

History Comes Alive!



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Tales From the City Archives



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Photos courtesy the Archives of the City of Los Angeles, and the Herald-Examiner Collection, Los Angeles Public Library

The City and Japanese Internment Camps

City Employees were involved in the internment of American citizens during World War II.

History is full of parallels. The events after the attack at Pearl Harbor brought out the best and worst in people living in Los Angeles. Even though the Second World War started 75 years ago, the events of the early 1940s still have a meaning for those of us in the early 21st century.

The Japanese American National Museum in LA's Little Tokyo is mounting an exhibition on one of the enduring local reactions to the war – the internment of 120,000 people of Japanese descent. Both aliens and American-born alike were deprived of livelihoods, property and their freedom without the benefit of a trial. Some of the Japanese were citizens of Los Angeles. A few were employed by the City of Los Angeles. They were punished even before the federal government had taken action.

Fletcher Bowron had been a respected Superior Court judge at the time of Mayor Frank Shaw's recall election in September 1938. A moderate politician, Bowron carried every part of Los Angeles, including the heavily African-American part of South L.A. Once he assumed office, Bowron began a series of regular radio speeches on Thursday evenings at 6:30 p.m., taking a page from President Franklin Roosevelt's weekly broadcasts to the nation. The City Archives have the transcripts of these speeches in Box C-2021.

The mayor used these speeches to inform the citizens about issues including his efforts to clean up the corruption in City Hall. Bowron was not above naming names of Councilmembers whom he felt were standing in the way of his goals at reform. Many political insiders came to see these messages as public shaming of political opponents. The medium of radio was a powerful tool in Bowron's first re-election campaign in the spring of 1941, with many of his speeches including testimonials from commissioners he had appointed. But all of that was behind him by Dec. 7.

In Mid-January 1942, Mayor Bowron had attended a gathering of the National Conference of Mayors in Washington, D.C. There were meetings with various White House officials, which were highlighted in a later speech upon his return to L.A. It seems clear that a plan to deal with the Japanese citizens was part of these meetings.

The mayor's speech on Jan. 29 included the following: "A few days ago, we dropped, at least temporarily, from the City payrolls all employees of Japanese parentage. This was done without violating the legal rights of anyone..."

Several prominent citizens quickly expressed their disagreement with both calls for action against the Japanese and the mayor's action against them. Clinton Clifford, one of the men behind the recall of Frank Shaw and Bowron's election, wrote a letter, contained in Council File 10484, addressed to Bowron, the City Council, the County Board of Supervisors and California Gov. Floyd Olson, that began: "Gentlemen, the press reports that you are being urged to take drastic action against alien Japanese by indiscriminate internment." Clifford further warned that, "We should not permit hysteria and indignation to serve as a substitute for hard work and hard thinking. We should build up public morale by taking intelligent and humane action, not undermine it by yielding to the hysteria of a witch-hunt..."

Pasadena realtor William C. Carr protested (now stored in Council File 10483) the discharging of 39 City employees and added the following: "Sometimes I wonder just how genuine our democracy is. If by democracy we mean freedom and liberty for the white man, let's say so and promptly subjugate all others so Hitler cannot divide and conquer. But it's not that kind of an America: Let's publicly reinstate these citizens." But we know that these pleas fell on deaf ears. Bowron's action of Jan. 29 was followed by FDR signing Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942.

By the end of April, the U.S. Department of the Interior was seeking material support through the City engineer Lloyd Aldrich. The City's Public Works Committee and Aldrich's office drew up an inventory of supplies and heavy-duty construction equipment that were available from City contractors and private companies. The equipment was to be used to develop 25,000 acres of federal land near Parker, Ariz. that was part of the Colorado River Indian reservation. This was where the Poston War Relocation Center was established. Up to 20,000 Japanese, largely from the Los Angeles area, were to be settled there to do agricultural production for the duration of the war.

Camp Manzanar was built on prop-

erty owned by the City near Lone Pine in the Owens Valley. The property was leased to the federal government and the internees raised vegetables with water from the nearby aqueduct. By

mentioned 39 people. The Civil Service Commission minutes for late January and early February 1942 record the use of "special absences" only twice. The first, on Jan. 30, lists two employees taking "personal leaves" and three others leaving the City for other employment – all Japanese. The second instance on Feb. 10 only refers to request form by number – 14 in all with no names. Since the supporting documents for the commission do not exist, I can say that perhaps only as many as 16 employees were forced to leave their civil service positions for "personal reasons." Unaccounted were many farmers who had leases to farm City-owned open land in areas including Sawtelle and near Ballona Creek. All of the leases were cancelled in February 1942 without explanation.

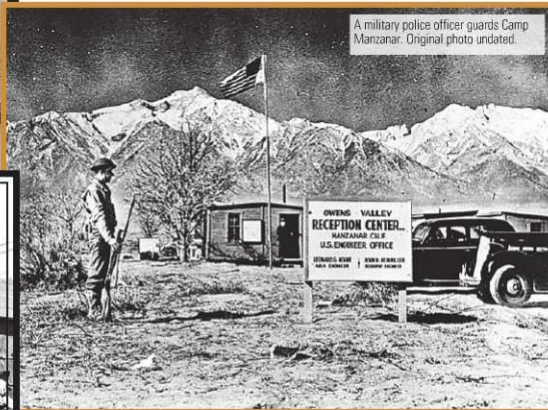
Bowron had a change of heart after the Supreme Court ruled against the indefinite detention of U.S. citizens in December 1944. He believed that the high court had settled the matter, and it was time to move on to other issues. He publicly apologized on several occasions after leaving office, most notably in 1956 when he told a group of radio broadcasters, "It was a grave and terrible injustice perpetrated on the Japanese in our midst. Those in whom we lost faith, never lost faith in us." Let's hope we can learn from this in our own time. Scholars including Abraham Hoffman and Tom Sitton praise Bowron's many fine qualities during his tenure as L.A.'s mayor. Yet even Bowron fell victim to the hysteria that turned decent people against their fellow citizens. Let's hope we've learned to be better than that. ■



Los Angeles Mayor Fletcher Bowron with returning Japanese City employees, Jan. 15, 1945.



Japanese internees at Manzanar Relocation Center are shown on Nov. 17, 1943, bidding goodbye to friends who had just signed their way out of confinement and were about to get into a station wagon and head for Eastern and Midwestern cities.



A military police officer guards Camp Manzanar. Original photo undated.

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March 1943, Councilman Roy Hampton of the 13th District felt it necessary to submit a resolution through the City Council that would increase the access of fresh food to the residents of L.A. if the Department of the Interior would cooperate. The resolution in Council File 14539 included the following paragraph: "Whereas, said Japanese are now not engaged in any gainful occupation, and unless they are financially able to support themselves, they are being cared for by the government at considerable expense..." The Water and Power Commission concluded that all was being done that could be reasonably done and filed the request without submitting it to Washington.

By May of that year, Fletcher Bowron's tone towards the Japanese had hardened into intolerance. His speech on May 26 focused on what to do with the Japanese being slowly released from the internment camps. He mocked those who felt "so sorry for the poor Japanese" and went on to make this startling prediction: "... had expressed the hope