

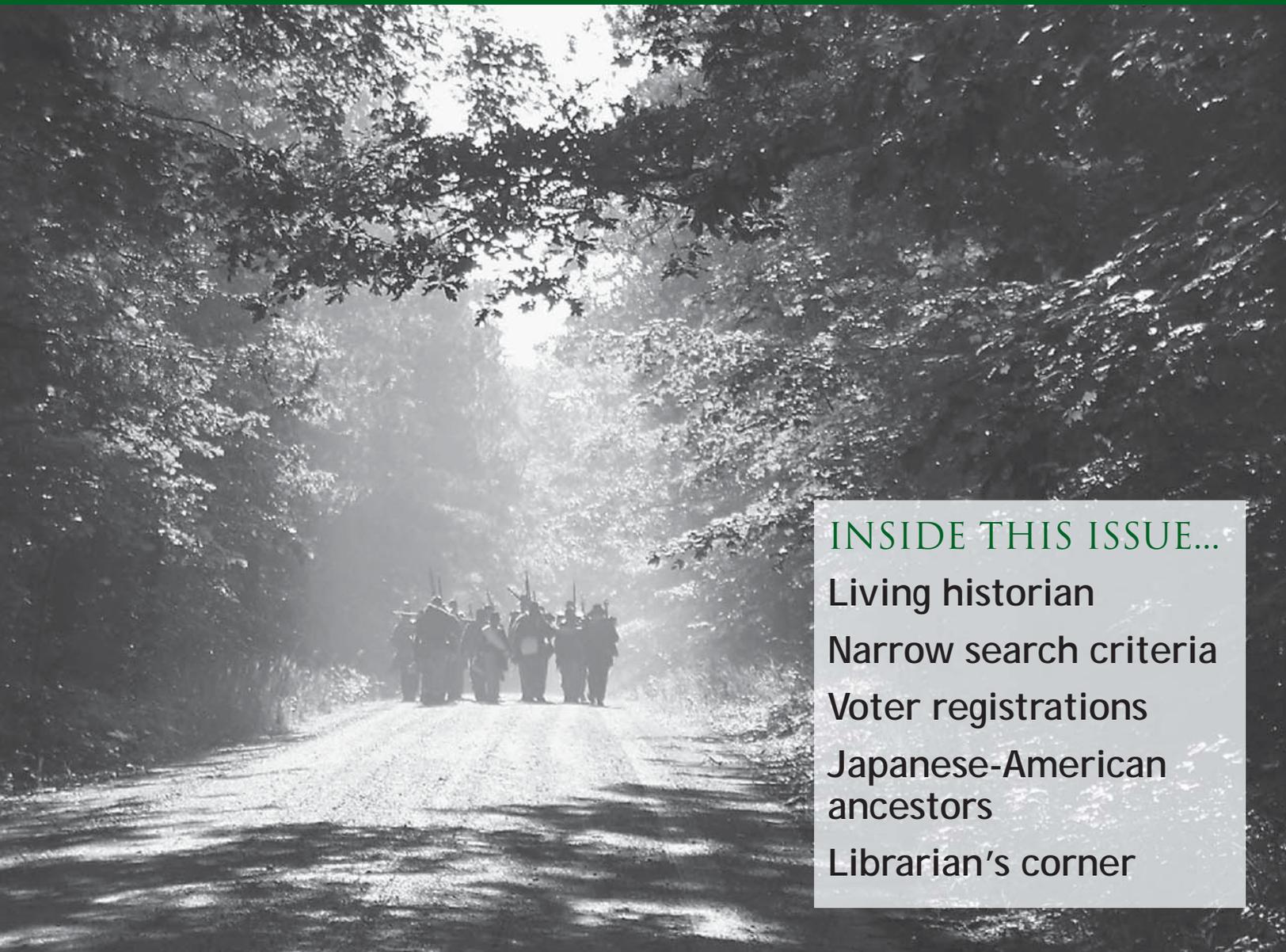


NGS MAGAZINE

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ON THE COVER

Reenactor soldiers participating in a period-correct, twenty-mile "Preservation March" for Historic Fort Wayne in Detroit, 20–21 June 2009 at the Manistee National Forest near Pentwater, Michigan, sponsored by the 3rd Michigan Volunteer Infantry, Company F. Photo by Mike Gillett.

