

Examining Racism and Discrimination Through Oral History Densho Curriculum Guide

Historical Background Info: Script to accompany slideshow

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In these oral histories, you saw individual stories, but it's important that we see them within the context of structural racism. So we're going to look at that history now, first at Frank Yamasaki's story as a part of broader anti-Japanese discrimination and in the lead-up to WWII incarceration, then at Mary Jenkins' story as a part of other policies and practices in the Jim Crow South.

FRANK YAMASAKI/JAPANESE AMERICAN HISTORY

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In the video we learned about how Frank got turned away from a swimming pool in 1930s Seattle.

Beginning in the 1920's municipal swimming pools became extraordinarily popular in America, and there were a growing number of them.

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What do you notice about who is at this pool and who is not?

People of color were often restricted from entering public pools. Sometimes there would be clear policies and signs, sometimes it would be implied.

Another one of Densho's oral history narrators, Yosh Nakagawa recalled, that as a kid in Seattle exclusion from public spaces was a fact of life, even when it wasn't explicitly stated.

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"You could not go to Colman swimming pool at Lincoln Park and swim, and that was a public park...if it didn't say 'No Japs Allowed,' it was very clear it was 'whites only.'"

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And of course this was just one of the many ways that people of color were essentially told to “Keep Out” from mainstream white America. For Japanese Americans -- and others -- this was just one manifestation of the kinds of exclusion they faced.

Before WWII, laws restricted immigration, citizenship, and land ownership for Japanese Americans. Those laws said that people of Japanese ancestry weren't capable of becoming real Americans, and so they put measures in place to make it nearly impossible for them to establish themselves here.

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Anti-Japanese Laws and Policies:

- The Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908 restricted Japanese laborers from entry
- Alien land laws passed by a number of states from 1913 through the end of WWII prevented Japanese Americans from purchasing, and later from leasing property
- The Immigration Act of 1924 halted immigration from Japan and several other Asian countries altogether.
- Japanese immigrants were also barred from U.S. citizenship until 1952 because they were considered incapable of assimilating into American society

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Since the earliest Japanese immigrants arrived in America, they were characterized as villains and invaders by politicians, labor unions, newspapers, and others.

Because of the decades of discrimination, and anti-Japanese sentiment it wasn't hard for some Americans to imagine Japanese Americans as the enemy after the Pearl Harbor bombing of 1941.

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As you can see, public speech and propaganda reinforced racist ideas that Japanese Americans were malicious vermin. Note about Jap being a racial slur.

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Even Dr. Seuss helped stoke anti-Japanese sentiment with racist cartoons and caricatures.

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Within three months of the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in February 1942. As a result, about 110,000 Japanese Americans were removed from the West Coast. This included women, children, sick, and elderly people. About two-thirds of them, over 72,000 individuals, were citizens born in the United States.

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They were placed in temporary detention centers that included hastily constructed facilities at race tracks and fairgrounds. Later they were removed to one of ten government-run camps, where many of them would remain for the duration of the war.

Even after the war, it took a long time for Japanese Americans to resume normal lives because many white people refused to let them live in their neighborhoods.

And some former Japanese neighborhoods in West Coast cities were then occupied by African Americans who had left the Jim Crow South as part of the Great Migration.

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Since that time, Japanese Americans have come a long way to re-establish themselves in American society. After lengthy hearings, the U.S. government acknowledged that WWII incarceration was a result of "racial prejudice, wartime hysteria, and a lack of political leadership." Shortly thereafter, Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988 awarded redress of \$20,000 to survivors of incarceration.

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Despite this progress, many Japanese Americans recognize that other groups are now facing the same sort of discrimination they once faced.

This includes religious and racial profiling of Muslims, refugee and immigrant bans, criminalization and family detention of immigrants from Latin America, police profiling of African Americans. Many Japanese American individuals and organizations have decided to speak out against this sort of discrimination because they want to be sure that what happened to them in 1942 never happens to any other group.

MARY JENKINS/JIM CROW SOUTH

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Mary Jenkins' oral history comes from her experiences as a child and as a mother in the Jim Crow South. This image, taken in Mary Jenkins' hometown of Albany, Georgia shows a line of taxi cabs that say they only serve white people -- and that tells a lot about what Jim Crow was all about.

