



FAMILY GATHERING: A STUDY GUIDE

A teacher's guide to facilitate
discussion of the film *Family Gathering*

Prepared by Lise Yasui

© Lise Yasui, 1990, updated 1995.

All rights reserved. No part of this Study Guide may be used or reproduced in any manner whatsoever without written permission from the author, except in the case of brief quotations embodied in critical articles and reviews.

The film *Family Gathering* was produced by Lise Yasui and Ann Tegnell.

Distributed exclusively through:

Center for Asian American Media

145 Ninth Street, Suite 350

San Francisco, CA 94103

Phone: 415/552-9550

Fax: 415/863-7428

distribution@asianamericanmedia.org

<http://catalog.asianamericanmedia.org>

Family Gathering

A Study Guide



From *Family Gathering* by Lise Yasui



Family Gathering: (Family) The Yasui family with friends and co-workers, near Hood River, Oregon, circa 1920-1921.

Synopsis of Film

Family Gathering is a deeply personal look at the effects of the World War II evacuation and internment of Japanese Americans on one family. It is told from the perspective of a third-generation Japanese American who grew up with little understanding of her ethnicity or the traumas experienced by her family during the 1940's. The film focuses on her grandfather, Masuo Yasui, who, after 30 years in the U.S., was arrested by the F.B.I. as a “potentially dangerous” enemy alien after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor. Through home movies, family photos, letters, government archive film, F.B.I. documents, and present-day interviews, Yasui examines the circumstances of her grandfather's internment and explores the myths, memories, and silences surrounding her family history.

Themes and Content *Family Gathering* does not present a comprehensive and representative history of Japanese Americans or the World War II internment program. Rather, it is about the process of discovering the past. *Family Gathering* traces the search for information about the internment through the memories of one family. The film-maker explores how this event directly affected the individuals of her family — how it changed their day-to-day lives and challenged their basic beliefs in justice.

On a broader level, it is the story of a search for one's place in a family history: what it means to break the silence about a painful past and what one gains as a result. *Family Gathering* can be appreciated by anyone who's ever wondered about their history and the forces that shaped where they are and who they are.

As you watch the film, keep in mind these themes: the motives for emigration and “becoming” American — what defines an American; the conditions leading to prejudice and discrimination; the role of personal stories and memory in understanding the day-to-day effects of political events.

Background Information *Note to teachers: This study guide was prepared with high school students, college students, and general adult audiences in mind.*

There are complex political, economic and social factors which shaped the U.S. government's decision to evacuate and intern Japanese Americans during World War II. Students should be encouraged to do further research. A selected bibliography accompanies this study guide. The following information provides some background on Anti-Asian movements in the U.S. You may want to present this information to students before viewing the film.

Suggested Uses of *Family Gathering*

Recommended for Junior High, High School, University, and Community Group audiences of young people and adults.

Two Versions: Length: 30 minutes, available on 16mm film and videotape; and 60 minute “American Experience” version, available in video only.

Curriculum Uses: U.S. History, Social Studies, Political Science, Sociology, Visual Anthropology, Psychology, Film Studies, Multiculturalism, Ethnic Studies and Ethnic Identity, Asian American Studies, Civil Rights and Civil Liberties, Immigration History and Politics, Race Relations and Discrimination, Community, Autobiography, History on Film, Genealogy and Family Studies

Historical Summary: Japanese Immigration and Anti-Asian Discrimination

Japanese began significant emigration to the United States during the late nineteenth century. Adverse economic conditions in Japan, the dislocations caused by rapid industrialization, and rumors of jobs and easy money motivated many to seek work in the U.S. A majority of the emigres were young adult men from the agricultural class. 1901-1908 marked a period of unrestricted Japanese immigration. By 1908, 127,000 had entered the U.S. The film maker's grandfather, Masuo Yasui, came to America in 1903.

Most Japanese settled on the West Coast — the majority in California. In Oregon, early settlers typically worked as laborers on the expanding railroad system, for the sawmills and fish canneries, or as domestic servants. Like Masuo Yasui, the young men saved their wages, hoping to start their own businesses or farms. Those with agricultural backgrounds used their knowledge to cultivate land considered undesirable by the established farmers and to introduce new fruit and vegetable crops. This was the path chosen by Yasui as he settled in Hood River, Oregon, a small town on the Columbia River, on the Oregon-Washington state border.

