

# PARALLEL WORLDS

THE CONVERGING PATHS OF THE NÜÜMÜ, NEWE, AND NISEI IN PAYAHÜÜNADÜ.



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—Bruce Embrey, Manzanar Committee co-chair  
and son of Manzanar internee Sue Kunitomi Embrey



**O**UR WORLD IS IN FREE FALL. Racism is paralleling coronavirus: it's divisive, mutating, and potentially fatal. Resistance requires vigilance and the implementation of a higher-minded protocol. California Natives are all too familiar with this scenario. Resetting, reframing, and reestablishing has been survival mode since "discovery." Now, a new plague jeopardizes the future.

Tribal leaders serve to protect and ensure healthy perpetuation of their languages, cultural heritage, and spiritual beliefs. They have walked a steep, bloody road in the face of oppression, broken treaties, and bigotry. History has proven to be as linear as the path of a mighty, raging river.

The Nüümü Yahoda language does not have a word for racism. The Nüümü have existed for twelve thousand years in the Eastern Sierra, but Americans renamed them Paiute. Their allies are the Newe—renamed Shoshone. Spiritually connected with nature, their intuitive waterway collaboration allowed Payahüünadü, "a place of flowing water," to flourish for centuries.

In the years before the Gold Rush, the Nüümü's green valley felt the first blight of racism. Settlers renamed it Owens Valley. When ranchers, cattlemen, and homesteaders' hunger and greed began to plague the Nüümü, retaining control of land, crops, and food reserves became an open conflict.



During the American Civil War, conflict erupted between the Nüümü and white settlers. The beleaguered US Army could not divert many soldiers to the conflict and instead "supplemented with armed California volunteers," according to former Nüümü tribal chairman Gerald Howard. Soldiers and volunteers forcibly removed a thousand Nüümü at gunpoint—picture a young child with size-two feet walking 183 miles in the summer heat to Fort Tejon. How would history read today if this military unit's leader chose not to look away from these acts of sadism and indifference?

Approximately 896 Nüümü survived three years of imprisonment and walked back to find their land appropriated by white settlers. Displaced, they persevered through domestic labor, traditional food gathering, and their unique irrigation techniques routing snow runoff to farmland. The local agricultural economy became dependent on Nüümü technology.

During the Roaring Twenties, a new menace emerged—the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power. It began an aggressive buy-out of all properties to acquire water rights. The Nüümü's economic trade became obsolete with the mass exodus of ranches and farms.

By 1937, an agreement was reached between Los Angeles and the Department of Interior to provide a series of land exchanges to establish three reservations, Bishop, Big Pine, and Lone Pine. However, the Nüümü's claim of "first in use" water rights and stewardship over their stolen ancestral waters remains in dispute.

On December 8, 1941, Congress declared war on Japan, and the US entered World War II. Political hysteria and racial bias affected everyone coast to coast. By February 1942, a stunned nation accepted President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066.

Within days, Federal Bureau of Investigation agents complied with the executive order, without formal charge or due process of law. Although they were not specifically mentioned in the edict, 112,581 Japanese Americans were arrested. Without warrants, specific lists of contraband items were seized from Japanese Americans. All their real estate and businesses were sold or given in trust and personal possessions abandoned. Only what each adult or child could carry was allowed.