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Jim Crow was a system of legal and social separation that defined and restricted the activities, behavior, and opportunities of African Americans. (Osborne, p. vii).

The period was book-ended by two major Supreme Court Decisions. Does anyone know what those were? Plessy v. Ferguson in 1896, and Brown v. Board of Education in 1954.

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The Plessy v. Ferguson case stemmed from an 1892 incident in which African American train passenger Homer Plessy refused to sit in a segregated car, breaking a Louisiana law. The Supreme Court's decision to uphold the lower court's ruling effectively condoned the notion of separate but equal public accommodations.

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As the era progressed, state segregation laws and local regulations became numerous. By 1900, laws in almost every southern state required black and white Americans to ride in separate train cars.

Signs that stipulated "White" or "Colored" appeared at bus stations, water fountains and rest rooms, as well as at entrances and exits to public buildings.

Hotels, movie theaters, arenas, night clubs, restaurants, churches, hospitals, and schools were also segregated, and interracial marriages outlawed.

Through this system, African Americans were denied basic privileges of American citizenship, including the right to vote. Since voting is a constitutional right, African Americans couldn't

legally be barred from it. Instead, poll taxes, unfairly applied tests, and other unjust barriers made it impossible for many African Americans to cast their ballots.

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And in many towns and cities, ordinances designated white and black neighborhoods. Covenants and unwritten agreements among real estate interests maintained residential segregation. More often than not Black neighborhoods were built in vulnerable areas like flood zones, and did not have access to the same public services as white neighborhoods.

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So while much of Jim Crow was encoded in laws, it was also a system of informal codes and social norms that kept black people separate from white people in both public and private spaces.

Groups like the Ku Klux Klan formed to terrorize blacks who expressed independence, acquired land and wealth, tried to vote, or tried to go into spaces that had been designated as “white.”

African Americans who broke the Jim Crow laws or defied the established social codes could be put in jail, or worse. Lynching took the lives of 4,715 black men, women, and children from 1882 to 1946.

As a result, many African Americans felt they had to remain silent about the injustices they experienced in their everyday lives.

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“We had to act...just as though everything was all right.” Ned Cobb

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While there were many ways the “separate” part of Jim Crow was enforced, the “equal” part was not enforced. Segregated schools made it especially clear that while black and white people were separate, they definitely were not given equal treatment.

In schools, everything from buildings to textbooks to teachers’ pay was inferior for African Americans compared with those for white people. In one county in South Carolina in 1910, the

state spent \$40.68 to provide education for the average white child and \$5.95 for each black child.

Eventually, a challenge to school segregation made it all the way to the supreme court.

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In 1954, the Brown v. Board of Education decision said that segregated schools could never be equal because their very existence as separate proclaimed that one race was better than another.

Jim Crow was not officially over then, but the legality of the “separate but equal” ethos that drove it had been challenged. This eventually helped delegitimize other Jim Crow laws and policies in the lead-up to the Civil Rights Era.

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While the Civil Rights Movement celebrated many victories, new works like “13th” and “The New Jim Crow” argue that Jim Crow has still not ended so much as been reimaged.

This is because many of the privileges that African Americans were denied during the Jim Crow era -- and before that, through slavery -- have been reintroduced through mass incarceration that disproportionately impacts black men and other people of color.

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This extends to school population with what’s known as the School-to-Prison Pipeline: Policies that encourage police presence at schools, harsh tactics including physical restraint, and automatic punishments that result in suspensions and out-of-class time. In many cases, children are eventually funneled out of public schools and into the juvenile and criminal justice systems.

Students from two groups—racial minorities and children with disabilities—are disproportionately represented in the school-to-prison pipeline. African-American students, for instance, are 3.5 times more likely than their white classmates to be suspended or expelled, according to a nationwide study by the U.S. Department of Education.

So even though we talk about Jim Crow as part of our “history”, it’s important to recognize that American institutions and systems continue to perpetuate the same discriminatory practices today.

Sources

www.densho.org

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