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**UNTOLD STORIES FROM  
AMERICA'S NATIONAL PARKS**

BY SUSAN SHUMAKER

SUE KUNITOMI EMBREY

(PART 12, PAGES 225 – 243)

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## SUE KUNITOMI EMBREY

In late 1969, a student driving Sue Embrey home from class at UCLA's Asian American Studies Center invited her to join a group on a pilgrimage to Manzanar, the internment camp where she'd been incarcerated nearly 27 years before. The invitation came in the midst of anti-Vietnam war demonstrations and the Free Speech movement, and Sue—although she was an activist on campus—had never confronted her own painful memories of being unjustly incarcerated. She accepted. Thus in December 1969—on the coldest day of the year in Inyo county—Sue began what would become a lifelong journey to understand what happened at Manzanar and to bring public attention and recognition to the site.

### *Sueko Kunitomi*

Gonhichi Kunitomi first came to the United States on a two-year contract to work on a Hawaiian plantation. He'd left his home in Japan, never returning to claim his rights of inheritance as the eldest son, because he was of draft age and unwilling to fight in the Russo-Japanese war. After Gonhichi's contract expired, he journeyed to the mainland. He married a Japanese woman and settled in Hollywood, eventually relocating to "Little Tokyo"—a predominantly Japanese community just east of downtown Los Angeles. There, they raised ten children in an environment rich in Japanese culture, but separate from mainstream America. Their eighth child was named Sueko, meaning "last child,"<sup>1</sup> or Sue, for short:

We lived a mixed life. Dressed in our kimono, we celebrated the New Year with its tradition of special Japanese food, shuttlecock games, and visits to other families, where we tasted their specialties. We also celebrated Christmas, Mother's Day, the Fourth of July with fireworks, and Armistice Day with parades downtown.

Through our public school education we absorbed all the values and principles that are embodied in the American Dream. We never questioned where our loyalty lay, for were we not American citizens, and didn't the public education we were getting emphasize the virtues of our great democracy and our good fortune in living in the United States? —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 169–170)

In December 1937, Sue's father—who owned and ran a moving business—died in an automobile accident while driving home from Glendale. Sue's two older brothers dropped out of school to go to work and the family struggled for some time. In 1941, Sue's mother, although she had never worked outside the home before, purchased a small grocery store in Little Tokyo. Together,

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<sup>1</sup> Sue had two younger siblings—a sister and a brother—so she was not, in fact, the last Kunitomi child.

mother and daughter ran the store, beginning in early March 1941. Sue had graduated from high school just the month before (Last Witnesses 171–172; Levine 21).

*December 7, 1941*

Nine months after Sue and her mother began operating their small grocery store, Japanese planes attacked Pearl Harbor. Sue was working in the store that morning, listening to music on the radio.

It was around lunchtime when the radio announced the bombing of Pearl Harbor. My mother was making lunch next door—we lived next door to the store—and I yelled at her, “They just said on the news that they bombed Pearl Harbor.” And she said, “Who did?” I said, “The Japanese.” She said, “That’s not true. They can’t do that.”

Then my brothers came home . . . They were playing pool in Little Tokyo. . . . And they said, “There’s a war between Japan and the United States because Japan bombed Pearl Harbor.” And my mother still wouldn’t believe it. She said, “That’s not true. It can’t be true!”

She was very, very upset. And she said, “What’s gonna happen to us? They’re gonna take us all away.” . . . She felt that right away, because she was not a citizen. She knew that, as not an American citizen, that she didn’t have very many rights. Then she said, “They’ll take all of us away.” And my brother said, “No, we’re American citizens. They won’t take us.” And she said, “You don’t know that.”  
—Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

Mrs. Kunitomi was right. Almost immediately that Sunday the streets of Little Tokyo were barricaded and police were on the scene. Many community leaders—particularly male heads of households—were taken away (Levine 21, 23).

By Monday morning after Pearl Harbor, there was nobody left. People could not get money out of their bank accounts. They couldn’t open their stores. They couldn’t do business because the family head was gone, and in most cases the father was the only one who knew what was going on. My mother was giving credit to everybody because nobody had money to buy anything. Overnight they were completely impoverished, not just in terms of money, but in their whole life. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 23)

By nightfall, 2,192 Japanese had been arrested. A series of proclamations issued later in December 1941 declared non-citizen Japanese, Germans, and Italians “alien enemies” and laid down regulations governing their behavior. By January 1942, all alien enemies were required to re-register and receive new identification certificates, which they were obliged to carry with them at all times. Sue’s family registered at the old Union Church in Los Angeles and was assigned family number 2614 (Tours 2; Daniels 87; Burton 29–30; Shumaker).

Western newspapers and military officials fomented public fear by spreading false rumors of Japanese American spy networks, supposedly feeding military information to Japan and helping plan attacks on West Coast cities. Anti-Japanese sentiment grew rapidly, typified by an editorial in the Los Angeles Times: “A viper is nonetheless a viper wherever the eggs are hatched—so a

Japanese American, born of Japanese parents—grows up to be a Japanese, not an American.” On January 2, 1942, Henry McLemore, a Hearst syndicated columnist, wrote:

I’m for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior . . . let ‘em be pinched, hurt, hungry . . . let us have no more patience with the enemy or with anyone who carry his blood. Personally, I hate the Japanese. — Henry McLemore (Tours 3)

Negative sentiment against the Japanese had been prevalent on the West Coast for many years, in part due to the community’s unparalleled economic success. By the time the United States entered the war, Japanese Americans owned about one-fiftieth of the arable land in the three pacific coast states. The average value per acre of all farms in these states in 1940 was \$37.94, while an acre on a Japanese American farm was worth, on average, \$279.96. In 1941, Japanese Americans produced 40% of California’s truck crops (Hersey 5; Tours 2).

