Masaye Nakamura's
Personal Story
Antonette C. Noble

Masaye was born in Hawaii on 7 August 1923, to a Japanese immigrant father and a Hawaiian-born Japanese American mother. When she was seven months old the young family moved to the Seattle, Washington, area and later, during the 1930s, to Los Angeles, California. Masaye was the oldest of four children. She graduated from Roosevelt High School in Los Angeles in 1941 and began attending UCLA, just months prior to the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor. Her family was required to leave California under President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066. While waiting for more permanent camps to be built inland, the family was first detained in a temporary "Assembly Center" at the Santa Anita Race Tracks. Her family was then sent to the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming, but she was fortunate to continue her higher education in Missouri. In 1999, at the age of seventy-six, Masaye told her personal story about this time in her life.

Preparation
Instructor's use of Masaye's story: This personal story captures many issues involved with the evacuation and detention of Japanese Americans during World War II. These issues include how the government had restricted the rights of Japanese and Japanese Americans in the United States and the anti-Japanese racism of the era.

Her story should be used to discuss these issues. It also can be used to show how the larger national events surrounding Executive Order 9066 affected individuals, such as Masaye, a young woman starting college when the United States entered World War II. After reading Masaye's story, have the students discuss the following questions. Included are some suggested answers for this discussion.

Procedure
1. List the ways the U.S. government restricted the rights of Masaye's family before and during the war. The answers should include how her father was prevented from becoming a citizen; her mother was stripped of her citizenship when she married a non citizen from Japan; the curfew requiring Masaye to leave school; and of course, the evacuation of Japanese Americans from the West Coast area.

2. Masaye's story is an example of racism against the Japanese in America. Discuss how this racism affected Masaye and her family. The answer should include answers discussed for question number one. There was also the assumption that because the Japanese Americans looked like the enemy, they were the enemy. Examples Masaye experienced were her train ride to college, her walk to town to the Post Office, and the clerk's surprise when Masaye spoke English.

3. Masaye mentioned that she felt she wasn't free, even in Missouri, far away from the internment camps. Give examples of how Masaye was treated like a "prisoner." Discussion can include how she had to leave UCLA due to the curfew; the sentries with guns when she left Santa Anita; the tags they were required to wear; her experience at Park College and not being able to leave campus unaccompanied.

4. In her conclusion, Masaye discusses how important it was to her that her parents had maintained their dignity throughout the evacuation and detention. How do you think this affected Masaye?
Masaye\'s Story

When I graduated from high school I was very excited because I was going to go to college. I had been accepted at UCLA [University of California at Los Angeles]. My father felt that higher education was very important. I did quite well in school. My goal was to go to college. When I enrolled in September of 1941, I decided that I was going to take advantage of everything college had to offer. I soon joined the Freshman Council, becoming active in student government. I really studied hard and tried to get all that I could possibly get out of the classes that I took. In order to help with the finances, I worked as a school girl in Beverly Hills, a short distance away.

I was really enjoying college life until, of course, December 7, 1941, when Pearl Harbor was attacked. It was so sudden and unexpected. It was a complete shock to me when Japan attacked the United States. Of course, I had to leave UCLA because there was a curfew on all Japanese Americans and their parents. We had to be in our homes between certain times in the evenings and early mornings. Also, we could not go beyond certain miles; I think it was five miles beyond our homes. Of course, UCLA was beyond that, from East Los Angeles.

My father told me [after Pearl Harbor], \"Since you\'re the oldest in the family, I expect you to take over when I leave.\" I said, \"What do you mean, when you leave?\" He said, \"I\'m not a citizen. I\'m not able to become a citizen. I am an alien, as far as the United States government is concerned. I think they\'re going to round us up and imprison us.\" He had a suitcase packed. He was all ready to go. He said, \"I don\'t think they\'ll take your mother, although she lost her citizenship when she married me.\" She was also born in Hawaii, although she lost her citizenship when she married my father. He said we would not be imprisoned because we were United States citizens.

