Freedom From Fear

A Journey of Remembrance

By Setsuko Winchester

This past December, I traveled across the United States with my husband Simon and one hundred and twenty brightly-glazed yellow tea bowls.

We had a plan – to visit as many as possible of the ten infamous World War II Japanese internment camps and to take photographs of the bowls placed inside them.

The camps span states from Arkansas to Arizona, California to Wyoming. Until a few years ago, I didn't even know the names of most of them. Yes, there were Manzanar and Heart Mountain. Tule Lake I had heard of, too. But Amache? Minidoka? Topaz? It was going to be quite an adventure into my unknown history.

The Bowls

At the heart of the project were the bowls. They seemed to offer a way for me to examine a part of American history which I, as a Japanese American, had avoided most of my life, even during the decade I was at NPR.

Being married to a man who loves history and loves America, (and who became a US citizen in 2011), I kept bumping into the question of "Who is American?" and "What does citizenship mean?" and "How long do you have to be here to be considered a bona fide member of this mongrel group?" Because these interned Japanese – most of them US citizens, after all – were clearly not considered full members.

And as a ceramicist, I wanted to explore these questions through clay.

For the Japanese, ceramic pots are part of the architecture of life – there's a pot for every occasion, from the mundane to the celebratory and the solemn. I chose the simple tea bowl because the philosophy of tea is all about celebrating humanity. A bowl fits in the palm of your hand, is human in scale, is an attempt to find beauty in the everyday. A handmade tea bowl may not be perfect, but it has soul. It seemed the most natural way to bring together, art, history, and a personal journey.

So on November 30 we filled a large box with 120 tea bowls, each to represent a thousand of the inmates. I had glazed them various shades of bright yellow to signify that the make-up of 'yellow peril' they represented was far from monochrome. The sizes were different too: the larger ones symbolized parents and grandparents, the smaller the camps' teenagers or young adults, children, infants.

On the Road

Starting from Sandisfield, on our first day we got as far as Marion, Virginia, home of Mountain Dew. The next day we reached Memphis where we stayed at the Peabody Hotel with its famous flock of ducks in the lobby. By the third day we reached the first of our camps.

Two of them, in Arkansas, in the pancake flat southeastern flood plains of the Mississippi Delta.

Just 27 miles separate Rohwer in the north from Jerome in the south. Miserable places, hot and wet with clouds of mosquitoes and mud like glue. Cotton, milo, and soybean fields stretch to the watery horizon. Little remains of the camps. Some smokestacks and water tanks and small cemeteries of those who died while incarcerated. There is also a memorial at each location commemorating those Japanese American boys who served in our military and died for their country. Our country, that is. Some 14,000 eventually served in the US Armed Forces. But when they returned they had no homes to come back to – only the camps. When they died, and many did, their bodies were returned to the camps.

I set the bowls down among the furrows, a smokestack in the far background. I took picture after picture, maybe fifty images or so. It took hours. The mud took even longer to remove from our boots.

There is a museum – a modest collection of papers and pictures and artifacts - in tiny McGehee, a town halfway between the camps. The sign indicating where to turn is damaged. The elderly white lady who curates explained that someone tried to take it out with a shotgun. Quite a few visitors complain that what she's doing is wrong, a disservice to the memory of American veterans. Others come in and ask about the Japanese – like me – who stop by. "Aren't you afraid of all these foreigners coming around?" She says she takes it all in stride. I ask her why she's doing this when she doesn't have to. What happened was wrong, she says; folks need to know.

The Camps

In 1942, at the beginning of World War II, as many as 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry who lived in California, Oregon, and Washington states were forcibly relocated to internment camps away from the Pacific coast. Allowed to take only a few possessions, many of the Japanese Americans lost businesses, farms, homes, and property. In 1988, the Civil Liberties Act, signed into law by President Reagan, officially apologized for the internment on behalf of the U.S. government, admitting that the internment was based on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership" rather than evidence of Japanese disloyalty. Here, Sandisfield resident Setsuko Winchester writes of her recent visits to the camps.