It is a common misconception that prejudice against the Japanese in the U.S. was a sudden and direct reaction to the Pearl Harbor bombing in 1941. In reality, from their first arrival on the U.S. mainland the Japanese were feared by many European Americans. The Japanese brought distinct customs, language, and religion, none of which blended easily into American mainstream culture. Typical of many new immigrants, the Japanese often worked longer hours and for less money than their American counterparts — factors which lead to resentment and hostility by those who felt economically threatened.

Like the Chinese before them, the Japanese were confronted with discriminatory laws designed to monitor and restrict their full participation in American life. A 1790 Naturalization Act allowed naturalization only for “any alien, being a free white person,” effectively barring all Asians and African Americans from citizenship. The act was revised after the Civil War to bar any Chinese immigrant from citizenship and in 1922, the Supreme Court officially ruled that the statute prohibited the naturalization of *any* “Oriental.”

In 1905 in California, an Asiatic Exclusion League was formed, comprised primarily of labor groups wanting to reduce the competition posed by Asian workers. Similar organizations sprung up throughout the West Coast. By 1908, there were over 100,000 members in California alone. Their aim: to exclude the Japanese through legislation, boycotts, school segregation and propaganda campaigns.

In 1907, at the U.S.'s urging, Japan entered into the “Gentlemen's Agreement” by

which Japan agreed not to issue any more worker's passports for the continental U.S. This arrangement sharply curtailed immigration but did not halt it altogether. Between 1908 and 1924, resident Japanese were able to bring wives over under the auspices of "family." Many marriages were arranged by friends and family. In this way Masuo Yasui invited Shidzuyo Miyake to come to the U.S. in 1912.

By 1920, 4151 Japanese lived in Oregon and owned 2185 acres of land. Over half was located around the Hood River Valley, with a considerable amount still in rough timber. The Japanese gradually converted the land to prosperous fruit and vegetable farms.

Following California's example, Oregon passed an Alien Land Law in 1923. It prohibited those ineligible for citizenship — namely, Japanese and Chinese — from purchasing any more land. Many side-stepped the law by having trusted Euro American friends buy land for them to hold or lease back to them, or by buying property in the names of their children, who were U.S.-born citizens. Masuo Yasui used this method to build his own land holdings, owning over 600 acres by the 1940's.

With continued pressure from labor and agricultural organizations throughout the West Coast, Congress passed the Immigration Act of 1924 which effectively prohibited any further Japanese immigration to the U.S. (This act was to stand for the next 30 years and was not changed until the 1950's.)

The bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese on December 7, 1941 provoked renewed fear and suspicion of the Japanese in America. Rumors of Japanese forces invading the mainland were promoted by sensationalist newspaper headlines, erroneous reports, and popular radio dramas. In an era when the public did not question statements made by the mainstream press, public opinion intensified against anyone of Japanese ancestry. Few people made the distinction between the Japanese in Japan and those who'd chosen the U.S. as their home. Once again, the government felt public pressure to do something about the "Japanese problem."

Ten weeks after America's entry into World War II, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. It gave the Secretary of War and the military the power to exclude any persons from designated areas, the rationale being to guard against sabotage and espionage. The military designated the western halves of Washington and Oregon, southern Arizona, and the whole of California — areas with the heaviest Japanese immigrant and Japanese American populations — as restricted, sensitive military zones. As a result, throughout the Spring of 1942, over 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry, citizen and non-citizen alike, were ordered to evacuate their West Coast homes and were forced into detention camps. Two-thirds of the evacuees were American citizens who had been born in the U.S.

The camps to which they were sent were located in isolated desert areas throughout the west and mid-west U.S. They were surrounded by barbed wire fences and watched over by armed guard. The majority of internees were incarcerated without charge, hearing or trial. On the basis of racial association only, the government labeled them "potentially" dangerous. (Research has shown that no documented act of sabotage or espionage was ever committed by an American citizen of Japanese ancestry or by a resident Japanese alien on the West Coast before, during, or immediately following WWII.) No program of mass exclusion or detention was imposed on German and Italian aliens or upon American citizens of German or Italian descent, despite the fact that America was at war with Italy and Germany as well. (Although there were numerous cases of individuals of Italian or German descent being interrogated or incarcerated by the government.)

