worked in whatever jobs they could find, including domestic service for white families. Many families managed to open small businesses, such as dry cleaners, laundries, grocery stores, and barbershops.

- **Why did the Issei have particular trouble resettling?**
- **What did Japanese-American families do to support themselves?**

Both before and after the war, Japanese Americans faced racial prejudice. Many Issei accepted this prejudice as a fact of life. At home, they tried to instill in their children a strong belief in their Japanese heritage, its morals and values. At the same time, they pushed their children to get the best education possible so they could succeed in the United States despite discrimination. However, the Nisei—second-generation Japanese Americans—felt they were part of two cultures. At home they spoke to their parents in Japanese, ate Japanese food, and grew up listening to Japanese folk stories. Outside, they spoke English to their American friends, ate hot dogs and hamburgers, and listened to American popular music. This created a conflict for many Nisei—on the one hand, pressure at home to retain their Japanese heritage and cultural identity, and on the other, a strong desire to "culturally assimilate" into their native land. This situation sometimes led to generational conflict between Japanese parents and their children. One Japanese-American woman remembers how her sibling felt torn by the cultural divide in their household. "My sister believed that 'instilling of Japanese culture and language only brought out the glaring differences between ourselves and Americans,' and these differences often made her feel like she did not belong. Conflicts would multiply when Papa would say to his children that Japanese were superior in their morals, values, and intelligence, yet they [the children] could see for themselves, in their schools, and community, that America had relegated the Japanese Americans to second-class status."

- **What values did Issei strive to instill in their children?**
- **What cultural conflict did Nisei face?**