

## **The Importance of Baseball to Japanese-American Communities and Culture on the West Coast during the Pre-War Years and World War II**

*Sarah Elizabeth Johnson*

Passed down from generation to generation, baseball has earned the reputation of “America’s Pastime” over the last century. By deeming baseball the sport of the nation, it assumes that all Americans feel a communal sense of national pride when playing or watching baseball. When describing the game’s enchantment, baseball legend, Jackie Robinson stated, “Baseball is only a pastime, a sport, an entertainment, a way of blowing off steam. But it is also the national game, with an appeal to Americans of every race, color, creed, or political opinion. It unites Americans in the common cause of rooting for the home team.”<sup>1</sup> Baseball unifies people and brings communities together; it acts as a common denominator. This paper will address how sport, specifically baseball, was a fundamental aspect of Japanese communities on the West Coast of the United States before the war and how they carried the tradition of the sport with them to the internment camps of World War II. Using articles that focus on the lives of Japanese-Americans and baseball before and during the war, the following will argue how baseball became a staple in Japanese-American culture and a fundamental part of their communities. Furthermore, the paper will argue the game’s role as a central part of their identity not only as Americans, but also as Japanese-Americans, with baseball bridging the two cultures. The paper relies on primary source interviews and commentaries from Issei, those born in Japan who immigrated to the US, and Nisei, the first generation of Japanese-Americans born in the United States. These interviews highlight the discrimination that those of Japanese ancestry endured during the days before and after the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, but the sources also reveal an expression of love for the game they grew up with: baseball.

As America’s pastime, the game carries a sense of national pride and intense patriotism as players from all different backgrounds come together on the field to compete. This love of baseball can be traced back to the Civil War where “Union soldiers engaging in pick-up games...proved instrumental in the rapid expansion of the game during the Reconstruction period.”<sup>2</sup> The spread of baseball was not limited to the mainland as the U.S. brought the game with them overseas on military campaigns to countries including Cuba and Japan in the nineteenth century.

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<sup>1</sup> Jackie Robinson, *Baseball Has Done It* (Brooklyn: Ig Publishing, 2005): 24.

<sup>2</sup> Steve Bullock, “Playing for Their Nation: The American Military and Baseball During World War II,” *Journal of Sports History* 27, no. 1 (Spring 2000): 68.

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In Japan, baseball took hold in society as it was a game to aid in the nation's modernization during the Meiji government years.<sup>3</sup> Many who immigrated to the United States in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries brought their admiration of the game with them. Those who were not yet enthralled by the game soon changed their minds after landing in Hawaii. Historian Samuel O. Regalado states, "Issei travelers of the late 1890s, many of whom had little time for recreation during their years in Japan, adopted baseball...during their stay in Hawaii. By the time they reached the North American mainland, recreation held an important seat in their communities."<sup>4</sup> The Japanese Issei's exposure of baseball allowed them to then pass on what they knew about the game to their American-born sons, the Nisei generation. Born in the US, this generation grew up as Americans and embraced American customs such as playing organized sports. Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast gravitated towards baseball in the early twentieth century, not only because it was America's past time, but also because the older generation viewed the sport as promoting the same values seen in Samurai culture from their motherland. For the Nisei, it provided a means to stay connected to their Japanese roots and embrace their American identity. Baseball became a huge part of the Japanese-American communities along the West Coast. The game would later serve as a way to prove loyalty and preserve the mass sanity of Japanese-Americans in the years of World War II and the internment camps.

In writing about how theaters of war such as World War II helped to spread the game, sports historian Steven W. Pope notes, "*American* sports had steadily won the hearts and minds of Europeans during the war,"<sup>5</sup> and he goes on to explain how baseball "had always 'followed the flag' to places like Latin America and the Far East...it took 'the big war' to introduce the game throughout Europe."<sup>6</sup> Baseball continued the U.S.' dominance on other playing fields and helped pursue America's title as the greatest on all 'fields', including the battlefield. To look at baseball's hold on a group of people is to look at the incorporation of the game in each of the ten internment camps within the U.S. during World War II. Despite the horror of these camps, they did allow for the love of baseball, felt by the members of the interned community, to be understood by their captors. In this case, the captors and the captured had a mutual love for the sport, as they were all Americans. To describe the importance of baseball to those interned in

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<sup>3</sup> Michael L. Mullan, "Ethnicity and Sport: The Wapato Nippons and Pre-World War II Japanese American Baseball," *Journal of Sports History* 26, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 85.

<sup>4</sup> Samuel O. Regalado, "Incarcerated Sport: Nisei Women's Softball and Athletics During Japanese American Internment," *Journal of Sport History* 27, no. 3 (Fall 2000): 432.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 10. Emphasis is from the original quotation.

<sup>6</sup> Steve W. Pope, "An Army of Athletes: Playing Fields, Battlefields, and the American Military Sporting Experience, 1890-1920," *Journal of Military History* 59, no. 3 (July 1995): 450.

the war relocation camps, Obermeyer states, "Japanese Americans interned in U.S. camps formed baseball leagues, complete with regularly published newsletters, showing their continued devotion to the national pastime of the nation that persecuted them."<sup>7</sup>

Baseball, as America's pastime, was more than just a game to the Japanese-Americans held as prisoners in the internment camps of the western United States. It acted as an escape from their reality as prisoners in their own nation. Playing baseball for the internees gave them some semblance of their old lives back as they played the game purely out of their love for the sport, not as prisoners, but as Americans playing their national pastime. Obermeyer discusses in his article, "War Games," that there was a strong belief that only "real Americans" played baseball, and in this sense, real Americans were classified as white. A troubling factor to many during World War II was Japan's support for professional baseball. As an enemy of the United States, this dedication to that game was troubling because it did not make sense for a nation who stood against the United States to embrace a game that embodied what it meant to be American. In an attempt to save baseball's image as America's game, the December 1941 edition of *Sporting News* provided an explanation by J. G. Taylor Spink in his article, "It's Not the Same Game in Japan," that put patriots at ease. He states:

