

SAGEBRUSH TREES, “SLANT-EYED SANTAS” AND UNCLE SAM:
CHRISTMAS AT MINIDOKA RELOCATION CENTER

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ABSTRACT

ANNE BLANKENSHIP: Sagebrush Trees, “Slant-Eyed Santas” and Uncle Sam:
Christmas at Minidoka Relocation Center
(Under the direction of Laurie Maffly-Kipp)

During the Japanese American internment of World War II, the internees of Minidoka Relocation Center celebrated Christmas with elaborate festivities every year. Christmas became intractably tied to American patriotism throughout the country and within Minidoka during the war. This paper seeks to understand why a community comprised of only a small minority of Christians would celebrate the major holiday of their captors. I show that while some Japanese Americans used Christmas as a way to show solidarity with America during a difficult time, others used the traditional artifacts of the holiday to visually display and protest their poor living conditions and loss of civil rights. The paper systematically examines the material culture of Christmas, particularly cards, gifts, trees and decorations. The analysis of gift giving reveals a complex exchange between internees and the hundreds of church groups outside of the camp that sent presents each Christmas.

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Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor shocked and angered most Americans. As often occurs in such situations, old prejudices and fears surfaced and punishment landed on those least equipped to defend themselves. Within a day of the attack, FBI agents and military police arrested Japanese American community leaders, Buddhist priests and Japanese language teachers and took them to high security prisons where many remained incarcerated for the entire war. When President Roosevelt declared the entire West Coast, though not Hawaii, a military zone to be cleared of all people of Japanese descent, tens of thousands American citizens, residents and orphaned children alike, packed their bags, sold their belongings and attempted to build functional lives in the desert camps where they were cast. The story of the Japanese American internment during World War II has been told from a variety of perspectives, but seldom do the religious beliefs and practices of the internees play a role. In this paper, I will examine the Christmas celebrations at Minidoka Relocation Center near Twin Falls, Idaho. In the fall of 1943, Minidoka opened its gates to 10,000 Japanese Americans from the Seattle and Portland areas. Eventually, some Nikkei, people of Japanese descent, were allowed to relocate farther east to attend college or find work in the cities or on the farms outside of the camp, but thousands remained in the camp, particularly those with small children and the elderly. For those men, women and children who remained incarcerated for the years of the war, the Christmas season became an opportunity to celebrate an American holiday with the rest of the country. While the Nikkei at Minidoka participated in traditional Christmas activities and imbued these occasions with strong patriotic themes, a close

examination of the practices also reveals subtle acts of resistance in protest of the internment.

Executive Order 9066 led to the creation of the War Relocation Authority (WRA), the government organization commissioned to build the relocation centers, “evacuate” the Nikkei from Alaska, Washington, Oregon and California and run the centers for the duration. Today, most people refer to the relocation centers as internment camps, but Roosevelt and others called them concentration camps during the war. This paper will refrain from the use of that term because to its divergent connotations after the European Holocaust of the same time period. I write about “internees” rather than “residents,” “evacuees” or “colonists” in order to properly acknowledge their incarceration. Some individuals at Minidoka and other camps did refer to themselves as colonists, however, drawing parallels between themselves and early pioneers of the West, taming desert land for civilization. Such debates over terminology hint at the vast complexities related to the Japanese American internment.

After months in temporary assembly centers at fairgrounds and racetracks, the WRA placed the Nikkei on trains and buses to be moved from the lush, green Pacific Northwest to the dry, brown, flat landscape of Southern Idaho. The hastily built center, functionally an enclosed town for 10,000 people, had not been completed when the internees arrived in the early fall of 1942. Stoves were not delivered and installed until mid-December of the first year and even plumbing for the public showers and toilets was not completed when the Nikkei arrived. The barracks, constructed of wooden frames covered in tar paper, baked in the heat of the summer and allowed the cold winds to enter throughout the winter. In oral histories taken decades after the war, internees complained

most about the suffocating dust storms and subsequent acres of mud. The WRA borrowed the land for Minidoka from the Bureau of Land Reclamation and this was indeed land that had not yet been reclaimed. Hurried mass construction on desert land tore up the ground and did not result in ideal living conditions. In addition to housing, the WRA built two elementary schools, a high school, a hospital and recreation/dining halls.

Once settled in their cramped barrack apartments, Nikkei could gain employment for minimal wages at the schools, hospital, kitchens, the coop or the WRA-initiated, but internee operated camp newspaper, *The Minidoka Irrigator*. Communal meals quickly resulted in a fragmentation of family life as children sat with friends at meals, often seeing their parents only at night. Family hierarchies disintegrated as younger generations spoke better English and could negotiate government policies more easily and communicate more successfully with the Caucasian administration. The WRA also hired civilian Caucasians to work as teachers, doctors and nurses, filling any gap left open after the Nikkei arrived. Government policy refrained from ever using the term “white,” but categorized any non-Japanese employee as Caucasian. This included African Americans and people from other Asian countries. Daily routine set in as the Nikkei adapted to life behind barbed wire.

The Christmas celebrations at Minidoka stand out among other community activities at Minidoka and contrast with the events held at other internment camps. No other event at Minidoka prompted as many internees to participate, nor did any other event receive as much attention in memoirs and oral histories collected decades after the war. Other internment camps did not throw such grand Christmas parties or have

remotely as many different Christmas activities as those at Minidoka. While some other camps held large parades on Labor Day or other holidays, these events did not involve nearly the number of people as the Christmas activities at Minidoka, nor were they remembered as vividly in later reports or newspapers during the war. Internees led and organized the annual dances, variety shows, caroling, decorating and tree trimming at Minidoka with little to no outside help or suggestion. The first plans for the Christmas celebrations, beyond those in the churches, came from the Community Activities Committee, a group of Nikkei who gathered together to sponsor entertainment and generally raise morale in the camp.

One possible explanation for the fact that these elaborate events occurred at Minidoka and not at the other camps stems from the differences of pre-war experiences among the internees. Japanese Americans from Western Washington and Oregon did not experience the extreme prejudices and obstacles that the Nikkei in California battled. While the Pacific Northwest was by no means entirely welcoming to the immigrant population, conditions were better and many stories attest to neighbors watching over houses, pets and even paying property taxes for Nikkei during the internment. These stories are quite rare in California. Minidokans might have been more eager to celebrate an American holiday because they had less resentment about life in America. The facts that more men volunteered for service at Minidoka and the camp experienced substantially fewer incidents of violence or labor strikes than other camps attest to this explanation as well.

This paper will consider two questions: Why did the internees at Minidoka hold such elaborate Christmas celebrations and what did they accomplish through them? In

complex ways, the celebration of Christmas at Minidoka Relocation Center enabled Japanese Americans to show unity with the nation, while simultaneously protesting their incarceration. Christmas also provided an opportunity for Protestant denominations outside the camp to publicly demonstrate their support for the internees. While Christians were in the minority at Minidoka, nearly all internees participated in the Christmas festivities each year of the internment, many for the first and possibly only time in their lives. Christmas celebrations unified the community within Minidoka and provided a welcome break from the grim realities of the war, racial prejudice and the internment. Like other men, women and children on the United States home front, the Japanese Americans at Minidoka showed great determination to celebrate Christmas despite hardships and sorrow.

During the celebration of Christmas, unity arose among Minidokans as groups of internees sang carols, exchanged cards and gifts and decorated trees and dining halls. These practices strengthened not only community ties among the internees in the camp and revealed a yearning for family unity and private traditions, but publicly displayed solidarity with the nation that imprisoned them. Even though their heritage originated in a seemingly foreign place and even though their adopted country banished them from their homes and imprisoned them behind barbed wire, surrounding them with watch towers, the internees showed one another and the WRA staff that they were Americans at heart who practiced the most American holiday with gusto despite all their limitations. They too wished for peace and prayed for their sons and brothers on the front, hoping that they would soon be reunited. Many Japanese Americans wanted to prove Americans wrong by showing their commitment to the United States.

While these Christmas celebrations looked like the displays of every other American community, a closer examination reveals the stark circumstances of the internees and a variety of forms of resistance. James Scott offers helpful language with which to talk about these forms of resistance enacted by a dominated group. He suggests scholars look beyond the public transcript to surface hidden transcripts when groups are not free to express their dissent.¹ The Nikkei lost nearly everything after Pearl Harbor; the government imprisoned their community leaders, froze their bank accounts and eventually moved them from their homes and everything familiar. The government censored letters and newspapers and sent anyone not deemed loyal to a higher security camp. Looking back on the events, we know the Nikkei were not in actual mortal danger, but the fear must have been tremendous at the time, not knowing what might happen next. A few Japanese Americans protested their loss of civil rights publicly and very deliberately, refusing to obey curfews, resisting deportation to internment camps or defying draft notifications. These cases could then be brought to court and the constitutionality of the new laws tried. A larger group sought to prove their loyalty to the United States by quietly submitting to these restrictions and volunteering for service. Still others resisted and protested the internment through subtle methods, often through a subversion of the dominant culture's own traditional artifacts.

Hidden transcripts revealing acts of resistance can be seen through a careful examination of the material culture of the camps as many internees realized the freedom that artistic spaces offered. The material objects of Christmas provided a unique opportunity for internees to express their discontent through treasured items of their oppressors. As I will later argue, participation in the activities of Christmas constituted a

¹ James C. Scott, *Domination and the Arts of Resistance* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1990) 4.

patriotic act during World War II, and many Minidokans created their acts of resistance within these activities. So while outsiders and camp administration might have seen the Japanese Americans acting appropriately patriotic, internees inside the camp and astute observers could have seen the forms of protest within the seemingly appropriate acts.

Christians outside of the camp used Christmas as a space to perform a public act of compassion for the internees through gift giving. The physical and psychological exchanges between the internees in the camp and Christians outside of the camp forged bonds that would endure beyond the years of the internment or the war. While few Christian churches in America protested the internment of their Japanese brethren, American Protestants showed calculated, but limited public support for the Japanese after they were interned in the form of material donations, particularly in the form of presents for children at Christmas. This action followed a long tradition of heightened charity giving at Christmas. But these gifts came with complicated strings of obligation and gratitude attached.

Though it might seem obvious that such a traumatic event would have lasting effects on a group's collective identity and their public presentation of religion, few historians discuss the total effects of the Japanese American internment. The limiting constraints of this short paper do not allow for a broad analysis of Japanese American religion before, during and after the internment, but I will comment on a specific blend of pluralism, patriotism and resistance that surfaced each Christmas at Minidoka. These events influenced contemporary Japanese American religion in multiple ways, but also revealed the sympathies and racial prejudices of many Christian churches of the time. While Buddhist groups made efforts to profess their "American" characteristics,

Protestant and Catholic national organizations were forced, by omission or proclamation, to declare where they stood politically in terms of the internment. This paper will help fulfill the ethical obligation to ascertain the full extent of the impact caused by the United States' forced internment of Japanese Americans during World War II. The study will enable broader generalizations about the impacts of trauma and stress on an understudied marginal group placed under peculiar restraints, as well as give specific examples of many non-Christians living in a Christian nation at a time when the country lauded diversity, but imprisoned an entire race.

Through a detailed analysis of material culture, this paper will demonstrate how Japanese Americans used Christmas to strengthen community within Minidoka Relocation Center, stake claims to the broader American culture and patriotism beyond their barbed wire confines, and protest their incarceration. Material culture, the “stuff” of history, can tell the observer a great deal about the past.² Charting the sales of religious kitsch, icons and bibles shows trends in consumption and popular religious life, and examining their use in homes and churches tells us even more. The addition of individual voices from contemporaneous letters and newspapers and recent oral histories fill the gaps to explain how people felt about and used such stuff.

As the overflowing attics of many Americans attest, Christmas has links to a disproportionate amount of such stuff, and some Americans, even those who complain about the excessive materialism of the holiday, might say Christmas even requires a lot of

² An examination of material culture often brings popular religious practices and beliefs to light that might otherwise be obscured behind official doctrine and public liturgies. For more on the uses of visual and material culture, see Colleen McDannell, *Material Christianity: Religion and Popular Culture in America* (New Haven, CT: Yale University, 1995); David Morgan and Sally M. Promey, eds., *The Visual Culture of American Religions* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2001); and David Morgan, *The Sacred Gaze: Religious Visual Culture in Theory and Practice* (Berkeley, CA: University of California, 2005).

stuff. The Christmases at Minidoka, even with wartime shortages, were no exception. Thus, a cultural history of Christmas, even of one in an internment camp, might be the most appropriate approach to such a topic. Though the material culture of Christmas contains infinite variety, this paper will focus on the most iconic symbols of Christmas: Christmas cards, gifts, trees and decorations. The paper will start with an analysis of the explicit and implicit role of religion in Minidoka's Christmas celebrations and then examine each object in turn, determining how each sheds light on this complex celebration. I will discuss the exchanges of cards and gifts first, followed by the decorative aspects of Christmas, trees and the decoration display contests. This organization follows a progression from the most private items to the most public.

Pluralism and Religion at Minidoka

A few words about organized religion at Minidoka and the other internment camps will help contextualize the celebrations of Christmas in the camp. The WRA, likely modeling their policies after military chaplaincy programs, determined that three religious traditions were sufficient for the Japanese Americans, specifically Protestantism, Catholicism and Buddhism. Shinto groups and related religious practices were forbidden due to their ties with the Japanese state and emperor worship. This policy forced all Protestant denominations, as well as all Buddhist sects, to collaborate for services and Sunday schools. At Minidoka, the Protestant clergy named their church the Federated Christian Church, and the Buddhists formed the United Buddhist Church. The clergy did not name a head pastor, but worked together to divide pastoral duties. The Federated Church, the Catholic Church and the United Buddhist Church all received

additional help from Nikkei laity and occasional volunteers or visiting clergy from outside the camp. Forced cooperation among denominations led to tiresome debates and occasional squabbles between pastors and lay leaders, but also taught church leaders and members alike a greater level of ecumenism and many internees relished this opportunity. Problems naturally arose when national denominational organizations funded activities, such as summer camps, for their specific members and when internees decided to convert. Which church could claim the individual?

As months and years passed at Minidoka, denominational divisions became increasingly apparent. Reverend Kitagawa, an Episcopal priest, first led separate communion and then full church services, and Shinshu Buddhists increasingly distanced themselves from the United Buddhist Church. Outside forces, such as visiting evangelists and members of the Friends Society, offered alternative views of religious life that also influenced religion at Minidoka. However, this pattern of fragmentation did not occur in all internment camps. While the Episcopal and Shinshu groups regularly held separate services by the end of the war at Minidoka, a brief study of the Sunday Services listings in *The Topaz Times* and *The Tulean Dispatch* shows that Buddhists, Catholics and Protestants held adult and youth meetings regularly, but no divisions seem to have occurred along denominational lines.³ At Wyoming's Heart Mountain Relocation Center, all Protestants worshiped at the Community Christian Church with the exception of the Seventh Day Adventists, who met separately.⁴

³ *Topaz Times* (Delta, UT) 23 Oct 1943, 22 and 29 July 1944. *Tulean Dispatch* (Newell, CA) 16 Jan 1943.

⁴ A brief perusal through several weeks of the Heart Mountain Sentinel's Sunday Services shows this to be true. *Heart Mountain Sentinel* (Powell, WY) 30 Dec 1944: 2.

A definitive explanation for the varieties of religious practice in the internment camps requires further study, but one answer may be found simply in the make-up of a camp's clergy. Several Caucasian clergy who had worked in Japanese parishes in Seattle voluntarily moved with their congregations to Idaho, though the WRA required them to find housing outside of the camp. These pastors worked with Japanese pastors from the West Coast who were interned with their congregations. The character of the Federated Christian Church at Minidoka, for example, was formed largely by the several Baptist and Methodist ministers who worked at Minidoka. The predominance of these low church traditions may have exacerbated conflicts with Episcopalians accustomed to higher church practices. And since an Episcopal priest was interned at Minidoka, Episcopal services could be conducted separately. Similarly, the Seventh Day Adventists at Heart Mountain must have had some organizational aid from a Japanese minister or a Caucasian outside the camp. At Christmas, signs of both ecumenism and denominational divisions surfaced in the religious services and other events planned by the Protestant clergy.