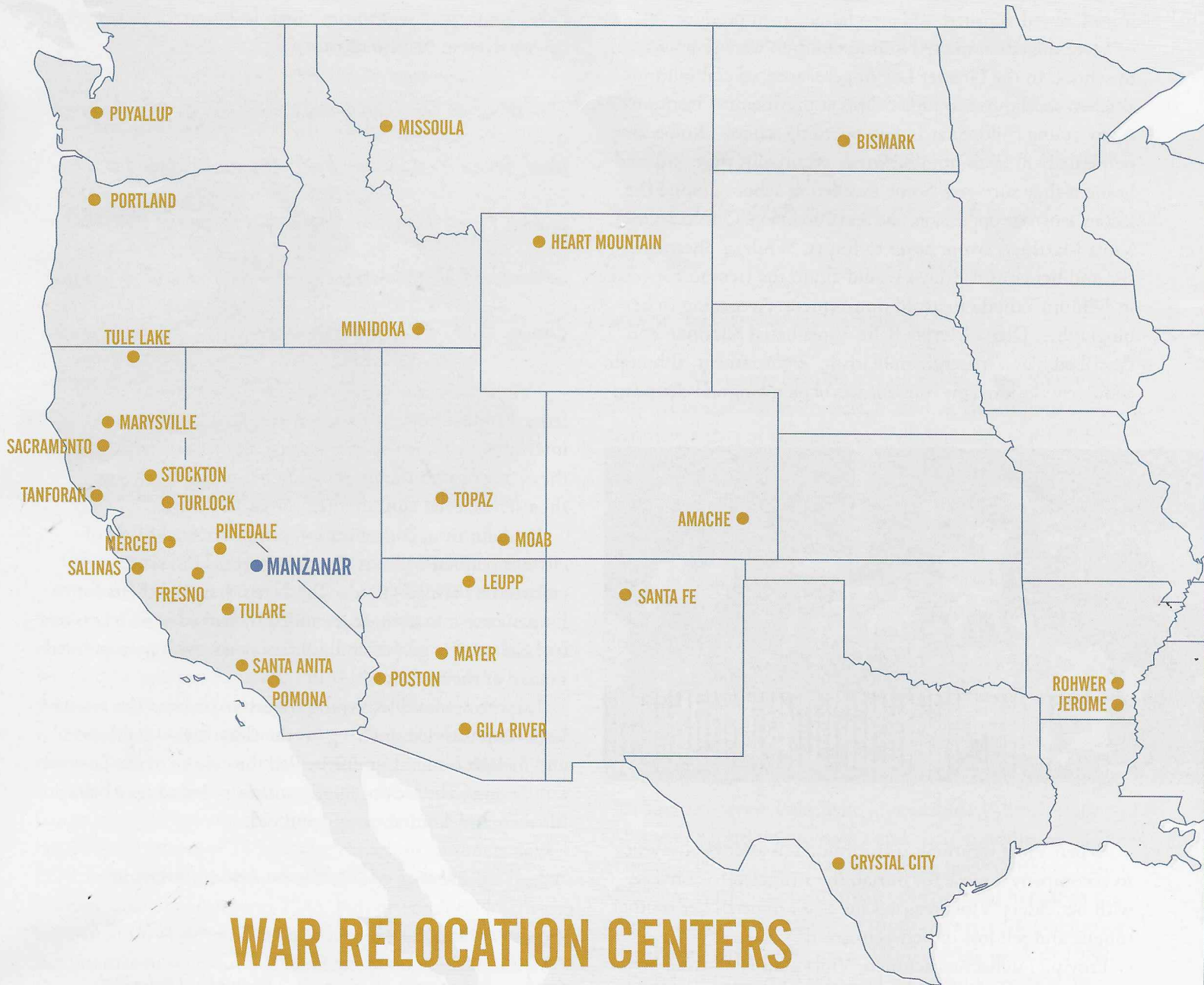
FDR created the War Relocation Authority (WRA) on March 18, a civilian agency responsible for supervising incarceration camps. In mid-June, FDR appointed career bureaucrat Dillon S. Myer as the new director of WRA. Myer fired existing staff and surrounded himself with favored subordinates to oversee his agenda.

Manzanar, a ghost town of wizened apple orchards in the Owens Valley, became a site of eminent domain: the Manzanar War Relocation Center (MWRC). July saw MWRC overflowing with incoming detainees arriving by bus or rail. Over 90 percent were from the Los Angeles region, ten thousand citizens in total. Two-thirds were Nisei, the children of immigrants. Others were Issei (first-generation immigrants) and Kibei (US-born, but educated in Japan).

After the war, Myer became commissioner of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. His first order of business? Terminate several key officials known as Native Indian advocates. During his tenure, he oversaw termination and relocation efforts, dismantling Native autonomy and blocking any legislative actions supporting upward mobility. Myer's tenure at both



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the WRA and BIA is not the only point of overlap in this story: many camps, like Manzanar, were built near reservations and Japanese American experiences of removal and imprisonment were similar in many ways to Native Americans'.

Some also saw overlap in the way Indian children were taken away from their families and sent to boarding schools. Like in a prison camp, the children provided the labor required to run the boarding schools: they cooked, cleaned, washed, ironed, sewed, repaired, and even farmed their produce.