#### *Executive Order 9066*

On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, authorizing the Secretary of War to “prescribe military areas . . . from which any or all persons may be excluded” and to “provide for residents of any such area who are excluded therefrom, such transportation, food, shelter, and other accommodations as may be necessary . . .” At first, no one was certain what it all meant (Burton 30–31).

After the president signed Executive Order 9066, we had all these meetings in Little Tokyo. I went to one of them. There were some people who wanted to protest and others who wanted to wait and see what the government was going to do. There was a big debate over whether we should go quietly and cooperate with the government, or whether everybody should go on their own wherever they could . . .

I heard some people were going to chain themselves to a telephone pole. They were dissuaded. We kept wondering whether anybody was going to protest. We sat around saying, They can’t do this to us. We’re American citizens. But we didn’t have much power. We had nobody in Congress, we had nobody in the city or state legislature who would say one word for us. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 36)

On March 2, Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona were divided into two such military areas. On March 11, the Wartime Civilian Control Administration was established to organize and accomplish the evacuation of Military Area No. 1, along the coast. In the beginning, the evacuation was voluntary. Then, on March 29, Japanese Americans were forbidden from leaving Military Area No. 1 until ordered to do so (Burton 32–33).

In April we were told to start packing; that we had to be evacuated. And I thought, “Oh, my gosh, we have this grocery store, and we have our house with all our furniture, and we have our cars.” . . . We just left everything behind. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

Sue's family left Los Angeles for "camp"—as it would be routinely called among the Japanese American community—in May of 1942.

We lived near the old Union Station where we were supposed to leave from on the train. So we walked there and our neighbors helped us with our luggage. They walked us about five blocks to the Union Station and saw us off at the train station. That was a sad morning.

I saw my brother was crying because he wanted to bring his toys with him, and he could only bring so many in his suitcase.

The whole Little Tokyo and our neighborhood were completely empty. . . . We had an old Spanish American War veteran living in a boarding house nearby and he wrote to us: "I can hear my footsteps behind me. There's nobody else around." He felt so bad. By the time we got back he had aged so and he was ill. He was at the veterans' hospital in West LA and we tried to find him, but we couldn't find him. They thought that he had passed away. He had no relatives. . . . I think it was just as sad for him being left behind as it was for us. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

The scene at the train station was a mixture of sadness and fear.

I cried after we got to the train station. One of the fellows who was going to Santa Anita the next day came by and said that he wanted to get a box of candy for me from another fellow that I had been dating, but that there were no shops open. . . . So I just burst into tears. Then when I looked up there was a soldier standing next to me and he turned and walked the other way. I guess he didn't want to see me crying. He had a bayonet on his rifle. After that they had photographs in the paper, so they asked the men to take the bayonets off. . . . I guess they didn't want the readers to see that the rifles had bayonets on them. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

Despite the intimidation and her sorrow, Sue remained loyal to the country of her birth:

I think we tried not to have feelings against [the United States], because it was our own country. My brother said, "Yeah, but we're going to prison, because of our background, our faces."

I felt, at that time—I was very loyal—I felt that you should never criticize your country. It was not a good thing to do.

But I don't feel that way any more. I think it's important that we object to things that our country is doing if it's not what we believe to be the right thing. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

The movement of evacuees into the camps began in March. By June 2, 1942, all Japanese in Military Area No. 1, except for those left behind in hospitals, were in U.S. Military custody. The removal of Japanese landowners in agricultural areas was especially burdensome, as it came at the peak of harvest. One strawberry grower asked for a deferral of his evacuation summons for a few days in order to harvest his crop. Denied permission, he bitterly plowed the berries under.

The next day, he was charged by the FBI with an act of sabotage and put in jail (Burton 33; Tours 5; Hersey 5).<sup>2</sup>

In all, more than 120,000 Japanese Americans, over two-thirds of whom were U.S.-born, were incarcerated in ten barbed-wire enclosures known as internment camps, located throughout the western United States. The only cabinet-level officials in the Roosevelt administration to oppose the camps were Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, who sought to end them as soon as possible, and Attorney General Francis Biddle (Daniels 88; Armor xviii).

### *Manzanar*

The camp to which Sue's family had been assigned was Manzanar, located 212 miles northeast of Los Angeles on the site of an old Spanish settlement in Inyo County. In the eastern rain shadow of the Sierra Nevada, Manzanar was once a fertile place. It and other Owens Valley settlements had supported fruit trees and farms (Manzanar means "apple orchard" in Spanish), watered by the drainage from the Sierras. By the time the War Relocation Authority arrived to build the camps, however, the area was a wasteland. In 1919, the city of Los Angeles had purchased the land for its water rights, diverting the run-off southward to the city and creating a man-made desert (Tours 15; Armor xi; Burton 162).

The earliest evacuees to arrive in the Owens Valley came to build Manzanar, the first of the ten camps to be constructed. Known as "pioneers," these Japanese Americans, primarily young men, began arriving on March 21, 1942. They worked 7 days a week for 10 hours a day, completing the major construction in just six weeks. Among them was Sue Kunitomi's brother.