Forced religious tolerance and ecumenism were not unique to the internment camps during the war, but were found in the armed forces as well. The official composition of religion in the armed forces likely influenced the artificially constructed ecumenism within the federal internment camps. Military chaplains, at the time limited to Protestants, Catholics and Jews, were required to celebrate their traditions equally, paralleling the WRA's limitation of only Protestant, Catholic and Buddhist traditions in the camp. Buddhist clergy were not permitted to join the army as chaplains until decades after World War II, again showing the limited religious tolerance of the time period.

The experiences of Jewish chaplains during the war reveal a number of similarities with the experiences of Buddhists in the camps. Jewish chaplains experienced two major challenges during the war: educating non-Jewish men and women about their traditions and finding common ground on which to hold services and ritual for the different branches of American Judaism.⁵ Buddhist clergy in the internment camps were often eager to share their faith with Caucasian WRA employees and Japanese Americans who had not previously been exposed to their religious heritage. The absence of private space forced dialogue and cooperation with those unfamiliar with the different traditions. After a Protestant chaplain lived with and learned about Jewish people during his service in the Pacific, he wished that the anti-Semites back home could see the brave sacrifices of all the Jewish soldiers.⁶ Both Protestant and Buddhist clergy experienced the challenges of the latter concern in the internment camps. Finding common ground between Baptists and Episcopalians, for example, proved to be a great trial at times. One chaplain expressed relief that his regiment would have only one Catholic, one Jewish and one Protestant chaplain, meaning he “[would not] have to share the Protestant services with anyone.”⁷ While some clergy members relished the opportunity for ecumenism, many others dreaded its challenges.

Behind the advantages of a perceived simplicity to ecumenical chaplaincy in the military and the internment camps, lay recently developed American ideals of pluralism and tolerance. The American ideal of pluralism went through several phases during the

⁵ Deborah Dash Moore, *GI Jews: How World War II Changed a Generation* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2004) 124-26.

⁶ Russell Cartwright Stroup, *Letters from the Pacific: A Combat Chaplain in World War II* (Columbia, MO: University of Missouri, 2000) 78-9.

⁷ Stroup, 13.

first half of the twentieth century. Horace M. Kallen first coined the term “cultural pluralism” in the 1920s, identifying it with anti-assimilationist overtones.⁸ Kallen saw different ethnicities and religions peacefully coexisting in the United States, but the term soon shifted to imply the necessity of acculturation, specifically “Americanization,” where the best outside contributions would be assimilated into a generic American culture.⁹ This version of the melting pot theory allowed for congenial tolerance towards some groups during a war against racist totalitarianism in the 1940s. Concerned that the nationalistic and ethnocentric rhetoric from Europe would spread to the United States, the U.S. Office of Education produced a radio series heralding diversity and tolerance in 1938-39 entitled “Americans All...Immigrants All.”¹⁰ However, this popular pluralism related to bonds among Protestants, Catholics and Jews, and the newly conceived Judeo-Christian tradition, rather than those between Christians and Buddhists.¹¹ Pluralism and calls for tolerance may have included the Japanese as far as many Americans desiring their Americanization were concerned, but, as the existence of the internment camps demonstrates, many people did not want any Nikkei in their country, assimilated or not. Many of the Japanese Americans living in internment camps during the war championed these ideas of national unity in the face of outside opinions that labeled them as the major exception to the pluralistic rule.

⁸ Philip Gleason, “Pluralism, Democracy, and Catholicism in the Era of World War II,” *The Review of Politics* (Spring 1987) 214.

⁹ Gleason, 215.

¹⁰ Philip Gleason, “Americans All: World War II and the Shaping of American Identity,” *The Review of Politics* (Oct. 1981) 499-502.

¹¹ Mark Silk, “Notes on the Judeo-Christian Tradition in America,” *American Quarterly* (Spring 1984) 65, 69.

American Christmas

My interpretation of Minidokan Christmas celebrations as both a patriotic act and as resistance against the internment relies on the underlying supposition that Christmas in the United States was intractably tied to fundamental American ideals by the 1940s. I will take a moment to make a case for this phenomenon before describing the rhetoric surrounding Christmas at Minidoka.

Christmas became inseparable from the war and love for America during the 1940s. One scholar writes, “Christmas is the most American [holiday] in the red-and-green essence,” conceptualized as a time when dreams come true, generosity, hopes and family fill every moment and the quest for “the elusive American Dream” endures.¹² Historians Golby and Purdue add that during World War II, Christmas became “a symbol of our better selves and all that is best in our civilization.” The spirit of these words was paralleled in London as a man during the blitz said, “British Christmas is the embodiment of all the ideals we are fighting for.”¹³ Christmas symbolized what their boys were fighting for: home and family, hopes and dreams, peace on earth and goodwill toward men. While these attributes do not differ greatly from the ideals of Britain or other Allied nations, Americans took pride in what they perceived as distinct holiday practices and their unique blend of patriotism and a secularized Christian identity.

The ties between patriotism, the nation and Christmas rose immediately after Pearl Harbor and could be seen in a variety of popular media. Publishers stopped the December 20th issue of the *Saturday Evening Post* at the presses in 1941 for Norman

¹² Karal Ann Marling, *Merry Christmas! Celebrating America's Greatest Holiday* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard, 2000) 355.

¹³ J. M. Golby and A. W. Purdue, *The Making of the Modern Christmas* (Athens: University of Georgia, 1986) 140.

Rockwell to quickly add a sign reading “Buy Defense Bonds” and a Red Cross emblem to the window front on the cover.¹⁴ The Bing Crosby movie *Holiday Inn* (1942) romanticizes the peaceful American Christmas in the countryside through the story of a Connecticut inn open only on holidays. While the inn largely observes distinctly American holidays, such as both Washington and Lincoln’s birthdays and the Fourth of July, the film is framed with Christmas at the beginning, middle and end. During one scene, firecrackers blaze around photographs of soldiers and military equipment. The combination of patriotism and Christmas is unmistakable in this movie produced and released during the first year of the war. A subsequent movie, *White Christmas* (1954), contains even more explicitly patriotic Christmas themes, opening with a USO performance of “White Christmas” on the Western front and concluding with the same on the home front.

When Bing Crosby crooned “White Christmas” for the first time in *Holiday Inn*, the song immediately became a huge hit, especially among soldiers abroad. Armed Forces Radio constantly received requests for “White Christmas” (1942) and “I’ll be Home for Christmas” (1943), particularly from the Pacific and North Africa where American soldiers housed in barracks in the hot sun could not identify the weather or environment with traditional American Christmas imagery.¹⁵ Symbolic of the pluralism and secularization of the American holiday, a Jewish American, Irving Berlin, composed the former. The songs contain no explicit religious content, but idealize the home, family and winter to make no question about what our soldiers are defending. Internees at Minidoka chose these popular songs as themes for Christmas displays and gave them

¹⁴ Marling, 110.

¹⁵ Marling, 324.

rave reviews in *The Minidoka Irrigator*,¹⁶ showing a commonality with the rest of the nation. While winter snow came to Minidoka, the internees still dreamed of Christmases past, of home and family.

Much of the rhetoric about the power of Christmas looks back at the past for inspiration. This is no different from recent complaints about the modern Christmas and its commercialism, or the great number of popular songs from the war, such as Irving Berlin's "White Christmas," that wish for a Christmas "just like the ones I used to know." People remember things being different when thinking of the past. Certainly the Christmases of the past were greatly different for the recently interned Japanese. Many poems and stories from the camp reminisce about the Christmas of 1940 or even that of 1941 to draw strength and hope from them.

Christmas during World War II took on distinctly patriotic overtones both inside and outside of the camp. Despite the hardships of war, or even because of these hardships, Americans believed they had a patriotic duty to persevere and celebrate their most special and meaningful holiday. In 1942, the director of the War Relocation Administration sent a message to the men and women living and working in the Japanese internment camps, echoing this obligation to celebrate Christmas for the sake of children and for the country. He writes, "Much of the traditional celebration associated with the holiday season is put aside, for we are a nation at war. Our way of life is threatened...The exception which I believe rightfully should be made is the children,

¹⁶ Mary Roth, Interviewed by Judith Austin, 6 Sept 1984, Idaho State Historical Society. "Platter Chatter" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 8.

whose happiness should not be clouded by war and its attendant trials.”¹⁷ Celebrating the holiday became a patriotic duty just like buying war bonds, growing Victory Gardens and participating in scrap drives. An internee writes of the “sacrifices we have performed and sacrifices we must make to insure for future Christmases like those of days of old.”¹⁸

The war must be won to preserve the American Christmas as this holiday symbolized the American way of life that both soldiers and those on the home front were fighting for.¹⁹

If Christmas was forgone, there would be nothing left to preserve.

Christmas has long been a contentious issue in America for those outside of a Christian tradition. By the twentieth century, Christmas was so integral to the American calendar that not celebrating the holiday made a loud statement to others and brought with it a multitude of complications for families with small children, who had a hard time accepting that Christmas was not for them. In 1939, Rabbi Louis Witt wrote to *The Christian Century* to explain why he thought it was unnecessary for Jews to abstain from Christmas. Like rhetoric heard about Christmas during World War II, he thought the positive aspects outweighed any hesitations people might have. Celebrating the “friendliness and good will” of Christmas would be beneficial for Jews, particularly for the joy it brought to children. The ideals of Christmas were not solely Christian, according to Witt, and he saw the holiday as a unique opportunity for Christians and Jews to join together in a cultural celebration. Witt also saw celebrating Christmas as a way to

¹⁷ D. S. Myer, “Myer Sends Message for Christmas, New Year to Minidoka Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 1.

¹⁸ Yuji Hiromura, “A Christmas Prayer” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 6.

¹⁹ William B. Waits, *The Modern Christmas in America: A Cultural History of Gift Giving* (New York: New York University, 1993) 195.

thank America for its accommodating and welcoming culture.²⁰ This perspective celebrates the Judeo-Christian tradition that was only then being formed and comments on the growing secularism of Christmas driven not only by the economic markets, but by the allure of a new pluralism. Not surprisingly, many Jews and Christians did not agree with Witt's sentiments, but the editor of *The Christian Century* exuberantly applauded Witt. He mentions the "common historical ground" of the two religions, citing Jesus' Jewishness, but largely orients his response around the supremacy of the American characteristics of Christmas over its Christian traits. He expounds that Christmas is the perfect opportunity to properly celebrate American democracy and tolerance by bringing Jews and Christians together in celebration.²¹ This exchange foreshadows some of the rhetoric heard at Minidoka each December. Non-Christians and Christians alike, whether celebrating America, looking for relief from the monotony of camp life or seeking an imitation of pre-war Christmases, put great efforts into Christmas preparations each year.

Christmas at Minidoka

Though many of the internees at Minidoka had never celebrated Christmas before, they threw themselves into holiday preparations each December. Despite even fewer resources than the rest of the war-rationed country, all of the traditional material trappings of an American Christmas played a role at Minidoka: Christmas cards, decorated trees, large public displays strikingly similar to those found in department store windows, men dressed as Santa Claus and, of course, gift exchanges, particularly for the children. These material manifestations of Christmas, identical in type and, at a distance,

²⁰ Penne Restad, *Christmas in America: A History* (New York: Oxford University, 1995) 158-59.

²¹ Restad, 159.

indistinguishable from other cards and trees and gifts around the country reveal upon closer inspection, the ugliness of internment and the remarkable resilience and resistance of internees. Sagebrush trees clothed in garlands of tin foil, block prints of barracks bedecking Christmas cards, charity and homemade gifts and handwritten scores of Handel's *Messiah* sat alongside letters to Santa for an armistice and masses for peace.

The internees ostensibly connected Christmas with America like much of the nation, noting with patriotic fervor and without irony, "Here behind barbed wires on top of sage brush cleared soil, we are about to celebrate our Christmas in an atmosphere none too familiar to us; but in an atmosphere where the Yuletide spirit will not go unprecedented. Christmas in an American relocation center...the American way."²² Comments such as these publicly proclaimed that the Nikkei were Americans first, and would continue to celebrate Christmas in the American way despite all obstacles. The public acts of Christmas celebrations at Minidoka demonstrated to outsiders that both Japanese American soldiers and those manning the home front, whether they be Buddhist or Christian, fought together for America, just as bravely and with as many sacrifices as other Americans, regardless of the many injustices committed against them. While statements like that above were published in the camp newspaper, written for and by Nikkei, Caucasian workers and administration at the camp would have read them as well and later oral histories and diaries from the time indicate that they did. One could argue that Nikkei made these comments for their benefit, to show what good Americans they were, but it would be unfair to utterly deny and explain away their patriotic sentiments.

The WRA director of Minidoka, Harry Stafford, emphasized that Christmas hope is exactly what we need during such hard times. He writes, "Once more the spirit of

²² Yuji Hiromura, "A Christmas Prayer" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 6.

peace and hope embraces the community to demonstrate that the hatreds and hardships of the war cannot kill the feeling that comes into all men's hearts on the anniversary of the birth of Christ."²³ Stafford believed that the power of Christmas could overcome the prejudices and fear brought on by the war. After the war, an internee echoed these sentiments, remembering how Minidoka's Christmas activities functioned toward this end. "The coming together of families in our block gave us hope and a deep sense of pride and made most of us temporarily forget our disheartening situation that we were committed to for the duration of the war."²⁴ In the 1942 Christmas edition of the camp newspaper, both "the officers and enlisted men of the 321st Military Police Escort Guard Company" and the Minidoka Administrative Staff printed Christmas greetings for their "Japanese neighbors."²⁵ The administration ended with a patriotic message, "It is our real hope that the coming year will bring success to the fight for democracy and improvement in the personal fortunes of each of you."²⁶ While the staff and military police at Minidoka rarely encountered great conflict with the internees, this cordial message suggests at least a motion for equality and compassion at Christmas, regardless of how Minidokans actually received this message or if it reflected the behavior of the Caucasian staff.

²³ H. L. Stafford, "Sincere Best Wishes for Xmas—Stafford" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 1.

²⁴ Henry K. Ozaki, "Minidoka Story-Christmas" *Minidoka Stories I and II*, Tsuguo Ikeda and Akio Yanagihara, eds. (n.p., 2003) n.p.

²⁵ William E. Dorland, "M.P. Extends Greetings" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 6.

²⁶ Minidoka Administrative Staff, "Greetings" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 6.

During the war, Japanese Americans at Minidoka enthusiastically celebrated Christmas regardless of their personal religious orientations. A Buddhist internee commented on her experience of the holiday in the camp:

One of the things that I, really impressed me and it still does is that Christmas was kind of—being Buddhist, it wasn't a real, real big thing before we went to camp—but then when we were in camp then Christmas became a big thing 'cause then we always had the, they had these competitions between the blocks...there was a contest and that's when you became real aware of Christmas.²⁷

The gift giving to every child in the camp, regardless of religious affiliation, also impressed this internee. This Buddhist woman remembered the large Christmas celebration as a seemingly unavoidable aspect of life at Minidoka, something she would not have otherwise experienced, but she did enjoy it. While Christmas was a new experience for many Buddhists, many loved the celebration and the break from regular camp life. They emphasized the religious aspects of the holiday as well as the secular. A former internee writes:

The results were amazing...Mae and Iwao lived in a block where most of the people were of the Buddhist faith. Many came to ask about the Christmas story. A beautiful nativity scene had been painted on one wall of their Dining Hall, with shepherds on a second wall and the wise men on the third wall. The ceiling was decorated with stars made from tin cans and there were Christmas wreathes made from wood shavings.²⁸

These Buddhists might have been initially unfamiliar with the religious origins of Christmas, but did not intentionally avoid them to focus on the secular aspects of Christmas.

