

## The National Park Service: Groveling Sycophant or Social Conscience? Telling the Story of Mountains, Valley, and Barbed Wire at Manzanar National Historic Site

A revolutionary idea came to fruition in the 1870s, when the United States became the first country to designate areas to be preserved as national parks. National park units preserve some of America's most important cultural and natural resources. Wallace Stegner called national parks America's best idea and noted that parks "reflect us at our best rather than our worst." Without parks, Stegner continued, "millions of American lives ... would have been poorer. The world would have been poorer."

Stegner's perspective of the value of national parks encounters a paradox at Manzanar National Historic Site. Manzanar, located at the foot of the Sierra Nevada in eastern California, tells the story of Japanese Americans who were denied constitutional rights and were interned in one of ten War Relocation Centers because of their ethnicity.

How the National Park Service (NPS) tells the story of the internment is an issue currently being addressed at Manzanar. Some people advocate an active role for NPS in informing social conscience through its interpretations of the internment of Japanese Americans at Manzanar. While an image of the NPS's role as social conscience resonates with many, a recent letter to the park reflects the opposite sentiment. Calling the National Park Service "a groveling sycophant," the writer of the letter suggests that NPS has succumbed to the "Japanese American propaganda machine" and neglects and even refuses to tell the truth about the War Relocation

Centers. In this paper, I focus on efforts the NPS has taken and is taking to engage the public in a dialogue as it develops the overall management plan for and interpretation of Manzanar.

The first challenge at Manzanar is to provide an adequate context through which the public can be engaged in a discussion of social issues related to the internment of Japanese Americans. Manzanar National Historic Site is characterized by an abundance of sagebrush and dust; only a few remnants of the camp are visible. Without physical reminders it is difficult to explain to visitors that this was indeed an internment camp.

When you visit Manzanar today, you can be so inspired by the location's beauty that you miss the important story told there. Manzanar is located in one of the primary recreation areas for millions of Southern Californians. The park is surrounded by recreational opportunities such as fishing in countless alpine lakes and streams, hiking in the Sierra Nevada, and climbing Mount Whitney. In fact,

some visitors have mentioned that, with its location near such beautiful mountains, the camp experience couldn't have been so bad. The camp has been likened to a summer camp in the mountains rather than an important site in the history of the struggle for civil rights.

To ensure that visitors gain a sense of history and place, the Japanese American community pushed very hard for reconstruction of various camp features. These include the barbed wire fence that surrounded the camp, one of the eight guard towers, a barracks building, and other significant camp features.

Reconstruction, as many readers will know, is one of four treatment options for historic sites; the others are preservation, rehabilitation, and restoration. Reconstruction represents the alternative with the least historic authenticity and is defined as "the depiction of one period in history using new materials based on archaeology and other research findings."

Usually, NPS discourages reconstructions. The following abstract from a session on reconstruction at the 1997 Society for American Archaeology outlines the debate:

The reconstruction of historical and archaeological sites and features has long been a controversial subject among professional archaeologists and historians. Some preservation purists claim that the public is unnecessarily misled by many reconstructions that have not been absolutely verified by archaeology and documentary records.

The abstract goes on to note that others have advocated a more liberal approach, emphasizing the education-

al and interpretive value of reconstructions.

The National Park Service has clear management policies about reconstruction. As stated in its 2001 *Management Policies*, "[n]o matter how well conceived or executed, reconstructions are contemporary interpretations of the past rather than authentic survivals from it." Thus, NPS will not reconstruct a missing structure unless four criteria are met: there is no alternative that would accomplish the park's interpretive mission; there is sufficient data to enable an accurate reconstruction; the reconstruction occurs on the original location; and the NPS director approves the reconstruction (NPS 2000). Thus, members of the Japanese American community and others had to demonstrate cause to allow reconstruction be made a part of the park's general management plan.

As I mentioned earlier, not much physical evidence of the camp remains. Only three of over eight hundred buildings still stand. Nevertheless, there is abundant evidence of foundations, sidewalks, rock gardens, and the camp road network. That these remnants speak volumes can be heard in this quote from *Farewell to Manzanar* by Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and James D. Houston:

It is so characteristically Japanese, the way lives were made more tolerable by gathering loose desert stones and forming with them something enduringly human. These rock gardens had outlived the barracks and the towers and would surely outlive the asphalt road and rusted pipes and shattered slabs of concrete. Each stone was a mouth, speaking for a family, for some man who had beauti-

fied his doorstep (Houston and Houston 1973, p. 191).

However, not everyone sees the crumbling foundations, rockwork, and other physical remnants from the same perspective. One *Los Angeles Times* article from 1997 criticized the lack of facilities at, and the appearance of, the site:

Manzanar National Historic Site was created as a memorial to remind future generations that in times of crisis, the constitution can be dangerously fragile. Yet today, Manzanar looks more like a vacant lot than a hallowed memorial. The site is littered with beer bottles and graffiti. There are no visitors' centers, no rangers on duty, no guided tours or displays. Cattle graze the area, trampling archaeological sites, while tourists who pull off the highway leave confused and disappointed.