When the mass eviction of the permanent resident alien Japanese and Japanese Americans began in earnest, my twenty-one-year-old brother, Hideo, quit his fruit-stand job and volunteered as one of the one thousand men and women sent in advance to help build Manzanar. . . . When we arrived at Manzanar on May 9, 1942, Hideo greeted us as we got off the bus and escorted us through the registration process and to our barracks in Block 20. We stumbled in the dark, as we were not permitted to carry flashlights . . . . Hideo had already filled the mattress covers with hay, so we did not have to go out before bedtime to do so ourselves, as others did. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 172)

At its peak, Manzanar housed a population of over 10,000 evacuees, held within a one-mile-square enclosure. The camp was surrounded by barbed-wire fencing and overlooked by eight guard towers. Its layout was based on a modified military "theater of operations" plan, with families housed in 36 blocks of 20' X 100' barracks, separated into four to six units, depending upon family size. Construction was minimal, designed to meet the requirements of low cost and rapid fabrication, and conditions were harsh. Even in late spring, the nighttime temperatures routinely dropped below freezing. In the summer, temperatures rose above 110 degrees. And,

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<sup>2</sup> Despite tales of treachery and espionage spread by the media and others, this was the only recorded act of sabotage by a Japanese alien or Japanese American throughout the entire course of the war (Hersey 20).

as one internee described it, “The main thing you remembered was the dust, always the dust,” created by a land that was artificially made barren (Tours 6, 16; Armor xiii).

They had bulldozed everything in order to build the barracks. Nothing was growing, not even sagebrush. In between every two blocks, they had what they called a firebreak. It was flat land, and when the wind blew, it created tornado dust storms. Later the government gave everybody grass seeds. People planted lawns and flowers in between the barracks . . . .

People wanted to beautify. They put in little gardens in front of their doors. They dug ponds and put in goldfish. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 57)

Eventually, the residents made the camp into a home—gardening, holding dances, and going to school. Photographer Ansel Adams came in 1943 at the request of his friend, camp director Ralph Merritt, to take photos of the place, the people, and the circumstances there.<sup>3</sup> The book he produced out of the experience, *Born Free and Equal*, was published in 1944.<sup>4</sup> In the introduction, he wrote:

Moved by the human story unfolding in the encirclement of desert and mountains, and by the wish to identify my photography . . . with the tragic momentum of the times, I came to Manzanar with my cameras in the fall of 1943 . . . . I believe that the arid splendor of the desert, ringed with towering mountains, has strengthened the spirit of the people of Manzanar. I do not say all are conscious of this influence, but I am sure most have responded, in one way or another, to the resonances of their environment. From the harsh soil they have extracted fine crops; they have made gardens glow in the firebreaks and between the barracks. Out of the jostling, dusty confusion of the first bleak days in raw barracks they have modulated to a democratic internal society and a praiseworthy adjustment to conditions beyond their control. —Ansel Adams (Armor xvii)<sup>5</sup>

Despite the people’s efforts to make Manzanar more pleasant, it was still—in essence—a prison.

The thing that stood out was the fact that we couldn’t leave! You go to the end of the one-mile residential area and there’s a barbed wire fence. And there’s no way you could get out. That was what bothered me the most. Here I was an American citizen and yet I was a prisoner.

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3 Adams is not the only noted photographer of Manzanar. Another, Toyo Miyatake, was interned there. Despite the injunction against Japanese owning cameras, Miyatake smuggled a lens and shutter into camp. From these he built a wooden camera and began taking pictures. When Merritt discovered the “crime,” he allowed Miyatake to continue his work, but specified that a Caucasian had to trip the shutter for him. Adams was also restricted in his work: He was forbidden to photograph the guard towers, the guards, and the barbed wire (Armor xx).

4 Harold Ickes wrote the book’s foreword and sent two copies to President Roosevelt, with a personal note (Armor xviii).

5 Published while the country was still at war, *Born Free and Equal*’s implicit message of guilt and shame did not still well with many Americans. Copies of the book were burned in public ceremonies.

There were eight towers, guard towers. . . . There were MPs with machine guns . . . they were loaded machine guns; at least that's what we were told.

. . . None of us had done anything! I don't understand how we could have just been kept there.  
—Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

The month before Sue's arrival, the camp's mimeographed newspaper, the *Manzanar Free Press*, had been launched. Sue—who had always wanted to write—was hired as a roving reporter, a job that would mark a turning point in her life.<sup>6</sup>

I learned that I had skills I had not been able to use or identify before. I enjoyed writing about activities in the camp and the energy of the hardworking population. People's diligent efforts to beautify their bleak surroundings lifted my spirits. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 173)

Despite all the conflicting feelings about being imprisoned by their own government, the Kunitomi family remained loyal to the United States. Three of Sue's elder brothers served in the military during the war (the fourth—despite his efforts to enlist—was classified 4-F) and her younger brother volunteered to serve during the Korean War.

I considered going into the WACS when the recruiting women were in camp. My mother was very worried. I was very patriotic. I really was disillusioned about what had happened, but I wanted to help with the war effort. And I wanted to do something rather than just sit there in camp. "It's still my country," I told her. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 119–120)

### *Leaving Manzanar*

Sue got her chance to leave Manzanar as part of the War Relocation Authority program of leave clearance. The program allowed eligible evacuees to leave the camps under the sponsorship of organizations and individuals and travel east to attend college or to work (Burton 49; Tours 9; Unrau).

