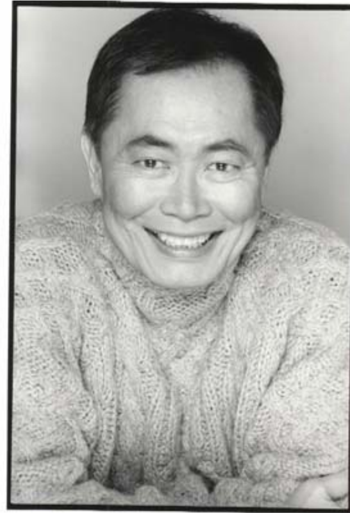
Introduction

By George Takei



George Takei

In movies and television, I have soared through space in starships. But in real life, I was born here on earth in Los Angeles, California.

I am Japanese American. My grandparents came to America from Japan more than 100 years ago. My mother was born on a farm near Sacramento, California, and my father was born in Japan but grew up in San Francisco.

I spent a part of my childhood in Arkansas.

I have fond memories of Arkansas. I remember the fun of those warm spring days catching pollywogs in the ditch. As if by magic, those squiggly little fish sprouted tiny legs that grew bigger and stronger and, by summer, those cute creatures turned into jumping frogs.

An unforgettable memory is the wonder of my first Arkansas winter when I discovered snow. I woke up in the morning, looked out the window, and the entire landscape was blanketed in white. It was magical! I ran outside and touched the white stuff. It was cold and powdery. I shaped it into a ball and threw it at Daddy. He threw his back at me. It was great fun!

I started kindergarten in Arkansas. There, I learned the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. I remember reciting, “with liberty and justice for all.” At that time, I didn’t know how important those words were — or how ironic it was for me to be saying them. Because, as I recited those words, I could see from my kindergarten window, a barbed wire fence that imprisoned me and high guard towers with armed sentries watching over me. I didn’t know then that those words I spoke meant the very opposite of what was happening to me, my family and 120,000 other Japanese Americans.

When World War II started, the U.S. government couldn’t make the distinction between American citizens of Japanese ancestry and the nation of Japan with which we were at war. We just happened to look like the enemy. For that reason alone, without any charges, without lawyers and without a trial, we were rounded up and imprisoned in internment camps.

I remember how scary it was the day soldiers with bayoneted guns came to our home in Los Angeles to order us out. We were put on trains and sent to the internment camp in Arkansas called Rohwer. There was another one in Arkansas called Jerome. Altogether, there were 10 camps like ours all over the western part of the United States.

Last year, I went back to the camp at Rohwer, Arkansas, for the first time since the end of World War II. It was completely changed. The barbed wire fence was gone. The guard towers were gone. The forest that I remembered from my boyhood was gone. The trees had all been cleared and it was now open farmland. There was nothing left that I remembered from my early days at Rohwer.

The only thing remaining from the internment camp was the cemetery. There were markers for people who died while they were imprisoned. The most imposing marker was a tall, concrete memorial to the young men who went from the internment camp to serve in the U.S. Army and were killed fighting for America. Despite the unjust imprisonment of their family and loved ones, these young men believed strongly in the ideals in the Pledge of Allegiance to the flag. They died fighting for the words "liberty and justice for all" – ideals that were denied to them. They fought and died for the core values that make America unique.

The ideals of America are magnificent. But because ours is a true people's democracy, those ideals are very dependent on the people – good people as well as fallible people. The history of our country is the story of good people working to make our American ideals true.

The founding fathers of this nation, who first set down the ideals on paper, kept Africans as slaves. But because good people struggled throughout history to make the ideal that "all men are created equal," in fact, real, we have a better America.

When the United States of America was founded, there was no role for women in positions of leadership – they didn't even have the right to vote. But because good people struggled long and hard through the years to correct that, we have a better America.

During World War II, when America was swept up by war hysteria, because brave young Japanese Americans fought for the ideals that were denied them, we have a better America. Our country has been built by good people of many races and creeds all coming together to make the shining principles of this land true.