²⁷ Fumiko Uyeda Groves, interviewed by Larry Hashima, 16 June 1998, Densho Visual Histories.

²⁸ Ruth Hara, "December 1942" *Minidoka Stories I and II*, Tsuguo Ikeda and Akio Yanagihara, eds. (n.p., 2003) n.p.

In defense of anyone who might suggest that Christians have any advantage over non-Christians in putting on a better Christmas, a column in *The Minidoka Irrigator* notes, “Did anyone notice that the original five members of the Christmas Contest committee members...were all Buddhists?”²⁹ No further comment explains why this distinction might be significant, but non-Christians undoubtedly knew just how to present an American Christmas after several Christmases in the camp. At these moments, the idea of Christmas as a performance, newly learned or not, becomes a compelling concept. Whether Nikkei targeted this act towards Caucasians or each other, Christmas was a learned behavior for some.

The Caucasian employees at the camp noted the participation of non-Christians with particular satisfaction. Arthur Kleinkopf, the Superintendent of Education at Minidoka, “asked one Japanese teacher if the children knew and celebrated Christmas the same as Caucasian children. She said, ‘Yes. Even the Buddhists do.’”³⁰ In this interaction, the Caucasian man shows his awareness of the cultural diversity within the camp, and the teacher specifically answers the unstated part of his question about religion. The next year he notes that “all school children regardless of their religious preferences join in the Christmas spirit and make great plans for the coming of Santa Claus.” In the spirit of the holiday, the teachers “decided to give Santa Claus cookies to the pupils” similarly regardless of religious affiliation.³¹ A Caucasian teacher glows about Christmas at Minidoka, noting that “although they have other religions besides Christianity, the whole camp emphasized the theme of Christ’s birth. It was just a

²⁹ “High Wind” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 23 Dec 1944: 3.

³⁰ Arthur Kleinkopf, *Relocation Center Diary* (Hunt, ID) 21 Dec 1942: 86.

³¹ Kleinkopf, 16 Dec 1943: 310-11.

beautiful time of year.”³² It is unclear whether or not this woman identifies any celebration of Christmas with the birth of Christ or if she saw actual nativity themes all around the camp, but she does acknowledge the many non-Christians celebrating the holiday. These few comments should not be used to represent a uniform Caucasian viewpoint, but they do suggest that the employees approved of and encouraged Christmas celebrations in spite of, or perhaps because of, the religious orientations of the Japanese Americans. Hopes for the conversion of non-Christians notwithstanding, the WRA employees wanting to see what they believed were normative American behaviors, might have simply seen normative acts, reading more into the actions of the Nikkei than was merited. Their actions at Christmas confirmed hopes that these men and women might be loyal United States citizens.

The Minidoka Irrigator always emphasized total participation among all internees, though it cannot be determined whether this reflects actual practice or if it was intended to encourage participation itself. The popularity of the dining hall decoration contest was emphasized during the first Christmas when the paper reported that every block entered the contest, but that two dining halls were dark when the judges visited and thus did not get judged.³³ While the dark halls could have been merely the result of a miscommunication about judging times, they could also suggest a protest among some Nikkei refusing to celebrate the American holiday. Additionally, it is curious that the Caucasian judges would not enter a dining hall merely because it was dark. Were they possibly afraid of some potential hazard within? Another article publicly scolds the three blocks that did not raise their quota of \$35 for the Christmas Fund, a general pot used for

³² Roth. Kleinkopf, 7 Dec 1942: 21.

³³ “D.H. 17 Decorations Catch Judges’ Eyes” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 30 Dec 1942: 5.

extra decorations and candies over the holiday. The same article heralds Caucasian staff members who donated and the many blocks that accrued far more than their assigned amount.³⁴ These pieces suggest that participation, though not mandated, was strongly encouraged. Non-participants became the brunt of public condemnation through the newspaper. One article takes a moment to tell exactly how many people are participating by listing the total camp population during each December of the internment. In 1942, 10,000 residents, 8,900 in 1943 and “7,000 residents will take part in festivities” in 1944.³⁵ The article assumes that everyone residing at Minidoka would be taking part in the festivities. In any case, every camp memoir and interview mentions some involvement in the Christmas celebrations, so participation was certainly wide-spread, even if it did not include every single internee.

Christmas at the Minidoka Churches

Scholars generally agree that most people spend more time and put more effort into the secular aspects of Christmas than the religious ones,³⁶ but this is not to say that religious observance did not play a role inside and outside of the camps during the war. The decrease in Christmas Day services since the 1930s in America can be deceiving as they have often been replaced by evening carol services and midnight candlelight masses on Christmas Eve.³⁷ This transition allows for a greater emphasis on the family on Christmas Day, but does not necessarily indicate a secularization of the holiday. The

³⁴ “BLK 23 Caucasian Staff Donates Generously” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 8.

³⁵ “Annual Christmas Decoration Contest Set; Keen Interest Felt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 3.

³⁶ Waits, 3.

³⁷ Golby, 106.

Christians at Minidoka and many non-Christians participated in a variety of religious observances during Christmas, including large concerts with the Mass Choir singing Handel's *Messiah* and traditional evening services on Christmas Eve. Activities led by the churches, rhetoric from church employees and even religious rhetoric in the camp generally distinguished itself from other manifestations of Christmas at Minidoka. While most aspects of Christmas directly invoked the war or patriotic themes or reflected the circumstances of the internment, religious services and messages almost never did, gesturing instead towards a universal Christian message, set apart from earthly concerns.

Religious services at Minidoka resembled the types of services held around the United States at Christmas and did not draw the parallels between Christmas and patriotism seen elsewhere. Preparations for the first Christmas season at Minidoka began early. On December 6, 1942, Reverend Everett Thompson, a Methodist pastor from Seattle who voluntarily moved with his Japanese congregation to Idaho, preached the sermon "Anticipating Christmas" at the Federated Christian Church's Sunday morning worship service.³⁸ Christians in the camp likely felt uneasy about celebrating their first Christmas behind barbed-wire and Thompson's sermon might have set them at ease, suggesting ways in which this Christmas would be similar to and different from those in years past.

Indeed, the Federated Church newsletter, written weekly by the Nikkei church staff, published suggestions taken from a *Christian Century* article on how to properly celebrate the holiday during the war. These ideas were not particular to the internment experience, but motioned toward the national concern for the appropriateness of celebration during the war. However, the specific suggestions in the article address

³⁸ "Church Program" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 5 Dec 1942: 2.

general concerns about holding a “Christian Christmas,” something unrelated to the war. The article first suggests doing good deeds for a full week without telling anyone of your helpfulness, an idea modeled after Jesus’ principle, “Let not your right hand know what your left hand does...Tell no one.” The second suggestion relates to the perennial concern over material gifts. The author says to “think of the real needs of people and try honestly to meet some of these real needs.” This tip does not tell the reader to abandon material gifts, but emphasizes the need for thoughtful, personal gifts. This discussion of gift giving does not mention how material gifts were often unavailable due to the war, nor does it elaborate on methods of conservation, any particular limitations at the camp or suggest potential spiritual advantages to the material shortages. The final suggestion is somewhat obscure, telling the reader to “take time to think of those personal relationships which make up our lives—of what they actually mean and what they might mean—this is the most creative thing we can do to prepare our hearts for the birthday of Jesus.”³⁹ The inclusion of ideas from a national magazine shows the internees’ attention to the world outside Minidoka and national religious discourse of the time, but these suggestions are also more distanced from the war and the internment than any of the secular manifestations of Christmas at Minidoka. The article suggests only very general methods of mental and spiritual preparation for the holiday, attempting to reorient the material aspects of Christmas towards the birth of Jesus and his message.

Church activities at Christmas appeared similarly isolated from national security concerns. The week following Rev. Thompson’s sermon, a guest from outside the camp

³⁹ “Christmas Preparations” *The Minidoka Herald* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1943: 2.

preached “The World Which Christmas Changed.”⁴⁰ This sermon sounds like a typical Christmas message, unrelated to the war or the internment. In addition to a large array of activities for the Sunday school students, the Christmas Worship Program in 1942 included the sermon “Unto You—A Savior” by Rev. Thompson.⁴¹ A Nikkei church worker described this service in a letter:

Over eighty-five young men and women of the Mass Choir in choir robes came down the aisle singing “O Come All Ye Faithful.” They sat in front of an improvised altar, beautiful because of a cross that hung between the folds of a draped velvet background. On the piano was a tumbleweed potted in a crepe-paper covered tin can. It was decorated with red stars. As we heard the familiar scripture reading of the First Christmas and the lovely strains by the Choir from Handel’s “Messiah,” our faith in the Prince of Peace was strengthened.⁴²

The service also included a performance of Handel’s “Pastoral Symphony” by a string ensemble from the camp. As I suggested earlier, this service appears unremarkable from a distance, but the limitations of a desert internment can be seen through a closer look at the objects of Christmas—a tumbleweed tree in a tin can.

The Federated Church program details the many upcoming Christmas concerts and caroling in the following days and the Episcopal service on Christmas Eve.⁴³ A special invitation for Issei and Nisei, first and second generation Nikkei, to celebrate Christmas services together made the front page of the Federated Church newsletter in 1943 in a hope to unify the church, often split by language barriers. In the same issue, the Nikkei church staff extended Christmas greetings to the church members. The note

⁴⁰ “Church Program” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 12 Dec 1942: 2.

⁴¹ “Sunday Church Program *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 7.

⁴² “Letter to Miss Alice W. S. Brimson from Shigoko Soso Uno,” 11 Jan 1943, Box 1/Folder 3, Emery E. Andrews Papers, Accession No. 1908-001, University of Washington Libraries.

⁴³ “Christmas Worship Service Bulletin,” 20 Dec 1942, Box 1/Folder 4, Ichikara Kaoru Papers, Accession No. 1839-001, University of Washington Libraries.

reads, “Let us take time to think of Him who was born into this world that we might have life eternal. Too long has the world failed to catch the message of the eternal Christ. May it be born in our hearts and radiate out into our community and into the world.”⁴⁴ Messages of unity within the camp and throughout the world echoed in the church’s Christmas messages. While most other facets of Christmas at Minidoka had obvious patriotic themes, the Protestant celebration of Christmas focused on universal, religious topics. The focus shifts instead to community, both narrowly within the Federated Church at Minidoka and more broadly to the world-wide community.

The fragmentation of the Federated Church resulted in separate Episcopal Christmas programs after the first year at Minidoka. An Episcopal mass was held on Christmas Eve in 1942, but was presented as an additional service, not an alternative one as in 1943. The Episcopal Bishop of Idaho led services with Reverends Shoji and Kitagawa on Christmas this year. The mass was highlighted by special baptismal, confirmation and communion rites.⁴⁵ Attention from the Bishop of Idaho on an important holiday suggests that Episcopal internees were not entirely forgotten by their denomination, even when removed to a different state.

The Catholic Church at Minidoka, always distinct from the Protestant groups, also celebrated Christmas masses. The Caucasian priest, Father Tibesar, chose to come with his Seattle congregation to serve their spiritual needs in Idaho. Catholics at Minidoka celebrated with a special midnight mass followed by a morning mass on Christmas Day for young children and the elderly who could not attend at night. Refreshments and

⁴⁴ “Issei-Nisei Christmas Services” *The Minidoka Herald* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1943: 1.

⁴⁵ “Special Episcopal Christmas Service” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 3. “Church Program” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 4.

fellowship followed each service. A member of the congregation vividly describes the midnight mass in 1943:

A drizzling rain and mud greeted the folks who stepped from their abodes to attend the service. The night seemed unusually dark. Footsteps oozing into the ground, finally made a pathway to the recreation hall where Mass was held. The year before it was held in the Chapel and the adjoining quarters of Father's. This Christmas it was believed useless to attempt holding the expected attendance there...Father's message was inspiring. It took the congregation out of the depths of moody thoughts, that went back to Christmases under brighter circumstances.⁴⁶

Father Tibesar noted an increase in non-Catholics attending Christmas services every year. While Father Tibesar did not actively proselytize while at Minidoka, he, like the clergy in the Protestant churches, found many converts during the war.⁴⁷ This may have been in part due to the influence of Christmas activities throughout the camp. The attendance at Christian services in the camp, like those elsewhere in the country, swelled at Christmas, bringing in non-active church members and non-Christians alike. It should not come as a surprise that the varied and at times unavoidable Christmas activities at Minidoka led some internees to church services. Participation in the camp choir and caroling groups led many non-Christians to services.

Music played a large role in the Federated Church's Christmas celebrations and in the camp Christmas celebrations more widely. The camp's Mass Choir participated in the Christmas worship service, singing selections from Handel's "Messiah."⁴⁸ Mae Hara, the Federated Church music director, expressed guilt for "stealing" sheet music during the internment:

⁴⁶ Takeo Koiwa, *Chibes_a-shi no kotodomo: About Father Tibesar* (Tokyo: Gengokai, 1968) 51.

⁴⁷ Koiwa, 59.

⁴⁸ "Center Brevities" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1942: 6.

I broke all the copyright laws. I had them stencil the music (...) and ran them off on our old-fashioned handcraft, and that was our source of our, our music. Fortunately, I had about three dozen copies of Handel, choral edition of the *Messiah*, which helped greatly. So that was the source. So we gave concerts from one end of the camp to the other for Christmas and whatnot.⁴⁹

Hara saw the importance of Christmas music in the camp, but was forced into an uncomfortable situation due to the limitations of the internment. School children were also trained in many religious and secular Christmas songs and went caroling in groups around the camp, visiting as many shut-ins and invalids as possible “in an attempt to bring as much joy and as much of the Christmas spirit into the lives of Hunt residents.”⁵⁰ Camp teachers, both Nikkei and Caucasian, taught the children a variety of Christmas songs to sing in class as well.⁵¹ On one elementary school caroling outing, a student remarked to her teacher, “Looks like we’re going to have Christmas after all, doesn’t it?”⁵² Spreading Christmas cheer throughout the camp through song brightened the holidays for some. Caroling groups were organized through both church and secular groups each year. Some of these events took place at the church buildings and others

⁴⁹ Mae Kanazawa Hara, interviewed by Alice Ito, 15 July 2004, Densho Visual Histories.

⁵⁰ “School Children Will Go Caroling” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 6. Kleinkopf, 21 Dec 1942: 86.

⁵¹ Roth. Kleinkopf, 7 Dec 1942: 74.

⁵² Kleinkopf, 23 Dec 1943: 312.

around the camp.⁵³ The churches also supplied song sheets for blocks to use in their individual holiday programs in the evening.⁵⁴

In addition to community carol singing, different groups would also sponsor record concerts. Some of these concerts were held in designated buildings at scheduled times, but other concerts were broadcasted over the public address system so that “residents may be imbued with the proper holiday spirit.”⁵⁵ While most internees at Minidoka participated in Christmas activities, no one could avoid these blaring Christmas concerts. Buddhists, Christians and non-religious internees would all listen to traditional Christmas songs, both religious and secular, each December.

Internees also expressed religious beliefs through prayers and rhetoric in the camp newspaper, personal letters and the high school newspaper at Christmas. The Christmas prayer printed in the Federated Church newsletter neatly summarizes the publicly stated viewpoint of the internment church at Christmas. After a few sentences of praise, they ask for God’s

favor for our country in this time of crisis. Over the whole land let righteousness, kindness and good will be spread abroad. Hear us as we pray for those for whom the joy of this Christmas day is shadowed, the poor, the cold, the hungry, the lonely, the unloved, and the victims of war and oppression...Grant that all the kingdoms of this world may become His kingdom. Shed upon all men the spirit of reconciliation.⁵⁶

⁵³ “2 Pre-Christmas Songfests to be Offered Friday” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 2 Dec 1942: 6. “Covering Hunt News: In Brief” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 11 Dec 1943. “Church Program” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 4. “Variety of Events Marks Second Christmas in Hunt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 1. “Christmas Carols” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1944: 2.