By the summer of 1943, Embrey was waiting for her clearance to leave Manzanar.

I had got a sponsorship from the YWCA in Madison, Wisconsin, in early '43. I told my mother, I'm leaving. She didn't want me to go because my brothers were up for draft status. I said, "I can't stay here. I just cannot stay." —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 165–166)

Sue recalls turning to look at the camp one last time before leaving for Madison; she knew that she had been changed forever, as a result of her internment.

I felt that . . . even if we were only one person, we had to take a position and do whatever we could to make things better for the rest of the people. And I think that's how I felt when I left there—that I was

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<sup>6</sup> While at Manzanar, Sue had also worked in an onsite camouflage net factory and helped the Maryknoll Sisters organize a camp school.

gonna try to do something that would affect everybody; that I would try to do something that would have an impact on other people. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

After a year in Madison, Wisconsin, Sue moved to Chicago, where, with help from the American Friends Service Committee, she secured a job at the Newberry Library, a research institution with first editions and rare books from around the world, (Last Witnesses 175).

### *The Closing of the Camps*

Following a Supreme Court decision in December of 1944, detained Japanese Americans were free to return to their West Coast homes. Internees had to leave on their own and those with assets of less than \$600 were given one-way train or bus fare, associated meals, and \$25.00 for expenses. Many evacuees found their boarded up homes vandalized and their stored goods stolen. When the Kunitomi family returned to Los Angeles, they found that their home and grocery store had been demolished. Sue was still working in Chicago when she learned that her mother had been released from the camp:

While I was enjoying my independent life in Chicago, my mother had returned to Los Angeles and was seeking the return of our complete family. In 1948, my younger sister decided to get married and live in Chicago, so I packed my bags and headed home. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 175)

By the time Sue rejoined them, the family was living in a one-room apartment. She quickly found them a house with three bedrooms right behind Little Tokyo—“not in a very nice neighborhood,” Sue notes, “but at least it was their own house” (Tours 11; Interview 9/2/05).

Back in Los Angeles, Sue became politically active, working with a group of Nisei<sup>7</sup> supporting Henry Wallace, FDR’s vice president who’d broken from the democrats to run as a presidential candidate for the Progressive Party. Through her work for the Progressives, Sue wrote pro-Wallace articles for the Nisei.

Then there was singing—a lot of singing of songs adopted by the Progressive Party, written by folk singers Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger. For a novice, it was an exciting time. I met many progressive-minded Americans of all ethnicities, strengthening my belief in American democracy. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 176)

Sue married a Caucasian, Garland Monroe Embrey. While her two sons were in elementary school, she enrolled at Los Angeles City College to take classes toward her longtime dream of achieving a college diploma. She later received a teaching degree at Cal State, Los Angeles, and a master’s degree in education from the University of Southern California. Her father had told her a college degree was impossible, for two reasons: she was a woman and she was a Japanese American (Last Witness 176).

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7 Issei: Japanese immigrants living in the United States; Nisei: 1<sup>st</sup> generation Japanese American, born in this country; Sansei: 2<sup>nd</sup> generation Japanese American; Yonsei: 3<sup>rd</sup> generation Japanese American.

My father died in 1938. I carried the burden of his advice until 1972, when I received my master's degree from the University of Southern California. No bells rang, no bright lights flashed; there was only my mother's delight and astonishment that I had gotten the diploma. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 176)

### *Pilgrimage to Manzanar*

Sue first became involved in the nascent movement to memorialize Manzanar while in college.

It was during my long-delayed college years that I met student activists at California State University, Los Angeles, who, like other students on other campuses, were pushing the administration to introduce courses in Asian American studies into the curriculum. It was their interest and concern about the interment camps that provided me with the impetus to study my own wartime experience. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 177)

In the late 1960s, Sue and two former camp inmates—Amy Uno Ishi and Jim Matsuoka—began visiting area schools and talking with students about evacuation and internment. In 1969, a group of Sansei college students from L.A., most of whom were born after internment, became interested in Manzanar. The students organized what they thought was the first pilgrimage to the site which, at that point, was primarily a desolate field—its buildings having been auctioned and removed in 1952—leased by the City of Los Angeles to local ranchers for grazing purposes (Levine 187–188; Tours 12; Unrau 819).<sup>8</sup>

At that point, Sue was taking courses at UCLA in the Asian-American Studies Center (Levine 246; Unrau 821).

I was at UCLA . . . and one of the persons said, “How would you like to go back to Manzanar?” I said, “Well I haven't been back for a long time.” They said, “Well, we're gonna go back.”

I said, “Why are you going in the winter, when it's so cold?” They said, “Because we want people to know how it feels; we want everyone to know . . . how you felt.” . . . I said, “Yeah, but you don't have a place to stay! When we were there, at least we had the barracks; we could go inside and warm up in the barracks.” “Oh, that's OK,” they said. “We want people to know how it felt.” [*Laughs*] So, it was really cold! —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

It ended up being the coldest day of the year in Inyo County.

