

5th Annual Florin Manzanar Pilgrimage

A Special Journey into Understanding

by Andy Noguchi

A Pakistani American high school student from Elk Grove, an adult education teacher from Berkeley, a World War II Military Intelligence Service veteran from Merced, a Nisei draft resister from Galt, and two peace activists from Davis. What could bring such a hodgepodge of people together? The Florin Manzanar Pilgrimage – a journey into understanding the tragic episode of America’s mass “racial profiling” and imprisonment of Japanese Americans - is the answer.

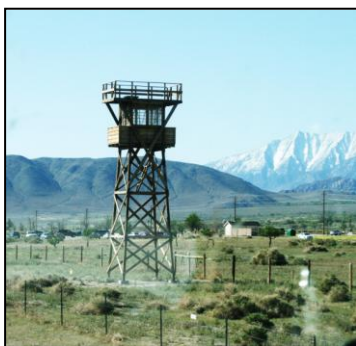
This awareness-raising April 23rd 3-day bus journey took travelers 350 miles to the high desert Manzanar National Park on the far side of the Sierra Nevada Mountains just south of Bishop. The pilgrimage was again sponsored by the Florin JACL & the Council on American Islamic Relations–Sacramento Valley (CAIR-SV).



Boarding the double-decker pilgrimage bus.

77 adventurous travelers boarded the imposing, double-decker bus at the Buddhist Church of Florin. This was the very site where local Japanese Americans first gathered to hear the news of their pending incarceration after the December 7th bombing of Pearl Harbor.

An amazing mixture of former internees (15 and from all 10 major camps!), students / youth from surrounding schools and colleges (33), Muslim Americans (11), educators, Japanese American family members, and people who support civil liberties / civil rights today all joined in. What a recipe for adventure.



A guard tower and barbed wire fence still overlook Manzanar

The pilgrimage included visits to the reconstructed Manzanar gymnasium (now a first class museum housing theater, bookstore, and barrack), walk to the guard tower, afternoon program at the former cemetery, interfaith service, and Manzanar At Dusk internee panel/discussion groups. They all provided a truly rich experience. Many of the activities were organized by the L.A. Manzanar Committee for their 41st annual pilgrimage drawing over 1,200 people that weekend.

One of the most enlightening parts of the pilgrimage was seeing those among our 15 former internees, now spanning in age from 60s to 80s, generously sharing their stories and experiences. They opened up their hearts, especially to the 33 engrossed youth eager to hear and learn. You could see the living history unfold during the Friday lunch bunch discussions, the Manzanar At Dusk program, and dozens of individual heart-felt conversations.

Muslim American travelers added an invaluable dimension to the pilgrimage. The parallels after 9/11, the cloud of suspicion, scapegoating, hate crimes, discrimination against immigrants, and arrests, mimicked steps taken against Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor.

Our appreciation goes to Muslim friends on the pilgrimage who shared their experiences like Adel Syed (CAIR-SV Civil Rights Coordinator), Rashid Ahmad (CAIR founder), Imam Ali (Santa Rosa religious leader) and wife Jaleelah Siddiqui, Sara Moussa (Assemblyman Dave Jones Muslim outreach coordinator), and others.

This year's walking tour of Manzanar and lunch in the mess hall led by Ranger Richard Potashin was struck with tragedy. As one of our former internees and Florin Manzanar Pilgrimage coordinators, Bob Uyeyama, finished sharing his stories as a kid in camp, he collapsed from a heart attack and later died in the local hospital. Our deepest sympathies go to his wife Masako and his son Jason.

Bob was such a good friend to so many of us, dedicated to sharing the camp experience, connecting with students, so hard-working, kind, fun-loving, and generous. He helped found the Florin Manzanar Pilgrimage five years ago.

On the bus ride back to Sacramento, four students including John Kanemoto, Alice Tse, Fiona Potter, and led by Annie Kim Tomita Noguchi, sung Bob's favorite pilgrimage song, "Don't Fence Me In," in his honor. Bob always shared his great singing and harmonica talents with us, explaining that though it was a cowboy song, "Don't Fence Me In" struck home with the internees. John Onate coordinated the pilgrimage talent show as a tribute to Bob.



The late Bob Uyeyama hosts the talent show and plays the harmonica in 2009

Besides the talent show, our Florin Manzanar Pilgrimage counts so many more fun, creative, and community-building activities. These include origami paper crane-making, traveler's trivia, Japanese folk dance lessons, custom-designed Manzanar T-shirts, BBQ Social, Sushi Saturday Night, bus DVD programming, Saturday bento specials, and more. The rest stops at Lake Tahoe, Mono Lake Interpretive Center, and Mammoth Lakes Visitors Center were a kick, too.

As our bus swung back into the Buddhist Church of Florin parking lot at the end of our 3 day trek, it was a fitting conclusion. We had traced the journey of Florin Japanese Americans to their Manzanar imprisonment and back to Florin again. We understood a little better what they had endured, the challenges facing America after 9/11, and how we need to stand up for other innocent Americans in need. The special journey into understanding had just begun.

[A huge thanks goes to those who served on the 2010 Florin Manzanar planning committee: Adel Syed, Twila Tomita; Annie Kim Noguchi; Marielle Tsukamoto, Stan & Christine Umeda; Bob Uyeyama; Fumie, Sam & Howard Shimada; Steve, Jennifer & Stephanie Kubo; Wayne Maeda; John Kanemoto; Esumi Fujimoto, Devin Yoshikawa; Basim-El-Karra; and Colette Masunaga.]