Japan never was converted to baseball. They may have acquired a little skill at the game, but the soul of our National Game never touched them. No nation which has had as intimate contact with baseball as the Japanese could have committed to vicious infamous deed of the early morning of December 7, 1941, if the spirit of the game had penetrated their yellow hides. Despite this and other forms of racism and persecution, by creating their own teams, and leagues, and baseball culture within the internment camps, Japanese Americans displayed their loyalty to their nation.<sup>8</sup>

This racist and nationalist view held by the majority of white Americans was not limited to solely Japanese but extended to all of Japanese ancestry, including those Japanese-Americans who were born in the United States. This racism and fear of an enemy, strongly persuaded the United States government to implement their war relocation programs. Despite being held as prisoners and seen as enemies of their own country, many of

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<sup>7</sup> Obermeyer, "War Games," 11.

<sup>8</sup> J. G. Taylor Spink, "It's Not the Same Game in Japan," *Sporting News*, December 18, 1941, 4, in Jeff Obermeyer, "War Games: The Business of Major League Baseball during World War II," *Journal of Baseball History and Culture* 19, no. 1 (2010): 11.

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the internees did not abandon their American identity but instead held on to baseball, remaining lovers of the game and their nation.

### More Than a Game: Baseball and Japanese-American Culture

As illustrated in his article, "Sport and Community in California's Japanese American 'Yamato Colony,'" Samuel O. Regalado argues that through baseball, Japanese-Americans and their communities "nurtured cultural camaraderie, competitiveness and pride."<sup>9</sup> He goes on to state that these characteristics were essential in helping Japanese-Americans get through the years of interment. Regalado discusses the origins and manifestation of baseball in Livingston, California as well as the Japanese-American culture of those living in the San Joaquin Valley, which had a large population of people with Japanese ancestry. America's pastime played a huge role in these communities as "many Nisei inherited their love for baseball from their elders"<sup>10</sup> and formed community-based teams. The Livingston Dodgers and the Cortex Wildcats were the two major teams to come out of this area and thus supported a great rivalry.<sup>11</sup> The players were local star athletes who played in the leagues as a form of recreation and communal pride. Baseball was a way of life for Japanese-Americans in the San Joaquin Valley as life itself was centered around the game. Regalado describes this obsession with the game: "so great was their love of sport that team members often assisted their mates on the farms to make time for baseball."<sup>12</sup> Along with helping their teammates finish their work, many of the athletes scheduled work around baseball in order to have more time to play.

It is important to understand the role baseball played for those in minority communities because it is the game itself that allows immigrants and their children to "Americanize"<sup>13</sup> through means of sport. The difference between African Americans and baseball and those who newly immigrated is that "many generations of blacks had adopted and contributed to American culture. Newly arrived aliens, on the other hand, needed to acculturate."<sup>14</sup> Regalado quotes historian Herold Seymour as he explains the opportunities baseball provides for those of minority ancestry, "One way children of foreign birth or parentage could fit into the new culture was to take part in baseball, and early on, many of them perceived

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<sup>9</sup> Samuel O. Regalado, "Sport and Community in California's Japanese American 'Yamato Colony,'" 1930-1945. *Journal of Sport History* 19, no. 2 (Summer 1992): 130.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, 133.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 135.

in it their badge as Americans.”<sup>15</sup> The easiest assimilation into American culture is through sport, especially its national pastime. Baseball acts as a unifier for all Americans regardless of race, class, or other classifications, because the national pastime of the United States is a topic without differences: baseball still maintains the same rules and regulations regardless of who is on the field.

Regalado explains the history behind Japanese immigration to the United States and how the various anti-Asian legislation made it almost impossible for the Japanese to assimilate into their new country. Yet, through loopholes and hard work, the Issei were able to establish themselves as permanent members of American society, especially in the West. “Between 1900 and 1910, their [Japanese] population in the contiguous United States increased from 24,326 to 72,157. By the eve of the second world war, 126,948 Japanese appeared in the census scrolls.”<sup>16</sup> In addition to the history behind the connection between baseball and those of Japanese ancestry, Regalado provides details about the Nisei teams that competed up against each other within the Livingston area, as well as against white teams. For the players and the communities which supported them, baseball was life itself. From the descriptions taken from the interviews, the former players describe how they planned their work days around baseball and Saturdays were reserved for baseball as the whole community stopped work to come and watch their home teams play. Community was the most important factor in these areas as demonstrated by the intense support and pride felt for the hometown team. It is this sense of community and shared identity that helps to maintain a kind of normalcy after the Pearl Harbor attacks and the evacuation of all aliens and non-aliens of Japanese ancestry after the signing of Executive Order 9066 by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. It is this idea of people brought together by sport and later held together through times of distress that Regalado emphasizes through his analysis of the Yamato Colony and baseball in California.

Like Regalado, Michael L. Mullan builds upon this idea of baseball as a unifying factor in Japanese communities on the West Coast. He states in the introduction that the essay will discuss “Japanese American baseball – the principal empirical universe is the historical experience of the Nisei generation of Japanese Americans in Washington State leading up to World War II.”<sup>17</sup> He focuses primarily on how the ethnic identity of the Issei and Nisei “allowed traditional ethnic boundaries to coalesce around a cultural formation like baseball.”<sup>18</sup> Mullan lists three ways in which “ethnicity

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 134-135.

<sup>16</sup> Regalado, “Incarcerated Sport,” 432.

<sup>17</sup> Mullan, “Ethnicity and Sport,” 83.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 83.