It was a cold and windy December day in 1969 when several hundred of us huddled together against the biting wind at the site of Manzanar to commemorate the human tragedy that had played out on the desert floor of the Owens Valley more than twenty-seven years earlier. The event, the first of what were to become annual pilgrimages to the camp's site, was meant to publicize the beginning of a campaign to repeal Title II of the Internal Security (McCarran) Act of 1950. Under Title II, the

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<sup>8</sup> The young people discovered that day that, in fact, this was not the first pilgrimage to Manzanar; for two Issei ministers—Rev. Sentoku Maeda and Rev. Shoichi Wakahiro—it was their 25<sup>th</sup> (Tours 36).

president was empowered to exclude and detain anyone considered a threat to national security.  
—Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 177)

250 participants, most of whom—according to one writer—were “Asian students who were curious about the camp and unable to get their parents to talk about life there,” attended the event.<sup>9</sup> Despite minimal advance notice, all three national networks had cameras at the site and the pilgrimage was carried on Saturday evening’s six o’clock news. While many Japanese Americans were elated at the story, some were not sure Sue and the others should be so visible or vocal, and were concerned that they were dredging up the past and “talking about camp.” “Camp,” Sue says, “is what we called it. Camp is what we still call it.” (Unrau 821; Last Witnesses 177).

I left [Manzanar] in October of 1942. I went back in . . . December of 1969. . . . I was standing there and one of the fellows, organizers, said, “Sue, would you get these video people out of the way?” . . . There were some people from NBC and CBS—or ABC, I don’t remember, one of them—from the television stations. And he said, “They’re in the way!” [*Laughs*] So I asked them to move away. And they started to interview me. They interviewed another person named Elaine Yoneda, a Caucasian wife of a friend of mine from San Francisco. So the two of us showed up on the six o’clock news that night.

And everybody said, “Oh my!”—the whole week, you know—“Sue Embrey was on the television!” And they weren’t very happy because one of the fellows they interviewed . . . said—when the reporter asked him, “How many people are buried here in this cemetery?”—he said, “A whole generation. A whole generation of people who will not talk about what happened to them.” He said, “They’re all dead.” And everyone was very angry with him, because [*Putting on angry voice*] “We’re not dead! We’re right here! And if we don’t want to talk about it, we don’t want to talk about it!” — Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

### *The Manzanar Committee*

As a result of the renewed interest among the students, Sue and others established the Manzanar Committee.<sup>10</sup> The committee began in 1971 as a small ad hoc group under the auspices of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and was formed with a two-fold purpose: to raise public awareness regarding the significance of the Manzanar site and to establish Manzanar as a state historic landmark. Pilgrimages to the site became an annual event, sponsored by the committee, and since 1973 have been held on the last Saturday of each April (Levine 190; Unrau 821).

Sue very rapidly became the driving force behind the Manzanar Committee and its activities. Her home was the committee’s official address and her telephone the official committee number. During that time, she was not only fighting to commemorate the site, but was speaking frequently to school groups, churches, and just about anyone who would hear her. Writing in April 1971, she indicates that she was still frequently in the doghouse with fellow Nisei:

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<sup>9</sup> Christopher Ross, “Return to Manzanar,” *Americana*, XIX (April 1991), p. 56 (Unrau 821, NOTE 49).

<sup>10</sup> Some sources cite the first leader of the group as Warren Furutani, National Youth Director of the JACL; Sue says that it was a joint effort, with Warren providing the JACL link.

Last week [at a “teach-in” about internment] I was called to task for reviving old memories and for wanting to “re-write” American history. So, my evaluation of the meeting is that it was a huge success!!  
—Sue Kunitomi Embrey to Mary Kochiyama, April 27, 1971 (NPS Archives)

In late 1971, the Manzanar Committee applied to the California State Department of Parks and Recreation to declare Manzanar a state historic site. In the application, they noted that the site “recreates” for many Japanese Americans “that moment in their lives when all the world was enclosed within this one-mile square.” The group gave the state photographs, maps, and historical information on the camp, along with a proposed inscription for a bronze plaque to be placed at the site (Unrau 821).

In January 1972 the state board met in Fresno and designated Manzanar as California Registered Historic Landmark No. 850. A 4.33-acre area, including two rock sentry houses at the entrance to the former camp, the cemetery, and an adjoining parking area, was leased by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power to the Manzanar Committee and the JACL for the landmark. Despite the prompt designation, finalization the landmark, which was contingent upon acceptable wording of the plaque, took much longer, and was characterized by a year of heated negotiations (Unrau 822).

They didn’t want our wording describing Manzanar for the bronze marker. After about a year, there was a tiny press article that they had rejected our wording. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 190)

The text the group proposed read as follows:

From war hysteria, racism, and economic greed, one hundred ten thousand persons of Japanese ancestry were directed by Presidential Order on February 19, 1942, to leave their homes and relocate to America’s Concentration Camps. Manzanar was the first of such camps built during World War II, bounded by barbed wire and guard towers in a mile square, confining 10,000 men, women, and children, of whom the majority was American citizens. This plaque is laid in the hope that the conditions which created this camp will never emerge again—for anybody, at any time. Then may this plaque always be a reminder of what Fear, Hate and Greed will cause men to do to other men.  
TONDEMONAI!<sup>11</sup>

On three occasions, representatives from the JACL and the Manzanar Committee traveled to Sacramento to negotiate, with assistance from State Senator Mervyn Dymally, State Assembly Speaker Robert Moretti and State Assemblyman Alex Garcia, whose district included Little Tokyo.

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<sup>11</sup> A Japanese term meaning “incredibly; never happened.” A group from the JACL later removed the term, which meant little to most of the Japanese Americans involved.