America is a continuing work in progress. Today, as we face newer challenges, we all have a role to play to make our country an even better America.

Content Overview Essay

Against Their Will: The Japanese American Experience in World War II Arkansas

Johanna Miller Lewis, Ph.D., Project Director, *Life Interrupted*

Seventy-four days after the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. The order enabled the United States Army to force more than 110,000 people of Japanese descent, 70 percent of them American citizens, from their homes. First confined in nearby "assembly centers," they were then shipped to ten "relocation centers." In the summer of 1942, two of these camps, Jerome and Rohwer, emerged from the swamps and forests of the Arkansas Delta. The neatly ordered rows of military-style barracks dotted the horizon and guard towers rose above the flat terrain. In September 1942, Japanese Americans began to arrive in southeast Arkansas by train from California. Displaced from their homes and snatched from their lives on the West Coast, each person experienced the upheaval individually; each person tells a different story. This essay tells the story of the Japanese American experience in World War II Arkansas.

The December 7, 1941 surprise attack on Pearl Harbor plunged the United States into World War II. On the West Coast, a long history of discrimination, suspicion, and prejudice against Japanese American residents, combined with the attack, created fear and near hysteria as Japan's military forces moved swiftly through Guam, Wake Island, and the Philippines, as well as British Hong Kong and Singapore. It seemed inevitable that Japan would seize control of the rest of the western Pacific and Southeast Asia. Many Americans feared that a Japanese invasion of the West Coast was likely and that Japanese Americans would cooperate with the invaders. Although no creditable evidence existed, then or now, that any Japanese Americans posed a threat to national security, residents of California, Oregon, and Washington demanded protection from what they saw as a possible enemy force in their own backyards.

In this climate of fear and wartime hysteria, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942, to establish military zones and to exclude certain individuals or groups (i.e., Japanese Americans) from those zones by relocation. Roosevelt's cabinet members, congressional leaders, or military commanders voiced little to no objections to the Executive Order or the subsequent military zones. In fact, throughout the war Congress repeatedly endorsed the relocation process by funding the camps and passing a statute making it a federal crime not to obey the orders of a military commander even though no martial law was declared. The Courts, including the Supreme Court, approved jail sentences for persons who peacefully resisted such orders.

On February 25, 1942, Lieutenant General John L. DeWitt, Western Defense Commander, instituted Military Zone One encompassing portions of Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona. The FBI rounded up immigrant Japanese American community leaders and

the local branches of the Federal Reserve froze all bank accounts held by Japanese immigrants. (Japanese and other Asian immigrants were ineligible for naturalization.) Exclusion notices appeared on utility poles instructing Japanese Americans to report to designated assembly centers with only what they could carry. Meanwhile, Evacuation Sale signs hung in Japanese American-owned store windows.

> **The war became real for me when the two FBI agents came to our home in Long Beach. It was a few months after December 7 . . . . A black car came right into the driveway. One man went into the kitchen. As I watched, he looked into the oven. Then he went into the parlor and opened the glass cases where our most treasured things were . . . . I followed the man into my mother's and father's bedroom. Strangers do not usually go into our bedrooms when they first come. As I watched, he went into the closet and brought out my father's golf clubs. He turned the bag upside down. . . . My mother and sisters were weeping.**
>
> ***Yuriko Hohri, Jerome inmate***

Operated by the WCCA—the Wartime Civilian Control Administration, an agency of the U.S. Army—housing at the assembly centers was a combination of hastily constructed barracks of tarpaper and two-by-fours and converted buildings on the premises. Despite the stench of horse manure at Santa Anita and Tanforan Racetracks some evacuees lived in converted horse stalls. Evacuation, however, was not relocation and the federal government needed to decide how to remove Japanese Americans from the West Coast for the duration of the war. The answer became the War Relocation Authority.