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shaped the lives of pre-World War II Japanese Americans in Washington State through baseball.”<sup>19</sup> The first is how many Japanese immigrants and Japanese-Americans viewed sports and baseball as a means for acculturation into American society. James Sakamoto, a leader in the Nisei community, believed that through involvement and participation in sport (playing baseball), Japanese-Americans could pass the “cultural test” that would prove they were ready for citizenship. The second way is through the “ethnic display” of the baseball teams and their players. Baseball allowed the Nisei to play the national pastime sport of their home country while also showing pride in their community and ancestry as Japanese-Americans. The team names served as the primary displays as they used Japanese names and characters on their uniforms, “embracing a deep communal and ethnic pride.”<sup>20</sup> Finally, the third way that ethnic identity shaped the lives of pre-World War II Japanese-Americans is the “submersion of ethnic difference.” Many Japanese-Americans jumped at the chance to play baseball as it left behind the formality of Japanese sporting culture and embraced “a moment of male leisure and a time for banter, fun, and sport.”<sup>21</sup>

### **A Day of Infamy and Internment**

The attack on Pearl Harbor, Hawaii by the Japanese Empire on December 7, 1941 not only drove the American military into the conflict against the Axis powers, but it also drove the United States to take military action against its own citizens. People who lived on the West Coast of the U.S., who had immigrated from Japan or who were of Japanese ancestry, were administratively forced by the American government to war relocation camps. The Japanese attack on the naval base in Hawaii propelled the US into a state of war and a state of panic, supported by extreme prejudice against all those with Japanese ancestry. This prejudice was based solely on the prisoner population’s race. Even though the majority of those interned in the war relocation camps were born and raised in the US and self-identified as Americans, the government and other Americans allowed fear and prejudice to justify the imprisonment of an entire population of U.S. citizens.

Even before the United States joined World War II, there was already animosity against Japanese-Americans in the U.S. because of Japan’s alliance with Nazi Germany and the Axis powers. Many believed that Japanese-Americans sympathized with Japan against the United States because of their ancestral ties to the Empire. Seen as a threat to the war

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 84.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

effort and enemies of the state, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 (1942) which allowed the government to relocate all immigrants from Japan and American citizens of Japanese ancestry living on the west coast to internment camps. The west coast of the US was such a threat to national security during the war because of its proximity to Japan. Geographically, it would be the best target for the enemy to attack. Executive Order 9066's purpose was to ensure the security of the United States against her enemies during a time of war by determining certain areas of the West Coast to be "military areas." The order stated, "[W]hereas the successful prosecution of the war requires every possible protection against espionage and against sabotage to national-defense material, national-defense premises, and national-defense utilities."<sup>22</sup> Despite the language of the order suggesting that the internment of all persons of Japanese ancestry was for the success of the war effort, the United States government did not take such drastic actions against those of German or Italian ancestry whose heritage tied them to the other members of the Axis Powers:

While civilians of Japanese ancestry were subject to a three-tiered process of exclusion, removal, and interment, most of America's ethnic Germans and Italians were spared from one substantial component: they were not forced to endure a comprehensive program of removal followed by incarceration in WRA camps.<sup>23</sup>

One of the major reasons as to why the populations of those of German and Italian ancestry were not sentenced to the same fate as those of Japanese descent was the difficult task of removing two entire communities. It was deemed impossible as the U.S. population consisted of over six million people of German ancestry and an even larger population of persons of Italian descent.<sup>24</sup> It was also easier to target those of Japanese ancestry due to their physical attributes. Italian and German Americans were not subjugated to the same racial profiling. Unlike German and Italian immigrants, who could become American citizens, Japanese Issei (first generation) were barred from obtaining U.S. citizenship, even though they had come into the country legally. This ability to become citizens of their adopted country "enabled members of these ethnic communities to become more closely enmeshed within the American social fabric than their

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<sup>22</sup> Executive Order 9066, 3 C.F.R. (1942).

<sup>23</sup> Alan Rosenfeld, "German and Italian Detainees," *Densho Encyclopedia*. Accessed May 5, 2017.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

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Japanese counterparts.”<sup>25</sup> While German and Italian Americans did fight their own battles of prejudice and discrimination, those of Japanese ancestry were forced to endure having their civil and basic human rights taken away. The lack of government action against Germans and Italians shows that Executive Order 9066 of 1942 specifically targeted those of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast.

Issued after the Pearl Harbor attacks in Hawaii by Japanese forces, Executive Order 9066 gave power to the Secretary of War and other American military officials to decide the fate of thousands of Americans in the name of keeping the nation safe. It gave way to the initiation of militant and excessive actions towards American citizens and legal immigrants to the United States as they were treated as prisoners of war in their own country. The executive order was a “solution” fueled by fear and biases because Japan was the enemy, and therefore, those of Japanese ancestry were guilty by association. Roosevelt intended this document as a verification of the legality of the war relocation camps, as the order made discrimination against a group of people based solely on their ancestry a nationwide law. As this executive order allowed for the military to take control of the “protection” of the home front, it also encouraged Americans not of Japanese ancestry to see those sent to the war relocation camps as enemies. Executive Order 9066 gave the U.S. military the necessary power to carry out such actions against Japanese-Americans. Roosevelt believed this action was for the betterment of the nation and war effort against the Japanese Empire especially after the attack on Hawaii and the heightened state of fear against foreign enemies. Japanese Americans became the victims of this new intensified patriotism as the order fostered an “Us versus Them” mentality.

Executive Order 9066 paved the way for Civilian Exclusion Orders to be issued up and down the West Coast of the United States. These Civilian Orders were issued by the U.S. military under the direction of Army Lieutenant General J.L. DeWitt. DeWitt was an ardent supporter of Japanese-American internment. Regalado quotes DeWitt, highlighting the fact that U.S. citizenship was not an important factor when dealing with Japanese-Americans: “‘A Jap’s a Jap.... You can’t change him by giving him a piece of paper[.]’”<sup>26</sup> Many supported and shared the General’s beliefs as fear of the Japanese enemy increased throughout the country. These military mandates ordered the evacuation of all aliens and citizens of Japanese ancestry from coastal cities including Seattle, Washington as stated in “Civilian Order No.18.” President Roosevelt’s order to legalize discrimination allowed for the voluntary evacuation to become a mandatory

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid.

