

# **Dorothy C. Cragen**

Interviewed by

**David J. Bertagnoli**

**THE JAPANESE AMERICAN PROJECT OF  
THE ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM AT  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON**



CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

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ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

INTERVIEWEE: DOROTHY C. CRAGEN

INTERVIEWER: David J. Bertagnoli

PLACE: Manzanar War Relocation Center

DATE: July 14, 1973

This is an interview with Dorothy C. Cragen, for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project by David J. Bertagnoli at Manzanar, New Mexico, July 14, 1973.

Manzanar War Relocation Center

Q: Mrs. Cragen, I am very much interested in the history of the Inyo County area. Could you tell me about your job?

C: You mean in relation to the Japanese camp?

B: That's right.

C: Well, I'd like to start out by saying that, as an American, I was very much opposed to the Japanese being placed in a camp. This is probably due to the fact that most of these children were American born, and I had a feeling that they were being treated as if they were not.

DOROTHY C. CRAGEN

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David J. Bertagnoli

on

July 14, 1973

They wanted very much to have the school district take over the camp, and I started them to do it. I said, "I'll take over the camp, but I don't want any Jap money." I tried to tell them that it was really money for them, if they would do that, because they would have only a federal fund and probably even more.



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B: This is an interview with Dorothy C. Cragen, for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project by David J. Bertagnoli at Independence, California, on July 14, 1973, at 7:30 p.m.

Mrs. Cragen, I understand you were superintendent of the Inyo County schools during World War II; could you please tell me about your job?

C: You mean in relation to the Japanese camp?

B: That's right.

C: Well, I'd like to start off by saying that, as an American, I was very much opposed to the Japanese being placed in a camp. This is probably due to the fact that most of these children were American citizens, and I had a feeling that if they could do this to the children of Japanese Americans, then they could do the same thing to me. And for that reason, I was very much opposed to the camp. During the time they were there, I felt it was my duty to work with them as closely as possible. We had no supervision of that school, although the federal government wanted us to, since they were in the Owens Valley Unified School District, which is here in Independence. They wanted very much to have the school district here take over the operation of that school, and I wanted them to do it. But when I approached the board--and I will not mention any names--they simply said to me, "We don't need any Jap money." I tried to tell them that it was really money for them, if they would do this, because they would have received federal funds and probably even more



state funds, but that was the statement they made to me. And I asked how they could tell which was Japanese money and which was American when all the money was in the till, but they refused to do it. So the teachers who were there were very fine, and they all came up and registered their credentials with us just as if they were in our schools, although they didn't have to at all because they were working at a government school.

B: Were these Japanese American or Caucasian teachers?

C: They were all Caucasian teachers. They had many helpers, however, among the Japanese who had been trained to teach. While they could not get credentials, they assisted. They were aides in the school. I visited their schools many, many times, and really, I used to wonder how the children could get up and sing such patriotic songs. They would sing, "I am an American," and all the familiar songs that we sang in our schools. The teachers did everything they could to promote the idea that they were Americans. But when I would hear them sing--and they sang so beautifully--I wondered how they really felt while they were doing that.

But my relationship with the camp was very fine. Dr. Carter, who was the superintendent of the Manzanar schools, and I, were very close and worked together as much as we could. I felt that in my relationship with the camp--through eating my meals down there many times--that the internees were always very nice. You felt no resentment. In fact, I felt the camp was really very happy. I suppose there were many who did resent it; how could they help it? But it didn't amount to anything, and there came a time when, actually, I think, many of them wanted to be there. They felt safer in camp because there was an awful lot of resentment in this county, a very great resentment against them, and, of course, there was resentment in other places all along the West Coast, as you know. I felt they were very happy there. They had their home life. Maybe they were not living in as good a home as they had lived in before, but they kept their families together. They were not separated or anything like that; the family unit was preserved, and to me, that meant a great deal. I felt it meant a great deal to them, and I heard many stories, of course, of when they first came. I think there was some resentment on the part of some of the Japanese, but they immediately moved them away from here up to Tule Lake. We had soldiers stationed there, and they had those big watchtowers where they surveyed the camp all the time, and they, no doubt, resented that too. But they sent the soldiers away and tore those posts down



from where they were observing every move they made; so they seemed to be much more content.

B: When did they tear the posts down? You're talking about the guard towers on the perimeter of the camp, aren't you?

C: Yes, the guard towers stationed around the camp.

B: When did they tear those down?

C: After awhile, they realized the Japanese weren't going to run away, because they didn't want to get away from there, they had no place to go, and they had plenty of food. They were well fed. I know because I usually ate lunch there every time I went down to visit the school. They had very good food and, in fact, they had some things that we didn't have. We were short on butter and coffee and many commodities like that, and they had plenty of everything, so they were never mistreated, I don't believe.

B: What kind of food did they get, regular American food?