Created by President Roosevelt on March 19, 1942, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) oversaw the ten relocation centers. The WRA confined the Japanese Americans in ten relocation centers in California, Utah, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Arizona, and Arkansas. Milton S. Eisenhower, a Department of Agriculture official and younger brother of General Dwight D. Eisenhower, served as the organization's first director and he intended the relocation centers to act as funnels to resettle inmates in farming communities in the interior states. Unfortunately, Milton Eisenhower's plan failed because anti-Japanese sentiment was not restricted to California. Unable to accept the idea of permanently incarcerating Japanese Americans, Eisenhower resigned his position as head of the WRA in June 1942 but did not make his disappointment public. He suggested that another Agricultural official replace him and President Roosevelt appointed Dillon S. Myer as the agency's head. He ran the agency until its termination in 1946.

Arkansas in the 1940s was a rural, farming state where animals and humans still supplied the labor necessary to plant, cultivate, and harvest the fields. Most Arkansans, white and black, lived and worked as tenant farmers or sharecroppers on land owned by someone else. This system kept the worker continually in debt to the landowner and unable to put aside enough money to buy land. In the Arkansas Delta, the population was desperately poor. Many people, black and white, lived in shacks without running water, indoor toilets, and

electricity. Jim Crow dictated the rigid segregation of society and the economy by race. Few communities offered formal education beyond the eighth grade and black schools, where available, lagged far behind white schools in their funding which resulted in inferior facilities, supplies, and curriculum. Debilitating disease was common, and health care facilities were limited.

The U.S. government became familiar with southeast Arkansas during the Depression when the Farm Security Administration, a New Deal agency, purchased tax-delinquent lands in Chicot, Drew and Desha County to develop as subsistence homesteads for poverty-stricken farmers. When the former Department of Agriculture officials who were running the WRA started looking for land in remote, isolated locations with easy access to existing railroads and the potential for agricultural endeavors to build the centers, they remembered Arkansas.

The WRA Centers at Jerome and Rohwer housed over 16,000 Japanese American inmates between September 18, 1942 (when Rohwer opened) and November 30, 1945 (when Rohwer closed). Jerome opened on October 6, 1942 and closed on June 30, 1944. It was the last camp to open and the first camp to close. Inmates assigned to Rohwer came from Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley in California, and totaled 8,475 at peak population. In addition to inmates from Los Angeles, Fresno, and Sacramento counties, California, Jerome housed inmates from Hawaii.

The federal government intended the WRA Relocation Centers to be self-contained and predominately self-sufficient communities. Each center contained the basic necessities: hospitals, post offices, schools, warehouses, offices, farmland, and living quarters. Jerome and Rohwer featured sewer systems, water treatment plants, electricity, hospitals, and kindergarten through twelfth grade schools—amenities unavailable to many Delta residents. Keeping in mind that neither the Japanese Americans nor the African Americans enjoyed all of their rights as U.S. citizens, such a situation raises the question of whether it is preferable to be poor and uneducated with a low standard of living and ostensibly free; or, to live behind barbed wire with guard towers with a higher standard of living?

> **Our father had told us that we were going for a "long vacation in the country." I believed him. I thought it would be a wonderful adventure. Our father told us we were going to a camp called Rohwer in a faraway place called Arkansas.**
> ***George Takei, Rohwer inmate***

The Japanese Americans traveled to Arkansas on passenger trains. In order to avoid large crowds and potential trouble, the trains took a seldom-used southern route through Texas which took three days and two nights. The WRA required that window shades be kept drawn during daylight hours, so no one could see the Japanese Americans, and passengers were only allowed off the train to stretch their legs late at night in remote areas where they could not be seen. When the train finally stopped and the Japanese Americans got off, they were shocked to find armed U.S. soldiers waiting to escort them behind barbed wire.