<sup>26</sup> Samuel O. Regalado, *Nikkei Baseball* (Champaign: University of Illinois Press, 2013), 92.



removal, regardless of citizenship status. Civilian Exclusion Order No. 18, dated April 24, 1942 stated, “[A]ll persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien, will be evacuated.”<sup>27</sup> Two-thirds of the evacuees and subsequent internees were U.S. citizens who had been born and raised in the states and had no ties to Japan.<sup>28</sup> At the time these orders were being put into place and carried out by the War Department, the United States had already joined the Allied nations to fight against the Axis Powers, which included the Japanese Empire. After declaring war on Japan on December 8, 1941, Americans who were not of Japanese ancestry saw those who had been their friends, neighbors, and important members in their communities as enemies of America and the Allied war effort.

Civilian exclusion orders targeting people of Japanese ancestry were posted in each city deemed a military zone by the U.S. War Department. All who were of Japanese ancestry were given about one week to collect their belongings and were to prepare to be taken to undisclosed locations. A list of instructions stipulated what families and individuals could bring to the camps: “Evacuees must carry with them on departure for the Assembly Center, the following property: (a) bedding and linens (no mattress) for each member of the family; ... (c) extra clothing for each member of the family.”<sup>29</sup> Significantly, American citizens of Japanese descent, had their freedom and civil liberties taken away with Roosevelt’s signature.<sup>30</sup> Miné Okubo, a Nisei who was sent to the war relocation camps wrote of her experiences of evacuation and living under internment in her memoir, *Citizen 13660*. The memoir allows for a more in depth look at the events that occurred after the passing of Executive Order 9066, as well as the emotions felt by those who were deemed a threat to their own nation. Okubo used graphics in the form of illustrations and narrative to describe her life leading up to World War II, while living in the internment camps, and after the war. The memoir was published in 1983, forty-two years after the United States had declared war on Japan. She describes the unimaginable: “[E]vacuation was voluntary... On March 27, 1942, voluntary evacuation was halted and the army took over, to bring about a forced and orderly evacuation.”<sup>31</sup> The mobilization of the nation was intensifying and so was anti-Japanese sentiment as the attack on Pearl Harbor became a rallying cry against anyone of Japanese ancestry. The way in which the government turned to militant methods to evacuate an entire population of people from the west

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<sup>27</sup> “‘Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry,’ April 24, 1942, posted in Seattle, Washington.” (April 1942).

<sup>28</sup> Miné Okubo, *Citizen 13660* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1983), 16.

<sup>29</sup> “‘Instructions to All Persons of Japanese Ancestry,’ April 24, 1942, posted in Seattle, Washington.” (April 1942).

<sup>30</sup> Okubo, *Citizen 13660*, 16.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

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coast displays the prejudice against Japanese that served as a justification for the injustices served to them. She goes on to explain how those of Japanese ancestry, regardless of U.S. citizenship, were seen as political threats to the nation. Okubo addresses the intense patriotism and fear that turned their own country against them. She explains the horrors she and hundreds of thousands of other aliens and non-aliens of Japanese ancestry endured during interment with her work. She addresses the very real discrimination and violations of human rights by the United States as well as the conditions of the camps that Japanese-Americans were forced to move to by the military. Okubo is not the only Japanese-American to turn to writing down her memories as a way to remember. Many of those who were interned during World War II kept diaries and journals in an effort to keep their experiences alive in historical memory. The memories of the persons interned allow for future generations to not only learn about the past, but also to serve as a warning and a reminder of the social injustices that took place against an entire population.

Some Japanese-Americans tried to resist the evacuation through legal action like Fred T. Korematsu who refused to report to the assembly center for war relocation. Korematsu, a California native, was arrested and convicted of blatantly disobeying a government order.<sup>32</sup> It was treasonous to protest the eviction or to question the reasons why they were being treated like criminals by their government. While many Japanese-Americans were losing their civil rights as American citizens, Korematsu and others like him exercised their rights as citizens and fought against the injustices being forced upon them. It is often misunderstood that all those of Japanese ancestry were compliant with the orders handed down from the U.S. government. Korematsu's fight against the government paints a different picture of Japanese-Americans. Americans pride themselves on the concept of fighting for and maintaining freedom for all its citizens. Yet, the U.S. government's actions during World War II directly contrasts this pillar of American culture and society. Korematsu's fight against internment was a display of American values as fighting for the freedom is the foundation of the United States.

Another example of active resistance against General DeWitt's curfew and prejudice against Japanese-Americans was an attorney from Oregon, Minoru Yasui. He used the U.S. Constitution to challenge the legality of the curfew put in place for Japanese-Americans.<sup>33</sup> As a lawyer and citizen of the United States, Yasui understood his rights as an American and used the most respected legal document in the country, the

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<sup>32</sup> "Fred T. Korematsu," Last modified 2010. <http://www.korematsuinstitute.org/fred-t-korematsu-lifetime/>

<sup>33</sup> Regalado, *Nikkei Baseball*, 93.

Constitution, to plead his case. As a result, he “spent nearly a year in solitary confinement.”<sup>34</sup> With time, the case was sent to the United States Supreme Court where the justices ruled in favor of DeWitt and the government. Regalado explains, “Curfew was a ‘measure necessary’ for the protection against sabotage,” as “a unanimous court held that ‘military necessity’ justified the use of the curfew and, in effect, validated the executive order.”<sup>35</sup> This fight is significant because the U.S. was actively trying to take away the rights and freedom of an entire population solely because of their ethnicity.

