

# The Past Recaptured? The Photographic Record of the Internment of Japanese-Americans

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"*Yo lo ví*," wrote Goya on one of his paintings depicting battles between Spanish partisans and the forces of Napoleon in 1810. Combining technical skill with passion, he produced a work that was both graphic and moving. Still not satisfied, he inscribed, "This I saw," to verify that the cruelty pictured had, in fact, occurred and that he was witness to it.<sup>1</sup>

Photography distinguishes itself from painting in the matter of verification. The medium implies that a three-dimensional event took place and that the photographer was witness to it. Even so, we know that photographs sometimes lie and often deceive. According to art critic Harold Rosenberg, deception results from two factors. Photographs reveal people and events externally and hence tell only half a story. Photographs are also presumed to be representative. Yet once the shutter is tripped, action is frozen, and the reality of only an instant is captured. A child may laugh one moment and cry the next. One view without the other is at best a half-truth.<sup>2</sup> Lens and film record objective fact, but where the camera is aimed and when the shutter is tripped are subjective decisions. The choice of a representative image reflects the creative observation and judgment of the person behind the lens.

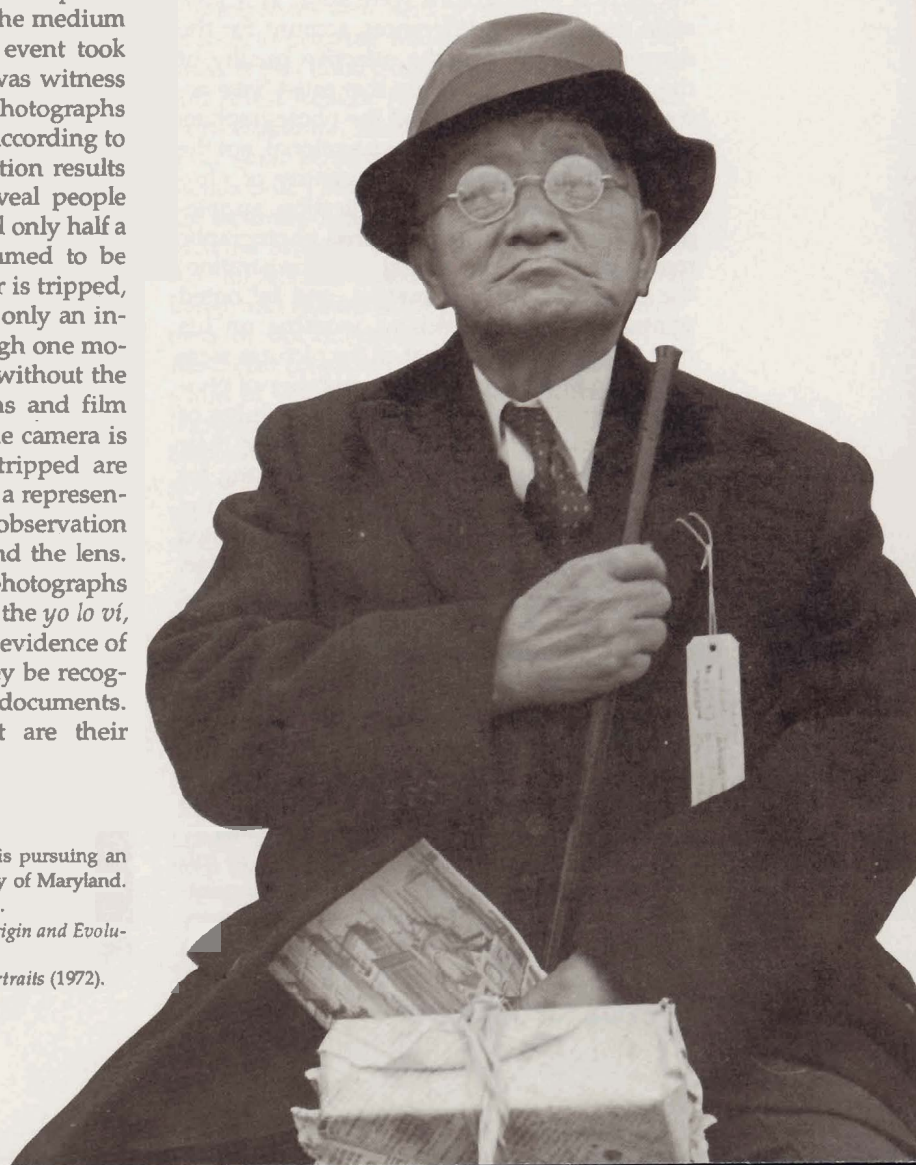
These factors notwithstanding, photographs still carry an indisputable sense of the *yo lo ví*, and their increasing availability as evidence of historical events demands that they be recognized and evaluated as historical documents. As such, are they useful? What are their limitations?