> **. . . the seats would recline somewhat but, due to the crowded conditions of having so many people in the cars and having little children and babies crying and kids running up and down the aisles and old folks, the whole trip was almost unbearable. In addition to the slow pace at which the train traveled, it would sidetrack every time a through train came by. We would sit on the siding for an hour or two, in the heat . . . so it was hot going through Texas and the Southern states.**
>
> ***Roy Uno, Rohwer inmate***

> **It was like, like, chaos, because you had your bags that you could carry. All of these people getting off the train at one time, one place, trying to figure out where you were to go, and how you're going to be assigned lodging, and so forth. The whole thing was very anxiety provoking, because you didn't know how long you would be staying…. The future was so unknown.**
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> ***Paul S. Sakamoto, Rohwer inmate***

With its humid summers and icy winters, the Arkansas Delta proved difficult for the inmates. The tarpaper covering the barracks absorbed heat in the summer and made the structure unbearably hot while providing little insulation from the freezing temperatures in the winter.

In military fashion, each camp was built on a grid system with barracks organized into blocks. Each block contained 10 to 14 barracks, a mess hall, toilets for men and women, a laundry facility, and a recreation hall. The goal was to construct semi-permanent housing and other facilities inexpensively and quickly. The government modified the military's "theater of operations"-type housing specifically for the relocation centers. The new barracks style was 20' by 120' with 6 variations of internal room dimensions.

Wall partitions separated the apartments but the partitions only reached to the eaves, making privacy limited. The flooring was wood with large gaps between the boards, allowing dirt and bugs into the barracks. Each unit was equipped with a heating unit fueled by coal or wood; a bare light bulb; army cots, blankets, and mattresses. Living quarters provided neither running water nor cooking facilities.

Each block included recreation halls and community buildings measuring 20' by 100' and the mess halls measuring 40' by 100' with a kitchen, storeroom, and dishwashing area. Inmates adapted buildings for schools or churches. The shower and bathroom buildings resembled a capital "H," with a laundry on one side and the men's and women's bathrooms on the other with the hot water heater in the crossbar. The bathrooms included standard toilets, sinks, and communal showers and the women's bathroom eventually incorporated stall walls between toilets and four bathtubs.

WRA staff housing resembled the inmate barracks on the exterior, but featured insula-

tion and wallboard on the interior. For those administrators and staff who brought their families with them to camp, their apartments had a small kitchen and laundry area. Single men and women ate in the mess halls. Administration office buildings varied from the other buildings at the center in the use of white clapboard siding.

"Government issue" camps assumed a military lifestyle and featured block mess halls and group bathrooms and showers without dividers for privacy. Since inmate families could not eat together in their quarters, children ate with their friends in the mess hall, and sometimes parents only saw their children in the early morning before school and in the late evening before bedtime. Inmates refused to assimilate totally into this camp culture, and held onto traditional symbols of Japanese culture such as ikebana, flower arranging, embroidered wall hangings, and kimonos.

> **"[Young people] just could go to the mess hall and eat their three meals with their friends. They didn't have to go with their family. . . There was no family life as such in camp, because family didn't eat together, didn't have to."**
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> ***Haruko (Sugi) Hurt, Rohwer inmate***

Communal living posed problems for the inmates from standing in line for everything to the breakdown of family structure and parental authority. Standing in line became a way of life for inmates. They stood in line to get on the train to come to Rohwer or Jerome; they stood in line to get off the train at Rohwer or Jerome; they stood in line to register, to eat, to shower, to use the restrooms, to get ice, to get wood or coal; they stood in line to get back on the train to go to their next destination whether it be another relocation center or Chicago or Cleveland.