Those who followed and complied with the government mandates had no idea how long they would be staying in these camps or even where the camps were located. Families and individuals did not know what they would need, which added another level of stress onto an already trying event. Okubo recalls reacting to the evacuation: “[W]e had not believed at first that evacuation would affect the Nisei, American citizens of Japanese ancestry, but thought perhaps the Issei, Japanese-born mothers and fathers were denied naturalization by American law, would be interned in case of war.”<sup>36</sup> Regardless of citizenship, they were expected to do as the government told them to do, or otherwise they would be viewed as going against the nation and against the war effort.

Internment camps, or War Relocation Camps as deemed by the U.S. War Department, were located in the most desolate desert areas of the country. The camps were fitted with buildings that were falling apart, not completed, and had been constructed in just a matter of weeks in some cases. They were not viable living spaces, yet thousands of people were sent to live in conditions that many would deem unacceptable for their pets. The camps were located hundreds of miles from the coast as was believed a necessary safety precaution because of the government’s warning against the threat of Japanese Empire’s proximity to the West Coast. Ten locations became home to a population of over 120,000 prisoners: Topaz, Utah; Poston, Arizona; Gila River, Arizona; Granada, Colorado; Heart Mountain, Wyoming; Jerome, Arkansas; Manzanar, California; Minidoka, Idaho; Rohwer, Arkansas; and Tule Lake, California.<sup>37</sup> Before the evacuees could travel to their final destination and assigned camp, they had to report to assembly centers as mandated by the War Relocation Authority (WRA), which was created as a result of Executive Order 9201.<sup>38</sup> These assembly

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 93.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 93-94.

<sup>36</sup> Okubo, *Citizen 13660*, 17.

<sup>37</sup> Wendy Ng, *Japanese American Internment During World War II: A History and Reference Guide* (Westport: Greenwood Press, 2002), 38-39.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid., 37.

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centers, located in Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona, were not really centers at all, but instead had been “fairgrounds, stockyards, and exposition centers, and a former Civilian Conservation Corps Facility.”<sup>39</sup> Conditions were horrible in these centers and the people who were forced to remain in them for months before relocating to their assigned camp lived without proper supplies and basic necessities. Behind the barbed wire, life was difficult and far from anything imaginable to those who did not experience it first-hand. The locations were set up according to military standards and looked like bases: “[A]ll the camps were built based upon the army model and resembled military housing of that period. The only difference was that they entire site was surrounded by barbed-wire fences with watchtowers staffed by armed guards.”<sup>40</sup> Each camp location had unpleasant features in regard to climate, landscape, and access to supplies. The locations were chosen based on their lack of proximity to areas deemed “military zones” and, therefore, areas sensitive to Japanese sabotage. There was little thought into how the people evacuating to these places would realistically live in such harsh environments. Despite there being a ban against possession of cameras in the camp for U.S. and non-U.S. citizens living in the camps, many still snuck them in and documented proof of how terrible the internment period was for those held as prisoners of the state.<sup>41</sup> Professional photographer, Ansel Adams was granted access to the Manzanar Relocation Center in Southern California by the US government to show the American people where a portion of the 120,000 people, who were their neighbors and friends, had been sent for the duration of the war. The photos show the desolate landscape, the Japanese-Americans as people who had their civil liberties taken away, and the poor living conditions of the camps. One photograph that stands out is the picture of the baseball diamond, carved into the earth, a symbol of normalcy and escape in the middle of a wasteland.<sup>42</sup> In spite of all the obstacles, discrimination and horrors faced by those classified as enemies of the state, Japanese-Americans held on to the sport of baseball.

### Tradition and Legacy

Baseball had been a part of Japanese-American culture for decades before the outbreak of World War II. It was a game respected by those who

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<sup>39</sup> Ibid., 31-32.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 40.

<sup>41</sup> Roger Daniels, *The Decision to Relocate the Japanese Americans*, ed. Harold M. Hyman (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975), 125.

<sup>42</sup> Ansel Adams, “Baseball game, Manzanar Relocation Center, Calif. [Photograph], 1943.” <http://www.loc.gov/pictures/item/2002695992>

learned it from American servicemen when the U.S. military campaigned all over the world, including Japan. When immigrating from Japan to the United States, those who had learned the game in their home country carried it back to the U.S., where it had originated, and the immigrants passed it down to the next generation. That generation, as Americans, took to baseball as they grew up with their nation's pastime and saw it as a regular part of their lives. The Nisei also saw the game as a bridge between the new and old generations that allowed them to respect their Japanese heritage as well as their identity as Americans. Regalado states, "Once there, they attempted to reconstruct all aspects of their lives, including their sporting loves as they remembered them from their recent days of freedom."<sup>43</sup> It was natural that the Japanese communities brought baseball with them to the internment camps and resorted to playing the game as a form of recreation, but more importantly they utilized it as a form of identifying themselves as Americans, loyal to their country. It served as an escape from the reality that internees were forced to live in because of their race and the war.

The legacy of Japanese-American baseball was created by Kenichi Zenimura, the "Dean of the Diamond."<sup>44</sup> Regarded as the father of Japanese-American baseball "Zeni," as he was known by his peers, was a pioneer of the sport in Japanese communities and paved the way for those who followed in his footsteps and broke down racial barriers. Kenichi Zenimura was born in Hiroshima, Japan in 1900 and immigrated to the United States with his family in 1908.<sup>45</sup> After eleven years in Hawaii, leading his high school team to an island championship and playing semi-pro ball with the Hawaiian Asahis, the Zenimura family moved to the mainland in Fresno, California. As soon as they settled down in their new hometown, Zeni organized the Fresno Athletic Club, which would become a semi-pro power house on the West Coast.<sup>46</sup> Baseball's Hall of Fame, Cooperstown's curator and historian Kerry Yo Nakagawa reflects on why Zenimura is remembered as one of the best: "Zeni was known as the Dean of the Diamond because nobody knew more about baseball, technically, physically, spiritually, than himself."<sup>47</sup> He was a player, a coach, a captain, and an inspiration to the entire Japanese-American community.

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<sup>43</sup> Regalado, "Incarcerated Sport," 434.