⁵⁴ “Song Sheets Available” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 8.

⁵⁵ “‘A Christmas Carol’ by Charles Dickens Record Concert” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1942: 4. “Christmas Concerts Planned by CA” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1943: 2. “Variety of Events Marks Second Christmas in Hunt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 1.

⁵⁶ “Christmas Prayer” *The Minidoka Herald* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1943: 2.

These words would not be unfamiliar to a church today, nor to any church in the 1940s outside of the internment camp. The prayer acknowledges a “time of crisis” for the country, but many churches use such dramatic language to refer to the crisis of abortion or during an election year. Just as the prayer does not define the nature of the crisis, it names general categories of those who suffer: “the hungry, the lonely, the unloved.” “Victims of war and oppression” are listed as well, but in no more specific terms than that. Warring nations are unnamed and “reconciliation” could easily refer to a wide range of peacemaking. Repeatedly, the messages from the Federated Church do not reveal their unique situation, their racially homogenous membership or give specific attention to the war. Instead, like the suggestions from *The Christian Century*, church leaders encourage congregants to focus on a larger, communal message of universality.

Some of the religious messages at Christmas had an extremely positive outlook, redirecting negative attitudes toward places and people in worse situations. Tom Fukuyama, the energetic Federated Church youth minister, deflects the potential difficulties of living in an internment camp to focus on the struggles of “the Burmese in India, the Chinese in far West China, [and] millions of war prisoners separated from their loved ones throughout the world...at Christmas time,” expressing gratitude for the Minidokans’ “extremely privileged” experience. While he regrets that some internees “cannot see anything but release from the boundaries of our Center,” he argues that “we should be grateful for life, a great degree of freedom and liberty, sympathetic authorities, and the possibilities for creative growth right here in Minidoka.”⁵⁷ Fukuyama sees a unique opportunity for the internees at Christmas, for here they can avoid the

⁵⁷ “Letter to Reverend and Mrs. Andrews from Tom Fukuyama,” 16 Dec 1942, Box 1/Folder 44, Emery E. Andrews Papers, Accession No. 1908-001, University of Washington Libraries.

“commercialization” and “platitudinous sentiments” that overshadow most Christmases and see through to the true meaning of Christmas: “Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace, goodwill toward men.” He sermonizes:

That message is as fresh and contemporary for us, as it was for his day. It is God’s imperative demand which is revealed in the image of Christ. Too long, men have looked to themselves for wisdom and direction. We are like frightened children, after all our bravado, clinging in desperation on the edge of thin ice. Our only hope is to seek, think, and live the eternal divine music of Christmas.⁵⁸

This very religious message was not published in the church newsletter, but was sent out to every member of the camp in the Christmas edition of the camp newspaper. Again, the leaders of the church avoid focusing on their personal experiences of the war or the internment, but look beyond their situation and beyond the strong patriotic themes seen in other forms of Christmas celebration at Minidoka. The Christian meaning of Christmas was not limited, nor did it vary temporally or spatially.

A Christmas prayer printed in the editorial section of Minidoka’s high school newspaper shows similar religious themes and focuses on suffering beyond the camp, but concludes with a patriotic message not seen in the messages from the Federated Church.

This student writes:

Our Father who art in heaven...give us thy spiritual strength so that we may find in ourselves the courage to face the dawn of the new day...bless the others who yet know not the true value of democracy, so that they too may learn and understand...grant us that we may have the courage to face the new year and make us truly worthy of our American heritage.⁵⁹

This prayer follows a structure similar to that of other Christmas prayers, but focuses more narrowly on specific requests for strength and understanding. The prayer also

⁵⁸ Tsutomu Fukuyama, “Bethlehem’s Message” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 3.

⁵⁹ Kleinkopf, 24 Dec 1943: 317-18.

addresses the question of American patriotism. The student, like many other internees, does not waver in their desire to be true Americans, despite the cruel and unjust treatment the Japanese Americans have received from their country. A similar Christmas prayer appeared in the 1942 Christmas edition of *The Minidoka Irrigator*, emphasizing not patriotism, but peace. This author pleads, “Why must our brothers die, Kind Father?”⁶⁰ This prayer focuses on less personal needs and still does not mention the internment, but reveals again the desire for the war’s end. The nature of these prayers suggests an emphasis on selflessness and sacrifice within the church at Christmas.

Christmas Cards

At Minidoka, many internees exchanged Christmas cards with each other and with friends and family outside the camp. While some internees purchased cards from outside sources, other internees made their own cards with haunting images that indicated the unhappy conditions within the camp. This artwork provides one of the most explicit acts of protest within the Christmas practices at Minidoka.

Despite the limitations placed on paper production, Christmas card business boomed during World War II as the need to keep in touch with loved ones became more urgent.⁶¹ The Japanese Americans experienced even greater challenges, as many families were separated into different camps, relocated family members and friends lived in church hostels, apartment buildings or college campus housing in the East and, like other Americans, had sons and brothers fighting around the globe. The practice of exchanging Christmas cards became increasingly popular in the twentieth century among non-

⁶⁰ Tom Takemoto, “A Prayer for Peace” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: iii.

⁶¹ Marling, 316.

Christians.⁶² The Nikkei at Minidoka would have been familiar with the tradition and might have exchanged Christmas cards before the internment. Articles in the camp newspaper attest to their popularity as regular updates regarding postage rates or mailing to military personnel pepper the pages months before December.⁶³

This desire to hear from family and friends through Christmas cards can also be heard in many of the letters and diaries from Minidoka. For one older couple separated during the war, Christmas only increased feelings of loneliness and hopelessness. After describing a new snow fall “as pretty as a Christmas card,” the husband, usually the more positive of the two, writes from a military prison camp in Missoula, “Last Christmas I held some expectations, but I’ve none of that this year, and there have been only two Christmas cards from Shigeko-san and Koike.” The next year, he happily tells of “a Christmas card and a plaque with Christ’s figure” that he received from the Prisoner Assistance Committee of the Episcopal Church, requests that his wife send a Christmas card to an acquaintance of his and expresses concern that he is unable to send cards to many of their friends at Minidoka, including their Episcopal priest from Seattle.⁶⁴ Such exact cataloguing of who has received what cards from whom shows their immense importance in unpredictable days. Many internees, particularly those in higher security camps, did not know when, if ever, they would be reunited with their families. Soldiers, in similarly unpredictable situations, mailed Christmas cards portraying their photographs

⁶² Golby, 109.

⁶³ “Christmas Card, Special Delivery Rates Announced” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 1. “Send Christmas Packages to Servicemen Soon” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 11 Sept 1943: 8. “Post Office Gives Dates on Overseas Christmas Mailing” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 17 June 1944: 1.

⁶⁴ Louis Fiset, ed., *Imprisoned Apart: The World War II Correspondence of an Issei Couple* (Seattle: University of Washington, 1997) 217-18, 263-6.

to their families at Minidoka.⁶⁵ Keeping close ties through the formality of Christmas cards enabled family and friends to update one another of their whereabouts and major events in their lives, much like contemporary Christmas cards. And for some internees separated from family, even a card from an organization provided hope and tied them to the outside world.

Another reason Christmas cards likely were popular during the internment was their unique economic and social value. As William Waits explains in his analysis of Christmas giving, Christmas cards initially became popular because of their apparent absence of monetary value. Cards convey a caring thought without the contingent obligation of a substantial return gift, and their lack of economic value avoids making a statement about the hierarchy between giver and recipient. Waits also mentions their potential artistic value, a characteristic often absent from traditional gifts,⁶⁶ but certainly present in the homemade cards from Minidoka. Since internees had so few resources and so little income, Christmas cards provided an ideal alternative to material gift exchanges. Class distinctions were largely eradicated in the internment camps as income varied only slightly, but Christmas cards could be presented to the Caucasian personnel as well.

The camp cooperative sold a “wide assortment” of commercial cards⁶⁷ and internees could have ordered others from catalogues or purchased them in Twin Falls. A poem in the 1942 Christmas edition of *The Irrigator* mocks these commercial cards: “I think that I shall never see/Some decent Christmas poetry/A Christmas card without

⁶⁵ “Nisei Soldier’s Photo Christmas Card” (denshopd-p13-00043), Densho, Mamiya Family Collection.

⁶⁶ Waits, 72-3.

⁶⁷ “Advertisement for Minidoka Consumer’s Cooperative” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 11 Dec 1943: 4.

clichés/Which no banality displays...”⁶⁸ Patriotic cards depicting flags and even military tanks and weaponry became “all the rage” in the 1940s,⁶⁹ but the Christmas cards made at Minidoka most closely resemble the cards popularized during the Depression. During the 1930s, homemade cards rose in popularity due to the reduced means of most people. In particular, simple block prints or sketches showing houses covered in snow became common at that time in America.⁷⁰

Several cards designed and created by internees at Minidoka depict this country scene with a twist: snow covered barracks. This simple imagery portrays a particular vision of the home without the abundance of gifts, feasting or even jovial celebrations that appeared on cards outside of the camp. The cards look lonely and silent, though smoke spills from a chimney on one particularly desolate looking card (Figure 1) to remind the recipient of the families dwelling within. This card shows a close up view of three barracks.⁷¹ The paths between the buildings are covered in snow and mud, and the dwellings themselves are constructed of thin boards with curtainless windows. A large number “5” is painted on the side of one building, and the sky overhead is dark and cloudy. This harsh, unfriendly and institutional environment is unwelcoming and totally lacking in Christmas cheer, redefining the spirit of the message within, reading, “Season’s Greetings.” The artist of this card showed a dejected attitude that many internees must have felt at living in such conditions and protested the fact that his or her community is forced to live in barracks rather than houses.

⁶⁸ John Essene, “Christmas Cards” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 11.

⁶⁹ Marling, 316.

⁷⁰ Marling, 316.

⁷¹ “Incarceration Camp Christmas Card” (denshopd-p141-00066), Densho, Shosuke Sasaki Collection.



Figure 1: Christmas Card, Sketch

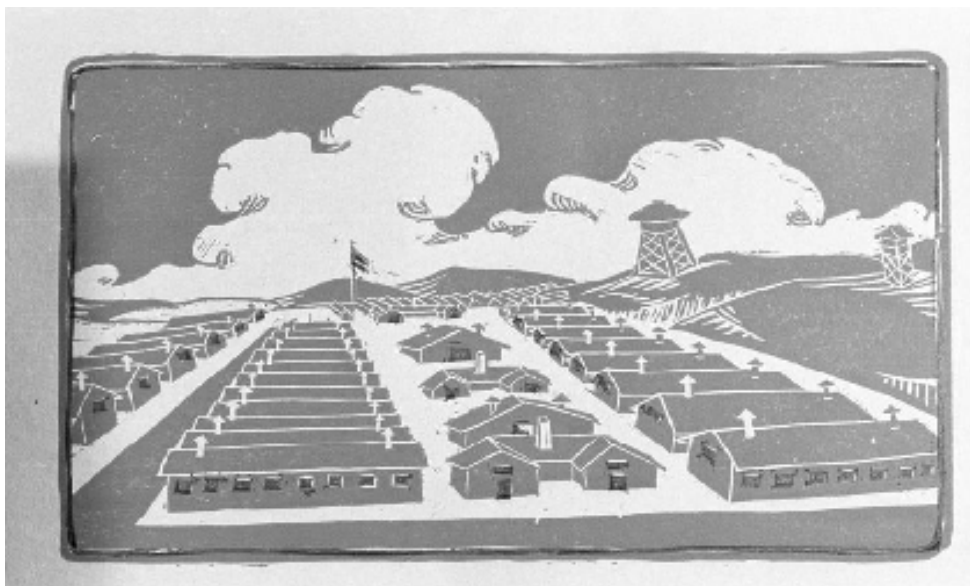


Figure 2: Christmas Card, Block Print

Another card (Figure 2), a block print, shows an eagle's eye view of the entire camp from the west.⁷² This card shows a much cleaner and crisper depiction of the camp, partially due to the artistic style. The rows of perfectly aligned barracks fade into the

⁷² "Camp Christmas Card" (denshopd-p13-00023), Densho, Mamiya Family Collection.

distance, with oversized guard towers looming down from surrounding hills.

Interestingly, the area where Minidoka was located is entirely flat, so the artist actually exaggerated not only the size of the towers, but also their geographical placement to increase the impression of imprisonment. However, the artist did not depict the barbed wire that surrounded the camp during some of the war, perhaps substituting the dominating hills in its place. Taking artistic license in this way enabled the internee to project a sense of doom and entrapment. A large American flag flies over the camp near the center of the picture, an ironic statement of both patriotism and the civil injustice at Minidoka. In contrast to the other card that emphasized the loneliness and shoddy condition of the camp, this card focuses on the military presence and order.

The artistic medium of Christmas cards provided a space for internees to express their opposition to the internment in degrees they might not have felt comfortable doing or been able to do through speech or writing. Letters in and out of the camp were censored, as was the camp newspaper. The sketches and block prints reveal a view of Minidoka Christmas from the inside, conveying ideas and feelings that internees could not express verbally. Since internees apparently had access to both handmade cards and those of a commercial variety, they could choose to make a defiant statement of protest or send a standard, mass-produced card for Christmas. However, it is unclear how the handmade cards might have been distributed.

Christmas Gifts

Gift exchange took two distinct forms at Minidoka Relocation Center. Children and elderly people received gifts mailed from churches outside the camp and limited gift

exchange occurred between internees. After explaining how the former exchange took place, I will detail the great variety of responses it incurred from internees, the churches and the public. Then I will discuss the implications hidden behind its shiny wrapping before concluding with the gift exchanges between internees.

Each Christmas, the Friends Service Committee and the Home Missions Council of the Federal Council of Christian Churches in America matched mainline denominations with specific internment camps and assigned them the duty of providing those children with presents at Christmas. For example, in 1942, Baptist and Episcopalian churches in the United States were responsible for providing all children and babies under 19 years of age at Minidoka with Christmas presents.⁷³ In 1944, they received gifts from the Northern Baptists and Methodists.⁷⁴ All ten relocation centers were included in this project for each year of the internment. During the first year of internment, Minidokans received an astonishing 17,000 presents from the church groups. The extra gifts were distributed to various youth groups, nurseries and hospital wards.⁷⁵ In later years, the total number of gifts decreased, though senior citizens were added to the group of eligible gift recipients.⁷⁶ Other individuals, such as former neighbors from the West Coast, WRA employees and even former internees, also donated money and

⁷³ “7,000 Gifts Received Through Two Churches” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 8.

⁷⁴ “Delivery of Gifts to Start Today” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1944: 1.

⁷⁵ “17,000 Gifts Donated Hunt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 30 Dec 1942: 2.

⁷⁶ “Religious Groups Gather Gifts for Evacuee Children” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 11 Dec 1943: 4.

presents to Minidoka at Christmas, but the vast majority came from the organized church giving.⁷⁷

To cope with the overflowing numbers of gifts, “Santa’s Workshops” were organized each year, staffed with young and old female internees to sort and distribute the presents to each block. This undertaking was organized through the Federated Church office during some years, but the volunteers were not all Christian, let alone members of the church. Photographs from 1943 (Figure 3) show long picnic tables spilling over with bundles, wrapping paper and boxes squeezed into a narrow barrack, the piles often obscuring the faces of the Japanese American women attempting to fairly divide the presents between the many Minidokan children. Board games, stuffed animals and other small toys can be seen. One photograph shows no fewer than nineteen women, both young and old, and one man hard at work.⁷⁸ Local churches and department stores loaned Santa suits to the camp each year, so men could dress as Santa for each housing block and at the hospital to deliver the many presents.⁷⁹ Santa was a popular figure at Minidoka and many former internees who were children in the camp remember his presence.