They didn't like the words "racism, economic greed, concentration camps." They argued it was mostly war hysteria. They said it was not California, but the U.S. government that did it. "Don't blame us," they said.

I said, "If it was just hysteria, how come it was only the Japanese and not the Germans and Italians? It was a deliberate attempt on the part of politicians and everyone else to get us out of there. And even the government called them 'concentration camps.'" —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 190)

In a final, stormy confrontation, Warren Furutani, Amy Ishi, and Sue stood their ground. William Penn-Mott, then director of the California Department of Parks and Recreation, flatly refused to approve the wording.

At that point, Warren Furutani, our founding chair, who had been quiet up to then, turned to Penn-Mott and said, "One man signed an order that sent all my relatives and friends to the camps; you're one person who's holding up the approval of this plaque wording. You're a racist, nothing but a racist."

Penn-Mott stood up, his face flushed red, and in an angry voice said, "I'm not going to stay here and be insulted and called names. I have to leave. . . . I don't approve the wording."

Garcia reached out and grabbed Penn-Mott's arm. He said, "Well, then this will go to the legislature."

"You can have it all," the director answered as he stalked out of the room. It was an unexpected and stunning victory. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (*Last Witnesses* 179)

Under the terms of the final agreement, the state would write the first sentence of the plaque. The second sentence would be written by the Manzanar Committee and the JACL; the third incorporated compromise language. The final wording of the plaque stated:

In the early part of World War II, 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were interned in relocation centers by Executive Order No. 9066, issued on February 19, 1942. Manzanar, the first of ten such concentration camps, was bounded by barbed wire and guard towers, confining 10,000 persons, the majority being American citizens. May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism and economic exploitation never emerge again.

1,500 people attended the 1973 Manzanar Pilgrimage on April 14 and watched as stonemason Ryozo Kado fitted the plaque into the front wall of the stone guardhouse. Kado, an evacuee resident of Manzanar, had supervised the construction of the guardhouses more than thirty years earlier. For the occasion, Kado assembled his original seven-man evacuee crew (Unrau 822).

On September 16, 1974, the Department of Parks and Recreation released a report, having been mandated to do so by the State Assembly, recommending that the "entire formerly enclosed 495-acre camp area" of Manzanar be preserved as an historical unit in the state park system. In 1977, the City of Los Angeles Cultural Heritage Board declared Manzanar a City Historic Landmark (Unrau 823–825).

*The National Campaign for Redress*

During the years that followed, the annual pilgrimages to Manzanar continued, slowly growing in numbers. By 1980, the community began to discuss more actively how to deal with the violation of their rights as citizens and legal residents. The National Coalition for Redress/Reparations began campaigning for Congressional legislation that would mandate an apology from the U.S. government and monetary compensation. The lengthy and arduous campaign for redress was eventually successful, resulting in 1988 legislation that required a \$20,000 tax-free payment and a formal governmental apology to each of the 80,000 surviving victims (Tours 12; Daniels 161).

*National Recognition for Manzanar*

In the meantime, Sue Embrey and the California State Historic Preservation Office began its own campaign for national recognition of Manzanar.

We applied to make it a California state historic site. And they said to us, “Well, it’s not really the state that formed Manzanar. It’s the federal government. We really don’t have anything to do with it, and you should apply to the federal government.” The State Historic Preservation office applied to the federal government. They applied for us. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

On July 30, 1976, the “Manzanar War Relocation Center” was listed on the National Register of Historic Places (Unrau 825).

On August 18, 1978, Congress approved Public Law 95-348, mandating the study of several sites associated with the Pacific Campaign of World War II. The law resulted, among other things, in the establishment of the American Memorial Park on Saipan and the War in the Pacific National Historical Park on Guam. In addition, the law called for the Secretary of the Interior to conduct studies of U.S. internment camps (Unrau 826).

Accordingly, around 1984, the National Park Service undertook and completed a survey of the ten War Relocation Authority camps. The authors of the survey recommended that, of the ten, Manzanar should be the one designated as a national historic landmark; no other boasted as many recognizable artifacts and remains on site. The movement was strongly supported by Los Angeles mayor Tom Bradley; he appointed Rose Ochi—at that time the executive director of the Criminal Justice Planning Office of the City of Los Angeles—as the liaison between Los Angeles and the National Park Service, and between the city and the Inyo County Board of Supervisors (Last Witnesses 180).<sup>12</sup>

Manzanar was designated a National Historic Landmark in February 1985. On April 27, during the annual pilgrimage, Jerry Rogers, Associate Director for Cultural Resources of the National Park Service, presented a new plaque marking the site as a National Historic Landmark to City Council Member Dave Cunningham. Rogers said:

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<sup>12</sup> Rose Ochi, an attorney, was later appointed as Assistant Attorney General for the United States in 1997, the first Asian American woman to serve in that capacity (Last Witnesses 180, note).

All nations mark and celebrate the historic places that represent their triumphs, their great leap forward. Even repressive governments call upon the inspiration of history to enforce patriotism. Our nation does that, and properly so. But few nations have the fortitude to do what the United States does here today. Manzanar cannot be celebrated, for it is not a triumph, an achievement, and not a great leap forward for the United States. But it must be commemorated, committed to and held in memory as a reminder that Jefferson's words mean as much in our day as . . . in his—"Eternal vigilance is the price of liberty." —Jerry Rogers (Last Witnesses 180)

#### *Manzanar National Historic Site*

Shortly thereafter, people in the National Park Service began to discuss legislation for granting Manzanar National Historic Site status. Sue and others felt that the timing wasn't quite right.