Over the years, many Nüümü children were sent away to school. In the Greater Los Angeles area, several Nüümü children succumbed to tuberculosis at the Sherman Institute. A few young children at Indian boarding schools also became perpetually ill from homesickness; eventually, they returned home if they survived. Some excelled in school despite the racism, language oppression, and social exclusion. One such child, Viola Martinez, swore never to forget. While at Sherman, she and her cousin Evelyn would climb the trees to converse in Nüümü Yahoda to avoid punishment. According to her biographer, Diana Meyers Bahr, Viola hated Sherman and described it as a "patently militaristic" environment, although, conversely, she loved the conveniences of plumbing and electricity.



When Viola returned to Payahüünadü after twelve years to accompany a niece for burial, she struggled to converse with her elders. Viola realized she had forgotten her mother tongue and felt lost in between worlds.

Proving intellectual acumen, Viola graduated from Santa Barbara State College at the end of the Great Depression, earning a bachelor of science degree in home economics and a secondary teaching credential while holding a full-time job. A close family friend, Tom Gustie, was emphatic about Viola returning to claim her Payahüünadü land assignment—and work as an educator in her hometown as an alternative.

With wartime labor shortages, Manzanar became the principal employer in the valley, and Viola found work as an employment counselor. Her job consisted of screening each

internee's application for a Permit to Leave a Relocation Center for Private Employment.

Japanese Americans were required to answer formal questions about their allegiance to the US. Questions 27 (willingness to serve in the armed forces) and 28 (willingness to swear unqualified allegiance to the US) required affirmative answers—if a person gave a negative answer or refused to answer, they were considered seditious and sent to Tule Lake. Some were sent to the Moab Isolation Center, a penal colony deep in Navajo territory.

*"Most of the camps were built on Native American land. When Poston was built, the government wanted to hire them. They refused on the grounds that they understood what incarceration was and still is today," Nancy Kyoko Oda, a survivor born at Tule Lake, said.*

"Viola drew comparisons and parallels between all the federal Indian boarding schools and Japanese American internment camps: 'People are put into a position where they have to feed themselves, clothe themselves, house themselves, even educate themselves, in a sense.'"

By definition, concentration camps are enclosures of citizens penned without charges of crime and sentencing, enforced by armed guards. The Nazis designed theirs for human extermination. Surrounded by barbed wire, Manzanar had eight tower guards and military police with guns pointed inward at the internees.

Imprisonment affected the collective psyche. The loss of leadership was demoralizing for the elder Issei—depression and malaise hit hard. It dismantled the culture of the Japanese family unit. The lack of family authority led to new behavior for men and women, young and old.

*"Fifty percent of the women had stillborns or miscarriages because of the stress, some without their husbands because of arrests," Marielle Tsukamoto, a Jerome concentration camp survivor, said. "Can you imagine all those little children crying at the same time in the dark? It was awful."*



Like the Nüümü, Japanese Americans' resilience and work ethic saved their souls. Buddhism had a significant influence on the spiritual development of Japanese society. Buddhist principles are similar to the Nüümü's deep reverence for creation. The Nisei and Issei's harvests were memorable—numerous oral recollections from local townspeople refer to the unusual proportions of their produce and the beauty of Manzanar's gardens.

Tule Lake produced enough for its mess halls and other camps. Japanese American farmworkers harvested almost thirty crops, including daikon radishes, rutabagas, and potatoes. Many had agricultural expertise but only received twelve dollars a month working as farm laborers.



Of the 112,000 Japanese Americans imprisoned, an estimated 33,000 served in the US Army (20,000 enlisted). The 100th/442nd Infantry Regiment, the Japanese American division, became the most decorated unit in US military history. Nearly 800 Japanese Americans died in action. Despite risking death to prove their American loyalties, the Japanese American soldiers didn't earn freedom for themselves or their families—afterward, they reported back to the internment camps.

Seven days before Christmas 1944, the US Supreme Court ruled on the constitutional issues around internment, favoring the release of all Japanese American prisoners, and FDR rescinded the exclusion orders. The government began shutting down the camps in 1945. Purportedly, on November 21, 1945, at eleven a.m., a four-year-old child was the last internee to walk out of Manzanar. Manzanar shuttered forever as the Nuremberg trials of Nazi crimes commenced in Germany. Many Nüümü and Newe tribal members willingly worked for six months on Manzanar's deconstruction. Every item was sold or auctioned, and gradually it reverted to its original state. LADWP took back the leased land.

This year marked the seventy-fourth pilgrimage to Manzanar, commemorated during the pandemic lockdown in April with a virtual recording. Its cemetery is the heart of the journey. During imprisonment, 146 people died. Surviving

families chose to take loved ones' ashes with them when they were released. Six burials remain marked by a white obelisk built by stonemason Ryozo Kado. An inscription in Japanese translates to "to console the souls of the dead."