⁷⁷ “Anonymous Donor Sends \$525 for Children’s Christmas” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 4 Dec 1943: 1.

⁷⁸ “Incarcerees Sorting Christmas Gifts” (denshopd-i37-00007), Densho, National Archives and Records Administration. “Incarcerees Preparing for Christmas” (denshopd-i37-00009), Densho, National Archives and Records Administration. “Incarcerees Preparing for Christmas” (denshopd-i37-00008), Densho, National Archives and Records Administration. Historians must use photographs carefully as they depict only a moment in time, one that may have been singular and artificial. Understanding the richer context around the moment can increase their usefulness. For more information on using photographs as historical sources, see Peter Burke, *Eyewitnessing: The Uses of Images as Historical Evidence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University: 2001).

⁷⁹ “Gala Christmas Festivities in Store for Hunt Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 1. “Annual Christmas Decoration Contest Set, Keen Interest Felt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 3.



Figure 3: “Santa’s Workshop”

Internees at Minidoka expressed immense gratitude for the donation of these gifts from the Christian churches. The rhetoric of gratitude surrounding the reception of the gifts came in two primary forms: an affirmation of Christian brotherhood and that of American solidarity. Ministers and employees of the Federated Church referred to the gifts as “an expression of Christian love.”⁸⁰ After Christmas, four Nikkei secretaries of the church were charged with writing thank you letters to the many donors.⁸¹ In one such letter, a church employee wrote of hearing an internee say, “Seeing all those gifts coming in from religious groups has made me think more seriously of spiritual matters than I’ve ever done before.”⁸² Whether this actually occurred or not, church donors got the

⁸⁰ “Letter to Betty Adkins from Tom Fukuyama,” 17 Dec 1944, Box 1/Folder 1, Betty Fukuyama Papers, Accession No. 4411-001, University of Washington Libraries.

⁸¹ “Variety of Events Marks Second Christmas in Hunt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 1.

⁸² “Letter to Miss Alice W. S. Brimson from Shigoko Soso Uno,” 11 Jan 1943, Box 1/Folder 3, Emery E. Andrews Papers, Accession No. 1908-001, University of Washington Libraries.

impression that their gifts mattered greatly and might even be bringing new members to the church.

Other internees saw the gift giving as proof of the true goodness of America. A pastor of the Federated Church wrote, “The number of gifts shows that the heart of America is essentially warm and the vociferous race mongers constitute only a small minority.”⁸³ The Minidoka church newsletter also used this theme in an article entitled “True Friendships.” It states that “countless events have happened to shake our faith in the people of America,” but the number of gifts this Christmas “proves beyond a doubt that we have friends, good friends, who would go out of their way to help us.”⁸⁴ Finally, an editorial in the camp newspaper explains:

The most tangible evidence that the “American way of living” is not a mere conglomeration of words but a living and breathing practice rooted deeply in American citizens is the exuberant manner in which various groups throughout the country, primarily church organizations, are rallying to make the coming Christmas for evacuees as cheerful and joyful as possible under the circumstances.⁸⁵

One important characteristic flows through each of these accounts of appreciation. While every author acknowledges that the nature of Americans is questionable given the recent past, no one ever suggests that America, the country, could be at fault. America remains infallible, though individual Americans might make poor choices. And given those past choices, Americans themselves have now corrected their actions by comforting and thinking of the children of Minidoka. Certainly, these gifts seem to have temporarily

⁸³ “Variety of Events Marks Second Christmas in Hunt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 1.

⁸⁴ “True Friendships” *The Minidoka Herald* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1943: 2.

⁸⁵ “Editorial: Christmas Thoughts” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 2.

alleviated some of the pain of internment, but could a teddy bear possibly heal the pain of lost homes, businesses, basic human and civil rights and the separation of families?

No spite or resentment can be heard in their sentiments despite the fact that the churches did not support the Nikkei when the government announced plans for their internment. While dissent would not have likely been heard during the internment, disapproval was not heard in later oral histories either.

However, in both contemporary reports and later oral histories, several Minidokans omitted or changed the Protestant origin of the gifts when telling this part of the Christmas story, perhaps demonstrating a degree of resistance to forgiving the churches. When reports did not mention the Home Missions Council or make a general reference to the Protestant or Christian churches, the source of the presents was often left unclear or attributed to the Quakers specifically. The Minidoka yearbook commemorated the gift giving: “Approximately 17,000 gifts were donated from hundreds of well-wishers and organizations throughout the country. Ah, but if, only these “friends” could have really seen the happy faces of the many youngsters as they hustled to receive their gifts, their hearts would have truly felt the appreciation of their gestures.”⁸⁶ Again, the number of presents emphasizes the magnitude of the giving, but this report fails to mention the exact source of the presents, the Protestant churches. A vague gesture towards “well-wishers and organizations” does not suggest a mass giving program. However, “friends” could be a reference to the Quaker Friends Service Committee, whose members often frequented Minidoka, holding lectures and information sessions as well as meeting with internees individually about relocation possibilities.

⁸⁶ “Santa in Minidoka” *Minidoka Interlude* (Hunt, ID) n.p., 1943.

Indeed, there seemed to be some misunderstanding among the Minidokans about which churches were responsible for the gifts, despite the newspaper reporting which denominations gave to Minidoka each year. One oral history tells of the Quakers delivering the presents, with no mention of other churches. The Friends were by far the most visible church presence in the camp. This report mentions that the Friends “sent gifts to us so the kids would have Christmas presents. I remember that. I thought how very kind of someone to even, ‘cause we kind of thought nobody ever thought. We thought we just were kind of lost, but that was...it was very impressive. I was very impressed.”⁸⁷ The gifts, from the Quakers as she recalls, meant a great deal to her during the internment. The material objects were less important than the realization that the Nikkei had not been completely forgotten. Cut off from the world, they still retained some ties to the outside world, in this case, in the form of the ever present Quaker face at Minidoka.

The Protestant churches appeared very proud of their contributions at Christmas and spread the news of their good deeds widely. The Home Missions Council of North America released a pamphlet, “America’s Biggest Christmas Party,” describing their charitable donations to the camps. It listed the quantity of gifts sent to the internment camps and told of the appreciation of “the little Americans with Japanese faces.”⁸⁸ This text reveals a complex mixture of prejudice and compassion as the children are labeled as Americans, but have un-American faces. Simply put, the Council claims that physical

⁸⁷ Groves.

⁸⁸ Home Missions Council of North America, “America’s Biggest Christmas Party,” Box 2/Folder 3, Kaoru Ichihara Papers, Accession No. 1839-001, University of Washington Libraries.

racial differences are un-American. This American child can never truly belong because she lacks Caucasian facial features.

While the Quaker Friends helped the Nikkei from December 7th until after the end of the war, they remained penitent and only asked for forgiveness for not doing more. This strongly contrasts with the message from the Home Missions Council which designed a brochure to flaunt its much more limited deeds. The Friends took space in *The Minidoka Irrigator's* first Christmas edition to share their humble message of Christmas greetings and contrition. They write:

At this Christmas time and at all times we want to live together with all men as brothers. We pray that wars may soon cease so that this way of life may be possible to all men. We humbly ask forgiveness for the fact that we have not always so lived in the past. Because we have not so lived, we bear our share of the guilt for this war which has caused you suffering and which brings only grief and sorrow to the world. We pray that we all may come through the testing of this fire stronger, truer, man and woman. We must not lose faith in the great good which everywhere remains in spite of wars and hatreds and misunderstandings. We look forward to the time when you may return freely to your home communities. We shall welcome you as neighbors and we trust that because of this sad experience we shall be better neighbors to you than we were in the past.⁸⁹

This letter echoes the sentiments of an American Christmas, it being a time for peace and brotherhood, but makes powerful statements about the guilt and responsibility associated with the crimes against the Nikkei. The Quakers stood by the Japanese Americans in court trials, lobbied eastern colleges to raise their quotas for Asian students, visited the Nikkei at Minidoka multiple times every month and set up hostels to help people relocate to Chicago and New York. And yet they remain humble, ask for forgiveness and pledge to be better neighbors in the future.

⁸⁹ "American Friends Service Committee Sends Greetings" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 3.

Newspapers outside of the camp offered yet another reaction to the gift giving. In December 1943, a Christmas-themed comic strip in the *San Francisco Chronicle* revealed anxiety about the gifts sent to internees and some outright fear of the Japanese-Americans. The cartoon particularly drew the ire of Minidoka minister Emery Andrews. The *Little Joe* cartoon depicted a Caucasian housewife sending a tall pile of presents to an internment camp against the warnings of a ranch hand, a mustached man wearing a large cowboy hat. The woman wears an apron and a small child trails after her in each cell. She instructs the man, “You take these gifts to those poor Japs—right now! And don’t forget—tell them merry Christmas!” The man returns to the house with a return gift from the Japanese. As he suspects ill will from the internees, he opens the package with a long string outdoors. Sure enough, the package explodes. The naïve woman learns her lesson and shouts, “Oh-h-h! Those awful, inhuman beasts! They tried to kill us!” The man ends the story, “Yep—I still claim Japs jest don’t understand kindness—”⁹⁰ Not only does this comic show amazing prejudice against Japanese Americans, it comments on the naiveté of women and the churches for organizing gift donations at Christmas. At the level of individual churches, the organized giving was most likely organized by women.

The *Little Joe* comic depicts Japanese Americans as so completely different from Caucasians that they cannot even understand kindness. Even the kindly woman calls the internees “Japs,” a derogatory term referring to the enemy. It suggests that any attempt to treat them as human beings, like sending Christmas gifts, is a wasted effort and will fail. More extremely, it tells readers that any contact with or proximity to the internees could

⁹⁰ Robert Leffingwell, “Little Joe: Give Till it Hurts?” *San Francisco Chronicle* (San Francisco, CA) 26 Dec 1943.

be extremely dangerous. This seems to be the source of anxiety over the gift giving—that it encourages contact with the Nikkei, a group shown as so cruel that they “grinned a lot” when presenting the gift-wrapped explosive, showing glee at the imminent disaster. The author portrays them as something other than human and clearly has no sympathy for the interned citizens. And, since a major paper published the comic, this was unlikely an extreme view.

Reverend Andrews wrote Robert Leffingwell, the author of *Little Joe*, opening his letter with the sentence: “You aren’t funny.” He writes about the Japanese Americans who bought more war bonds, donated more to the Red Cross and volunteered in greater numbers to the armed forces than any other group. He ends: “If you only knew what happened in the relocation centers this Christmas and Christmas last year, you would make a public apology for the ignorance portrayed in your ‘funny’ strip.”⁹¹ Andrews’ detailed paper collection at the University of Washington includes no response to this letter. Andrews spent his entire life working for the Japanese American community in Seattle and ceaselessly tried to educate others and correct their prejudices.

Other outside newspaper reports were not so virulent, but still betrayed a certain level of prejudice. A lengthy article in *The Sunday Oregonian*, the main Portland newspaper, highlighted the activities of the internees at Minidoka. The journalist proclaims that “the ‘westernization’ of the colonists was dramatized during the recent holiday season. They threw themselves into a furious round of preparations for Christmas.” He describes the dining hall decoration competition in great detail, emphasizing the displays showing nostalgia for the past and a yearning to return home.

⁹¹ “Letter to Mr. Leffingwell from Emery E. Andrews,” 29 Dec 1943, Box 1/Folder 4, Emery E. Andrews Papers, Accession No. 1908-003, University of Washington Libraries.

He quotes the child who worried before Christmas about the camp's guarded gates, "Can Santa get a pass?" and explains that many other children "were fearful that Santa could not drop through the narrow stovepipes that served the heaters." Rest assured, "36 slant-eyed Santa Clauses showed up...several climbing through fireplaces that had been set against window openings." The article continues the Minidoka Christmas tale to highlight the many gifts sent from "outside Caucasian sources" and tells how "colonists were stunned at the expression of good will. Some decided the gifts were rewards for the colonists' honorable behavior record. 'For the first eight weeks we didn't have a single policeman inside the camp,' recalls Harry L. Stafford, project director. 'And in all that period there wasn't so much as a black eye. Without any disrespect to their nationality, imagine 9500 Irish cooped up, with a record like that!'"⁹²

This article clearly takes a very different position from that found in the "Little Joe" comic strip. But even though the author stands up for the Japanese by showing their good behavior record and their patriotic American spirit, he still talks of "slant-eyed Santas" and refers to their necessary process of "westernization." Indeed, focusing on their patriotism and good behavior implies that many people outside the camp might find this report a surprise. Articles such as this one are framed as human interest pieces, appearing in West Coast newspapers where the readers would have known neighbors and other associates who were interned. The articles simultaneously alleviate any guilt some Americans might feel about the internment by emphasizing positive aspects of the camp, such as the Christmas celebrations, while also alleviating their possible concerns that the Japanese Americans might be a threat to their personal or national security. While no

⁹² Mel Arnold, "'Don't Call us Japs,' Request Young Evacuees at Minidoka—"They're Who We're Fighting'" *The Sunday Oregonian* (Portland, OR) 7 Feb 1943.

oral history or internal contemporary source suggests that internees saw the gifts as a reward for good behavior, this reporter chose to emphasize this idea, perhaps to reassure readers that the camp administration was monitoring the internees and keeping them under control. This article is likely as positive as any written by someone outside of the camp, though the Caucasian ministers in the camp often wrote lengthy articles for publication in major newspapers back home. These articles harangued the United States government for their civil rights violations and called for justice, regardless of the patriotic acts of the Japanese Americans. However, newspaper articles reporting on Christmas in the camp showed Americans outside of the camp how those inside were celebrating and carrying on life in ways similar to them, though they were now reliant on the benevolence of others.

Beyond these public acknowledgements of gift giving, the churches never explained why they sent gifts to the Japanese American internees. A variety of possibilities exist, from traditional Christmas charity to complex exchanges of self-fulfillment, gratitude and obligation. Many of these questions apply to other types of charity giving in different places and times. Are gifts ever given without strings attached?

First, however, the identity of the givers should be examined. During the internment, individual denominations did not play a direct organizational role in gift giving, let alone individuals within the churches. The Home Missions Council conceived of the gift program and assigned duties and obligations to the denominations who then commanded their churches and their congregants to donate presents. On the other side, the different internment camps received the gifts and directed them to individual children

internally. Christians outside of the camp had little to do with the program aside from obliging their superiors in the church hierarchy. Marcel Mauss, an anthropologist who laid foundational theory about the gift, explains, “It is not individuals but collectivities that impose obligations of exchange and contract upon each other.”⁹³ Mauss researched the organization and morality of gift giving among Pacific Northwest Native Americans and Pacific Islanders and claimed their models underpin our own giving today. Mauss’ framework of agency clarifies the organized giving to the internment camps at Christmas. However, individual church members and the church organizations likely perceived the gift giving in different ways.

Individual congregations and their members may have seen the internees as one more needy cause among many, though this perception does not necessarily simplify the exchange. American Christmases have long been tied to charity giving. Stephen Nissenbaum distinguishes the space of Christmas from the rest of the year, when begging was permitted and acceptable during the Christmas season.⁹⁴ One of the most classic images of Christmas is the Salvation Army man dressed in a Santa suit, ringing his bell for donations for the poor. The Salvation Army began this practice by hiring homeless men to dress as Santa and collect for the organization. While begging for themselves as individuals was viewed as inappropriate, asking anonymously for the charity group was seen differently. Anonymous gift donation to soldiers first began during World War I. This program achieved two goals: the soldiers received needed supplies and the program

⁹³ Marcel Mauss, *The Gift: The Form and Reason for Exchange in Archaic Societies* (New York: W. W. Norton, 1990), 5.

