

Letters from the Japanese American Internment Grades 6-8

Learning Standards

U.S. History, 5-12 (from the National Center for History in the Schools)

- Era 8 The Great Depression and World War II (1929-1945)
Standard 3C: The student evaluates the internment of Japanese Americans during the war and assesses the implication for civil liberties.

Objective

In this lesson, students make deductions about life in an internment camp by reading and comparing letters written by young internees to an old friend, children's librarian Clara Breed. Along the way, they consider the advantages of looking at a historical event from the multiple points of view of eyewitnesses.

Time

Two or three 45-minute lessons

Materials and Reproducibles

- F. and [M. Ishino](#) and [Letter Questions](#) (Step One)
- [F. Tsumagari](#), [L. Ogawa](#), [T. Hirasaki](#), and [Graphic Organizer](#) (Step Two)

Key Terms/Concepts

internment, resiliency, first-hand accounts

Introduction

On December 7, 1941, the day of the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, there were more than 110,000 people of Japanese descent living on the West Coast of the United States. Within a few months, they were all gone from their homes. Out of fears of espionage and sabotage along the Pacific, the government placed Japanese American men, women, and children in internment camps in the interior of the country. Two-thirds of the internees were U.S. citizens. None of them was ever charged with a crime.

Clara Estelle Breed was the supervising children's librarian at the San Diego Public Library, where she came to know many young Japanese Americans. When they were evacuated from San Diego, she was at the train station to see them off. She handed out stamped, self-addressed postcards and urged them to write to her when they reached their destination.

Miss Breed spoke out publicly against the internment policy, believing that democracy "must be defended at home as well as abroad." But by taking an interest in the internees, she was not merely taking up a cause. Her correspondents were her friends. Like anyone writing to a friend, the internees tended to report on personal concerns and ordinary matters: their parents, their classes, the dances they held, the books they were reading, the movies they saw. It is a great irony that the letters tell us as much about life as a young American in the 1940s as they do about the internment—the punishment imposed upon these young people because they were not fully recognized as Americans.

Students examine four of the Miss Breed letters in this lesson on primary-source documents. As they compare the writers' differing points of view, they might see more clearly that the history of an event or period of time is never a single story.

Step One

We suggest that students examine one of the primary sources before you introduce the subject of the internment and the story of Miss Breed and her friends. Hand out printouts of the [letter by Margaret Ishino](#) and the [Letter Questions](#) to students working in groups of three. Ask students to try answering the questions—individually or in groups—after carefully reading the letter.

When they have completed the exercise, begin a class discussion to discover more clues. Reveal only that sixteen-year-old Margaret Ishino wrote the letter, though it was signed by both Margaret and her six-year-old sister Florence.

It should be immediately clear to students that Margaret and Florence are at a camp, but what kind of camp? The discussion might bring out details that are inconsistent with the idea that this is, say, a summer camp. Why is their baby brother and the rest of their family with them? Why does Margaret refer to their living quarters as a barrack?

The students might also try to solve these mysteries: How do Margaret and Miss Breed know each other? What is Miss Breed's profession?

Step Two

Share background information on the Miss Breed letters and the circumstances in which they were written. Divide the class into three groups and hand out printouts of these three letters. Give Fusa Tsumagari's letter to the first group, Louise Ogawa's to the second, and Tetsuzo Hirasaki's to the third. Give each student a copy of the Graphic Organizer (*see Required Materials*).

Have each group discuss its designated letter and the Graphic Organizer questions in order to present an informal report on this topic: *How did life at in the camp differ from normal life?*

After the groups have presented their reports, read the three letters aloud. Have each student fill in all of the boxes of the Organizer.

Note: You might divide the class into smaller groups, to facilitate full participation. More than one group can work with each of the letters.

Step Three

Lead the class in a discussion of the letters, including Margaret's. Look for differences and similarities. Which differences might be due to the personalities of the writers or their relationships with Miss Breed? Which ones might be due to the times at which the letters were written? Did the camp change? How did the presence or absence of a fence around the camp affect the writers?

Move on to a discussion of the reliability of first-hand accounts. At the board, make lists of the statements that seem to be facts and those that seem to be expressions of opinions or feelings. Look for support for one writer's statements in the statements of the others.

Conclude by considering questions such as these:

- What is the value of reading more than one source?
- Can one document help a historian judge other documents?
- Did the combination of all the letters affect your judgment of each letter?

Step Four

In a writing assignment, students might try to imagine a typical day at the camp, or they might focus on one aspect of the internment, using both the Miss Breed collection and other classroom resources. The exercise will perhaps highlight the differences between primary sources—the raw material of history—and the accounts of historians. In evaluating the essays, consider the strength of the students' documentary evidence and the soundness of their interpretations of the evidence. Suggested topics:

- Family life in the camps
- The survival of Japanese traditions
- American loyalty among internees
- Internment and the Bill of Rights

Extension

- Ask students to write a newspaper article describing the reasons for Executive Order 9066.
- Ask them to write a journal entry in the persona of someone whose neighbor or good friend has just been removed to an internment camp.

Additional Resource

National Museum of American History, *A More Perfect Union*
<http://americanhistory.si.edu/perfectunion/experience/index.html>