We argued that we could not introduce a bill for Manzanar until the redress issue was settled. Two bills in the hopper would not only confuse the representatives; the action might kill both bills. So it was not until 1991 that Representative Mel Levine (D-Los Angeles) was approached to introduce a bill. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 181)

On January 16, 1991, Congressman Mel Levine, democratic representative from Los Angeles, introduced a bill to "establish the Manzanar National Historic Site." By the end of 1991, the Manzanar bill, HR 543, had a large number of sponsors, including Congressmen Robert T. Matsui (D-Sacramento), Norman Mineta (D-San Jose), and William Thomas (R-Bakersfield), who represented Inyo County. A similar bill was introduced in the Senate, S 621, by Alan Cranston (D-California) on March 12, 1991. The bills included \$1.1 million in replacement costs for Inyo County to construct a new facility to house its Road Department, located at that time in the former Manzanar auditorium. The city of Los Angeles would maintain its water rights and 500 acres of the land would be designated as Manzanar National Historic Site (Unrau 827).

On May 21, 1991, a hearing was held before the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands. Congressman Levine testified, as did Jerry Rogers. Rogers observed:

We believe . . . that this aspect of American history is extremely significant and should be properly interpreted for the benefit of the public, and that that benefit is precisely to assure against that type of error in the future. —Jerry Rogers (Unrau 872)

In addition to Rogers, others witnesses who testified included Hiro Takusagawa, who represented the National Japanese-American Historical Society of San Francisco, William Yoshimo, national director of the JACL, David Simon, representing the National Parks and Conservation Association, which supported the cause, Rose Ochi, who carried a message of support from Mayor Bradley, and Sue Embrey, representing the Manzanar Committee.

On June 24, 1991, the House Committee reported favorably on the bill and recommended it be enacted into legislation. The Senate Subcommittee on Public Lands, National Parks and Forests considered the bill's counterpart, S 621, along with HR 543, on July 25, 1991. Again, Rogers and Embrey testified on the bill's behalf (Unrau 827–830).

In her prepared statement, Sue summarized the importance of Manzanar as a national historic site:

Manzanar need not be a reminder of an event which negates American democracy. It can and must be a positive model of what our nation is willing to do. Democracy is a fragile concept, only as good and as strong as the people who practice it. Let us tell the world that we are a people, strong and resolute, acknowledging the errors of the past in order not to repeat them in the future.

This is the legacy which we believe Manzanar historic site can leave for future generations, for Americans of every color and creed, to learn from the past and to guide us in the future, to strengthen equal justice under the law, toward brotherhood and human dignity. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey, 7/25/1991 (Senate Hearing 113)

Months later, Sue received encouraging news:

Late on Thanksgiving eve 1991, the [Senate],<sup>13</sup> anxious to adjourn for the holiday weekend, passed HR 543. The bill [had] stalled, however, because the president of the Los Angeles City Water and Power Commission objected that it did not adequately protect the city's water rights. He had not objected to the House version, but he hinted to me that because he didn't think the bill would pass he hadn't paid it much attention.

. . . [Later, Mike] Gage [president of the L.A. Water and Power Board] told me that he would offer to make Manzanar a city historic site, to the tune of \$2 million, if I would make sure that the bill did not pass. The offer, he said, was to remain a secret between ourselves. My supporters waiting in the City Council told me later that they felt sorry for me as the six-footer towered over me, shaking his finger.

. . . I was not about to do anything to stop [the bill], for I knew that the City Council and the mayor supported it. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 182–183)

After weeks of delay, Bradley had called Senator Dale Bumpers (D-Arkansas), chair of the Senate subcommittee on National Parks, Forests, and Public Lands, to let him know, in no uncertain terms, that the city supported the bill. Bradley urged him to send the bill to the Senate floor for a vote. After making several minor amendments, the Committee unanimously recommended passage of HR 543, as amended, on November 20, 1991. The bill was brought to the floor on November 26 and passed without debate or discussion (Last Witness 183; Unrau 830).

The aides for Mel Levine called me and said, "What is an important date in '92 for Japanese American history?" I said, "February 19<sup>th</sup> is the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Executive Order 9066." So they said, "We are gonna get it on the floor then." —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Bahr excerpts 13)

On February 18, 1992, Chairman of the House Subcommittee on National Parks and Public Lands, Congressman Bruce Vento (D-Minnesota), brought HR 543, as amended by the Senate, to

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13 Sue says "House," but Unrau documents that this bill was passed by the Senate.

the floor, recommending passage. Congressman George Miller (D-California), who also endorsed the bill, introduced into the record a *Los Angeles Times* article accusing the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power of standing in the way of the bill's passage by demanding concessions and threatening to block transfer of the lands if it did not receive an exemption from the Clean Water Act, the Clean Air Act, and the "public trust doctrine." Consideration of the bill continued the following day (Unrau 830).