I had felt up until that time that we were one hundred percent American citizens. I was aghast at the idea that I would not be considered one hundred percent American and that I would have to be looked on as an enemy and lose all my rights I had as a citizen. When the evacuation orders were posted in our neighborhood, and we were asked to leave, I think I felt a sense of relief that all of us were going together rather than just my parents or just my father.

Before we were evacuated, we were told that we would only be given probably two weeks to get rid of our belongings and to settle matters and so my mother decided that she would store some of the valuable things she wanted to keep, and sell the rest. One day a used salesman came to the door and he looked around and said, \"I\'ll give you twenty-five dollars for the whole lot.\" My mother was enraged because we had a piano, a beautiful dining set, a living room set, and the bedrooms had beds and dressers. She thought twenty-five dollars for all this furniture was insulting. She uttered some words I had never heard her say and she had told us that we should never use, and she chased him out of the house and slammed the door. She gave the furniture away to some neighbors who had been very kind to us during this ordeal. She said she rather gave the furniture away than to let some man take advantage of us.

When the order came we assembled at the church that we used to attend every Sunday, the Union Church in Los Angeles. We were given tags and boarded buses. We didn\'t know where we were going to go. The bus driver asked us to pull the shades down so that the people on the streets couldn\'t see us and also that we couldn\'t see them. The ride was fairly short. I was surprised when we got to our destination and I opened the shades, and the first thing I saw was the statue of a horse. We were at the Santa Anita Race Tracks. When we got off the bus we saw this whole pile of straw in front of some barracks. They brought some bags along and said, \"Fill these bags with straw and these will be your mattresses for your stay here.\" I started to sneeze and couldn\'t stop. I couldn\'t take the straw. I guess I was allergic to the straw. So, I didn\'t use the straw mattress and neither did the rest of the family because of my allergy.

As soon as we got settled my father asked, \"Do you still want to go to college?\" I said, \"Of course I do.\" I told him it had been my dream, and now the dream was shattered and gone. He said, \"I heard there are some church groups that are working to let some of the students out of the camps to go to colleges in the Midwest and in areas where people would feel that they would not be endangered by you.\" I said, \"Endangered? What do you mean?\" \"They think you might be the enemy, because you look like the enemy.\"

He had been quite active in the Presbyterian Church, so he contacted a friend who contacted the Quaker organization and they had formed a committee to try to get some of the students out...
of the camps so they could continue their education. I was able to 
get an application, apply, and they were able to find a place for me 
at Park College in Parkville, Missouri, where the president of 
the college had been in Los Angeles during the evacuation. He had 
been horrified at the fact that American citizens were taken out 
of their homes and herded into these camps. He decided that when 
he went back to Missouri he would encourage the staff and the 
administrators to accept Japanese American students who were in 
the camps into Park College. He was successful on the campus, but 
the townspeople of Parkville were up in arms with the fact they 
were going to bring Japanese American students to the college. 
They said that if any of the students were seen anywhere around, 
they would lynch them, or kill them, because they were enemies 
and how dare Dr. Young bring these enemy aliens to the school as 
students. It was known as the “Parkville War”; the war between 
the college and Parkville. Dr. Young stood firm and he did accept, 
I think there were seven students, and I was one of them, one of 
the lucky ones.

I remember the day I left [the Santa Anita] camp, an army truck came into the camp to get me. There were three 
soldiers: two in the front and one in the back, and they all had 
rifles. It was an open truck and we left the camp and headed for 
Union Station in Los Angeles. They left me with one of the train 
men and he said, “Come with me and get on this car here.” So I 
climbed aboard this car, and all the seats were occupied. All the 
people were staring at me as I walked in and they were not pleasant 
stares. I could feel this hate, this feeling of real anger for the fact 
that I was boarding that car. I said there wasn’t any seat here. He 
said to sit in the front, there’s a little space there, you can put your 
suitcase down and sit there.

When the conductor came through to pick up the tickets from 
us, I was the first one he saw. He approached and I put my ticket 
up. He snatched it and with a look of real hate, he spit on me. I was 
so taken aback with his action I could feel the spit rolling down my 
cheek. I couldn’t even reach up and wipe it off. I felt so humiliated, 
and ashamed, and dirty. When he spit on me I could hear the gasps 
in the car, but no one spoke up, no one said anything as he went 
through the car. Everybody was looking at me and I just sat there 
frozen. I sat like that throughout the trip. I don’t know how long 
it was—throughout the night and half the day. I didn’t eat, I didn’t 
move, I just sat there.