C: Just regular American food. I suppose in their own homes they probably cooked differently. They didn't always eat at the commissary. I ate at the commissary whenever I had lunch there, and all of the employees that worked in the camp went there to eat, and quite a few of the Japanese Americans also. But, I'm sure that in their own homes they cooked food. They had a good hospital, and they put out a newspaper. Whenever we had anyone visit our schools here--people we would ask to come in and talk to our teachers--we would usually make an arrangement for the person to go to Manzanar and talk to the teachers there. So we really had a fine relationship.

B: What grades did the camp schools have?

C: Kindergarten through high school.

B: So they taught everything?

C: Well, I used to know how many students they had in school, but it seems to me that they had about a thousand high school students. I visited the elementary schools as well, but don't remember how many there were.

B: Did you ever talk to any of the Japanese American students?



- C: I talked to their teachers.
- B: The Japanese American teachers?
- C: Yes.
- B: How did they feel about the internment?
- C: They were always sweet and lovely. They made no criticisms whatsoever, never a negative word about being there.
- B: Did they ever say anything about how their students felt? Were their students rebellious?
- C: No, but I'm sure the students were happy because I would have heard from the other teachers if they had not been and they had no disciplinary problems whatsoever.
- B: Now, to get a little background on yourself. Where did you receive your college education?
- C: I went to the University of Southern California [USC].
- B: And you graduated with a bachelor's degree from USC?
- C: Yes.
- B: Is that as far as you went in school?
- C: Well, I did quite a bit of graduate work there but never for a master's degree.
- B: What were your feelings toward the Japanese Americans before World War II---before Pearl Harbor? I'm sure you had contact with them at USC.
- C: Well, I never had any feelings about the Japanese people in America. I heard many reports about them doing things around the West Coast. But you know how it is during wartime, you hear so much that you can only believe half of what you hear. I had no bias, and no prejudice against the Japanese Americans.
- B: You said that you were appalled by the thought of them setting up the camp at first.
- C: Yes, I was.
- B: Did you do anything about this? Did you take any action, such as writing to your congressman, or anything like that?



- C: Well, I hate to tell you this, but I spoke very openly against it. A fellow that worked there, who had been a teacher in this county, told me that a man who later became a member of the Supreme Court, in Washington--not Earl Warren--told him that I better keep my mouth shut, which I didn't do.
- B: Did they take any action against you?
- C: No, but I never could admire him later when he went to the Supreme Court because of that.
- B: You mentioned Tule Lake before, did you go up to that camp?
- C: No, I never went to that camp.
- B: They had an education system there too, didn't they?
- C: I'm sure they did in all of the camps.
- B: But you didn't have any contact with any of the teachers up there?
- C: No, none at all. I did hear that the troublemakers went there, and there were a few of them here. I'm sure that if you would talk to some of the people around here, they'd tell you wild stories about the troublemakers. But I probably was there more than anyone in the county, other than the employees, and I saw no evidence of any trouble.
- B: You are, of course, familiar with the riot that took place?
- C: Yes, that was very early when the Japanese came here.
- B: Yes, the camp was only about eight months old.
- C: But the people involved in that riot were moved out of this camp.
- B: Could you tell me about the riot?
- C: I really don't know very much about it.
- B: Did the attitude of the Caucasian teachers at the camp change as a result of the riot?
- C: No, they didn't seem to be bothered by it; I don't think it affected them at all.



B: Did they say that they discussed it in their classes at all?

C: No, they never mentioned it.

B: Did they just kind of ignore it, or don't you know?

C: I don't know. But I feel they were very happy there. In fact, one woman who worked there told me that a young fellow was going to marry a Japanese girl. He was Japanese, and he went to Los Angeles--this was late in the period when they were letting some of them go down to Los Angeles and purchase some things--and while he was down there he was hit over the head and robbed, and the rings that he had purchased were taken away from him. He came back to the camp and said that he didn't feel that he ever wanted to leave it again.

B: Is that right? He felt that safe there?

C: He felt safer there. Around 1943 and 1944 they were allowing them to go out. They were being relocated in the East and other places.

B: Some of these people must have come through the town of Independence. Were they treated with prejudice, with respect, or what?

C: They rarely came to the town of Independence. During the first year that they were there, they never went anywhere. Here's a little story that you might appreciate: A boy whose parents were at Manzanar came on a furlough to see them. He was dressed in the uniform of the United States Army and he went down to Lone Pine, because, after all, he wasn't in the camp, he was a soldier. He went into a barber shop to get a shave or a haircut and he started to pull off his coat and the barber said to him, "We don't take any damn Japs in here." To me, it was such a horrible thing. There was this boy who had been to Attu, and you know they had quite a battle at Attu.

B: Yes, they did. Now, the 442nd, the Japanese American battalion, was the most decorated and the most heroic battalion of the entire United States Army. Do you think their exploits changed the townspeople's attitudes?

C: No, no. Of course, I don't want you to think that every person here in town was against them.