<sup>44</sup> *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Kerry Yo Nakagawa in *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

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Standing at five feet tall and weighing in at just over one hundred pounds, the Dean of Diamonds was hardly the standard of American athleticism. Despite his stature, Zenimura played big. Former teammate and catcher for the Clovis Commodores, Fumio Ikeda, remembers Zeni's competitiveness: "For his size, pound for pound, it was hard to beat him. He could play every position, bunt, hit, and steal bases on you. He was all-around."<sup>48</sup> This competitive spirit and dislike for losing did not interfere with his sportsmanship. Ikeda recalls a time during a game in which an opposing player tripped Zeni. Instead of lashing out at the player he acted courageously and simply walked away from the encounter in the true fashion of *yamato-damashii*: the way of the Samurai.<sup>49</sup> Zenimura acted as a bridge between the American and Japanese culture as he played the national pastime with aggression fueled by admiration and passion; yet, he maintained the ties to his home country and the traditions of honor and sacrifice of Samurai culture. He was so well respected for his skills and reputation in the baseball world that he became the only Nisei to crossover from the Nisei league to coach an all-white league team in the Twilight Leagues. "A little small man, but real smart in baseball. Real smart. He knew all the tricks of the trade in baseball. He had my respect and he had the respect of the ball players on the team," reflects former player Don Jorgensen on his coach and mentor.<sup>50</sup>

The respect Zenimura received was not limited to those within his inner circle but also included big league players including Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. On October 29, 1927, Ruth and Gehrig traveled to Fresno, California to play with and against the best the Twilight League had to offer.<sup>51</sup> It was the big leaguers' first time meeting a Nisei player. The game resulted in a 13-3 victory for Gehrig and his Nisei teammates, handing the Babe a loss in the process. After this exhibition game, Japanese baseball representatives reached out to Zeni in the hopes that he would convince Babe Ruth to travel to Japan to show his talents. In 1934, the Great Bambino traveled to Zenimura's homeland and put on a show. The Hall of Famer was so well received and revered in Japan that professional Japanese baseball was established in 1936.<sup>52</sup> Five years later, the Japanese Empire attacked Pearl Harbor, Hawaii on December 7<sup>th</sup>, creating a mortal enemy out of the United States. This act of terrorism against Americans ignited an intense hatred in the U.S. towards all those with any connection to Japan.

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<sup>48</sup> Fumio Ikeda in *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.

<sup>50</sup> Don Jorgensen in *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

<sup>51</sup> *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, 2015.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.

Over one hundred thousand persons of Japanese ancestry were sent to ten different detention camps in various desert wastelands across the United States and “Americans imprisoned Americans.”<sup>53</sup>

Kenichi, his wife Kiyoko, and their two sons, Howard and Harvey, reported to the Fresno Fairgrounds for assembly after Executive Order 9066 was signed and put into action. The Fresno Fairgrounds, or Fireman’s Park as it had been known in the 1920s, was once the home of multiple Pacific coast semi-pro teams, but as the war relocation program got underway, the grounds became temporary housing for Japanese-Americans awaiting assignment to one of the internment camps.<sup>54</sup> The Zenimura family was sent to the Gila River war relocation camp in Arizona. Upon arrival, Kiyoko remembers her husband’s frustration at their situation as his friends and teammates and their families were all sent to the camp in Arkansas.<sup>55</sup> In true Zeni fashion, he started to build. After two weeks of their arrival in Arizona, Kiyoko saw Zeni clearing the sagebrush and rocks by hand from the desert because he had decided “he was going to build a baseball field again.”<sup>56</sup> The community came together to help build the field and restore a sense of normalcy. Kiyoko spoke of baseball as a piece of salvation in a desert wasteland: “It was a great hardship for everyone being in the camp because no one had anything. Building the ballpark really saved us.”<sup>57</sup>

Wherever Kenichi Zenimura went there was sure to be a baseball stadium built by the Dean of the Diamond. From the Fresno Japanese ball park to his crown jewel, the Gila River Zenimura Field, Zeni brought baseball to every community. On March 7, 1943, Gila River camp director Bennett threw out the first pitch at Zenimura Field. It was the beginning of what would be known as “barbed wire baseball.” In each of the ten internment camps across the United States, baseball was a communal focal point and sense of pride. There was irony in the fact that “so called ‘enemy-aliens’ could put on a baseball uniform and travel from Gila River, Arizona to Heart Mountain, Wyoming,” without any trouble but, “if they wore civilian clothes, they’d be arrested.”<sup>58</sup> Baseball not only provided an escape for those in the internment camps, but it also provided a disguise against those who still maintained hostile notions and prejudices against all those of Japanese ancestry, no matter how “American” they appeared. Kenichi Zenimura changed the status quo of American society and forced people to challenge their prejudice views of Japanese-Americans and minorities

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<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid.

<sup>55</sup> Kiyoko Zenimura in *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, 2015.

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through the game of baseball. Noriyuki "Pat" Morita, the narrator of *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese Baseball*, a documentary on Kenichi Zenimura's impact on baseball and on the Japanese-American community reflects, "The good old American game of baseball, it did help to transcend the sins of bigotry and hatred."<sup>59</sup>

Men were not the only ones who found solace in sports during internment. Japanese-Americans, men and women both, shared in the hostility and discrimination aimed towards them from their own nation. While men turned to baseball as an outlet, women turned to its counterpart: softball. In the internment camps, the prisoners began to build and construct baseball diamonds in the middle of the wasteland they called home during the years of internment. These desert diamonds served as a baseball field for the men and a softball field for the women. Regalado claims that "women's softball programs emerged as one of the most popular recreational activities in the camps."<sup>60</sup> They wished to escape from their reality and saw sport as the best way to forget about being prisoners of their own nation. Each of the ten camps and sixteen assembly centers soon had organized clubs and leagues where Nisei women could display their athletic ability and be in a social atmosphere with their peers. Second generation Nisei grew up in two worlds: one was the world of their parents and Japanese culture and the second was the world they had been born into as U.S. Citizens, America and its contrasting culture. Most Issei parents wanted their children to grow up just like other American kids. They wanted the next generation to assimilate in a way they never could because of the restrictions against Japanese Issei from obtaining American citizenship. Despite their children possessing American citizenship, they still wanted to maintain a balance of American and Japanese culture as it was important to understand one's heritage.