[When I finally arrived in Kansas City], Dr. Young and a few 
students were there waiting for me. He welcomed me and said, 
“The students at Park are excited about greeting you and accept-
ing you as part of the student body. But, I want to warn you of one 
thing.” Then he told me about the townspeople and how they felt 
and how I shouldn’t go down to the town by myself.

When we got to the campus I met my roommate and I saw my 
dorm room for the first time. It had a nice soft bed and was nicely 
furnished. It was so different from camp! The teachers were all very 
fine. The classes I took were exciting. I really felt very grateful to the 
Quakers for allowing me to leave the camp and go to Park College.

Winter at Heart Mountain Relocation Center. (Wyoming State Archives, 
Department of State Parks and Cultural Resources)

After a while, however, I felt tired, or kind of frustrated about 
asking people to accompany me every time I went downtown. I 
didn’t want to keep asking people to do things for me when I was 
perfectly able to do it myself. I still felt like I wasn’t free, that it was 
almost like camp, to be enclosed in an area and not be able to leave 
without someone going with me. One afternoon I needed to get 
some stamps. I decided I was going to go down to the town by 
myself. As I was walking down I saw two young men sitting on this 
small bridge that I had to cross in order to get to the Post Office. 
As I got closer, I realized they were looking at me not pleasantly, 
but rather with almost hate in their eyes, and I started to get a little 
afraid. My knees started to feel weak, my heart started pounding, 
and I thought I should turn around and go back. But then I said, 
No, Why should I turn around? I don’t want to look like they 
frightened me. So, I kept walking and did manage to walk by. Then 
I heard their footsteps behind me then other foot steps so I knew 
there were other people with them. Somehow I managed to get to 
the Post Office and walked in and asked the clerk for some stamps. 
The woman looked at me with a funny look on her face and said, 
“You speak English?” “Of course I speak English, that’s the only 
language I know. I’m an American citizen, just like you,” I 
responded. She gave me the stamps, gave me my change, and 
didn’t say another word. I turned around to go, and the people who 
had followed me parted so I could get through. I walked out and 
back to campus.

I was back in my dorm room about ten minutes when my house 
mother came and said, “Dr. Young would like to see you in his 
office immediately.” I walked into his office and he was pretty 
angry. He said, “You promised me you would always be accompa-
nied when you went downtown, and this afternoon you went there 
by yourself. Do you know if something had happened to you how 
I would have felt? And how the rest of this campus would have felt? 
It’s my responsibility, our responsibility to keep you safe here, and 
you broke one of the rules that you said you would keep.” Of
course, he was right. He then grounded me for a month, not allowing me to participate in any of the activities they had at school for a month.

The second Christmas at Park College I was able to scrape enough money to buy a Greyhound bus ticket from Kansas City to Heart Mountain, Wyoming. When I got off the bus the first person I saw [at Heart Mountain] was my father. It was in the midst of a snow storm, a blizzard. It was very cold, wet, and miserable. We walked to the barracks and the unit where my family was. I saw how bleak it was, how desolate. Although there were decorations up for Christmas, the internees had tried to decorate their units for Christmas and to celebrate Christmas even in camp, I realized how different it was from the situation I was in at Park College. I saw the barbed wire, the sentry towers, and I burst into tears. Half of it was because I was happy to see them and half because I felt guilty that they had to live under such terrible conditions when I was really living a very good life outside the camp. Although I enjoyed my stay with them, I stayed a week, my heart was breaking during that time. I could see that they had not lost their sense of dignity, and also their spirit. The thing that really struck me was the fact that in spite of these terrible conditions, there were no complaints. They didn’t have any bitterness in them. I realized how strong they were and I should learn from them that to be strong and to endure and to maintain dignity. They stayed for almost three years and then went back to Los Angeles to settle near where they had been before the evacuation.

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