⁹⁴ Stephen Nissenbaum, *The Battle for Christmas* (New York: Knopf, 1996) 253.

helped unify the nation at Christmas by popularizing a common goal.⁹⁵ Abstract giving to a charity group, such as the Salvation Army or even army troops, was the norm until recent decades. Only lately have groups placed an emphasis on buying specific gifts for specific people with adopt-a-family or adopt-a-soldier programs.⁹⁶ Matching donors with actual individuals with explicit desires increases the reality of the exchange. In the 1940s, Christians outside of the internment camps mailed gifts to children, but were never matched with individual internees. This increased the level of comfort and anonymity for donors who perhaps felt animosity towards actual Japanese Americans, but could give generally to a faceless cause sponsored by their church.

While widespread charity is popularized at Christmas, specific concerns relate to poor children during the holiday. Since the inception of the family-oriented Christmas, something only solidified in the mid-1800s, children received more attention at this time of year. In the first decade of 1900, Elizabeth Phillips founded the Santa Claus Association to collect monetary donations, buy toys and distribute them to needy children.⁹⁷ Many groups later imitated her actions as the perceived necessity for children to receive presents at Christmas rose. Many church members likely donated to the internment camp children alongside other charities without thinking a great deal about it, but clearly, as shown by the *Little Joe* cartoon, not all people felt this way.

But was the organized gift giving to the Nikkei children intended as charity or was it perceived as charity? It seems that these gifts were something more than charity relief. While similarities exist between the gifts at Minidoka and other Christmas charity

⁹⁵ Waits, 159.

⁹⁶ Marling, 358.

⁹⁷ Waits, 167.

and some donors may have seen their gift in this way, additional, more complex exchanges occurred at the internment camps. Also, it is unclear that the internees saw themselves as recipients of charity. While they expressed a great amount of gratitude, a sense remains that these gifts are either a show of kindness and thoughtfulness or perhaps even an earned reward for their suffering. When the quantity of presents far outnumbered the children at Minidoka in 1942, the extra presents were dispersed to youth groups, schools and the hospital within the camp. No one suggested that the presents be returned or even passed on to other needy groups. However, the internees gave generously, along with the rest of the nation, to buy Red Cross Christmas Seals and war bonds every year.⁹⁸ Do charity recipients typically give to charities themselves? Certainly the church members could have seen their acts as charity while the internees saw them differently. Arguably, charity gifts are never simple and one-sided; rather, like any gifts, they are complex and always involve an exchange of goods. Mauss' conception of a continuous cycle of obligatory return gifts, where each party must constantly strive to outdo the other, presumes that a gift is never given without receiving something in return. Several other scholars have also examined the complexities of the gift and what intangible qualities can be bound with it.

If a gift cannot be given without strings attached, what type exchanges did the gifts at Minidoka incorporate? Certainly the internees were not able to reciprocate with material goods, but the commodification of intangible goods will help frame the exchange. For example, both individuals and the churches received self-fulfillment and gratitude in exchange for their simple gifts. Adam Smith talked about these types of reciprocation

⁹⁸ "Christmas Seals Sold" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 19 Dec 1942: 8. "Christmas Seal Drive to Start Next Monday" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Nov 1944: 1.

acting as a part of an “interiorized form of commerce” and Bourdieu helpfully describes such tradable goods as “symbolic capital.”⁹⁹ Donors, both individuals and church organizations, received this symbolic capital in exchange for their gifts.

Self-fulfillment and satisfaction was the most apparent exchange that occurred among individuals outside of the camp. Helmuth Berking writes that Western cultures frequently view self-fulfillment as an exchangeable commodity.¹⁰⁰ Christians outside the camp likely felt good about themselves and their churches for giving to the internees. Additionally, like other forms of anonymous charity giving, the donation alleviated the guilt of individual Americans who were free and comfortably well off, giving them an opportunity to help those in need without the messiness of addressing the greater systematic problems of poverty or racial prejudice. They could feel satisfied that they were helping without having to actually change the system and fix the problem. Indeed, the gifts fortified the existing social inequalities. Certainly a large factor of the exchange went towards relieving the guilt of the Protestant Caucasians who did little to resist the internment of their Christian brethren, much as Americans gave to the poor without working to change the system that keeps them in poverty. While some Americans outside of the camp likely gave with sincerity, this boost in self-esteem and a relief of guilt for giving a gift to a needy interned child can be tied to an abstract sense of good will that the individual “can exploit in the future.”¹⁰¹ We cannot know exactly what

⁹⁹ Mark Osteen, ed., *The Question of the Gift: Essays Across Disciplines* (Routledge: London, 2002) 13, 18.

¹⁰⁰ Osteen, 18.

¹⁰¹ Osteen 17-18.

givers imagined as future favor, but perhaps they attached their gift to an idea of resultant, obligatory conformity and loyalty to the United States among internees.

Particularly for the institutes that organized the giving, the receipt of gratitude for small toys may have been very valuable. This idea has been compared to a Godfather effect, where great favors, 17,000 gifts in the case of Minidoka, would increase the prestige of the giver's group, but also obligate the recipients to an unstated vow or future debt. In the case of the internees, this debt would involve a promise to not speak out against the inaction of the churches and instead applaud their very public donation of Christmas gifts. Georg Simmel, a German sociologist, goes as far as claiming that society would collapse without gratitude, as it is the foundation of social behavior. He says that the "essential ambiguity" of the gift and the intangibility of gratitude solidify the power inequalities that structure our world.¹⁰² This paradigm of obligatory gratitude, for even such small gifts, can be seen in the politics of the church's relations with the Japanese Americans, before, during and after the war.

National denominations ran the risk of losing control over their Japanese American congregants during the war when Protestant Nikkei were jumbled into ecumenical churches and largely led themselves. The sparse material donations received at Minidoka would not have been invoked later on, but in a binary worldview, the churches did help, regardless of the degree. Had they done absolutely nothing during the war, they would have had little claim over the Japanese Americans after the war. The churches' control was retained during the war through these gifts and through the obligatory gratitude they demanded. The gifts strengthened preexisting bonds between Protestant Nikkei and the national churches, while also solidifying the churches' power

¹⁰² Osteen, 14.

and domination within a stratified racial hierarchy. Receiving the gifts reaffirmed the Japanese Americans' lower social status and their sense of obligation to the outside churches. However, the precise combination of motives of the churches cannot be easily ascertained. Groups and individuals react to fear in myriad and complex ways, and I have established some of the possibilities. While intentionality of the churches can be questioned, the results were apparent during and after the war when church councils refused to allow the Nikkei to re-form their own ethnic churches.

Though many internees recalled a dearth of presents at Christmas, gift exchange between internees did take place and served an entirely different purpose than the exchanges with churches outside of the camp. Due to the enforced poverty of the internees, Minidokans had to either make gifts by hand or save their wages for a very long time. This hardship increased the meaning and perceived value attached to the gifts exchanged between internees and many internees remembered the specific gifts decades later, though others still bemoaned their want for more. Still others dreamed for immaterial and unattainable gifts of peace and freedom.

Prior to the first Christmas in the internment camp, articles in the *Irrigator* encourage internees to cheer up and try to be creative for Christmas gifts. The "Feminidoka" women's column reads, "We'll be thinking of Christmas soon. Yes, but with no gifts, no trees, no nothin', what's there to look forward to? Don't be pessimistic...even if we can't buy presents for our friends we can always use our ingenuity to make lovely and clever gifts."¹⁰³ Polished or decorated rocks, arrangements made of sagebrush bonsai, handmade furniture or other artistic pieces created from natural objects found in their desert surroundings made popular gifts at Christmas. One

¹⁰³ "Feminidoka" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 28 Nov 1942: 2.

man writes to his wife, “I’m working on my stones every day, as usual. Requests for my wares for Christmas gifts are keeping me very busy.”¹⁰⁴ Like other Americans the internees exchanged presents, but like the Christmas cards, the actual appearance of the objects reveals the conditions at the camp and a level of resistance by sometimes creating their own gifts rather than purchasing commercial ones. Issues of the camp yearbook, the *Minidoka Interlude*, also proved to be very popular Christmas presents, and could not be printed fast enough to keep up with demand.¹⁰⁵ The annual showed group photographs of each block, highlighted clubs and church groups at Minidoka and even devoted an entire page to “Santa in Minidoka,” showing the prominence of the annual Christmas celebrations.¹⁰⁶ Not only were the yearbooks keepsakes for the Nikkei living at Minidoka, they could be mailed to relatives and friends outside of the camp to share their experiences. The yearbooks were produced by internees and published in the camp, a variation on homemade crafts.

Other internees saved their meager wages to buy larger presents for family and friends. Dorothy Beagley submitted this story as her favorite memory from the camp:

The winter of 1944, my mom saved her meager \$16.00 a month to order from the Montgomery Catalog, a pair [of] ice skates for me for Christmas. What a surprise! It was the only gift I ever received during our camp years. In the last issue of the Minidoka newspaper, there we were...ice-skating down our canal. We thought we were celebrities!¹⁰⁷

Another man recalls receiving a “beautiful brown leather diary with a lock” during a Christmas leave at Minidoka with family friends. He wrote in this diary throughout the

¹⁰⁴ Fiset, 264.

¹⁰⁵ “Annual Gift-Givers May Obtain Cards” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 1.

¹⁰⁶ “Santa in Minidoka” *Minidoka Interlude* (Hunt, ID) 1943.

¹⁰⁷ Dorothy Kogita Beagley, “A Christmas Gift to Remember” *Minidoka Stories I and II*, Tsuguo Ikeda and Akio Yanagihara, eds. (n.p., 2003) n.p.

war in order to share his experiences with his parents who lived in Hiroshima.¹⁰⁸

Receiving larger presents like ice-skates and diaries that came with an acknowledged sacrifice in such hard times, as well as home-crafted gifts that demanded hours of labor, made such a strong impression on young internees that they still recall the events in detail and many still possess the gifts themselves.

Despite these stories and the thousands of gifts mailed to children from outside of the camp, the disappointment of few, small or no presents was felt by many internees who recalled the abundant material acquisitions from years past. Tsuguo Ikeda spoke about this:

The one thing missing was presents. Really wasn't much to give each other... I know some of the kids in elementary school were given Christmas gifts...but for the teenagers, there was no gift exchange. But the thing was all of us were treated equally that way. We were all deprived of that, so, but we also had a pleasure of socializing and using our creative ideas and motivation to decorate, so we loved that competitiveness. So Christmas was great.¹⁰⁹

For Ikeda, the decorating contests and other community events at Christmas made up for the lack of gifts. Perhaps the passing of decades improved the memory of Christmas at Minidoka; it seems that later economic improvements and freedom from incarceration would make the past seem worse by comparison, but the internees' Christmas memories are very positive. Ikeda also mentions the equality at Christmas, for all internees made similar wages. Class distinctions, which would have been otherwise accentuated at Christmas, were essentially erased. While basic needs of housing, food and clothing were met by the WRA, the internees had very little income for extras such as gifts.

¹⁰⁸ Ted Takashi Yasuda, "Christmas 1944 in Minidoka Relocation Center" *Minidoka Stories I and II*, Tsuguo Ikeda and Akio Yanagihara, eds. (n.p., 2003) n.p.

¹⁰⁹ Tsuguo "Ike" Ikeda, Interviewed by Alice Ito, 27 Sept 2000, Densho Visual Histories.

One last combination of gift exchange occurred at Minidoka. Despite their limited wages, some internees gave presents to WRA employees at Christmas. Kleinkopf observed this practice of gift giving to his staff. He writes on Christmas Eve:

A number of the appointed personnel have found Christmas presents in their desk drawers. These have been placed there by the evacuees. This seems to be a custom with them. Many who wish to give gifts bring them to the office when no one is present and leave them where they will be found later. It has been generally agreed among all members of WRA staff that there shall be no gift giving. However, one cannot refuse these gifts which are so willingly and sincerely given. A refusal would be a sign of disrespect.¹¹⁰

These gifts suggest amiable relations and possibly even friendship between Caucasians and Japanese Americans at Minidoka. The Nikkei, having a lower status than the WRA employees, could not expect more than appreciation and kindness in return. Kleinkopf's report does not say why he thought a refusal would be disrespectful, but it would have drawn attention to the anonymous giver and perhaps made them uncomfortable. His journal does not indicate that he knew anything about Japanese practices of gift giving.¹¹¹ The WRA staff, largely filled by men and women unable to join the military, often saw their positions at Minidoka as part of the war effort, and discrimination of the Nikkei by Caucasian staff members was seldom reported. One could argue that the internees would not have publicly complained about such offenses, but reports of Caucasians calling internees "Japs" did occur occasionally and the camp director quickly reprimanded those responsible, explaining that the interned Japanese Americans were not the enemy and only the enemy merited such derogatory language.

¹¹⁰ Kleinkopf, 24 Dec 1943: 316.

¹¹¹ The complex obligations of gift giving in Japanese society today largely grew out of the post-World War II economic booms, so would not have influenced behavior in the camps. Katherine Rupp, *Gift Giving in Japan: Cash, Connections, Cosmologies* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University, 2003).

The pages of *The Minidoka Irrigator* were filled with Christmas advertising from local businesses in Twin Falls and Jerome each December, showing the Minidokans' connections to the local economy. Internees did most of their Christmas shopping through catalogues from department stores like Montgomery Ward, but passes into town were not hard to come by and, despite dirty looks from prejudiced locals, a chance to leave the camp was often relished. Caucasian camp ministers who lived outside the camp opened their doors to the internees every day and invited them in for a cup of tea and the rare opportunity to enjoy a rest inside a traditional home. WRA staff also helped the internees with Christmas shopping, picking up small items from outside the camp. Kleinkopf listed popular gifts purchased in 1942, including "Christmas candy, dolls, model airplane materials, nursing bottles, garlic, medicine, yarn and even the *Esquire* magazine. The *Esquire* was for an elderly Japanese bachelor."¹¹²

Shops clearly saw the economic value of marketing to the nearby town of 10,000 Japanese Americans. In the weeks before their final Christmas at Minidoka, the internees were barraged with advertisements from a wide variety of shops, including jewelers, toy shops, department stores and even a bakery in Jerome selling fruitcakes. Within the camp, the Minidoka Consumer Cooperative advertised their holiday gift items as well.¹¹³ The *Irrigator* advertised itself in the form of a gift subscription to buy for family or friends outside of the camp. The advertisement reads, "They'll unwrap this gift 52 times...yet you won't have to wrap it once," calling the subscription a "weekly letter

¹¹² Kleinkopf, 22 Dec 1942: 67.

¹¹³ "Costume Jewelry for Christmas Gifts" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 2 Dec 1944: 2. "Santa Brings Them Slippers" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 2 Dec 1944: 3. "Santa is on the Way!" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 2 Dec 1944: 4. "It's Time for Fruitcake!" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 2.

from home.”¹¹⁴ Most of these advertisements, aside from those from the Cooperative and the newspaper, did not explicitly target the internees in their content or rhetoric. The items advertised are typical American Christmas gifts. The advertisements look just as appropriate for the local paper as for the *Irrigator* and were likely used in both. Similar advertisements filled the newspapers each December. In the *Irrigator* Christmas edition in 1943, businesses as diverse as Covey’s Coffee Shop, Idaho Egg Producers, a shoe repair shop, Pacific Fruit and Produce, No Delay Café, Fidelity National Bank, the Showa Shoyu Brewing Company and Sun Valley Stages bike shop all bought space to wish the internees a merry Christmas.¹¹⁵ While political barriers arose between Japanese American citizens and Caucasian citizens during the war, economic relations did not change significantly, beyond the Japanese businesses and competition eradicated from the West Coast. Stores in Southern Idaho were open for business as usual for the relocated internees, and this meant lucrative sales at Christmas.

