Oregon in Depression and War, 1925-1945: Anti-Japanese Sentiment

Themes: Social Relations, Politics and Government

When the war ended, about 8,000 Japanese Americans known as “renunciants” were sent to Japan. These people reputedly had renounced their citizenship during their stay in the camps. In many instances, the “renunciants” were under tremendous pressure in the relocation centers and were reduced to pleading for any favors. In exchange, some of them renounced their citizenship or signed away the citizenship rights of their children. The U.S. Department of State and the Department of Justice fought the efforts of the “renunciants” to regain their citizenship rights from 1944 until 1959, when the federal government ceased to oppose such requests.

When the federal government permitted the internees to return home in December 1944, most of them remained in the camps for another year because of the dangerous anti-Japanese sentiment in their hometowns. A few regional politicians, including Washington Senator Warren Magnuson and Oregon Congressman Walter Pierce, called for tough restrictions against Japanese Americans when they began to return from the relocation centers. In Hood River, shopkeepers posted signs announcing, “No Jap Trade Wanted,” sentiments that made it necessary for returning farmer Ray Yasui to travel twenty-five miles to The Dalles to purchase supplies. Hood River newspapers also published a petition signed by many local residents declaring that the Japanese should not return to the valley. In one of the most egregious cases of racism, the Hood River American Legion removed the names of sixteen Japanese American servicemen from the local honor role, creating a national furor. Still other Japanese Americans returned to hostile receptions and loss of property, especially former truck farmers in the Portland metropolitan area.

The Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) made a major effort after the war to seek justice for the internees. One of the JACL’s important achievements was passage of the Japanese American Claims Act in 1948, a measure designed to help internees recover lost property. The JACL argued that “principles of justice and responsible government require that there should be compensation for such losses.” As it worked its way through Congress, the bill enjoyed broad support and received high praise from cabinet members and the former leadership of the War Relocation Authority. The legislation provided only partial redress for wartime losses, but as historian Roger Daniels points out, it “was an important symbol of the improved image of the Japanese American people.” It was not until 1990, however, that Congress provided across-the-board payments to the surviving internees, appropriating $17.2 million to be distributed to Japanese American survivors and their dependents.