The two opposing cultures shared a love of competition: "One of the few arenas in both cultural imperatives could be satisfied was...competitive sport."<sup>61</sup> Sports were not just for the men, women also came together to organize and participate in competition. Even though there was little organization of women's sports in the early years of immigration, Issei women created social clubs in which they could take part in various activities, including dance, flower arrangement, and cooking, as well as courses that specialized in the study of Japanese and American cultures.<sup>62</sup> As these social clubs advanced and grew so did the range of activities they offered for Japanese women, Issei and Nisei. One of the core foundations of

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<sup>59</sup> Noriyuki "Pat" Morita in *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

<sup>60</sup> Regalado, "Incarcerated Sport," 431.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 432.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*



these clubs was to promote empowerment and a sense of identity for those women growing up as Nisei as it was difficult for them to fuse their heritage and nationality together as one.

Another important factor that aided in the creation of these clubs was that the Issei elders had a desire to “advance the assimilation of their children and to strengthen community ties.”<sup>63</sup> In the middle of the 1930s Golden Age of Japanese-American athletics, women’s softball developed into a craze on the west coast of the United States. This rise in popularity was due in part to the Great Depression and to Roosevelt’s New Deal that led to thousands of men constructing 8,000 parks all over the United States.<sup>64</sup> As the number of baseball/softball fields expanded, so did the reach of the game, especially for Nisei who took to the game as their brothers, cousins and friends took to baseball.

The Nisei began to work on creating teams and leagues that would compete in the hopes of forgetting their current situation. Those who could not play, went and watched the young women play. Peggy (Teniguchi) Yoshimoto reacts, “I mean where else could they go?” when talking about the limited entertainment afforded to those held as prisoners in the camps.<sup>65</sup> Softball did more than just provide the day’s entertainment for those interned or give Japanese-American women an equal opportunity to play sports; it also provided a way to break down cultural social norms that prevented Nisei women from gaining independence. Regalado makes the argument that “confinement at the relocation centers altered traditional family roles.”<sup>66</sup> While women were still restricted inside their own communities and by cultural ideals as to what a woman’s role was, the camps gave Nisei women a chance to change their social status. Valerie Matsumoto expresses this new-found freedom as “[w]omen’s developing sense of independence in the camp environment and their growing awareness of their abilities as workers contributed to their self-confidence.”<sup>67</sup> It was in this way that those women who entered the internment camps as naïve people emerged with a new addition to their identity. They developed into strong, confident women who leveled the idea and social norm of male prestige while establishing their independence as Japanese-American Nisei females.<sup>68</sup>

One of the most interesting aspects of life for Japanese-Americans before World War II is the contact the Japanese-Americans had with white

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<sup>63</sup> *Ibid.*, 433.

<sup>64</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 435.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, 436.

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teams when playing baseball. Mullan describes to the reader how when the two ethnically different teams played against each other there was an “ease of interaction with whites in baseball and the absence of discrimination”<sup>69</sup> as told by the Nisei players. It was as if prejudice and racial discrimination did not exist on the field as the focus was solely on baseball and the game. Despite warnings of “Yellow Peril” from other Americans who saw Japanese-Americans as a threat to the U.S., along with the anti-Asian legislation passed by the government, baseball allowed for a temporary solace from the hostility and hatred felt by many outside the community.

This feeling of sanctuary in baseball from social pressures could explain why Japanese-Americans played baseball and relied on the game as a temporary distraction from their situation in the internment camps. Mullan’s focus on the Wapato Nippons and the Japanese league in the Seattle area correlates with Regalado’s focus on the Livingston Dodgers and Cortez Wildcats of the San Joaquin Valley. Both areas share an ethnic identity that allowed them to come together as communities and embrace the game of baseball: “Baseball was primarily a vernacular language of inclusion; its use by the Japanese community in the 1930s and early 1940s was a way of belonging to the greater nation outside the ethnic enclave.”<sup>70</sup>

To understand the importance of baseball to Japanese-Americans and to American society as a whole is to understand the game’s impact on the American military. Steve Bullock’s article, “Playing for Their Nation: The American Military and Baseball During World War II” illustrates the crucial role baseball played in each branch of the American military during World War II. “Military culture during World War II was a culture dominated not only by war, but also by sport.”<sup>71</sup> He goes on to explain how baseball was used to keep morale among the troops high, as well as, keep them fit and mentally ready for the physicality of combat and raise money for the war effort. In the early months of the United States’ involvement in World War II, the military determined that baseball was the overall favorite sport to be played by the soldiers, outranking football by a land slide.

The American military has a long history of using sport to aid in the training of soldiers. Sports require athleticism and certain sets of physical and mental skills that are easily transferable to combat situations. Baseball, in particular, has been associated with the military and used for training as “leaders viewed it as a means for conditioning and teaching teamwork.”<sup>72</sup> In the years following World War I and leading up to World War II, sports training in the military, specifically baseball, became a useful tool as soldiers

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<sup>69</sup> Mullan, “Ethnicity and Sport,” 84.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 91.

<sup>71</sup> Bullock, 67.