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Researching your Japanese-American ancestors



A 1943 photo of the Manzanar Relocation Center with the Sierra Nevada in the background. Photo courtesy the Library of Congress, Prints and Photographs Division, Ansel Adams, photographer.

Descendants of Japanese or Japanese-American internees during World War II have a unique opportunity to mine historic documents for genealogical tidbits. In 1942, Executive Order 1099 set in motion the removal for internment of more than 100,000 Japanese and Japanese-American residents of the West Coast. Many special records about this particular population group, now held at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), were created as a result. The wartime internment in “camp” is still a painful memory for many in the Japanese-American community. However, those affected do their family history a great disservice by overlooking this very rich source of information.

Much of what has been retained at NARA refers to the running of the internment camps—everything from the plans for building them to information on buying food supplies. But there are other records that provide information on the individuals who were interned, giving a very good idea of what life was like for them. Several specific records created by the War Relocation Authority, in NARA’s Record Group (RG) 210, housed at the Archives building in Washington,

D.C., are the richest source of information for family historians.

Files on individual internees

An “evacuee file” (entry 22) was created for each internee. It is easy to find out if such a file exists for the person you seek by searching for the surname on NARA’s website at <www.archives.gov/aad/> or on Ancestry.com. Some basic information is included in these databases, but it barely scratches the surface of what is in the actual files. In them you will find some or all of the following: an individual data form, a leave clearance form (these two give the most direct genealogical information), letters of support, property inventories, health records, exit passes, and school records. Because of the very personal nature of some of the information contained in these files, they are under something called a “B-6 restriction.” In order to get the actual file, you must show that the subject is dead or have a letter from the subject granting you access to the file.

The data and leave clearance forms noted above provide the following information on the internee: date and place of birth, names of father and mother and their places of birth, father’s

Individual record sheet of Isono Takaki (RG 210, entry 22).

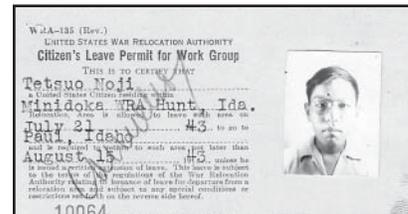
occupation, name of spouse, and the names of all living relatives both in Japan and in the U.S. and their relationships. These six pages can do wonders to expand a family tree. Although our family knew Isono Takaki (my husband's great-grandmother), no one knew her maiden name or other information. Her file revealed the name of her father, Yukutaro Hayashi, providing a maiden name for Isono, and even the full maiden name of her mother, Teru Takenaka. Finding the name of the tiny village where she was born, Miyanojinmura, Mii-gun, Fukuoka-Ken, is important for further research.

These two forms also cover a person's educational and work history. The Kumasaka family worked for a very long time in the greenhouse business in Seattle. But the family's earliest immigrants worked in other fields before getting settled. For example, Yuji Kumasaka's file detailed his work life from the sugar fields of Oahu in 1906, to railroad gang work in Montana in 1908, to sawmill work in Washington (1909–19), before settling in Seattle.

The other documents in these files explore even further the life experience of family members both in and out of "camp." Letters of support were solicited from friends and acquaintances on the outside when a family applied to leave. For the most part they are positive testimonials by friends and describe how the family lived and

how they interacted with the community. Some of the most positive things someone could say about an internee were that he/she was industrious, "American," and Christian. A supporter wrote of one of our families that there was "no drunkenness or venereal disease."