In her testimony before the US Senate about Manzanar, Sue Kunitomi Embrey said,

*"Democracy is a fragile concept, only as good and strong as the people who practice it. This is the legacy which we believe the 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 dignity."*

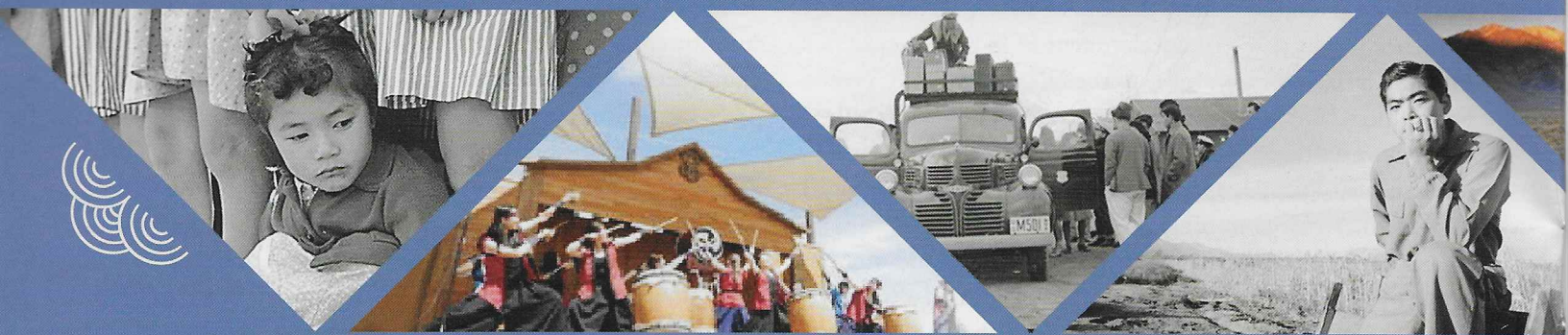
When Manzanar became a National Historic Site, Viola said, "This was Native American land... The Indians were definitely a part of that area, as well. I'm hoping it will be a monument not only to the early settlers but also to the Indians here [first]. The Japanese Americans are just as important. They were brought into a situation that certainly was not of their choosing. To a lesser degree and in a shorter period of time, what happened to them is what has been happening to the Native Americans." Viola spent the next eighteen years as an educator and co-founded the American Indian Education Commission and championed the Native American Ministry and "dedicated herself to helping whites become more aware of the realities of the lives of Indian people."

Ms. Embrey, "The Unquiet Nisei"—so named by biographer Diana Meyers Bahr, who also authored Viola's story—became a founding member and chair emeritus of the Manzanar Committee. A driving force in establishing the Manzanar National Historic Site, she devoted herself to the vanguard for redress and reparations. She lived to see justice prevail thirty-five years later—Thanksgiving week in 1989.

President Ronald Reagan and President George H.W. Bush both signed bills authorizing and appropriating funds for reparation to all the surviving families. With recompense came a letter of apology signed on behalf of the country. Many oral recollections by children of Issei reported,

*"My grandparents cried when they got the letter. The public apology was more meaningful than any sum."*





## THE OWENS VALLEY PAIUTE SHOSHONE CULTURAL CENTER AND THE WESTERN FILM HISTORY MUSEUM

was scheduled as a venue for a two-day cultural exchange in May for Parallel Worlds. Because of the pandemic, it became a virtual event. In June, for the first time, the paths of the Nüümü, Newe, and Nisei converged deliberately. Listening to each other's perspectives created an in-depth understanding of past sufferings.

It began with a Nüümü blessing spoken by utu utu gwaitu hüümü (Jamie Meredith, Payahoop Nüümü), followed by a performance by the Bakuhatu Taiko Dan drumming group, a six-minute trailer of the documentary *Manzanar Diverted*, and a panel of educators, activists, and Payahoop Nüümü. Webinars were facilitated by the nonprofit group Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival.

Each panelist shared their journey regarding how Manzanar and Payahüünadü informed their life choices or inspired them—bearing witness to historical events. The following quotes were culled from interviews by this writer.