<sup>72</sup> Obermeyer, “War Games,” 2.

could use the skills they learned from the game not only to improve their physical abilities, but also their abilities to lead and be members of a team. Strong athletes made exemplary soldiers. Historian Jeff Obermeyer explores several reasons why the American military utilized baseball in multiple ways in his article "War Dogs" stating, "[O]rganized sports kept soldiers occupied during periods of inactivity, fending off boredom and the attendant antisocial behaviors."<sup>73</sup> Professional and semi-professional baseball played a huge role in advancing the popularity of baseball among servicemen as they provided much of the gear to soldiers, overseas and at home, to ensure that the game would be played, keeping soldiers occupied and maintaining athleticism. Baseball was more than just a training tool, it was a symbol of American patriotism and "a cultural export representative of American values... wherever American servicemen were stationed."<sup>74</sup> Soldiers overseas set up diamonds behind the lines of battle to play the game, and in doing so, reestablished baseball as the game of democracy, of freedom, and of the United States of America. Baseball was the game of democracy because of its correlation to the United States, the defender of democracy. It did not matter whether Americans were on the home front or abroad, baseball became a global presence because of the military. The ten internment camps scattered across the desolate areas of the United States resembled Army bases, because the barracks served as housing and days were scheduled "to a T;" those interned were told what to do and when to do it based on a military like schedule. Just as the Japanese used baseball as a means of escape from the prison that was the internment camp, the U.S. military used baseball as an escape for their soldiers. The similarities between the Japanese and the military serve as a reminder that the nation turned against its own people in an act of fear when cultural understanding and acceptance would have served a greater purpose in the overall war effort. As America's pastime, it makes sense that the favorite sport of America's fighting force would be baseball and the War Department capitalized on this favoritism. Through various means baseball was primarily used to boost morale or keep morale high among the troops. Bullock writes on the comment of Sgt. Babcock: "[B]aseball was 'deep in the hearts' of American servicemen as the game provided a bit of sanity in an atmosphere rife with insanity."<sup>75</sup> This idea goes along with that expressed in both Regalado and Mullan's articles that baseball offered a temporary escape from reality for all Americans. The military promoted athletics, with an emphasis on baseball, in an attempt "to instill within servicemen the

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., 69.

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perception that the American athlete was a superior breed."<sup>76</sup> With the idea of American athletes as superior to all others comes with it the ideal that Americans were the superior breed in general. Gifted athletes created gifted soldiers as Major David stated in the article "organized team athletics developed 'leadership, aggressive, initiative, and the will to win.'"<sup>77</sup> These are the same kind of qualities displayed in the Japanese-American Leagues of the west coast. It is easy to make the connection between American, military, and Japanese-American culture in terms of baseball because of the similarities, but these connections were often obscured by the prejudice and racism created through fear.

These similarities between the skills Japanese-American boys were taught from playing baseball to those of the military give an understanding as to why many Japanese-Americans signed up to fight in World War II. One must wonder why those who were treated as being non-citizens in their own country chose to serve in the military. For many it was because they feel as though they had something to prove to the country, to the government, and to all who do not believe in their abilities. For others, they served because of a deep sense of patriotism and wished to serve their country and protect it from harm. Both reasons for joining the military were valid for those interned in the war relocation camps, but there was also a third option to which many young Japanese-American men gravitated when joining the service; many wanted an escape from the internment camps themselves.

### **Loyalty and Patriotism**

For the entirety of the war, Japanese-Americans were seen as those with questionable loyalty to the United States and because of the question of their loyalty to the state, the entire Japanese-American population of the west coast was evacuated from their homes and sent to internment camps where they were required to live as prisoners. Many were forced to take loyalty oaths, swearing their allegiance to the United States. They were forced to do so upon pain of arrest or conviction of being a traitor and of having ties to the Japanese Empire. Many of those who took the oath were American born Nisei who had no ties to the country of their parents' origin and only identified as Americans. Young Japanese-American men who were interned in the War Relocation Camps signed up for service with the American military because they wanted to fight for their country. They did not see an issue with fighting for a nation that had viewed them as prisoners and enemies of the state because they identified as Americans and wished to

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<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 72.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

do their duty as American citizens. This reason also came with the added reaction that if they went and fought against the Japanese, then their loyalty to the country would no longer be questioned. It would prove they were the same as any other red-blooded American boy who wished to fight against any nation who would do harm to the United States. Not only did many join to prove their loyalty to Uncle Sam, but they also joined to escape from the depression of the camps. Their freedom in exchange for their service was a trade well worth it to many young men who joined the service.

Loyalty was not solely judged based on who did or did not join the military. While becoming a member of the armed services was a powerful expression of patriotism, other forms of patriotism and loyalty to the United States were also displayed by those in the camps. Baseball stood as a symbol of American pride, and playing the game was an act of patriotism that outwardly displayed one's "Americanness" to the outer world. Noriyuki "Pat" Morita describes the feeling of pride: "Putting on a baseball uniform was like wearing the American flag."<sup>78</sup> The coming together of Japanese-American communities from all over the Pacific Coast in the internment camps allowed for alliances and rivalries to be reconstructed. Through the strict isolation of the internment community, baseball re-emerged in Japanese-American culture stronger than it had at the beginning of the war. The building of fields, construction of leagues and semblance of life outside the camps gave those who were interned a piece of home and the partial reality that tried to re-create the memories of Friday night ball games and the feeling of a normal American night playing the nation's pastime. Baseball was more than a game, it was an identity and a way to identify oneself as a member of a community: as a proud Japanese-American.

*Sarah Elizabeth Johnson is from Scottsdale, Arizona. In 2013, she graduated from the University of Arizona with a BA in History and a minor in English with an emphasis on American Literature. As an undergraduate she served as president of Phi Alpha Theta History Honors Society and was a member of Alpha Chi Omega. Her research interests include twentieth-century United States history with a focus on sports history as American history and how sports have impacted race, gender, and political relations in the U.S. This fall, Sarah will be attending graduate school at Boston College to pursue her MA degree in History.*

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<sup>78</sup> Pat Morita in *Diamonds in the Rough: Legacy of Japanese-American Baseball*, Directed by Gan Hanada. San Francisco: Kanopy Streaming, 2015. Film.

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