> **[Rohwer was] far enough south to catch Gulf Coast hurricanes, far enough north to catch Midwestern tornadoes, close enough to the [Mississippi] river to be inundated by Mississippi Valley floods, and lush enough to be the haven for every creepy, crawly creature and pesky insect in the world.**
>
> ***Eiichi Kamiya, Rohwer inmate***

> **[The Rohwer high school students were] perfectly Americanized. These girls with their permanent waves, their bobby-socks, these boys with their sweaters, their loose, casual swinging gait—are, except for facial characteristics, not oriental at all.**
>
> ***John Gould Fletcher, Pulitzer Prize-winning poet and native Arkansan***

Despite their forced removal from the West Coast and placement in what could arguably be called a prison, inmates at Rohwer and Jerome attempted to create new bonds in their daily activities. Children attended camp schools; adults worked in WRA administrative offices and other facilities; some gardened small plots wherever they could find space, raising both vegetables and flowers; many tended field crops that eventually helped feed all ten WRA camps; young people attended dances; and everyone enjoyed sports—which also provided an

outlet for young men and women. Young Orsborne, an administrator at Jerome, remembers "there was always something going on."

The rhythms of daily life also meant establishing schools and meeting spiritual needs. Elementary and secondary students attended classes and took part in extracurricular activities. Adults could pursue formal education, learn new hobbies, or continue practicing traditional Japanese culture. Some worked on center newspapers that published important news in both English and Japanese. Others pursued traditional flower arrangement, calligraphy, drawing, or weaving. Traditional sports such as judo and sumo wrestling remained popular. Both Buddhist and Christian worship services were available. Life went on, in the face of adversity, within barbed wire and guard towers.

Life beyond barbed wire set the Arkansas camps apart from the other eight centers. Inmates frequently applied for, and received, permission to travel into local towns and cities for shopping and recreation. Excursions to McGehee, Pine Bluff, and Little Rock not only provided a respite from the monotony of camp life but also gave the inmates a powerful sense of segregation in the rural South. Confusion arose among inmates over whether their place was at the front or back of the bus; whether to use the white or colored bathrooms; whether to drink from the white or colored drinking fountains.

> **I got on the bus and my first decision I had to make outside of camp was 'Where do I sit?' The white people sat in the front of the bus. The blacks were in the back. And so I got on and I thought, 'Gee, I don't know where should I sit?' So I said, 'Gee, we were confined so long and we were discriminated so much that maybe I'll be considered black,' so I went to and I sat in the black area. The bus driver stopped the bus and he says, 'Hey, you gotta sit in the front.' So I got up and moved, but I didn't come way in the front either, I sat right by the dividing line.**
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> ***Ben Tsutomu Chikaraishi, Rohwer inmate***

In addition to trips into the local community, some young women made chaperoned bus trips provided by the United States Army to Camp Shelby in Hattiesburg, Mississippi for dances with the Japanese American soldiers who were in training there for combat in Europe. A Boy Scout Troop from Stockton, California, held a jamboree on the banks of the Mississippi River with a troop from Arkansas City. Perhaps the most remarkable excursion outside camp was made by the distinguished artist, Henry Sugimoto. In February 1944, Sugimoto exhibited paintings and drawings, depicting daily life in Jerome and Rohwer, in a one-man show at Hendrix College in Conway.

> **I was very agreeably surprised throughout the life of the Center at the excellent conduct of practically all evacuees. I do not believe that any other similar-sized segment of our population would have behaved themselves as well under similar circumstances. I feel that a group of average Americans, under similar conditions, would have been continually causing turmoil, strikes, and so on,**

and that administering such a Center would have been unbearable.
Ray Johnston, Project Director, Rohwer Relocation Center

Arkansans who worked as administrators and staff members at Jerome and Rohwer were exposed to a different culture and way of life. Working on the federal pay scale, administrators and staff members received some of the highest pay rates in the state, especially in education. All administrators lived in WRA housing at the camp. The staff housing was almost identical to inmate barracks on the exterior but they featured a higher degree of finished carpentry and insulation on the interior. Administrators and staff had the option of bringing their families to live with them behind barbed wire. For those who brought their families, the children attended the camp schools along with Japanese American children. Those who decided not to bring their families lived in barrack-style dormitories. Interaction between the administrators and inmates occurred daily. While camp employees could eat in separate mess halls from the inmates, the two groups intermingled in work and play. Administrators attended community events such as cultural performances and sporting events. And, on at least one occasion, a camp administrator and his wife shared a weekend get-away to Mississippi with a couple of married inmates.