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The author, a professional photographer, is pursuing an advanced degree in history at the University of Maryland. This essay is part of a larger work in progress.

<sup>1</sup> Tim N. Gidal, *Modern Photojournalism: Origin and Evolution, 1910-1933* (1973), p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> Harold Rosenberg in Richard Avedon, *Portraits* (1972).



These questions come to mind when we look at the large collection of photographs (approximately 12,500) in the National Archives that the War Relocation Authority made in connection with the evacuation and internment of Japanese-Americans after the attack on Pearl Harbor. The benign images tell little or nothing about the injustice inflicted upon this group of Americans. The people are generally well dressed and engaged in innocent activities: standing in line, posing in front of lovely homes or lush vineyards, playing checkers, chatting, settling their affairs, selling furniture, or advertising kittens. In some photographs, haste and confusion are evident, while in others activity mimics that associated with moving—fairly common in American life—and seems to express anticipation.

What is the explanation? Had the impact of the evacuation order not been fully felt when the earliest photographs were shot? Is it possible that cultural differences account for the discrepancy between the affective quality of the photos and the trauma that must have accompanied this event? Had the photographers deliberately focused on the exceptional, not the representative, image? The quantity of photographic evidence in this collection, supplemented by another five hundred photographs made for the Farm Security Administration, the Office of War Information, and by noted photographer Ansel Adams working on his own, made it unlikely that all the pictures were propaganda pieces. The large number of photographers also diminished the plausibility of this explanation. Diversity characterized their work, and two, Dorothea Lange (working for the WRA) and Russell Lee (working for the Farm Security Administration), were skilled documentarians, sensitive to social injustice, and had done outstanding work publicizing rural poverty during the depression. Among the others were competent and even very talented internees. Moreover, it turned out that the government impounded and retained in its files photographs it did not wish made public. The written records of the WRA confirm this policy, and so confute the notion that such benign photographs were mere propaganda.

The WRA collection may be divided as follows: (1) *Preevacuation* photographs documenting the lives of Americans of Japanese ancestry living on the West Coast in early 1942. (2)



Fig. 1. "Well dressed . . . standing in line"



Fig. 2. "Posing in front of lovely homes"



Fig. 3. "Playing checkers"





Fig. 4. "Settling their affairs"



Fig. 5. "Selling furniture"



Fig. 6. "Advertising kittens"

Evacuation photographs of Japanese-Americans packing, storing, boarding trains, buses, trucks, or driving their vehicles to the assembly centers. (3) *Assembly center* photographs of way stations en route to relocation camps. (4) *Relocation camp* photographs of agricultural, vocational, educational, recreational, religious, and political activities at the camps. (5) *Relocation (resettlement)* photographs depicting closure of the camps, resettlement in other parts of the country, repatriation to Japan, and return to California. They also show property of Japanese-Americans that had been vandalized or was deserted or appropriated by others.

This study focuses on the preevacuation photographs, evacuation photographs, photographs taken at the Manzanar and Tule Lake camps, and the relocation or resettlement photographs. Assembly center photographs were omitted because the quarters were makeshift and internees were sent to resettlement camps as soon as possible. Manzanar was selected because it was photographed by Dorothea Lange and Ansel Adams. Any shortcomings in their work would not likely result from lack of technical skill. Both were critical of the government's policy and sympathetic to the plight of the Japanese-Americans.<sup>3</sup> The Manzanar camp pictures also offer an opportunity to analyze the impact of stylistic differences between Lange and Adams as they relate to the effectiveness of documentation and communication. Aesthetic considerations could influence the value of photographs as historical evidence. Supplementing the photographic record of Manzanar is much textual material, including government records and accounts written by internees that detail life in the camp and a riot that occurred in late 1942.