In 1980, a Presidential Commission was established to "review the facts and circumstances surrounding Executive Order 9066 . . . and the impact of such Executive

Order on American citizens and permanent resident aliens . . . and to recommend appropriate remedies.” In 1982, the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians found that “the record does not permit the conclusion that there was any military justification for the mass exclusion and detention” of Japanese Americans and their resident-alien parents. They concluded that “the broad historical causes of Executive Order 9066 were race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership.”

In 1988, based on the recommendations of the Commission and following a long appeal by former internees for justice, President Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. It called for the first formal government apology to Japanese Americans incarcerated during World War II and a payment of \$20,000 per surviving former internee. (This amount is calculated to be a mere fraction of what was permanently lost in property and possessions during the war.)

After two years of delays, Congress passed an entitlement bill finally began awarding these monies in October 1990. Masuo and Shidzuyo Yasui, like many first-generation immigrants, did not live to hear the apology. The passage of the Civil Liberties Act was considered a bittersweet victory for all Americans. It hopefully sends the message that such injustice must never happen again.

Preparation for Viewing Briefly outline the course of events leading up to the decision to intern.

Tell students that this was something the film maker herself knew little about while growing up. Suggest that the film was her way of digging into a past which some members of her family had never talked about.

The film takes the form of a diary and tells the story of a personal journey to understand the past. Ask students to think about similarities between the Yasui family experiences and their own experiences and family history.

Ask students to look for the ways this film differs from other documentary films they've seen about historical topics.

Post-Viewing Discussion and Questions *Constitutional Issues and the History Behind a Political Decision:*

Remind students that the decision to intern Japanese Americans was the result of long-standing prejudice against Asians. Many political, social, and economic factors led to the government's decision. Discuss these factors as revealed by the film.

Why do you think the government did not intern people of German or Italian ancestry?

Discuss this statement:

“You may think that the Constitution is your security — it is nothing but a piece of paper. You may think that the statutes are your security — they are nothing but words in a book. You may think that elaborate mechanism of government is your security — it is nothing at all, unless you have sound and uncorrupted public opinion to give life to your Constitution, to give vitality to your statutes, to make efficient your government machinery.”

— CHIEF JUSTICE CHARLES EVANS HUGHES

Discuss which rights guaranteed under the Bill of Rights and the Constitution were violated as a result of Executive Order 9066. (Seven of the ten Articles of the Bill of Rights were abrogated: Article I: freedom of religion, freedom of speech, freedom of the press, right to assemble; Article II: right to keep and bear arms; Article IV: freedom from unreasonable searches and seizures; Article V: right to an indictment or to be informed of the charges; right to life, liberty, and property; Article VI: right to speedy and public trial, right to be confronted with accusatory witnesses, right to call favorable witnesses, right to legal counsel; Article VII: right to trial by jury; Article VIII: right to reasonable bail, freedom from cruel and unusual punishment. Further Constitutional guarantees violated were: right against involuntary servitude, right to equal protection under the laws, right to vote, right to habeas corpus.)

Ask students if they think the government's decision to apologize for the internment and offer financial compensation is necessary or fair. Discuss arguments on multiple sides of the issue: some say that what happened to the Japanese could happen to anyone, that “the fight for Redress was for all Americans.” Others claim that “Blood is Thicker than Water” — that given the

circumstances of war, that the government's suspicion of Japanese Americans was warranted. Others claim that such an act is merely a symbol since no amount of money can properly redress the wrongs committed by the government. Still others wonder if it is fair to make redress to one particular group, when there are instances of similar injustices imposed on many other groups. (i.e., should the government make similar official apologies and redress to African Americans whose families were subjected to slavery?)

What do those statements mean? Hold a debate, one side for redress and reparations, the other side opposed and another considering the more complex middle ground of its implications for American society as a whole.

On the Form and Style of the Film How does the form of the story telling in *Family Gathering* differ from the stories told in history books or by other documentary films?

