

I meet Buddy at the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles. At first his gentle, round face glows with good humor. Then he slips into the rhythm of his story, which begins when his grandfather moved from Japan to Hawaii more than a hundred years ago. It ends with the three years Buddy spent at the concentration camp in Heart Mountain, California, when he was a Boy Scout in junior high.

In the late 1800s, economic problems and drought drove thousands of unmarried men from Japan to Hawaii and the west coasts of North, Central and South America. These immigrants, or 'Issei,' worked on railroads, on farms, in fishing and in lumber. Some were students. Buddy's grandfather worked in Hawaii's pineapple fields.

To most Americans, all Japanese were the same, but these men heard the differences in their dialects and saw it in their cultures. Buddy's grandfather had come from Kiyushu village in Kumamoto Prefecture. He was as different from immigrants from Tokyo as New Yorkers are from Californians, as Yankees are from Southerners.

They formed kenjukos, or social groups, with others from their region or their village.

"A community is like extended family," Buddy says.

These small groups of Japanese began to unite to protest discrimination against them. When Americans wouldn't give them work, they worked with each other. Later, they tried to fight the new laws together: the one that stopped Japanese from becoming American citizens, the one that stopped them from buying land, the one that stopped more Japanese from immigrating.

The children of these immigrants, or 'Nisei,' went to American schools, read American books and magazines, listened to American radio programs, watched American movies. They learned American values, which sometimes complemented, but often contradicted, the values they were learning at home.

Buddy's father was born in Hawaii in 1898. He moved to the Santa Clara Valley in California and raised strawberries on land he leased from the farmer next door.

"No one would sell my father land," Buddy says. "No one would give him a loan even when it was legal for Japanese to own land."

He married a woman he had never met. She was from his grandfather's village, where he had never been.

"People feel a certain connection with others from the same place," says Buddy. "They know the village, how people behave, their values. They get a lot of comfort from being together."

Buddy was born in 1929. He was in eighth grade and a Boy Scout when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941 and brought the United States into World War Two.

Most Americans still assumed that all Japanese were the same, and suspected the ones on the West Coast, from Canada to South America, of being potential spies for Japan.

First, the government imposed a curfew on them. One evening, Buddy broke it so he could go to his Boy Scout meeting. "They wanted me there," he says. "I was a member in good standing."

A boy in his troop told his parents, who called the police. The FBI went out to the farm to find out if Buddy was a spy. "I was almost certain they were going to take my dad away," Buddy says, shaking his head. "That was the end of Boy Scouts for awhile."

Then Buddy and his family began to hear rumors that all ethnic Japanese on the West Coast would be sent to concentration camps for the rest of the war. "We were just finishing civics in school," Buddy says, "learning about government and the constitution. When I heard the rumors, I said, 'No way. I'm an American citizen.'"

Before World War II, the term "concentration camp" meant any guarded compound where members of ethnic minorities and political opponents were confined. As the horrors of the Nazi concentration camps became known, the American government changed its term to "internment camps."

These camps have the same thing in common, says a sign in the museum. People in power remove a minority group from the general population and the rest of society lets it happen.

Buddy's family could have moved east, like thousands of other Japanese did, to Utah, Colorado, New Jersey, Chicago. "My dad had put all his money and labor into growing strawberries," Buddy says. "He wasn't going to abandon the harvest the next month. My parents also weren't going to pull up stakes, move their kids away right before graduation. Besides, where would we go? How could they know if it would be any better anywhere else?"

A month before Buddy graduated from eighth grade, his family found themselves on a train to the assembly center at the Santa Anita Racetrack. They lived in the stables for the next four months with their piles of battered suitcases and trunks.

"Some families lost everything," Buddy says. "We were lucky. Two neighboring farmers, including our landlord, took care of our household goods and farm equipment while we were away. One of them was Irish and the other an immigrant from France. They caught a lot of heat for supporting us."

Buddy was allowed to take all the clothes he could fit into his duffel bag, except for his Boy Scout uniform. It was khaki color, and the government was afraid the 13-year-old might disguise himself as a soldier and sneak out of the camp. He cut an emblem off it instead, one he had received at a Boy Scout Camperama. He squeezed in a plaque with the Boy Scout oath that his father had bought for him.

The rims of Buddy's eyes begin to turn red. "The only visible support I received was from my fifth-grade teacher, Mrs. James." Buddy says her name slowly and clearly. I know he realizes she is long dead, but it's almost as if by acknowledging her that he is thanking her, more than 50 years later. "She was the only one who came to say goodbye at the train station. I found out later she gave up her record of 25 years of perfect attendance as a teacher to do it."

Buddy wipes his eyes and goes on. "Later, she mailed me my diploma. She'd found it in the wastebasket."

By the time Buddy got out of the camp, Mrs. James had retired and moved away. He was never able to trace her.

Few white Americans saw the human beings behind the face of the enemy. Some supported them on principle: a few lawyers and politicians, Quakers, the ACLU. Most of their supporters -- neighbors, teachers, a librarian -- had known them before the war. One pretended to be Japanese so he would be interned with his friends. Another sneaked film to interned photographer Toyo Miyatake, who took remarkable photographs that documented life at the camp at Manzanar.