“The change begins with the name,” Ann Kaneko said. Ms. Kaneko is the documentarian of *Manzanar Diverted* (a seven-year work in progress to be completed by early 2021). Los Angeles-born, Kaneko often wondered where LA water came from, so she followed the aqueduct. She has produced an evocative film that covers Payahüünadü's ancestral waters, the Manzanar National Historic Site, the Nüümü, and Newe tribes. Fluent in Japanese and Spanish, Kaneko was a Fulbright and Japan Foundation Artist fellow. A UCLA graduate with an MFA in film directing, she also teaches media studies at Pitzer College. Both Ms. Kaneko's parents and grandparents survived incarceration at Jerome.

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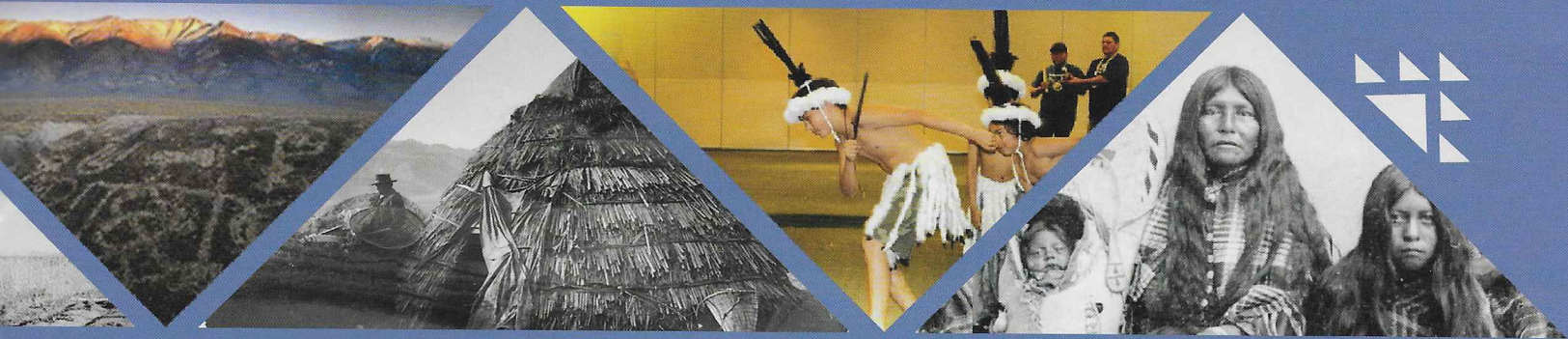
Manzanar Committee co-chair. “She saw Manzanar as a site of conscience and recognized Native peoples were the first to experience forced removal that dispossessed them of their land and livelihoods, just like what happened to Japanese Americans. She connected her experiences to a long legacy of systemic racism going back to the founding of this country. Her social justice leadership flowed from a passionate desire to make the world a better place for all people.”

A vibrant octogenarian, Marielle Tsukamoto is a retired educator. A prolific activist and Jerome survivor, she serves as a mentor and positive speaker. “Every seven years, in education, a subject is presented for updating,” Ms. Tsukamoto said. “We had worked very hard to update US history to reflect Manzanar accurately when Governor Schwarzenegger cut the budget in 2009. It's always the first thing to get cut. It was so disappointing.” Her mother, an activist, educator, and author, has the notable distinction of an elementary school named in her honor in Elk Grove: Mary Tsukamoto Elementary School.

Bishop Tribal Historic Preservation Officer Monty Bengchovia shared, “We are working hard to preserve, protect, and enhance our historic properties, including the language and the landscape. Our last fluent speaker was in the 1990s. We have created the Nüümü Yahoda Language Program to research, instruct, and develop a curriculum for people to become fluent speakers. Serving a six-county consortium, the center offers language classes in Nüümü Yahoda, Pakanapul, Kawaiisu, Kitanemuk, Yowlumni, Wukchumni, Yaqui, and Western Mono. Learning is encouraged through cultural experiences such as basketweaving, beadwork, hand games, and traditional storytelling.”

“One of my assignments was for the kids to interview their elders,” Gerald Howard said. “Through interviewing, students found learning more interesting.” Mr. Howard has





served as Nüümü tribal chairman for two separate terms and taught high school history for thirty-four years. His uncle, nonagenarian Lee Howard, served in the navy during WWII. He piloted a landing craft under heavy fire while delivering soldiers to occupied beachheads in the Pacific theater. He is Nüümü-born and attended Stewart Indian Boarding School. After a faithful military career, he returned to Payahüünadü to retire. More than one hundred Nüümü veterans from World Wars I and II are laid to rest in Bishop.