In December 1944, the Supreme Court ruled that loyal American citizens could no longer be kept from returning to their homes. The War Department lifted the ban on Japanese aliens as well. With the ban lifted, the War Relocation Authority began to arrange to close all relocation centers. Some inmates returned to the West Coast and attempted to rebuild their lives, while others chose to resettle in the Midwest or East Coast. Although many Jerome and Rohwer inmates returned to California, a large number resettled in Chicago, Cleveland, Cincinnati and New York.

Of the more than 16,000 Japanese Americans relocated to Arkansas during World War II, only a small number remained after the war. The majority of inmates chose to return to California or resettle in the Midwest. Wilson Plantation of Wilson, Arkansas, offered former inmates in all ten relocation centers the use of land as sharecroppers or tenant farmers. A number of families from the Poston Center in Arizona moved to Wilson Plantation. Another farming cooperative located in Scott, Arkansas, persuaded Japanese Americans from Rohwer to become sharecroppers. A handful of inmates moved to Scott but only one family remained in Arkansas permanently—the Yadas.

Sam Yada, his wife Haruye, and their two sons, Robert and Richard, moved to North Little Rock in 1953. Yada opened a nursery and for many years was one of the few voices in Arkansas to talk about the camps. As a reminder to Arkansans about the legacy of Rohwer and Jerome, Sam Yada donated books on the topic of the camps to public and school libraries around the state. He also participated in a two-part documentary about Rohwer and his experiences in camp.

Aside from the donations of books and the participation in the documentary, Mr. Yada wanted most to preserve the Rohwer cemetery and monuments. With the help of Rosalie

Santine Gould, former mayor of McGehee, Arkansas, and George Sakaguchi, former Rohwer inmate and member of the Japanese American Citizens League, Midwest Region, Mr. Yada ensured that the cemetery and monuments remain for future generations. Today, Sam's sons Robert and Richard continue their father's work by supporting the Life Interrupted project and its legacy.

After the war, most evidence of the camps' existence was removed when the federal government sold off the buildings and equipment; and the land, some of the most fertile farm land in Arkansas, was sold. Oats, soybeans, winter wheat, and cotton grow where the Jerome and Rohwer Relocation Centers stood. Building the camps required clearing dense forest, and the technological advances built by inmates at the camps, such as irrigation systems, helped the land become economically successful.

Today, little evidence remains of the incarceration that took place in southeast Arkansas during World War II. At Jerome, a smokestack from the hospital complex, two concrete tanks from the wastewater disposal plant, and a former administration building are visible from U.S. Highway 165. Farmer and landowner John Ellington lovingly tends those remnants, along with a granite memorial dedicated to the wartime experience of Japanese Americans. A cemetery and two cement monuments dedicated to Japanese American soldiers and built by inmates during the war, along with smoke stack off in the distance, mark the site of Rohwer. Still owned by the War Relocation Authority through a bureaucratic error, in 1992, the cemetery at Rohwer was named a National Historic Landmark.

Imprisonment of Japanese Americans during World War II was the most serious government violation of civil rights since slavery. While no simple reason explains why it happened, a Presidential Commission concluded that "the broad historical causes were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership." For Japanese Americans, the experience created deep distrust in the government. Although the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 included a formal apology to Japanese Americans for their wrongful imprisonment which lasted in some instances longer than three years, provided a one-time payment of $20,000 to camp survivors, and established a community fund to promote civil liberties education, these could not erase the profound humiliation and pain suffered by Americans of Japanese ancestry.

For all Americans the most important question is whether national security justifies the denial of civil rights. From the Alien and Sedition Acts of 1798 to the Patriot Act that followed the September 11, 2001 attacks, our nation continues to struggle with this fundamental question. No doubt our nation will be tested many times in the future, but we must guard against the impulse to punish people who might seem "different" from the majority of Americans.