In the Desert

It takes a few days to get through the rest of Arkansas, to cross all of Texas and New Mexico. But finally we reach our next destination, the western Arizona camps formally known as Poston, 1, 2, and 3, but which the internees sardonically renamed Roastin, Toastin, and Dustin.

The desert here in the Colorado River Valley is searing, grit perpetually hanging in the gusts of hot air. Poston was huge: with over 17,800 people, for a while the camp was the third largest city in Arizona.

A small clutch of original buildings and their cement footprints remain, enclosed behind a wire fence. Two local girls show us a hole in the fence where we were able to crawl through and take in the tea bowls, a stack at a time, in order to take my photos. A water tower also remains from that time.

Today, Poston is distinguished for being the most studied of the camps. A Navy Medical Corps psychiatrist named Alexander Leighton made Poston the subject of a 1945 "The Governing of Men." Time magazine reported at the time that "After 15 months ... Commander Leighton concluded that many an American simply fails to remember that U.S. Japanese are human beings."

The next camp we visit, Manzanar, in California is located north of the Mojave Desert. The high peaks of the eastern Sierras offer a dramatic backdrop. This camp is probably the best known, thanks to the 1973 children's book *Farewell to Manzanar*. Over 10,000 people were incarcerated there.

Today it is the Manzanar National Historic Site, run by the National Park Service, with a staff of rangers and full-blown interpretive center. With the help of the former Manzanar internee community, the rangers work to preserve what is left and to recreate some of the buildings that were there. Today you can see the footprints of the camp and a replica of some of the buildings – most notably a guard tower – and the original stone entrance gates.

But budget cuts limit the opening hours, and there are frequent power outages and internet failures due to the remoteness. And there is local hostility here, as well.

Rose, one of the rangers, told us to look at the plaque at the foot of the flag pole by the parking area. It is pockmarked with gunshot wounds. People come by at night and let loose with guns, as a reminder.

The rangers at Manzanar were a brave crew, youngsters who wanted to learn and face this period of American history rather than forget and erase it. We left with promises to keep in touch.

Then it was back to Arizona to visit camp number five on our list, Gila River. This camp, southwest of Phoenix, is on sovereign Indian land belonging to the Gila River Indian Community. We needed permission to visit, a permit normally taking months to arrange. But the tribal government liked the photographic project – after all, Americans Indians were treated as poorly as the Japanese, and so there is much sympathy – and we received our permission in days.

The Indian community are trying to turn this desert land into a productive agricultural area with irrigation canals, grazing cattle, citrus and olive groves and other crops in production. The community has respectfully kept undisturbed a portion of the area where the original camps were located.

Today there are the tell-tale cement footprints of where the barracks, koi ponds, and other community buildings once stood: ideal backdrops for my pictures.

Paul Shorthair, the Indian liaison, offered helpful suggestions as to how I might arrange the bowls. His sympathies, his respect, were evident.

Heading Home

Finally, with the western winter coming in fast, we decide to chance one more camp on the way home. This one, Amache in southeastern Colorado, required us to cross the infamous Wolf Creek Pass in the aftermath of a snowstorm. But we made it, and at Amache it was a warm and sunny day.

John Hopper, the local school principal, has worked with the help of the Colorado and Amache Historical Societies to restore some of the sprawling camp. He oversees a museum, small but fascinating, and he proudly opened it up for us, showing us some of his painstakingly assembled trove of memorabilia, artifacts, letters, books, and glass cases with personal items from former internees. He tells us that while he supervises, his students are the ones who keep this place running and provide tours and explanations. Eighty percent of the students are Latino, children of immigrant fieldworkers. To them, he said, the lessons of what happened to the Japanese Americans is very real.

And then we came home, by way of Kansas, Illinois, Indiana, with three hundred pictures to edit, all of the bowls unbroken and safely back in their carton.

With six of the ten camps down ... four more to go, when the weather warms up this spring. The adventure continues ...