The major drawback to using the photographic file of Manzanar was that it was comparatively small. Thus, the Tule Lake camp photographs were included. Among these are photographs documenting friction between pro-Japan internees and camp authorities and shots of alleged incidents of arson, espionage, murder, and suicide. None of the photographers who worked at Tule Lake acquired a national reputation, but the skill displayed in their work was basically sound.

Executive Order 9066 authorizing the secre-

<sup>3</sup> See Ansel Adams, *Born Free and Equal* (1944); and Milton Meltzer, *Dorothea Lange* (1978), pp. 238-245.

tary of war to establish military areas and exclude therefrom any or all persons signaled the beginning of the evacuation of 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry from their homes on the West Coast and their internment in the interior. Seventy thousand of them were United States citizens. The record reveals that while the United States government ignored the constitutional rights of the Japanese-Americans it expended enormous amounts of energy ensuring their safety and well-being. In what way will photographs augment the written record? Can they stand alone; that is, would they have much historical value in the absence of textual material?

The purpose of photographing the WRA program, set forth in Administration Instruction no. 74 of January 2, 1943, was to document it by means of photographs as fully as possible. All significant phases of the relocation program were to be included, but not necessarily all activities at every place. Subjects satisfactorily documented at one center were usually, in the interest of economy, not to be photographed elsewhere. This was the government's intention, and the reason becomes apparent in both the omissions and the repetitions that the WRA objectives disdained. There are, for example, many photographs of meetings organized by block captains at Manzanar, Tule Lake, and several other camps. Where such photographs were categorized, the WRA labeled them "political activity." Yet, photographs of political activity as we understand it—competition between groups, persons, and ideas and the response of the governed to laws and to the people who governed them—are omitted from all but the Tule Lake file and

even there they are unsatisfactory.

Perhaps political activity is difficult to photograph. But why then was so much effort expended to photograph block captains' meetings when the results communicate little or nothing about politics in the camps? Perhaps it was the government's wish to document the degree of self-rule afforded the internees and to counter allegations of racism.<sup>4</sup> If so, it means that propaganda was one objective of the WRA's Photography Section.

The same is true of photographs of living conditions. There are numerous photographs of barracks. They are crude, tarpapered buildings, but they do not shock us; they merely recall military housing. Since the evacuation was justified by military necessity, we are not uncomfortable. But no photograph exists in the National Archives of the toilets that are known to have been placed side by side and back to back. This detail, so easy to film, was very important. It caused psychological stress among women, particularly teenage girls, and until modified was responsible for physical symptoms attributable to that distress.<sup>5</sup> The omission of such a photograph would go unnoticed in the absence of extensive textual materials. Awareness of it makes one more sensitive to related photographs. In the Manzanar files, for example, is a photograph of a frame outhouse. Dated July 3, 1942, the photograph, by Dorothea Lange, carries the legend "Hospital latrines, for patients between barracks which

<sup>4</sup> See Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps, U.S.A.* (1971), pp. xii, 71, 95, 102; and Daniels, *The Politics of Prejudice* (1977).

<sup>5</sup> Arthur A. Hansen and Betty E. Mitson, *Voices Long Silent: An Oral Inquiry Into the Japanese-American Evacuation* (1974), p. 36; Budd Fukey, *The Japanese-American Story* (1976), p. 54.