On February 19, 1992, the fiftieth anniversary of the signing of Executive Order 9066, the bill was brought forward in the House and got a roll-call vote of 400 to 13—a resoundingly supportive endorsement and, for us, the maraschino cherry to top the whipped cream. All that we had struggled for since the 1970s had been won—an impossible dream. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 183)

President George H. W. Bush signed the bill into law on March 3, 1992. The 23<sup>rd</sup> annual pilgrimage, held on April 25<sup>th</sup>, brought more than 2,200 participants to celebrate the designation (Tours 36). Sue told a reporter:

I'm relieved that something is going to be done to protect the site because so many people are concerned about making sure that their history is there, that the story is told, and the public knows about it. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 191)

The land itself was not transferred from the city to the NPS until 1997, when land of equal value and acreage to Manzanar was traded to the city's Department of Water and Power.

Finally, in 1997, after some struggle, 313 acres were added to the original amount allotted for the site, bringing the total to 813 acres to be preserved in perpetuity. On April 26, 1997, Deputy Secretary of the Interior John Garamendi attended the pilgrimage to accept the Manzanar land for the federal government and on behalf of the people of the United States.

The Manzanar Committee celebrated our thirtieth anniversary pilgrimage in April 1998. At our request, each camp reunion and pilgrimage group raised a banner of its own creation in a roll call held before the interfaith religious services. It was a fitting memorial on the eve of the millennium.

. . . It has been a long journey of hard work, patience, and endurance, but it has also been one of fun and companionship. As I meet earnest young men and women who feel strongly about our nation and the ideals on which it was founded, I am optimistic about our future. With the vision of these young people, human and civil rights are being strengthened for future generations so that all Americans can share equally in the bounties of our country. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Last Witnesses 184)

A lot of times people say, "You don't sound very bitter." It has to go beyond bitterness. Bitterness doesn't do you any good. If you can work on something, it's helpful. I think the pilgrimages [to Manzanar] have been healing for me. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 217)

In 2000, the House of Representatives voted to appropriate \$5 million for development of the Manzanar National Historic Site. The funds have made on-going restoration of original structures on-site possible, as well as a new state-of-the-art interpretive center. The exhibits at the center educate visitors about a period of American history that is important for all to remember.

As American citizens, you don't want your rights taken away like that, without any cause. There was no reason for it. We were not accused of any crime. We certainly weren't accused of anything.

. . . It was important for me because I'm an American citizen and I'm a minority American citizen. I want to make sure that my rights are protected like anybody else's. Doesn't matter what color their skin might be. But I think it's very important that every one of us who is an American citizen—or a legal resident—not be deprived of our rights. . . . That's what our country's all about.

I think it's important for the country to tell the world that we are a democracy. And not only that we are a democracy, but that we *work* at it. We work very hard at being a democracy, for all of us, for everybody who lives here.

. . . The *working at it* is the important part.

I wanted people fifty years from now to remember what was there. Although it was a negative place, we wanted to turn it around to be positive, so that people will always remember that America is a democracy. We want to shout to the world that we are a great nation . . . willing to say that we're sorry about what we did; that we are willing to make the change. It's important for us as a democracy to be able to do that. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Shumaker)

The inclusion of Manzanar in the National Park Service system is controversial, both locally and nationally. Shortly after the designation of Manzanar, Yale historian Robin Winks weighed in on the debate.

With the recent addition of Manzanar National Historic Site to the National Park System, the public has been introduced more dramatically than ever before to a fundamental debate. Should the national parks commemorate and protect only places and events in which we take pride, or should the parks strive to mark events and places that many agree represent shameful episodes in our national experience?

. . . The question is, should we commemorate or should we strive to forget, indeed should we bury from the national consciousness, these fearful times in our history? . . .

Each of the 367 units of the National Park System—the most intellectually elegant and the best administered system in the world — is a branch campus of our greatest national university. Each unit has a unique mission, and each is to be interpreted so that visitors may comprehend the mission and attain a better understanding of American heritage . . . .

Education is best done with examples. These examples must include that which we regret, that which is to be avoided, as well as that for which we strive. No effective system of education can be based on unqualified praise, for all education instructs people of the difference between moral and wanton acts and how to distinguish between the desirable and the undesirable. If this premise is correct, we cannot omit the negative lessons of history. —Robin Winks (22)

Sue Embrey, who has been called “an unquiet Nisei,” the “Messiah of Manzanar,” and “Mother Manzanar,” has taken the message of Manzanar to the streets, to the schools, and to the United States government.

The biggest problem we have in our country is human relations. When you don't know what makes another person tick, you have all these prejudices.

. . . I talk to kids in schools about the constitutional issues, and the fact that we were held for three years without any charges against us, without a hearing of any kind. There was still a Constitution on the books, and the courts were open, but the leadership was not willing to grant us our rights. You've got to protect everybody's rights, not just your own. Otherwise, your rights aren't worth anything. —Sue Kunitomi Embrey (Levine 223)

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#### *Quotes about Sue Kunitomi Embrey*

Art Hansen, Senior Historian, Japanese American Museum:

I think if the Japanese American community were to create saints, Sue should be one of them. She is one of the Japanese Americans who are servants of truth. But, also, she gave it the Americanized version of truth, the American credo, and the American dream—not the material dream, but the American dream of a kind of social order that we believe in. To me, that's what she is: a saintly person (Bahr excerpts 15).

Alisa Lynch, Chief of Interpretation, Manzanar National Historic Site:

I don't know if people really realize how much she has been involved and how instrumental she has been. At the same time, I also don't want the master narrative to be that this is a one-person site because it's also not. I think, however, through her tenacity and her efforts, and her words, and her time, and her heart and all of these things, she has helped to get this story on the map (Bahr excerpts 15).

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