

Japanese Evacuees, Portland Assembly Center // OrHi 28157

In May 1942, Portland area Japanese Americans, both issei, or first generation, and nisei, or second generation, were evacuated to hastily-constructed temporary living spaces in what had previously been the Pacific International Livestock Exposition building in the north of Portland. The building was partitioned into tiny apartments using thin plywood boards, and each family was assigned a room with a common toilet and little privacy. In this image, Japanese American residents are shown leaving the cramped North Portland Assembly Center with their few belongings to be relocated by train to one of the Japanese internment camps. Most internees from Portland were sent to the Minidoka Relocation Center in Idaho. Some internees went to Tule Lake in California, and a portion relocated to the internment camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

Only months before this image was taken, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which gave the U.S. Army the right to exclude any person from designated military zones in time of national peril in order to preserve national safety. Of the 110,000 Japanese Americans incarcerated under this law, over 4000 of them came from Oregon.

After two failed legal challenges to Executive Order 9066, and two and a half years after passing the Executive Order, second-term President Roosevelt rescinded the Order and the last camp was closed by the end of 1945. By that time, however, many returning first and second Japanese immigrants had lost the land they once cultivated in regions in and around Portland and in other regions throughout the West. In 1968, two decades after the last internment camp closed, the U.S. government began paying reparations to Japanese Americans for property they had lost. In 1983, a Commission appointed by President Jimmy Carter and Congress determined that the relocations were unjustified and recommended that Congress apologize and give a tax-free payment of $20,000 to surviving evacuees. The payments were finally authorized in 1987 when President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Rights Act of 1988, and the first check was disbursed to a survivor in 1990.