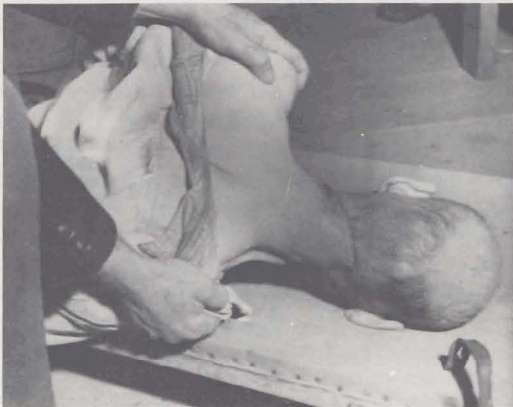


Fig. 7. "Suicide"



Fig. 8. "Meetings organized by block captains"



serve temporarily as wards. For the first 3 months of occupation medical facilities have been meagre but the new hospital *fully* equipped is almost ready for occupancy." It reads like a press release except that the photograph is marked "impounded," hence the photograph never served that purpose. Did Lange, if she wrote the legend, write it in an effort to slide the photograph past the censors? That such photographic evidence was impounded gives us an idea of the type of information the government wished kept secret. To its credit, the WRA did not destroy the photograph.

If propaganda and the conscious creation of a particular impression of the camps were the sole purpose of the photographic project, it is doubtful the pictures would have been impounded rather than destroyed. That they were kept suggests that documentation as documentation was indeed an important purpose.

Repetition is another matter. Medical and dental treatment are two subjects repeatedly photographed, documenting the government's considerable effort to provide adequate care. A crude hospital latrine contradicts this evidence, or at least counterbalances it. Shots of mess halls, barracks, work scenes, and recreation activities indicate conditions of camp life the government was proud of and underscore an image of camps where internees were neither pampered nor mistreated.

The numerous shots of internees participating in characteristically American activities, such as baseball and Boy Scout parades, are balanced by shots showing that internees were encouraged or at least permitted to pursue activities uniquely Japanese: flower arranging, brush painting, and traditional drama.

Young and old were provided with educational opportunities, and the WRA was apparently not embarrassed if initially the educational facilities were crude. The early shots underscore the importance the government and internees alike placed upon making education available.

Repetition and sheer volume seem to imply veracity. It is difficult to imagine that so many photographs could have been staged. Repetition also emphasizes quantity of evidence and suggests that an omnipresent witness, the camera, safeguarded the well-being of the internees and documented their treatment, their activities, and their living quarters.

### *The Preevacuation Photographs*

The preevacuation photographs document the acculturation of the Japanese-Americans. Their clothes are stylish, their teenage children, except for their Oriental features, would be interchangeable with any other group, and their houses bear no special stamp. If not for Japanese-language signs, their businesses too would be indistinguishable from others in any American town, except that the captions tell us that this is "Little Tokyo."

Figure 12, taken in front of the Japanese Independent Congregational Church, is evidence that acculturation was reflected in their religious life as well. Other preevacuation photographs document representative homes of Japanese-Americans: some poor and ramshackle, some typical of middle-income families, some revealing wealth and a high standard of living. Upon entering the United States,



Fig. 9. "Crude, tarpapered buildings . . . recall military housing"



Fig. 10. "Teenage children"

the Japanese, like other ethnic groups, became parts of all strata of American society.

The preevacuation photographs tend to be rather matter-of-fact but not so their legends. The captions on the backs of Dorothea Lange's photos have an affective quality that strengthens her imagery and at times transcends it. Regardless of the biography they recount, how distant the connection to Japan, how benign the occupation, how American the offspring, the fact that all persons of Japanese ancestry were to be evacuated is repeated like an obligato.

Compared with photographs of the camps, the preevacuation shots assume greater significance. Images begin to repeat and recall earlier ones. Rows of crops neatly cultivated in the camps remind us of rows of crops in West Coast fields where Japanese laborers worked and where Japanese-Americans owned property. The people often appear tied to the earth, giving their labor and love to cultivation of the soil. Faces juxtaposed against mountains and skies recall portraits and landscapes made before evacuation. It is not the child who cried in the evacuation photos so much as the many earnest and often jovial children who later reappear in the camps.