The personal account sometimes affords us a different perspective of history. Discuss how the facts and figures of history — the “major” events, the statistics and dates — sometime obscure our understanding of how those events affect people on a day-to-day basis. Can history told from a personal perspective make the larger events of history more tangible and understandable?

On Film Making Style The film maker says that “no documentary is without a point of view, a position. I did not want to make a ‘traditional’ documentary which might give the impression of a definitive statement about the internment. No film can be completely representative. I can no better speak for the 11 members of my father's family than I can for the thousands of people who experienced time.”

What devices does the film maker use to let viewers know that the film is not intended as “official” history.

Is true objectivity possible in a documentary film? In any media (news-papers, tv reports, radio, books)?

On Ethnic Awareness and Identity Discuss the emotional effects of the World War II incarceration. Because of the pressure to prove their loyalty to the U.S., most first-generation Japanese were afraid to speak Japanese, to contact relatives in Japan, or to follow any social or cultural customs. What would it be like to have to deny any affection for the land of one's birth? How does one defend oneself against an unproven but popular supposition of guilt?

Ask students to write down their ethnic ancestry and if known, which generation they represent in America. Then ask them to imagine that their ancestral country has suddenly attacked the U.S. The U.S. declares war on that country and announces that they will proceed, without trial, to jail any person of that ancestry on the grounds that they *might* present a security risk to the U.S. Ask students to describe what they will do. Will they protest? Can they protest? How?

On Prejudice and Discrimination Is there tolerance of ethnic pride in present-day America? Can it be equally and comfortably expressed by all ethnic groups? Are there biases against ethnic groups in the U.S. with which we have hostile foreign relations? Do different ethnic groups face different restrictions? (e.g. citizenship, visas, benefits and entitlements) Are there similarities between the prejudices faced by the Japanese and those faced by other ethnic groups today?

Do students think events similar to those of WWII could happen again? Under what circumstances?

Follow-Up Activities Ask students to write a personal diary which explores their ethnic heritage or family history. Interview family members for information. Students can include interview transcripts, family photos, artifacts, mementos, myths, and “rumored” stories in their diaries. (Note: Please be sensitive to students who may come from “non-traditional” families, e.g. adoptive or foster families, and adapt these assignments accordingly.)

Have students write a letter to an imagined future grandchild. What do they think is important information to leave behind? Should one write only of the successes in a family history? Ask students to think about the emotional risks of delving into personal history and to include their reasoning for “editing” parts of that history if they choose to do so.

Historical Chronology

- 1790 **Naturalization Act:** naturalization for any alien “being a Free White Person”
- 1849 California Gold Rush — Chinese immigration begins
- 1853 Commodore Perry to Japan, trade begun 1854
- 1882 **Chinese Exclusion Act:** suspends Chinese immigration; Extended in 1892; 1902 made permanent (not lifted until 1943)
- 1886 **Japan legalizes emigration to U.S.**
- 1897–99 **Alaska gold rush:** Pacific Northwest drained of laborers, Japanese recruited to fill in
- 1901–08 Unrestricted immigration from Japan to U.S.; 127,000 enter. (1903 Masuo Yasui arrives in Seattle, Washington.)
- 1904–5 Japan invades Russia; provokes anti-Asian sentiment in U.S.
- 1905 Japanese Exclusion League formed in California
- 1906 Hearst Press (*San Francisco Examiner*) publishes first “yellow scare” headlines on the possibility of Japanese spies in the U.S.
- 1907 **Gentleman’s Agreement:** Japan agrees not to issue any more worker’s passports
- 1908–24 Japanese “Picture Brides” Era: women enter the U.S. through arranged marriages. (1912 Shidzuyo Miyake arrives to marry Masuo Yasui.)
- 1913–23 **Alien land laws** passed in California and Oregon: no land ownership for those ineligible for citizenship
- 1914–18 World War I (U.S. and Japan are allies)
- 1922 Supreme Court interprets Naturalization Act of 1790 to “prohibit naturalization of any Oriental”
- 1924 **Immigration Act** prohibits all further Japanese immigration to U.S.
- 1931 Japan occupies Manchuria; Japan deserts the League of Nations and abandons all agreements of naval limitation; hostility towards Japanese Americans in U.S. grows
- 1932 Franklin D. Roosevelt elected to his 1st term
- 1933 Adolf Hitler comes to power in Germany
- 1936–39 Germany invades the Rhineland, Austria, Czechoslovakia
- 1937 Japan invades China, bombs U.S. gunboat on Yangtze River