Many of the letters and papers in these files are about leaving camp, even temporarily. I found a photo ID "work pass" for my father-in-law,

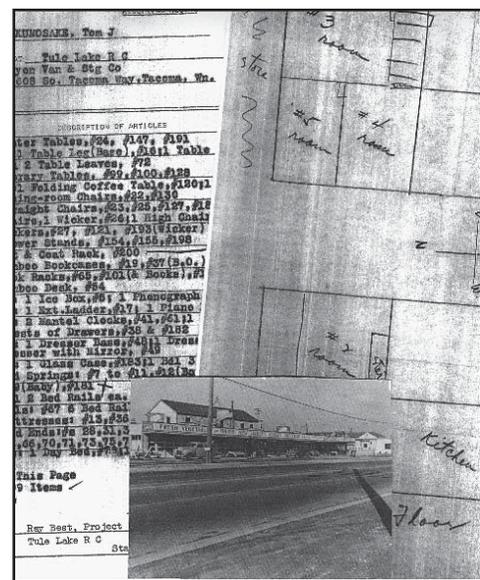


Leave permit card for Tetsuo Noji (RG 210, entry 22).

Harold Noji. We had no other photos of him at a young age! The most heart-wrenching set of letters I found for our family was

about a parent trying to get a pass to leave the internment camp to care for a sick daughter who had been working outside of camp in an area from which Japanese had not been evicted.

Property inventories and correspondence about shipping goods form a large part of some files. This can give an idea of a family's possessions before the war, and possibly what happened to items of personal and real property. In the case of Tom Kumasaka, he detailed for the authorities the property he had left behind, including a plan and keys to two locked rooms. It seems that authori-



Inventory and plan of property owned by Tom Kumasaka in Tacoma, Washington, with a photo of the family business (RG 210, entry 22).

ties were helping with storage of those items, and helped to sell the real estate left behind.

Health and school records are very personal and must be handled with discretion. In one case, I found the entire pregnancy history, including miscarriages, for a great-uncle's second wife. She detailed leaving and then returning to her first husband before leaving permanently. In our family, one child was born in camp, and the labor and earliest days of his life are chronicled in some detail. School records might show that a relative was particularly strong in a subject or at academics in general very early in life.

For persons above school age, there is a work card that chronicles all the jobs a person performed in camp. Our family members did tasks from trash collector to teacher. Internees were paid for their work, though the wages were low. The card also sometimes records why a person changed jobs. Uncle George had something of a temper and was "fired" from the kitchen for fighting!

Other personal data files

In addition to these individual internee files, there are a few other types of documents that record specific information about individuals or families.

Individual Locator Cards (entry 23) contain codes of basic data found more easily elsewhere, but the handwritten data on the cards is fun. Someone recorded each and every time the internee left and returned to camp and where he/she went. Agricultural labor was in short supply and young internees were often farmed out to work. Many in our family took advantage of this and enjoyed a certain sense of freedom being out of camp.

Basic Family Data Cards (entry 49) place individuals into family groups, in case you don't know already (as I didn't) how people with the same surname were connected. A card was created for each year and gives date and place of birth for all and indicates how much money each family member made working in camp.

Final Exit Rosters (on microfilm M1865) again sort people by family group and then give the date of their exit from camp and the location to

which they were sent. Sometimes the first place a family went after camp was not the place they finally settled. This information might fill in a missing location in a family's history after camp.

