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The Japanese American Confinement Sites Collection: A Conversation with Gina Murrell

Grace Lemon
American Library Association

Gina Murrell
University of San Francisco, gmurrell@usfca.edu

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The Japanese American Confinement Sites Collection

A Conversation with Gina Murrell

Author Bio: Gina Murrell is Digital Collections Librarian at Gleeson Library at the University of San Francisco. Before starting at USF in April 2019, she worked as Digital Asset Coordinator and Archivist at Gap Inc., Digital Preservation Assistant at University of California-Berkeley, and Project Coordinator of the Oregon Digital Newspaper Program at the University of Oregon in Eugene. In her current role, she enjoys bringing hidden histories to light and is looking forward to broadening the digital collections to include more diverse voices.

Intro: Started in 2009, the Japanese American Confinement Sites digital collection is a collaboration between the University of San Francisco's Gleeson Library and the National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS). The physical collection is with NJAHS, which digitizes the collection and then sends the digital objects to Gleeson Library for upload onto the library's website. There are more than 800 objects in this digital collection, which documents the federal internment of Japanese Americans on US soil during World War II.

Q&A:

How would you describe the collection to a perfect stranger?

The Japanese American Confinement Sites digital collection is a collaboration between the University of San Francisco's Gleeson Library and the National Japanese American Historical Society (NJAHS) to digitize and make digitally accessible objects that document the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II.

Who is the intended audience of the Japanese American Confinement Sites collection? How do you envision undergraduates using the collection?

The Japanese American Confinement Sites collection is intended for anyone who has an interest in this hidden history, whether it's undergraduates, graduate students, faculty, staff, or people or institutions beyond the university. At the very least, I want undergrads to use this collection as a supplement to coursework in Asian Studies, Japanese Studies, and US History.

How did this collection begin? How has it grown over the years?

In 2009, USF Associate Professor Seth Wachtel and the students in his Architecture and Community Design Program collaborated with Gleeson's then Digital Collections Librarian, Jessica Lu, and Lynn Horiuchi of UC Berkeley to design and establish the Confinement Sites collection site on the Gleeson Library website. Max Nihei, then a student at USF and now the Collections & Exhibitions Manager at NJAHS, handled the digitization. The collection has expanded from 46 objects at its inception to nearly 1,000 objects online today.

This exhibit combines government documents (“architectural drawings, engineering plans or maps”) with intimate objects like brooches, instruments, letters, photos, and more. What was the motivation behind linking official documents to personal belongings of the Japanese Americans who were held at these sites? How does having personal artifacts affect the presentation of this collection?

In the Japanese American Confinement Sites collection, linking official documents to personal belongings serves to humanize real people who were dehumanized as a result of government propaganda. Americans of Japanese descent who were interned as an immediate result of U.S. President Franklin D. Roosevelt issuing Executive Order 9066, and as a long-term effect of decades of anti-Asian racism, had lives. They had marriages and engagements, children and parents, businesses and hobbies, and these humanizing layers are reflected in the personal artifacts.

This collection is digital, with extensive information such as dates, notes, the size of the artifact, and even the name of who donated the item if available. What was the process of digitizing this collection? Were there any challenges?

Max Nihei of NJAHS digitizes the collection with the help of two student assistants. Digitization is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of the Interior, National Park Service (NPS). In addition to digitizing the objects, Max provides the metadata for them. On my end, I edit the metadata, and then I add and upload the digital objects and corresponding metadata to the Gleeson Library Japanese American Confinement Sites collection site. The real challenge at this stage is digitizing a great number of digital objects in time to meet the grant deadline.

This collection is part of the University of San Francisco’s Gleeson Library, which has a fairly large number of digital exhibits. What is the value of having an online exhibit rather than only a physical one? Why is it important to make collections so easily accessible to the general public?

From the moment I was hired— I started as Digital Collections Librarian on April 1, 2019—my priorities for the Gleeson Library Digital Collections included accessibility. An institution can have an incredible physical collection or exhibit, but if no one is able to see it, then what's the point? Digital collections and exhibits make physical collections and exhibits more accessible. They give these collections a much wider reach—something that especially benefits those unable to see the collections in person, whether due to disability or advanced age, geographic distance or cost of travel to the institution, or simply getting time away to come in person.

The 2016 presidential election was plagued by fake news and misinformation spread to enact fear in citizens and spur on a nationalist agenda. A significant part of what led to the Japanese American Relocation Centers was racism, nationalism, and fear mongering by white Americans in response to Pearl Harbor. How does this exhibit,

an official, documented, and factual representation of the wrongdoings by the American government, benefit the general public and news outlets in 2019?

There's the famous quote: "Those who cannot remember the past are condemned to repeat it." The forced imprisonment of Japanese Americans in camps during WWII is not something everyone remembers or even knows about. Unfortunately, we are seeing a similar scenario unfold in the United States today, but with a different group of non-white people who are dehumanized by the same forces of racism and xenophobia. "Never Again Is Now!" is the cry of activists urging us to remember the wrongdoings of the U.S. government against Japanese Americans. The Japanese American Confinement Sites collection is a part of that remembering.

Currently, at the US/Mexican border, migrant children are being held in unsanitary and unconstitutional detention centers by the American government. How can the artifacts in this collection serve not only as a reminder, but a warning of how these actions affect this country? Why is it so important to document every facet of American history, especially the immoral, dangerous, and ugly parts?

The Japanese American Confinement Sites collection consists of actual, irrefutable proof that unconstitutional detention centers by the U.S. government are a thing that can happen because they have happened. And what happened in the past affects the present, and we can't move forward as a country until we reckon with our past. This digital collection is a way of reckoning with our past. Yes, it's ugly. Yes, it's immoral. Yes, it set a dangerous precedent. But it's who we are, and we must learn from this.

Visit the Japanese American Confinement Sites digital collection at
<http://digitalcollections.usfca.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/p15129coll10>

This interview was conducted by Grace Lemon. She is a junior at Northwestern University and an editorial intern at Choice.