- 1939 **Germany invades Poland; England and France declare war on Germany**
- 9/40/39 Japan joins Italy and Germany in Tripartite Pact
U.S. declares oil and metals embargo on Japan
- 12/7/41 **Pearl Harbor** Hawaii attacked by the Japanese
- 12/11/41 **Germany and Italy declare war on U.S.; Congress declares war**
- 2/19/42 **Executive Order 9066:** empowers the military to take “necessary steps” for the country’s security
- 3/42 **Curfew declared** for all persons of Japanese ancestry on the West Coast; mass evacuation and internment begins
- 1943 Two segregated army units of Japanese Americans are formed. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team becomes the most highly decorated WWII Army combat unit
- 5/45 **Germany surrenders**
- 8/45 U.S. drops atomic bombs on Japan
- 8/10/45 **Japan surrenders**
- 1946 Last camp closed (Tule Lake); Masuo Yasui released
- 1948 **Japanese American Claims Act:** Congress appropriates \$38 million settlement to former internees (awarding \$.10 on the dollar for monies lost)
- 1952 **McCarran-Walter Immigration Act allows for Japanese immigrants to apply for U.S. citizenship through naturalization**
- 1980 Presidential Commission on Wartime Relocation Internment and Evacuation formed
- 1988 President Reagan signs the **Civil Liberties Act of 1988** calling for a formal apology and financial reparations for the 60,000 surviving Japanese American internees

Selected Bibliography

- Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians.** *Personal Justice Denied*. Washington, D.C.: Superintendent of Documents, U.S. Government Printing Office, Part I: Findings, 1982; Part II: Recommendations, 1983.
- Daniels, Roger.** *Concentration Camps USA: Japanese Americans and World War II*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970.
- Daniels, Roger.** *The Politics of Prejudice*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962.
- Daniels, Roger.** *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States Since 1850*. Seattle: Univ. of Washington Press, 1988.
- Drinnon, Richard.** *Keeper of Concentration Camps: Dillon S. Myer and American Racism*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1987.
- Ehrlich, Gretel.** *Heart Mountain*. Viking Press, 1988. (fiction)
- Gesensway, Deborah and Mindy Roseman.** *Beyond Words*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1988. (art work)
- Guterson, David.** *Snow Falling on Cedars*. New York: Vintage Books, 1995. (Fiction, mature readers)
- Houston, Jeanne Wakatsuki and James D.** *Farewell to Manzanar*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973.
- Ichioka, Yuji.** *The Issei: The World of the First Generation Japanese Immigrants, 1885-1924*. NY: The Free Press/MacMillan, 1988.
- Irons, Peter.** *Justice at War: The Story of the Japanese American Internment Cases*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1986.
- Keen, Sam.** *Faces of the Enemy: Reflections of the Hostile Imagination*. San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1986.
- Kessler, Lauren.** *Stubborn Twig: Three Generations in the Life of A Japanese American Family*. New York: Random House, 1993. (Note: this is about the Yasui family in particular.)
- Kitano, Harry H. L.** *Japanese Americans: Evolution of a Subculture*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1969.
- Okubo, Mine.** *Citizen 13660*. NY: Columbia University Press, 1946.
- Takaki, Ronald.** *Strangers from a Different Shore: A History of Asian Americans*. Boston: Little Brown and Company, 1989.
- Tateishi, John.** *And Justice For All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps*. NY: Random House, 1984.
- TenBroek, J.; Barnhart, E.; and Matson, F.** *Prejudice, War and the Constitution*. Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1954.
- Weglyn, Michi.** *Years of Infamy*. NY: William Morrow and Co., 1976.
- Wilson, Robert A. and Hosokawa, Bill.** *East to America: A History of the Japanese in the United States*. New York: William Morrow and Co., 1980.