Monica Embrey, Sue's granddaughter, recited a poem written for Sue by author Michi Weglyn. Following Monica, Totsahoidu Dance Group performed a traditional Nüümü ceremonial dance in closing. This event was made possible by an endowment from the California Civil Liberties Education Program, administered by the California State Library.

We have learned that by affiliating with good fellowship, we can transcend hate and diffuse rage. Unconditional kindness regardless of race still matters. Although most humans aspire to evolve—implicit bias or biased instincts have to be overcome with rational deliberation—some people need help rising above an inherent human condition: primal discrimination.

So, what's changed today? Talking through a screen door six feet apart parallels how essential it is to give each other a safe space to engage and connect. Recent violent acts against people of color have fueled a powerful national protest movement and toppled icons of colonial origin. An eyewitness account reported, "A white majority of woke Gen Z and millennials in Mission Viejo were masked and willing to be arrested for peaceful civil disobedience"—a different color from the 1960s protests. Bravo to Nike for taking a knee in support of a sports team's name change by removing offending merchandise from their online stores. Choosing to buy Nike products endorses the cause peacefully.

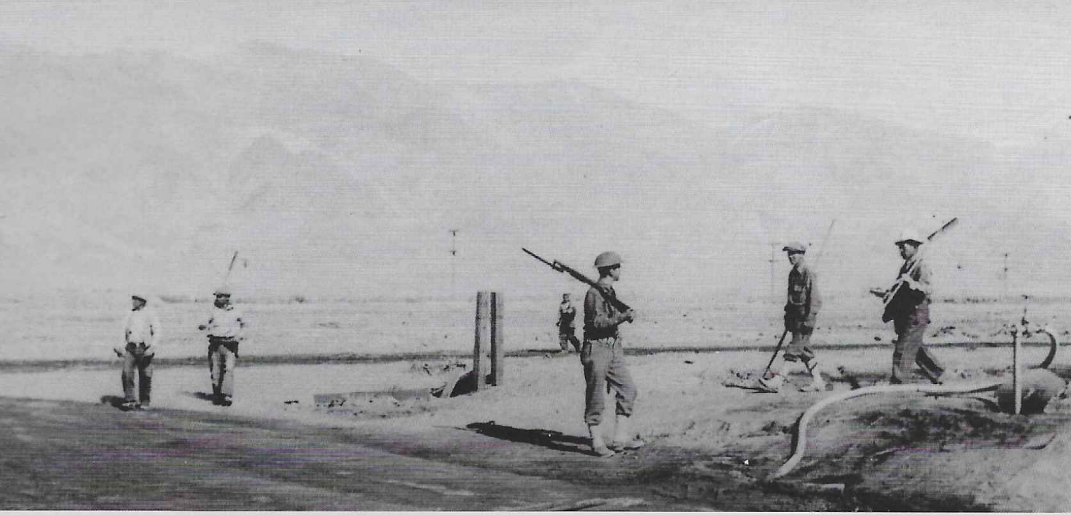
Another change: California officially apologized for the historical mistreatment of Japanese Americans on February 19, 2020. HR 77, introduced by Assemblyman Al Muratsuchi (D-Torrance), was co-authored with six others. Although many of those mistreated are now deceased, HR 77 sets precedence in memorializing the consequences of xenophobia.

On June 18, 2019, one hundred California tribal leaders met Governor Gavin Newsom for their annual meeting. Governor Newsom "formally apologized in person on behalf of California for a history of violence, maltreatment, and neglect" and said that, "it needed to be described in history books as genocide." These official acknowledgments of wrongdoing are small steps. Being ashamed as an "Indian" has left irrevocable damage on children. Mitigating five generations of post-traumatic stressors begins with replacing bloviating narratives from careerists with the real truth.

What hasn't changed? The First Amendment: "Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press, or the right of the people peaceably to assemble and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

The freedom to speak and write about uncomfortable subjects like hate crimes is enshrined in the First Amendment. Due diligence from educators and lawmakers can make historical changes with public servants dedicated to a moral compass. Here's hoping Governor Newsom updates California's history as an official act. Meanwhile, tobacco down, prayers up, and mask off someday, spirit willing.





Images of Japanese internment at Manzanar. © National Park Service.



These programs are a collaboration between the Advocates for Indigenous California Language Survival, the Owens Valley Paiute Shoshone Cultural Center, and the Manzanar National Historic Site, made possible by a grant from the California Civil Liberties Education Program administered by the California State Library.