On December 7, 1941, Japan carried out a surprise attack on a U.S. military base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. After this incident Americans feared the Japanese would attempt a similar attack on the U.S. mainland. They were also convinced that spies and saboteurs lurked within Japanese American communities. In 1941, 127,000 Japanese Americans—about 70 percent of them U.S. citizens—lived in the United States. California was home to 93,000, and another 19,000 lived in Oregon and Washington.

Within hours of the Pearl Harbor attack, FBI (Federal Bureau of Investigation) agents moved through Japanese American communities, arresting prominent individuals. Working without any evidence of wrongdoing, they arrested anyone who they thought might have feelings of loyalty toward Japan. The government closed banks run by Japanese Americans and froze the bank accounts of Japanese Americans. Agents searched Japanese American homes for items such as radio transmitters that might be used to signal Japanese ships close to the coastline.

Under heavy political, military, and public pressure, President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on
February 19, 1942. The order required all persons of Japanese ancestry, whether U.S. citizens or not, to leave specific areas of California, Washington, Oregon, and Arizona. Japanese Americans in those areas were ordered to sell their possessions and check in at reporting stations for transportation to assembly centers. They could bring with them only what they could carry. Given only a few weeks to turn themselves in, they sold their houses, cars, and stores at very low prices. By obeying the president’s executive order, Japanese Americans lost an estimated $400 million in property and income.

Gathering at the reporting stations, Japanese Americans registered as families, and each family received a number. Then they were taken to temporary quarters called assembly centers. These assembly centers were located at fairgrounds, racetracks, and stockyards not in use. On average, families would stay at assembly centers for a hundred days before leaving for permanent camps. In general, families were kept together when they moved to the permanent camps, but not always.

In 1942, Japanese-owned businesses on the West Coast were quickly closed as their owners were evacuated to relocation centers. The Library of Congress.
The U.S. government hastily constructed ten permanent internment camps in remote areas: two each in California and Arizona; one each in Utah, Wyoming, Colorado, and Idaho; and two in Arkansas swamplands. The guarded camps held a total of 112,000 Japanese Americans and Japanese aliens during the war for fear of sabotage or espionage. Japanese Americans who were forced to leave their homes were kept as prisoners at these heavily guarded camps for months—or in some cases, years.

Their living quarters were barracks; thin walls provided no sound barrier between rooms. Each room held one family, as well as cots, blankets, bare lightbulbs, and a potbelly stove for warmth. To make additional furniture, families scrounged for construction scrap materials at night. They ate their meals in large mess halls, and their school-age children attended classes that were held inside the confines of the camp. Despite the meager accommodations and lack of freedom, the resourceful...
Japanese Americans managed to build a semblance of community life while they were held captive.

The last excerpt in this chapter comes from Citizen 13660, a book written and illustrated by Mine Okubo. Published in 1946, it was the first account of the Japanese internment experience. Born in 1912 in Riverside, California, Okubo held a bachelor’s and master’s degree in fine arts from the University of California at Berkeley. She traveled extensively in Europe, studying various art traditions and techniques. When her mother became gravely ill in 1939, she returned to the United States. After her mother’s death, Okubo moved back to Berkeley, where her younger brother was enrolled at the university.

After the Pearl Harbor attack, Okubo and her brother were among the many Japanese Americans who were forced to leave their homes and check in at reporting stations. They became family unit number 13660, hence the title of Okubo’s book. They were taken first to Tanforan racetrack, then Topaz internment camp in central Utah. At both locations Okubo wrote about her experiences daily and drew illustrations of what went on in the camps. She compiled her work and titled it Citizen 13660.

Things to remember while reading the excerpt from Citizen 13660 . . .

- Japanese people who had immigrated to the United States but who were not U.S. citizens were known as Issei (pronounced EE-say). There were about forty-seven thousand Issei in the United States in the 1940s. Japanese Americans born in the United States (the children of Issei) were called Nisei (pronounced NEE-say). Nisei and their children, who were called Sansei (pronounced SAN-say), were U.S. citizens. Approximately eighty thousand Nisei lived in the United States during the war years.

- In the areas where internment took place, the policy affected all Japanese Americans, including those with only one parent of Japanese ancestry.

- After Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Americans assumed the Japanese would attack the West Coast soon thereafter.
The internment of Japanese Americans lasted more than three years. Internees were stripped of their rights, their dignity, and their property, though the government had no evidence that they were a security threat to the nation.

Excerpt from Citizen 13660

On April 24, 1942, Civilian Exclusion order No. 19 was issued and posted everywhere in Berkeley. Our turn had come.

We had not believed at first that evacuation would affect the Nisei, American citizens of Japanese ancestry, but thought perhaps the Issei, Japanese-born mothers and fathers who were denied naturalization by American law, would be interned in case of war between Japan and the United States. It was a real blow when everyone, regardless of citizenship, was ordered to evacuate.

My family...was scheduled to leave with the next to the last group at 11:30 a.m. on Friday, May 1, 1942. Our destination was Tanforan Assembly Center, which was at the Tanforan Race Track in San Bruno, a few miles south of San Francisco. We had three days and three nights to pack and get ready. My brother was excused from the University with a promise that he would receive his B.A. degree in June.

A guide was called to take us to our home, Barrack 16, Room 50. We went practically halfway around the race track and then diagonally across the center field through sticky mud and tall weeds. The ground was wet from the downpour of the day before. Those who had come on that day were drenched and their baggage was soaked.

We followed the guide past the race track to the other side where the horse stables were. We passed many stables before Stable 16 was pointed out to us. It was an isolated building surrounded by tall weeds and standing high above the ground.

We shook the mattresses and flattened them out and made our beds with the sheets and blankets we had brought along. We “hit the hay” around ten that night, but learned very quickly that

Evacuation: Force removal from an area.

Denied naturalization: Not allowed to change their citizenship.

B.A.: A Bachelor of Arts college degree.
sleep was not to be easily won. Because the partitions were low and there were many holes in the boards they were made of, the crackling of the straw and the noises from the other stalls were incessant. Loud snores, the grinding of teeth, the wail of babies, the murmur of conversations—these could be heard the full length of the stable. Moreover, it was very cold and we were shivering. One blanket was not enough to keep us warm. We got up and opened the duffel bags and the suitcases and spread everything over our beds. Sleep finally overtook us around midnight. Thus ended our first day in the Tanforan Assembly Center.

The first month was the hardest because adjustments had to be made to the new mode of life. The naked barracks and white-washed stalls had to be fixed up into living quarters, and we had to get used to the lack of privacy of camp life. . . .

Although cooking was not permitted in the barracks and stalls, blown fuses often left us in the darkness, guiltily pondering whether it was our hot plate or our neighbor’s that did the trick. . . .
On September 9, 1942, the advance work group of 214 people left for the Central Utah Relocation Project to make preparations for induction.

On the 16th of September at five in the afternoon, my brother and I reported with our hand luggage to a newly constructed bull pen. We were assigned to Group 5, Section 8. Our train captain read off the names in the group. . . . We took our assignment (Block 7, Barrack II, Room F) . . . F was one of the end rooms.

The typical interior of a barracks home at a Japanese relocation camp. Families had to hang sheets or blankets to create “rooms” within the bare, one-room living quarters.

National Archives photo no. 210-G-E291.