Fig. 11. "Little Tokyo"



Fig. 12. "Japanese Independent Congregational Church"



Fig. 13. "Some poor and ramshackle"



Fig. 14. "Typical of middle-income"



Fig. 15. "Some revealing wealth and a high standard of living"



Fig. 16. "Rows of crops neatly cultivated in the camps"





Fig. 17. "Crops in West Coast fields"



Fig. 18. "Portraits . . . made before evacuation"



Fig. 19. "Faces juxtaposed against the sky"



Fig. 20. "The child who cried at the evacuation"

The pictures suggest that even under bizarre circumstances people establish routines and recreate the familiar. The internees grew gardens for a hobby as they doubtless would have grown Victory gardens had they not been interned. They established makeshift schools, improved their living quarters, arranged flowers, painted pictures, fished, played card games, read, improved their English, and in general made a bleak environment livable.

Eloquent in recording details of the physical surroundings and activities of the internees, the photographs are silent with respect to their personal feelings. Inferences based on imagery alone proved false. For example, contrast between the barracks and the ramshackle West Coast homes of laborers and fishermen prompted the speculation that adjusting to camp life might have been easier for people from humble origins than for the more prosperous. Written materials proved otherwise and thus are better sources of information about feelings and behavior.

*Farewell to Manzanar* and *Nisei Daughter* are autobiographical accounts by two women interned with their families.<sup>6</sup> They suggest, indi-

<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (1973); Monica Sone, *Nisei Daughter* (1953).



Fig. 21. "Earnest, often jovial children who later reappear in the camp"





Fig. 22. "Established makeshift schools"

rectly, that personal strengths and youth aided adjustment to relocation and that disparity in lifestyle before and during the internment was less important. Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, author of the first book, blames the relocation experience for her parents' marital problems, particularly her father's alcoholism and early death. Houston portrays her father as a restless non-conformist, often at odds with himself, whose sense of self-esteem was tied to his material possessions. The evacuation was traumatic, but one could rewrite the scenario and imagine that Wakatsuki's response to a draft call might have been the same. As described in *Nisei Daughter*, the effects of relocation on Monica Sone's family were altogether different. Personal strengths and family cohesiveness obtained in spite of the outrages committed against them. The treachery of Caucasians is recounted, but so are many acts of personal kindness.

#### *The Evacuation Photographs*

The evacuation photographs speak to upheaval. Movement has started, disruption is apparent, but, with a few notable exceptions, the photographs are insufficient as historical evidence. Figure 26 is an eloquent protest by one Japanese-American. Dressed in his army uniform, this World War I veteran is being



Fig. 23. "Arranged flowers"



Fig. 24. "Painted pictures"



Fig. 25. "Movement has started, disruption is apparent"

evacuated. The irony is obvious. The photograph aptly conveys the veteran's statement. Figure 27 depends somewhat more upon the sensibilities of the viewer but is equally affective. An old, proud, well-dressed man sits with a label on him; he has been depersonalized, like a trunk to be moved. Similarly, figure 29



shows a woman with a label tucked into her coat. It seems reasonable to assume that she tried to hide it in protest because it offends us now, almost forty years later, as it doubtless offended her then.

But photographs such as these that can stand alone are the exception; most require supporting text or captions. Without the printed word, they bear closer similarity to an innocent move than they do to a forced evacuation. The process appears orderly as people leave town

in trucks, trains, buses, or in their cars. Seldom is emotion glimpsed and the military is inconspicuous. We have no appropriate reference for such images.

Just as the preevacuation photographs complement those of the camps, the evacuation photographs supplement those taken in the camps. The early shots show primitive quarters. Later ones show how the internées improved the barracks. Remembering that they were allowed to take only what belongings they could carry, we wonder how they obtained the improvements. Whatever the answers, the photographs show that the reloca-



Fig. 26. "World War I veteran"



Fig. 28. "Played card games"



Fig. 27. "An old, proud man . . . sits with a label on him"



Fig. 29. "Woman with a label tucked into her coat"



Fig. 30. "People leave town in trucks"



Fig. 31. "In their cars"



Fig. 32. "Incongruous military presence"

tion camps were not punitive; efforts to make life there more agreeable were not discouraged.