Alongside the discussion of material Christmas gifts, the letters to Santa from children at the camp who wished for very immaterial things deserve some attention. Kleinkopf copied a collection of letters and poems from the schools in his journal. Though perhaps other letters that he did not include asked for games, toys or other traditional gifts, these letters all acknowledge the wartime shortages and the much needier people elsewhere. One student asks for an armistice so families all over the world could be together and happy. Another asks for three things: “success to the United States in winning the war so everyone will be happy and can start a new life again,...some war bonds and stamps and... I want you to bring some snow so it will be a

¹¹⁴ “*Irrigator* Advertisement” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1944: 4.

¹¹⁵ *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1943: 2, 4, 6.

white Christmas instead of muddy Christmas.”¹¹⁶ These requests reveal the inner desires of children, wishes heard around the world during the war. They also imply, by their wishes for happiness, that people were not happy then. These messages from children contrast greatly with the gratitude Reverend Fukuyama expressed about the “privileges” of the internment. A sixth-grader concluded a poem, “But we have to be real Americans,/Just like the Pilgrims or Puritans;/We have to go without some things/And take just what Old Santa brings.”¹¹⁷ This student’s attempt at rhyme stakes a claim in America, while also accepting the burden of wartime rationing alongside other Americans. The verses do not reveal a sense that this child is happy to go without, but begrudgingly accepts the limitations. It also defines what constituted a “real American” for one child: white Protestant men and women who looked nothing like themselves. Amidst a flurry of donated and other material presents, these Christmas wishes had to wait years for answers.

Christmas Trees

Christmas trees played a variety of roles in the celebrations at Minidoka. The government supplied the camp with evergreens for public buildings and internees supplemented these with sagebrush trees taken from their surroundings. I will discuss their place as an essential element of the American Christmas and then argue for their particular importance for the Japanese Americans from the Pacific Northwest. Having and decorating Christmas trees was also a popular family tradition that could be held

¹¹⁶ Kleinkopf, 23 Dec 1943: 313-315.

¹¹⁷ Kleinkopf, 23 Dec 1943: 315-316.

throughout the internment. Finally, I will explain how the creation and use of sagebrush trees also functioned as a form of protest.

The opening scene of a recent episode of *American Dad*, an animated Fox comedy, depicted the all-American father and his family at a community tree-lighting ceremony. The father sighs with satisfaction and asks, “Ah, the lighting of the town Christmas tree. Can you imagine anything more American?” His son answers, “An American flag?” The father replies with excitement, “Or, or, an American flag with Christmas trees for stars!”¹¹⁸ This scene shows both the integration of American patriotism with Christmas and the central role of a secular symbol of Christmas—the Christmas tree. The exact way in which the tradition of decorated trees entered the American holiday has been hotly debated, but it follows an ancient tradition of bringing cheery greenery into the home during the dark and cold winter months. Evergreens, holly and mistletoe brighten the house aesthetically during a time without fresh flowers. The American tradition developed to show abundance and eventually unity as the trend became a standard tradition in all families.¹¹⁹ In 1923, the United States began its annual lighting of the national Christmas tree in Washington, D.C. and has continued this tradition ever since, publicly linking patriotism, the home and Christmas.¹²⁰ During World War II, the WRA supplemented their deliveries of coal and food to the Japanese internment camps with hundreds of Christmas trees each December. The government apparently viewed pine trees as basic a need as food and warmth for its displaced citizens.

¹¹⁸ “The Best Christmas Story Never” *American Dad*, Fox, original airdate: 30 Dec 2007.

¹¹⁹ Marling, 49-61.

¹²⁰ Waits, 160.

The United States government supplied trees for each dining hall, schoolroom, church hall and hospital ward.¹²¹ By December 1944, the last Christmas of the internment, internees were free to return to the West Coast and community activities were cut from the government budget. Each block still received a Christmas tree, however, through a donation from the Federal Council of the Church of Christ.¹²² The dining hall trees were used for the annual decoration competition, but the trees in schoolrooms were left for each teacher and class to decorate.¹²³ Kleinkopf wrote of the children's anticipation for the trees each year. "The children were waiting for them and had their decorations ready" when the trees were finally delivered only five days before Christmas in 1943.¹²⁴

At Minidoka, Christmas trees served the double purpose of honoring an important aspect of a traditional American holiday and meeting an immense aesthetic need for a community taken from the lush Evergreen State and deposited in the barren, dry landscape of the Southern Idaho desert. Japanese Americans were deeply invested in the land because they grew the majority of produce and natural landscaping materials in the Seattle area before the war.¹²⁵ Oral histories recall internees tenderly transporting seedlings on the evacuation trains to Minidoka, and many Nikkei designed and created traditional Japanese gardens at Minidoka as well as patriotic Victory Gardens to

¹²¹ "Christmas Tree Decoration Contest Set" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 2 Dec 1942: 3.

¹²² "Annual Christmas Decoration Contest Set; Keen Interest Felt" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 3.

¹²³ "Covering Hunt News: In Brief" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 11 Dec 1943: 3.

¹²⁴ Kleinkopf, 20 Dec 1943: 312.

¹²⁵ Anna H. Tamura, "Gardens Below the Watchtower: Gardens and Meaning in World War II Japanese-American Internment Camps," Unpublished MA thesis (Seattle: University of Washington, 2002) 18.

supplement their canned and processed cafeteria meals.¹²⁶ Most Japanese immigrants had come from temperate areas in Japan and thus had never been exposed to the landscapes of Southern Idaho, characterized by flat expanses of dry sagebrush, frequent dust storms and a limited range of color.¹²⁷ A journal entry by a Caucasian employee of the camp recalls a trip into Twin Falls where an internee requested, “‘I’d just like to get out of the car, walk over to one of those trees, touch it, and put my arms around it.’ They were thrilled beyond words by the sight of trees, flowers, and green fields.”¹²⁸ This evocative and painful description of “the lady who wanted to caress the tree” could be partially mitigated through celebrating this particular aspect of an American Christmas. A newspaper article spoke to this need when it mentioned that “70 evergreens from the state of Washington” would arrive soon.¹²⁹ Familiar trees from their home would have been particularly welcome. Minidokans felt the need for gardens and natural greenery year-round, but this need increased during the colder months when even their valiant attempts to grow gardens in the camp failed.

Despite the supply of donated Christmas trees each year, many Minidokans wished to erect their own tree in their small barrack apartment in order to recreate a traditional family practice and decorate their living space. An internee cataloged Christmas trees in a list of the “tangible objects” of Christmas that will be missed. She reminisced about “brightly lighted ever-green trees at each and every home...need it be a

¹²⁶ Tamura, 30.

¹²⁷ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Disorientation and Reorientation: The American Landscape Discovered from the West” *Journal of American History* (Dec 1992): 1045.

¹²⁸ United States Department of the Interior, *Minidoka National Monument: General Management Plan* (Seattle: National Park Service, 2006) 30.

¹²⁹ “Gala Christmas Festivities in Store for Hunt Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 1.

shack or a mansion.”¹³⁰ This reflects an attempt to retain family ties and tradition, despite the disruption of internment. During the war, families were torn apart when many men were taken to higher security prison camps and older children relocated to jobs further east or joined the army. Large impersonal dining halls broke down the family unit further as children usually ate with friends and not their family. Placing a Christmas tree in the home allowed families to preserve a tradition that they might have observed before the war. Others simply may have wanted a bit of decoration for the winter months.

However, internees had no way of obtaining an evergreen in their desert camp besides the publicly displayed WRA trees. So they improvised with sagebrush and tumbleweeds. One internee recalled a detailed description of the construction of such a tree:

Christmas without a Christmas tree just wasn't Christmas. When we were evacuated from Seattle and taken to the Relocation Center in Idaho we found ourselves living on desert land devoid of evergreen trees... There was one man, an Issei named Kyono, who worked as an engineer in the Fire Station, who decided to make himself a tree. Kyono might be considered an unlikely candidate to consider such a project. He was quite large for a Japanese and evidently of the laboring variety... he was the type that appeared at home in a flannel plaid shirt.

During the days before Christmas... you could see him twisting small strips of green crepe paper. Kyono with his work hardened fingers would be twirling the crepe paper strips one by one to form needles for his tree. I think for the trunk and branches of his tree, Kyono used a stripped Sagebrush. Sagebrush has a pungent odor which is both pleasant in a way and repugnant in another... When Kyono had enough needles, he began assembling them onto the bare brush. I am not sure now how he attached them but it was a tedious job of many hours... when the tree was completed it looked beautiful to us and slightly envious that he would have a tree for Christmas.

When I look back at those days I can picture Kyono with his children or friends celebrating Christmas. A small room with bare stud walls; cots with army blankets; simple home made furniture; a small pot belly stove for warmth and Kyono's Christmas tree. All in an area not unlike that of the first Nativity—Desert land of Sagebrush, Greasewood,

¹³⁰ Yuji Hiromura, “A Christmas Prayer” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 25 Dec 1942: 6.

desert flowers and Cheat grass—land where sheep and shepherds cross on their annual trek to the high pastures.

Yes if baby Jesus were to look at that scene BABY JESUS
WOULD HAVE BEEN GLAD.¹³¹

This vivid portrait of a man meticulously twining pieces of crepe paper onto a sagebrush tree conveys the need for the internees to celebrate their past traditions and bring greenery into the barren desert land. Crafting a Christmas tree enabled this man to recreate an important aspect of the home around which his family and friends could gather. The author also saw religious merit in these new traditions through their environmental parallel to the land of Jesus' birth. He recognizes the unfamiliarity of a "desert land devoid of evergreen trees," but finds a way to make that a positive aspect of their Christmas. The material object allowed them to remember and honor past Christmases and celebrate this new one.

Many teachers created sagebrush Christmas trees as well, supplementing their government tree with smaller sagebrush trees and, at times, perhaps protesting their reliance on the government through this act. One particularly noteworthy photograph from Minidoka (Figure 4) shows a typical Christmas scene: Fourteen small children gather around a seated Santa Claus, some on the floor, one on his lap, and several leaning close to hear his words. It is unclear whether the people in this photograph were intentionally posed, but every child looks intently at the internee dressed as Santa. School desks filled with books line the back wall and an evergreen tree decorated with tinsel, garlands and ornaments has been placed in a back corner. But a smaller sagebrush

¹³¹ Norio Mitsuoka, ed., *Nisei Odyssey: The Camp Years* (Fountain Valley, CA: n.p., 1991) 212-213.

tree covered in sparkling tinsel fills the very center of the photograph.¹³² We have no firsthand explanation why this teacher placed the sagebrush tree in a higher place of honor in his or her classroom, but possibly the sagebrush tree seemed a more appropriate symbol for a desert Christmas, its small size appealed to the children or perhaps the government trees arrived late and the teacher supplied a substitute.



Figure 4: Sagebrush Tree

A fifth-grade Caucasian teacher at the camp made a distinction between the sagebrush trees and the evergreens, recalling, “A lot of teachers had sagebrush for trees, but I think I had a Christmas tree. Somehow the sagebrush never served the same purpose. But they did use sagebrush.” In her mind, sagebrush could never be “a Christmas tree.” She continued to describe what the other teachers did, “They would

¹³² “Christmas Celebration” (denshopd-i39-00003), Densho, Wing Luke Asian Museum, Hatate Collection.

enamel them white and put glistening things on them or other colors and the youngsters would...decorate, and we would decorate our crazy windows and stuff. Well, Christmas is beautiful at any time no matter where you are, even a desert.”¹³³ This teacher acknowledged the limitations of the camp, but still drew a qualitative distinction between traditional evergreens and the improvised substitute.

Kleinkopf toured some of the classrooms at Christmas and observed “a Christmas tree made from a clump of sagebrush. After the tree had been sprayed with silver and the usual Christmas tree decorations put on, it was truly beautiful. This lowly shrub, which most people despise, had risen to a place of eminence in the minds of the pupils and teacher in this room.”¹³⁴ Kleinkopf saw the difference between the sagebrush and evergreens, but this difference made the former tree more valuable in his eyes, in contrast to the opinions of the Caucasian teacher. The following year he noted that “seventy evergreens have been ordered from the State of Washington...Forty of these are 8-foot trees...Some of the teachers, as they did last year, are using sagebrush trees.”¹³⁵

Kleinkopf failed to indicate whether Nikkei teachers were more or less inclined to use sagebrush trees than Caucasian teachers, but in either case, privileging sagebrush trees can be read as an act of protest and resistance, refusing the government’s paltry offerings to their abused citizens. Creativity showed itself in nearly every aspect of camp life as internees had to make do with very little. Many of these artistic acts reveal hidden transcripts of protest or resistance. Sagebrush trees and tumbleweed snowmen were part of the routine by the end of the war.

¹³³ Roth.

¹³⁴ Kleinkopf, 22 Dec 1942: 67.

¹³⁵ Kleinkopf, 16 Dec 1943: 310.

Kleinkopf also witnessed the construction of perhaps the most militarily themed trees of the war:

Visited a sixth grade class where the boys were decorating a Christmas tree by dropping little fluffs of cotton on the pine needles. Each time they would drop a piece of cotton they would say “Bombs over Tokyo.” In another room I noticed a sixth grade boy sticking silver straws on the ends of the limbs of the Christmas tree. When he had finished he said, “Look, teacher. These are anti-aircraft guns firing at a Jap Zero flying overhead.”¹³⁶

This amusing, though perhaps alarming, incident could be dismissed as the behavior of twelve-year-old boys, but it still emphasizes the inseparable connections between the war and Christmas. Whether the boys are Caucasian students in Brooklyn or Japanese Americans in an internment camp and whether the tree is made of pine or sagebrush, the war, militarism and American patriotism stayed at the forefront of Christmas celebrations. Kleinkopf offers no further comment on the situation which indicates that he thought it interesting enough to mention, but not anything extraordinary.

Christmas Display Competitions

The Christmas decorating contests stand out as the largest community event at Minidoka during the war. Nearly every memoir and every oral history from Minidoka mentions this event which distinguished Minidoka’s Christmas activities from those at the other internment centers. Churches around the country mailed presents to children at every camp and nearly all relocation centers held small church services or organized caroling opportunities, but no camp had any Christmas activities that involved the entire community like the Minidoka decorating competitions. The detail in which some internees recall their contributions is astounding, and most all Minidokans participated,

¹³⁶ Kleinkopf, 22 Dec 1942: 88.

whether they were Buddhist, Christian or non-religious. WRA employees also recorded their impressions of the event and often expressed their amazement at the levels of participation and ingenuity among the internees. I will show that many of the displays heralded patriotic messages of military sacrifice, while simultaneously reminding witnesses of the tragic internment.

Minidoka's Community Activities group, comprised of Nikkei committed to increasing the quality of life in the camp, organized the Christmas decorating competitions each year. While the concept began as a simple tree decoration contest the first year, the intense creative energy transformed initial plans for a tinsel tree and crepe paper garlands to actual displays, each with a distinct theme and style. Photographs of the displays show a striking similarity to the department store window displays found in American cities at Christmas. The practice of designing elaborate display windows became popularized well before World War II,¹³⁷ so internees from Seattle and Portland would have been familiar with the concept. Some of the internees may have even been employed by such stores and involved in their creation. The first announcement about the contest at Minidoka described it simply as a "Christmas tree decoration contest," explaining that "decorations must be made by the colonists themselves" and promised that "crepe paper and tinsel will be distributed soon to each block."¹³⁸ Two weeks later, the paper reported on the "displays," something beyond mere tree decorations.¹³⁹

Public announcements in *The Minidoka Irrigator* carefully spelled out the detailed rules and guidelines for the competition every December, and the emphasis on equality

¹³⁷ Marling, 82-104.

¹³⁸ "Christmas Tree Decoration Contest Set" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 2 Dec 1942: 3.