Buddy and his family left Santa Anita in September and arrived at Heart Mountain four days later.

The Heart Mountain concentration camp in Wyoming was divided into blocks. Each one housed people from a different area: Central Washington, San Jose, the Santa Clara Valley, Los Angeles. Buddy's family already knew some of the farmers in their block. One of his uncles was there with his family, and one of his aunts with hers.

Buddy doesn't remember spending much time with his parents. He went to the school that adults had set up, shot marbles, watched baseball, played and ate with his friends.

"It would have been nicer if our family could have eaten together," he says. "It really led to the fragmentation of the family."

At Heart Mountain, even the children noticed the differences between the groups. "From time to time there were conflicts," Buddy says. "My friends and I from San Jose stayed together and played sports. The ones from Los Angeles were tough guys. The way they dressed seemed foreign. They were very intimidating."

But after all, he says, kids couldn't really get into trouble in the camp. A barbed wire fence and armed guards in watchtowers equipped with high beam searchlights surrounded it.

Although they had no contact with scouting beyond the barbed wire, they had their own district inside. Buddy was a senior patrol leader. "We had a fantastic program," Buddy says. "The troops were divided into the areas they came from, and we held competitions between us. The Los Angeles troop was the biggest, and the one to beat." Buddy smiles, remembering. "We beat them -- once."

Kids can adjust to almost anything, Buddy says, but life in the camp was hard on adults. "All of a sudden, what did it mean to be the head of the household?" he asks. "Parents and grandparents had little control over their lives. Their economic base was gone."

Buddy's parents found that work lessened their feelings of isolation and hopelessness. His mother became a cook's aide, and his father worked with other men clearing sagebrush and cactus from the area. They built irrigation ditches, with help from the older boys during their summer vacation, and grew potatoes, sugar beets and other vegetables. The land is still fertile there now.

Traditional Japanese values also helped see them through. Respect for authority, for one. And who was the highest authority? Buddy answers his own question: The American government.

"My mom and dad said, "This is our country. Somehow we'll get out of this." They warned us not to do anything to bring shame on the family. And after the war, they told us over and over, "There's no sense crying over spilt milk. You can't be angry or you'll never move forward." Instead, they told us to get an education, work hard and be model citizens.

"Sometimes I still get angry," Buddy says. "But I think their way has worked. You can't demand respect. You have to earn it."

The most serious division among the Japanese in the camps came when the American government allowed, and then drafted, Japanese Americans into the armed forces.

Some internees believed they could prove their loyalty to the United States by signing up. More than 2,350 joined the armed forces. Their unit joined the unit of 10,000 Japanese Americans who had volunteered in Hawaii, where no Japanese were interned. They fought in North Africa, Italy, France and Germany. They liberated the survivors of the concentration camp in Dachau. They suffered high casualties and won numerous citations for bravery.

Six thousand Japanese Americans served in the Military Intelligence Service and in the Women's Army Corps.

Some internees who were drafted refused to fight because they had no civil rights. Seven leaders of the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee were arrested for conspiracy to encourage draft resistance. Sixty-three others in Heart Mountain were convicted of draft resistance and sentenced to three years in prison. Draft resisters at other camps held demonstrations and strikes. Some internees who were born in the United States protested by giving up their American citizenship.

"You have to laud the ones who stood up for their rights," Buddy says. "But the veterans said that if everyone resisted, Japanese Americans would look disloyal. You have to laud them too."

In 1947, President Truman pardoned 282 draft resisters, but that didn't end the controversy. "It's like the war in Viet Nam," Buddy says. "It still divides Japanese Americans today."

The last camp closed in 1946. In all, more than 120,000 Japanese had been interned. Four were killed by American soldiers. More than 1,860 died. In the United States, 10 Caucasians were convicted of spying for Japan, but not one Japanese.

When Buddy graduated from university, he began working for Hughes Aircraft Company as an electrical engineer. It took a year for him to get his security clearance. When the personnel department found out he'd been in a camp during the war, they assumed he must have done something to deserve it.

At Hughes, he experienced discrimination. "Whenever I heard someone in management say Asians couldn't do this or that, or they weren't management material, I always told them to let me try." Buddy laughs. "I was pretty confident by then. And whenever I heard someone stereotyping or using racial or ethnic slurs, I'd stand up and say, "Sir, did I hear you right?""

Before Buddy retired, he worked in Hughes' corporate office creating their affirmative action plan, which gave all qualified employees the opportunities white men had.

Now, as a docent at the museum, he tells visitors about the Japanese American experience as part of the country's legacy and how to relate that experience to events in society today.

He tells people, "You have an obligation, a responsibility as a citizen, to speak up whenever you see someone being picked on. No one did it for us."

Buddy likes to use metaphors when he talks about groups. "We're like pieces of a quilt," he says. "We're different shapes and colors, but when we fit together, we make something beautiful. Or we're like plants in a garden. Some spread and some are delicate, but we all have a place, and the right to be respected for who we are."