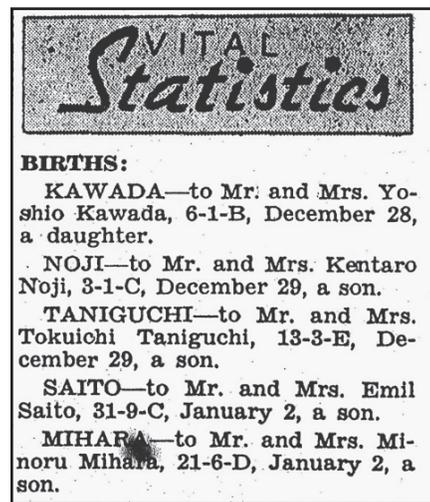
Internal Security Case Files (entry 51/52) were created if a person came into contact with the police. These files can contain very personal information and are also under the B6 restriction. Internment camps were the size of a small city (Tule Lake was the largest "city" in that part of California at the time), and had all the same issues. There were noise disturbances, thefts, and murders. However, minor problems like the report of a lost purse were also logged. My favorite story from these files is that of 15-year-old Sachi Noji, who lost her algebra book and a coin purse with 31 cents in it on 29 December 1943. When I told her of my find, she thought a moment and then all of sudden a flood of memories came back to her about the day her baby brother was born and all the craziness, including losing her book, that accompanied the event.

Unindexed but important documents

As noted above, each camp was basically a small city. It is amazing to me how quickly the internees put together all the "conveniences" of a normal society, such as newspapers, civic organizations, and local sports teams.

Each camp had at least one newspaper and sometimes more than one (available on microfilm C0053) and they

can be very informative. They are not indexed, so you do have to read through them, but they are full of names and you might just find mention of the person you are researching. One of the mainstay sections, just like for other



Announcement of birth of Noji son, The Minidoka Irrigator, 8 January 1944 (microfilm C0053, roll 92)

local papers, was notices of births, marriages, and deaths. Sports teams are listed by name and people who participated in plays and concerts are named. I found a fairly long article on a family member, Oliver Noji, who was an art teacher at Tule Lake. He was trained as an architect and had traveled to Europe before the war. We learned many details of his life from this article.

While many of the general files for each camp (entry 48) are not of interest to genealogists, some of them are but they take some work to sort through. In a report about the educational system at Tule Lake, I found an essay by 14-year-old Yukio Kumasaka detailing his feelings about internment. In another report I found the minutes of a meeting of the food cooperative at Tule Lake that took place after the theft of money from a safe. The meeting lasted many hours and I could almost smell the cigarette smoke and feel the restlessness in the room! I found our family member, Tom Kumasaka, on the list of participants. I had gleaned a very real sense of his experience for a few hours of his life in camp. These files are not arranged by internee name, but with diligence you can sometimes find references to the people you seek.

And much, much more

I've been able to describe just some of what is available in RG 210. There is more to be plumbed in these documents, though it does get more difficult beyond what I've mentioned. There are even more documents in other record groups at the Archives II building in College Park, Maryland. There you can learn about those enemy aliens who were arrested and held (some temporarily) separately from their families in military installations (RG 60). Documents from the assembly centers (places where internees were held between about April and October 1942 while the internment camps were being built) can give a feel for this part of a family's experience (RG 499). From the period after the war there are documents about compensation paid to some of those dispossessed by internment (RG 60). And finally, there are documents relating to the hearings in 1981 (RG 220) and the final apology

in 1988 and redress payments to survivors up to 1999 (RG 60).

Some of these documents are more difficult to access than others, but all are worth your while to help you learn more about family members and their experiences during this difficult time. To end on a lighter note, the photographs from RG 210, which are held at College Park, can be searched by surname in ARC <www.archives.gov/research/arc>. You might just hit the jackpot as I did with this wonderful image of Henry Kumasaka and friend enjoying the snow, even while incarcerated.



Henry Kumasaka and Toshio Doi sledding at Minidoka Relocation Camp (NARA photo 210G-11A-729).

Pamela Loos-Noji, PhD, has been doing genealogy for about five years after a career as a medieval art historian. While her own family research points her focus mostly towards New England and Pennsylvania, her extended family's story was so intriguing that she became very interested in the Asian immigrant experience on the West Coast and Hawaii. Currently she is studying with the ProGen 6 group, is active in the Montgomery County (Maryland) Genealogy Club, lectures locally, and volunteers at the local Family History Center. Her time at the National Institute on Genealogical Research in 2008 led to a volunteer position at the National Archives in Washington, D.C. She can be reached at <kin1889@me.com>.