¹³⁹ "D.H. 17 Decorations Catch Judges' Eyes" *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 30 Dec 1942: 5.

and fair play noticeably increased each year. Even the first year of competition saw explanations that “equal amounts of decorating materials, such as crepe paper, ‘icicles,’ construction paper, lights, etc., is now being distributed.”¹⁴⁰ The next year, decorating supplies were itemized down to “1 tube of glue” and “4 lbs. pop corn” per block.¹⁴¹ The day and times for judging were always publicly announced and even the manner in which the judges entered the halls was preordained to give every block an equal opportunity to impress the judges. Each year, all judges would enter from the door opposite the kitchen “so that every hall will have the same advantage as far as effect is concerned.”¹⁴²

Minidokans commented on the secrecy involved as each block planned and designed its display each year, and the primary accounts depict fierce competitions among all of the 36 blocks. One woman used her newspaper column to complain about her block’s lack of organization one year, showing how seriously some people took the contest.¹⁴³ Simple prizes, such as murals painted by internees or a Chinese banquet, were awarded to the winning block each year, but clearly a great deal of pride and honor was also wrapped up in the Christmas contest.¹⁴⁴

Decades after the war, some former internees can still recall which block and design won each year. This enthusiasm could be explained by the mere fact that the Christmas display contests were the biggest event during the years of internment at

¹⁴⁰ “Originality Counts in Tree Make-Ups” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1942: 6.

¹⁴¹ “Gala Christmas Festivities in Store for Hunt Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943.

¹⁴² “Gala Christmas Festivities in Store for Hunt Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 1.

¹⁴³ “Feminidoka” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 1 Jan 1944: 3.

¹⁴⁴ “Originality Counts in Tree Make-Ups” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1942: 6. “Annual Christmas Decoration Contest Set; Keen Interest Felt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 3.

Minidoka. No other event involved as many people from the camp, nor did any other event welcome and encourage every person to participate. But this only suggests the popularity of the event without explaining why it occurred. Its popularity quite likely stemmed primarily from the fact that it offered Minidokans a bit of excitement, an outlet for creative energy and something to anticipate during the year. Additionally, for a moment each year, the Japanese Americans could show that they were just as patriotic and celebrated Christmas, a very American holiday, in just the same manner as people outside of the camp. The Christmas display contests injected a bit of competition and enabled them to show each other and people outside the camp just what good Americans they were, but the actual displays also portray a degree of resistance, protesting their internment. This event and the other Christmas activities provided a much needed break from the otherwise dreary camp life. When reading accounts from the other internment camps, no events come close to bringing this degree of actual joy to internees aside from the baseball games popular at all camps.

Concerns for wartime frugality and conservation always played a major role in the competition. While the Minidokans clearly had limited means themselves, and could not have been particularly extravagant had they wished, the explanations for this emphasis on creativity and penalties for commercial decorations were always couched in rhetoric about the patriotic duty to limit material excess for the war effort. Details on the contest explained that “privately bought commercial decorations may be used, but will count toward attractiveness only.”¹⁴⁵ This comment is perhaps not as strange as it might sound since “attractiveness” was a specific category in the judging. The categories stayed consistent each year. The judges gave scores out of one hundred points, awarding up to

¹⁴⁵ “Originality Counts in Tree Make-Ups” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 16 Dec 1942: 6.

twenty points in each of the following categories: total effect, Christmas theme, participation, Christmas tree and originality.¹⁴⁶ In 1943, “commercially made ornaments would be discounted” altogether.¹⁴⁷ Kleinkopf noted in his journal that internees “made Xmas wreaths from sagebrush and wood shavings, and tree ornaments from egg shells, orange peelings, and cup cake covers.”¹⁴⁸ The judges of the contest, Caucasian officials and teachers from the camp, heralded the “ingenuity and dexterity” of the internees, who decorated “with the few materials they had.”¹⁴⁹ While celebrating Christmas was an important patriotic obligation in itself, the war and its necessary sacrifices were not forgotten and added an extra challenge to this event.

Internees recall with great detail how the displays were constructed with limited materials. One woman describes how “sagebrush branches were crafted into wreaths and trimmed with curled tin cans...Flour sacks were trimmed with bits of bright cotton yardage and made into window curtains. Life-size angels made of cardboard and sugar sacks covered the bare posts.”¹⁵⁰ Former internee, Henry Ozaki, writes:

The Christmas tree was flocked with cotton to look like snow; bed sheets were loaned for this occasion and spread out to also look like snow. The tree decorations were all handmade from whatever materials we could muster, with an ingenious use of blue cellophane over hard-to-get

¹⁴⁶ “Gala Christmas Festivities in Store for Hunt Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 1. “Annual Christmas Decoration Contest Set; Keen Interest Felt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 3.

¹⁴⁷ “Gala Christmas Festivities in Store for Hunt Residents” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 18 Dec 1943: 1.

¹⁴⁸ Kleinkopf, 2 Jan 1943: 96.

¹⁴⁹ “D.H. 17 Decorations Catch Judges’ Eyes” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 30 Dec 1942: 5.

¹⁵⁰ “Letter to Miss Alice W. S. Brimson from Shigoko Soso Uno,” 11 Jan 1943, Box 1/folder number 3, Emery E. Andrews Papers, Accession No. 1908-001, University of Washington Libraries.

spotlights, which illuminated different tones of blue on the Christmas set in our community mess hall.¹⁵¹

By simply covering lights with colored cellophane and using sheets and cotton balls, this block was able to create a beautiful winter wonderland. The lighting was often recalled in the newspaper as well, showing the great attention to detail many blocks took to set the perfect Christmas atmosphere. Another man recalls the many different tasks that had to be completed for his block's decorations:

Stogy Toki...assembled the youth to decorate the mess hall and assigned various jobs. Mine was to cover the poles with white crepe paper. The usual wrappings of the pole lacked any appeal so I looked for a new design. I found that when the crepe paper was pulled, it curled into a tube. Pole length tubes were then assembled around the pole and the ends capped with white paper giving a soft Doric appearance. Others were giving the windows and walls a frost-like coating and constructing a stage with a back drop with the message "May All Your Christmases be White."

After completing the Doric poles, Stogy asked me for a design for lighted columns which framed the stage. I applied the tube concept and assembled a 4 inch tube with card board inserts around a circular base at the top and bottom with light fixtures. This resulted in lighted columns casting a circular base at the top and bottom. These lighted columns cast a snowy glow to the stage. In front of the stage was a single lighted crepe tube decorated with garlands.

The combined effects of the frost coated windows and tubular lighted stage had transformed the drab mess hall into a winter wonderland and the net result was the first place prize.¹⁵²

The detail in which he remembered these tasks more than fifty years later shows how important his participation was to him. Completing tasks for the annual Christmas display empowered this boy and made him feel like part of the community during his time at Minidoka.

¹⁵¹ Henry K. Ozaki, "Minidoka Story-Christmas" *Minidoka Stories I and II*, Tsuguo Ikeda and Akio Yanagihara, eds. (n.p., 2003) n.p.

¹⁵² Jim Tazuma, "Christmas 1943" *Minidoka Stories I and II*, Tsuguo Ikeda and Akio Yanagihara, eds. (n.p., 2003) n.p.

The rhetoric surrounding the celebrations during the final Christmas at Minidoka, when the WRA cut activity budgets and many families had sons fighting in Europe, increased in reservation, but the displays were more elaborate than ever. The newspaper tells that “residents will take part in festivities this year with a more sober outlook, keeping in mind the boys who will not be able to share the fun.” In 1944, internees could pool together up to \$25 per block for decorations, but judges would give more credit for displays using fewer materials and less money.¹⁵³ This emphasis reflects desires for fair play and creativity, but also tells of a persecuted group showing their American perseverance to celebrate a national holiday while doing it in the most patriotic way possible. The themes of the displays also told this story.

While it could be questioned that internees chose Caucasians to judge their proficiency at building the best Christmas displays, the WRA employees would have been more objective than even prominent Nikkei leaders in the camp, who would have been affiliated with a certain block. As previously stated, fair play was always emphasized during the contests and oral histories tell of fierce competition. However, the fact remains that these displays were presented to and viewed by those in power. While internees organized the event of their own volition, the judging of the displays by Caucasian administration adds an element of explicit performance for those who held power over them. Internees knew their captors would see their displays, so the content within the displays should be closely examined for hidden transcripts.

Most of the displays depicted nostalgia for the traditional American home, patriotic military themes or a combination of the two. As I have said before, wartime

¹⁵³ “Annual Christmas Decoration Contest Set; Keen Interest Felt” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 9 Dec 1944: 3.

patriotism took the form of both direct military support and personal sacrifice for the war effort as well as honoring the American dream, a large part of which is a celebration of a traditional family Christmas. A display with the motif “Santa Remembers Minidoka” juxtaposed the idealistic Christmas of the past with the current situation of Minidokans. This block built a large Santa standing by a signpost. One sign reading “Seattle 1941” points toward a scene of a typical American home at Christmas with stockings hung from a fireplace near a large decorated evergreen, “signifying what Christmas had once been.” Another sign, “Minidoka 1942,” points toward a miniature display of Minidoka with barracks and a mural of the Idaho landscape.¹⁵⁴ This display showed the idealized, family-oriented holidays of the past. The “Minidoka 1942” display protests the current situation of internees forced to celebrate Christmas in an isolated and guarded institution. Only a year later, some internees had come to accept Minidoka as home, it being the only home they had. Soldiers and relocatees now came back to Minidoka for Christmas holidays, since it was where most of their families lived. The oddity of considering Minidoka home was acknowledged by the “Feminidoka” writer that year.¹⁵⁵ In 1943, one display similarly showed the exterior of a typical American house at Christmas with a white picket fence, snowman and a window looking in on a decorated Christmas tree.¹⁵⁶ Both soldiers and the internees yearned for a traditional Christmas during the war, and one celebrated in a house, not a barrack in the desert.

¹⁵⁴ “D.H. 17 Decorations Catch Judges’ Eyes” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 30 Dec 1942: 5.

¹⁵⁵ “Feminidoka” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 1 Jan 1944: 3.

¹⁵⁶ “Christmas Decorations” (denshopd-i39-00005), Densho, Wing Luke Asian Museum, Hatate Collection.



Figure 5: Christmas Display, Uncle Sam



Figure 6: Christmas Display, Foxhole

As more Japanese Americans joined the service, displays directly tied to the war became more popular. Internees wrote “Keep the Home Fires Burning” in large letters above a 1943 display that focused on pictures of boys in the service from the camp sitting atop the mantle of a grand fireplace. A large painting of Minidoka sat on the mantle behind the photographs.¹⁵⁷ One could argue that this backdrop merely designates the place from which the soldiers came, but the fact remains that their home is an internment camp. Despite their loss of civil rights, these men joined the armed forces to fight for a country that imprisoned them, and their families and their families at the camp created a display to demonstrate that fact. The hidden transcript beneath a seemingly patriotic display suggests anger at their situation, but not wholesale rejection of the United States. A red-white-and-blue display from the same year (Figure 5) showed a large picture of Uncle Sam to one side with Santa Claus on the other. The entire display was strewn with patriotic ribbons and banners, the center text reading, “Happy New Year! Old Nick Reminds You-Have a nice Christmas, but don’t forget our Uncle Sam and his fighting boys who are striving for a victorious New Year!”¹⁵⁸ This display removed all aspects of a traditional Christmas except for the image of Santa Claus to emphasize how the war took precedent over the holiday. A Caucasian teacher described another patriotic display that particularly moved her:

The one that really got to me was the mess hall that had “I’ll be Home For Christmas, But Only in my Dreams.” And they had an enormous mural, almost life size, and it showed the Japanese-Americans in—. I just get shivers when I think of it. The colors for the most part were shades of tan,

¹⁵⁷ “Block Spirit, Issei-Nisei Cooperation Shines Through ‘Big Five’ Hall Decorations” *The Minidoka Irrigator* (Hunt, ID) 1 Jan 1944: 1. “Christmas Decoration Contest” (denshopd-i37-00014), Densho, National Archives and Records Administration.

¹⁵⁸ “Camp Christmas Decorations” (denshopd-i37-00013), Densho, National Archives and Records Administration.

brown, and khaki, the way it actually would be out on the front. And they had the Japanese-American soldiers with their helmets and their guns in trenches and the barbed wire and just ready for action, peering into the—and then that song, “I’ll Be Home for Christmas.” It just gives you shivers.¹⁵⁹

In this display, internees used a popular American song to convey their similar situation to the rest of the country. Despite their loss of rights, they too were sacrificing men to the war and they too hoped for their safe return at Christmas. A similar 1944 display, “When I’m Alone My Thoughts Will Stray,” depicted a cutaway of a barren battlefield and a Japanese American soldier crouched in a foxhole writing a Christmas letter to his family at Minidoka (Figure 6). This display was constructed entirely of scrap metal which would then be donated to the war effort.¹⁶⁰ Again, Minidokans showed their participation in an American holiday without forgetting their patriotic duty or obligations to those fighting the enemy. Christmas could not be separated from the war, nor could it be separated from the internment.

Conclusion

So why did the internees at Minidoka put so much energy and effort into the major holiday of the country that imprisoned them? First, many, perhaps most, internees saw Christmas and anticipated its arrival every year for the fun it promised. Life in an internment camp did not offer many diversions and the great number and variety of activities offered at Christmas provided the internees with a much needed break from their dreary routine. Most oral histories taken from Minidokans speak of the Christmas celebrations in more positive terms than any other aspect of the internment years. The

¹⁵⁹ Roth.

¹⁶⁰ “Block 41 Christmas Display” (denshopd-p2-00039), Densho, Bain Family Collection.

activities strengthened the internment community to improve quality of life year-round. Christmas also allowed Minidokans the best venue through which to remember and recreate family celebrations from before the war. The religious services and rhetoric at the churches within the camp encouraged internees to think beyond their personal situations and even the war itself at Christmas, while a complicated exchange of gifts forged bonds between the internees and churches outside of the camp.

As I have shown, the material culture of Christmas revealed a very complex balance between patriotism and resistance. The mere celebration of Christmas constituted a patriotic act during World War II. Through this practice, the Nikkei showed that they were true Americans, celebrating just like other Americans around the country, with the same hopes, dreams and ideals. Additionally, many of the decorative displays had blatantly patriotic themes. Tying Santa to Uncle Sam and depicting scenes from the front showed the dominance of the war in their minds, but also publicly stated their allegiance to U.S. military actions. These displays can also be read as intentional performances of patriotism for the Caucasian WRA administration to prove their loyalty.

At the same time, the construction of these traditional Christmas artifacts conveyed the internees' protest of and resistance to the internment. A careful examination of these objects, particularly Christmas cards and Christmas trees, exposed the challenging circumstances of the internment and a resistance toward the dominant culture of their captors. Cards depicted cold, grim landscapes with institutional barracks covered in snow rather than the expected snow covered houses, and some dining hall displays juxtaposed their current incarceration with pictures of loyal American soldiers from the camp or with scenes from past Christmases in freedom on the coast. Further,

many internees opted to use sagebrush from their desert surroundings instead of government-supplied evergreens for Christmas trees, reminding their guards of their circumstances. These subtle alterations to traditional Christmas artifacts protested the internment and staked space for the Nikkei within America.

The traumatic experience of internment by their own country could have resulted in violent riots or the complete rejection of all things connected to American culture. And such things did occur in some internment camps, but many of the Nikkei at Minidoka Relocation Center chose not to reject America, its culture or its prevailing religious traditions. However, they did not meekly accept their loss of civil rights and embrace life behind barbed wire either. The examination of a quintessential American holiday, one with Christian roots and emblematic of American ideals, celebrated in a space largely void of Christians and absent of civil liberties, revealed the complexities within an ethnic community with varying internal religious and economic backgrounds. This study also exposed the layered relations between the Japanese Americans and the outside forces which sought to control them. The manner in which these people cried out in protest of their circumstances can inform researchers examining other cases of trauma and incarceration and aid them in looking for greater complexities and possibilities within their domination. In the case of the Japanese Americans, studies of other camps and other forms of religious life at this time will greatly expand our knowledge and understanding of this community after the internment.

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