These photographs thus document decent treatment in carrying out an unjust policy.<sup>7</sup> Families were together. The military presence is incongruously juxtaposed with old men and women, invalids, and the blind. Probably the most important function of the photographs as historical documents is in translating a political event into human terms. We no longer think of the evacuation of 110,000 Japanese-Americans from the West Coast in abstract terms. We see those people who had gone to church, looked lovingly at their land, hung out their last wash, and sold their possessions waiting in lines to board trains and buses. Executive Order 9066 now has a face—it has 110,000 faces.

<sup>7</sup> Adams, *Born Free*, p. 36. See also Dillon S. Myers, *Up-rooted Americans* (1971).



Fig. 33. "Hung out their last wash"



Fig. 34. "Looked lovingly at their land"





Fig. 35. "The initial starkness"



Fig. 36. "Gardens appeared outside the barracks"

#### Photographs Made at the Camps

The photographs made at Manzanar and Tule Lake document life in the camps. The initial starkness of the barracks was relieved by human resourcefulness, and within a year gardens appeared outside the barracks and improvements within. The viewer delights in the progress, applauds the internees, and feels relieved that the emotions of the people remain hidden. We learn nothing of the psychological costs of the lack of privacy, the disruption of family life that resulted from communal eating, or how it felt to walk two hundred yards through snow to an outhouse.<sup>8</sup>

Nor do we learn about the struggle for leadership in the camps between the Issei (born in Japan) and the Nisei (born in America). Only the written accounts reveal the stress of living together, the restlessness of the young men,

<sup>8</sup> Lowell Chun-Hoon, "Executive Order 9066," *Amerasia Journal* 1 (Feb. 1972):57.

the efforts of the Japanese American Citizens League to cooperate with the government and the ensuing resentment felt by the Issei and the less acculturated Kibei (born in America and educated in Japan). Strained to the limit, the fabric of the community at Manzanar tore apart and exploded in violence on December 2, 1942. There are no pictures of the riot. Did the government wish to stifle evidence of unrest? Demonstrations by members of the pro-Japan groups were photographed at Tule Lake, however, and although the results were impounded they were not destroyed. But Tule Lake was a camp where malcontents and criminal elements from other camps were eventually gathered so that such demonstrations may have served the government's purpose, and possibly such photographic documentation was desired. On the other hand, if censorship prevented photographing the Manzanar riot, why did it only apply to written records that analyze the riot in detail, or was it so spontaneous that it was not possible or not safe to photograph it? Since textual records are generally made after the fact, unexpected events need never go unrecorded. Other possibilities to explain the lack of photographs of the riot are that they were lost or were removed from the files later and not returned.

Even where political events are photographed, the results are usually disappointing. Those of pro-Japan groups demonstrating tell us only that there were people unhappy enough to shave their heads and/or engage in



Fig. 37. "Might as well laugh as cry"

dramatic displays of opposition. They do not reveal the cause.

Equally disappointing and uninformative are photographs dealing with the loyalty oath. The army's decision in January 1943 to form an all-Nisei combat team required that a loyalty oath be taken by all persons over seventeen years of age.<sup>9</sup> Some Nisei answered the unreasonable questions and volunteered for the army to demonstrate their loyalty and to escape the tedium and the stigma of camp life. Others bitterly disdained both oath and army. Barred from citizenship, many Issei were fearful of relinquishing their ties to Japan in their reluctance to be left without a country. Thus, many refused to take an oath disavowing their mother country, and often their children followed suit since they would have chosen repatriation with their parents.

The oath was a complicated issue and feelings ran high. Photographs show people signing the oath. Those who refused to sign were later photographed receiving repatriation orders. An example is figure 37: a young man smiling as he is being informed that he will be repatriated to Japan. His smile might suggest that he has no regrets, but the caption tells us that his personal motto was "Might as well laugh as cry." Photographs cannot convey personal, political crises.