We have taken great strides to begin to address the problems noted in this article. Many people, particularly in the Japanese American community, have long recognized the problems noted in the *Los Angeles Times* article and have been actively engaged in the development of Manzanar's general management plan. Even at that time, people like T. Shiokari expressed strong support for reconstruction efforts, noting: "I strongly urge the NPS to depict the typical conditions when the Japanese race was first evacuated into the centers, and also the conditions near the end of the war where gardens, schools, recreation facilities were made available."

The current chairperson of a citizen's advocacy group known as the Manzanar Committee, Sue Kunitomi Embrey, also participated in the dialogue about the park's management

plan. In fact, the Manzanar Committee was instrumental in having one of the ten former internment camps designated as a national park unit. Embrey reported the sense of the group this way:

We strongly recommend the reconstruction of some of the rock gardens located throughout the camp area to give the viewer an enhanced visitor experience. We support the placement of one or more barracks in the demonstration blocks.... A demonstration block would not be complete without the inclusion of latrines, mess hall and laundry building. We encourage the addition of these structures in the demonstration block. It is absolutely essential that one or more guard towers be reconstructed.

These and other similar views greatly affected the general management plan for Manzanar. The approved plan for the park calls for reconstruction of the camp's barbed wire fence, camp entrance sign, guard tower, and barracks buildings. The fence and camp entrance have already been reconstructed and we will be reconstructing one guard tower in the next few years. We will relocate and restore one or more of the camp barracks buildings that still exist in the local area.

The National Park Service has worked closely with the Japanese American community in determining the initial development and management of the site. However, I must reject "groveling sycophant" as an accurate description of NPS efforts to develop and interpret the site. Even within the Japanese American community, there are disagreements about how to tell the internment story. These often focus on whether the relocation

centers such as Manzanar ought to be called “concentration camps.” Two quotes from the *Rafu Shimpō*, a newspaper published in Los Angeles, illustrate each side of this controversy. A letter by Kelly Shinatku on stated that:

You may say ‘bah humbug,’ but I believe that future generations must not forget what this government did to its own citizens. Using the term concentration camps when referring to the internment of Japanese Americans imparts to those who did not live through the camps an unambiguous picture of what happened.

In response, the editor, George Yoshinaga, reported a conversation he had with another former internee, also named George:

Like this writer, George is dead set against referring to the relocation camps as ‘concentration camps.’ He was in Manzanar.

At the present time, NPS has decided to use “internment” as the best way to avoid being caught up in a whirlwind of controversy that could obscure the significance of the site.

Since the designation of Manzanar as a unit of the National Park System, the Manzanar Advisory Commission, with members from the Japanese American, Native American, ranching, and local communities, has actively participated in a dialogue about the development, management, and interpretation of the site. And of course, in accordance with the 1969 National Environmental Policy Act, public involvement has been solicited for all major management actions.

The National Park Service continues to consult with a variety of groups and individuals in the development of the park’s interpretive programs.

Much like the Manzanar Advisory Commission, the review panels are composed of different groups within the Japanese American community, veterans, local Owens Valley residents, Native Americans, academics, and NPS staff. Mock-ups of the park’s proposed interpretive exhibits were recently produced and displayed in Los Angeles and the Owens Valley in order to solicit public comment about their content.

I believe this extensive review and planning process will facilitate, if not ensure, that a truthful, balanced context will be presented to the visiting public. It is through such efforts that NPS can fulfill what I believe must be its role as the caretaker of sites of social conscience rather than, as some fear, becoming the source of that social conscience.

The forthright, candid interpretation of sites such as Manzanar will help us avoid repeating the mistakes of history. A statement by Robert Sproul of the Fair Play Committee in 1944 eloquently summarizes a longstanding and powerful goal for parks such as Manzanar:

Whenever and wherever the constitutional guarantees are violated in the treatment of a minority, no matter how unpopular or helpless, the whole fabric of American government is weakened, its whole effectiveness impaired. Each such violation establishes an evil precedent which is inevitably turned against another minority later and eventually the very principle on which our Nation is founded, namely, the dignity and worth of the human individual.

Manzanar National Historic Site and similar sites should help to com-

municate the lessons of history, to ensure that the dignity of the human individual is upheld, both in America and in the world.

It is important to remember the words of United States Supreme Court Chief Justice Charles Evans Hughes, as quoted by Michi Nishura Weglyn in the book *Years of Infamy*:

You may think that the Constitution is your security—it is nothing but a piece

of paper. You may think that statutes are your security—they are nothing but words in a book. You may think that the elaborate mechanism of government is your security—it is nothing at all, unless you have sound and uncorrupted public opinion to give life to your Constitution, to give vitality to your statutes, to make efficient your government machinery (Weglyn 1996, p. 32).

*[Ed. note: this paper was originally presented at the Organization of American Historians / National Council on Public History annual meeting, April 2002, Washington, D.C.]*

### References

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