The Manzanar Committee

The Manzanar Committee is rarely mentioned in the secondary literature. Since Sue Embrey has been considered *The Manzanar Committee*, once even being called the “Messiah of Manzanar,” I have relied on Sue to recount its history in obtaining both state landmark and national historical site recognition. Her account is augmented by comments of others who were involved with the Manzanar Committee.

The beginning of the Manzanar Committee, following the 1969 Pilgrimage, was tentative, an ad hoc group originally called the Manzanar Project. Sue attributed the idea of forming a committee to Warren Furutani, who was working for the JACL and attempting to disseminate information about the camps to students. The Los Angeles Department of Water and Power (DWP) had reclaimed the Manzanar property, according to the lease negotiated with the federal government. The DWP inquired whether the JACL would like to obtain the cemetery area and the front entrance of Manzanar. Furutani presented the offer to the emerging Manzanar Committee. “We didn’t know what to do with the offer,” Sue admitted, “but we accepted it and cleaned up the cemetery and the front entrance.”

“We had two purposes in forming the committee,” Sue stated. “The first was education, informing people about the camps. The second was to file an application to designate Manzanar as a California State Landmark.” The Committee had become a cohesive group by the time we started [that process] in [19]’71. Members, in addition to Sue and Warren Furutani, were Don and Susan Rundstrom, Ron and Pat Rundstrom, Amy Ishii, Rex Takahashi, Jim and Faye Matsuoka, Bill Leong, Henry Matsumura, and Ryozo Kado.

These members of the Manzanar Committee wrote the story of Manzanar, documenting its significance in California history, a requirement for State Historical
Landmark status. The Committee cited three justifications for being granted the status: Manzanar was the first WRA camp constructed; it was the camp nearest to Los Angeles, which has the largest population of Japanese Americans; and the cemetery with the I Rei To tower was a site of considerable historical and archeological significance and should be preserved as a landmark.

Rex Takahashi composed the original draft:

In the early part of World War II, 120,000 persons of Japanese Ancestry were interned in relocation centers by Executive Order 9066, issued on February 19, 1942, by President Franklin D. Roosevelt. Manzanar, the first of ten such concentration camps, was bounded by barbed wire and guard towers, confining 10,000 persons, the majority being American citizens. May the injustices and the humiliation suffered here as a result of racism and economic greed never emerge again.

The committee had added the Japanese phrase ton de mo nai, “It’s Incredible.”

Members initially disagreed about the wording, some thinking it too strong, but the Committee ultimately submitted that version. Manzanar was awarded the provisional designation of California State Landmark by the Department of Parks and Recreation on the condition that there be fewer words for the plaque, which had to be hand-cast in bronze. The Committee learned through the JACL, however, that it was not the number of words, but certain terminology that was considered objectionable: concentration camp, racism, and economic greed.3

Sue, Warren Furutani, and Amy Ishii met first with the State Department of Parks and Recreation. In addition to objecting to the Committee’s terminology, the State wanted to include hysteria as a cause. A compromise was effected: “hysteria” was included, and “economic exploitation” replaced “economic greed.” To no one’s surprise there was no agreement on “concentration camp.”

Alex Garcia, California Assemblyman whose district included Little Tokyo, was supportive of the Manzanar Committee’s work. He and Dennis Nishikawa, his aide, who had been the president of the Sacramento Chapter of the JACL, arranged for the Committee to meet with William Penn Mott, the director of the Department of Parks and Recreation.

During the meeting the Parks and Recreation representatives argued that there was not enough evidence that the relocation centers were concentration camps. The Manzanar Committee argued that they had submitted ample historical evidence. The Committee stressed that the wording should reflect the views of the people who were inside the camp, and not the people who were looking in from the outside. Finally, Director Penn-Mott stated that he could not accept the wording and excused himself from the meeting. As Sue and Warren both remembered the incident, there were angry exchanges between Warren and Penn Mott, as the director was leaving. Penn Mott finally stormed out of the room, declaring: “You can have it all!”4