#### *The Resettlement Photographs*

The resettlement photographs are weak. They show that the people photographed were not starved or obviously mistreated but tell nothing of those unphotographed. Only the written record tells the story here. Where pictures show people leaving camp for work-release programs, to serve in the army, or to relocate to the Midwest or East, the captions are important. They show that people were released for seasonal agricultural work or to resettle altogether soon after the camps opened. One wonders why, if it was prudent to release them so quickly, they were taken into custody in the first place. Why did the government continue its building and maintenance program when many of the internees were being released? Where was the voice of reason after the shock of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

<sup>9</sup> Allen R. Bosworth, *America's Concentration Camps* (1967), pp. 165-167. The WRA administered an oath to Issei and Nisei for permanent relocation.



Fig. 38. "Frequent dust storms"

#### *Conclusion*

How useful as historical documents are photographs? Subtleties often escape the camera, no matter how skilled the photographer. The work of Dorothea Lange is no more or less effective than that of Ansel Adams although Lange was experienced at exposing social injustice with a camera. Lange's WRA work depends heavily upon the prose that accompanies it. Both Lange and Adams succeeded to the extent that they focused on the faces of the internees, dispelling their anonymity and allowing the viewer to identify with them as human beings.

Their photographs made at Manzanar fail to capture the feeling of isolation, temperature extremes, and frequent dust storms. The paintings photographed in figures 38 and 40 are more effective because they interpret events as the internees experienced them; the photographs are pale reflections beside them.

Photographs of the camps, with the exception of Tule Lake, may also be criticized as making life appear too normal and showing too many smiles. But by documenting the routine so fully perhaps they tell us that the majority of Japanese-Americans cooperated with the government and suggest why revolts and strikes were rare, except at Tule Lake where many dissidents from other camps were sent. They undermine revisionist histories that search for signs of opposition to shameful events, and, when finding none, hold in con-





Fig. 39. "Reporters freely entered the camps"

tempt those who chose not to resist.<sup>10</sup> Jews of the Holocaust are alleged to have secretly desired their own deaths because they believed, as did the Japanese-Americans, that evacuation meant leaving their homes, not life itself, and that resettlement implied moving to another area, not that they would be exterminated.<sup>11</sup>

Both groups had grown accustomed to harassment, economic exploitation, political discrimination, and grudging acceptance by a hostile society. The Japanese-Americans survived because they cooperated with an hysterical but fundamentally decent government that granted the security they were entitled to. The Jews were not so fortunate. Whether they cooperated or resisted, they perished because annihilation, not temporary relocation, was the intent of the Nazis. American relocation camps were not Nazi concentration camps. The language of Executive Order 9066 was descriptive and not cruelly deceptive.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur A. Hansen and David A. Hacker, "The Manzanar Riot: An Ethnic Perspective," *Amerasia Journal* 2 (Fall 1974): 112; Gary Okihiro, "Japanese Resistance in America's Concentration Camps: A Reevaluation," *ibid.* 1 (Fall 1973): 20-34.

<sup>11</sup> Lucy S. Dawidowicz, *The War Against the Jews, 1933-1945* (1978), pp. 202-223.



Fig. 40. "Isolation"

Most Americans are ashamed of this episode, but the focus is properly on the failure of leadership and the role of journalists in disseminating hatred and suspicion. Accounts that accent the lack of amenities in the camps during wartime are ludicrous. If the policy had been justified, its execution would have been admirable.

This is where photographs enhance written accounts and are faithful to history. We can look with relief to these pictures, cognizant that, like other nations, we imprisoned people who we believed might be dangerous in wartime, but, unlike other nations, we did not mistreat, dehumanize, or starve them. Reporters freely entered the camps and internees were often allowed out. We committed a grave error, but we were civilized. The photographs are our witness.

As historical material, photographs are subject to the same perturbations possible with written documents. They may be lifted out of context, chosen as representative when they are not, incorrectly labeled, placed out of sequence, cropped, and doctored. Like written documents, what was not recorded may have been more significant than what was; but, unlike written records, photographs cannot be made after the event.

Photographs recapture some of the past through recognizable images and a scale that is familiar. With their aid, we may feel something of the human impact of an event. Such affective information will increase our intellectual understanding and help us to make more enlightened historical judgments. □