- B: I'm speaking generally, very generally.
- C: But there were people who were very loud in their talk against them, and you can see how the school board felt. And, actually, it would have been hundreds of dollars in their pocket to have operated that school.
- B: They just didn't want to have anything to do with the Japanese Americans?
- C: They wanted nothing to do with them. I was in contact with them until the time when they were all leaving. Before you came, I was in here looking for papers. I couldn't find them, but I remember an institute we held down there. All of the Japanese teachers, aides, and helpers autographed that paper for me. Are you familiar with the book, Born Free and Equal?
- B: No, I'm not.
- C: They put out a book while they were there. Mr. Merritt, who was the head of the project, helped them with it-- and I have a copy of it.
- B: Is it a published book?
- C: It was put out by some phase of the U.S. War Department. I haven't looked at it for a long time, so I don't remember.
- B: The institute you were talking about, was that a workshop type of thing?
- C: It was a workshop, yes. I don't have the program as such, but we were all down there enjoying ourselves so much together, and before I left the Japanese American teachers wanted to autograph this newspaper and give it to me. I have that, and I also have one of their yearbooks.
- B: Oh, they published a yearbook? Do you mean the high school or the whole school system?
- C: The high school, but I think it covered all of the grades.
- B: Was it complete with photographs and everything?
- C: Yes, it has photographs.
- B: Do you have one of these books?
- C: I have all my historical books stored in my cupboard.



Of course, all the people who were employees there were people that I knew, and I think that most of them had the same feelings that I had about the place. It was mainly the people who had no contact with the camp that had such bad feelings about it.

B: Did you go to the dedication ceremony this past spring when they put up the plaque at Manzanar making it a historical landmark?

C: No, I didn't, and I might add that I'm a little bit unhappy about that plaque.

B: Are you familiar with the wording?

C: I'm unhappy with the wording. I think that, probably, most of the people who were instrumental in having that plaque put up are not the people who were in the camp, but descendants. And they probably resent it more than the people who were actually there. Now, I'm just guessing at this, but I certainly don't like the wording.

B: What do you object to in particular?

C: I think they should have said, "May the incident at Pearl Harbor, and the succeeding events never emerge again." I think they should have mentioned the bombing of Pearl Harbor, because after all, that was what set the whole thing off, wasn't it?

B: You think they should have qualified it, in other words? And not simply have said, "May the injustices and humiliation suffered here as a result of hysteria, racism and economic exploitation never emerge again."

C: I certainly do, because the way this reads it looks as if the Americans were altogether to blame. As I say, I think they should have said, "May the event of Pearl Harbor, and the resulting effect never emerge again." That way they would have shouldered some of the blame. I don't think the Americans were altogether to blame. It's a little bit different when you live in California. You see, this thing happened here on the West Coast, and I can see the average person's feeling down on the coast. They thought if they could reach Pearl Harbor they could bomb here, and naturally, they wanted to get the Japanese out of there, which I think was very bad. We didn't do that to the Germans when we were fighting Germany. And, of course, I know many Germans you wouldn't be able to even recognize, but they were Germans. I don't like what they said in that third paragraph, and I think that they should have said, "May



the incident at Pearl Harbor, and the resulting events never emerge again." I think we could all go for that, but there are a lot of people around here who resent that marker very much. I resent that paragraph myself, and I think that I was very liberal in my feelings about them. I certainly felt that we had done wrong by penning up those American citizens. Of course, some of those fathers and mothers were American citizens, and to me the whole thing was illegal. I think that's why we finally started trying to relocate them. The Supreme Court finally got around to saying that this was illegal.

B: They termed the various centers like Manzanar "concentration camps" on the plaque. Do you actually think Manzanar was a "concentration camp"?

C: Well, it started out as a concentration camp, but I think in a very short time they realized that it didn't need to be. They didn't let them out mainly because they felt they would be hurt if they were out. There were a lot of people in this town that would certainly not have been kind to them.

B: You've been very helpful and I want to thank you very much on behalf of the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project.

END OF INTERVIEW



## Attitudes

on relocation, 1,4,5,6  
toward Japanese Americans, 1,2,3,4,7,9  
toward Manzanar War Relocation Center, 1,2,3,4,8,9

Attu, Alaska, 6

Born Free and Equal, 7

Cragen, Dorothy C.,

education, 4

employment, 1

Carter, Dr., 2

Discrimination, 1,2,6,7

Independence, California, 1,6

Japanese Americans, 1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9

Lone Pine, California, 6

Los Angeles, California, 6

Manzanar War Relocation

Center, 1,2,3,5,8,9

education at, 1,2,3,7

memorial plaque, 8,9

riot, 5

teachers, 2,4,7

Merritt, Ralph P., 7

Owens Valley Unified School

District, 1,7

Pearl Harbor, bombing of, 4,8,9

Tule Lake Segregation Center, 2,5

United States Army

Japanese American battalion, 6

United States government, 1

United States Supreme Court, 5

University of Southern California, 4

West Coast, U.S.A., 2,4,8