



AIKO HERZIG YOSHINAGA

Award of Excellence

Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga, a Nisei who found her true calling as a researcher, provided essential documented evidence through her exhaustive work at the National Archives and Records Administration (NARA) that advanced the Japanese American redress movement and several court cases in the 1980s. Her contributions helped to change the way the Japanese American World War II experience is understood today.

Born in Sacramento in 1924 to Sanji and Shigeru Yoshinaga of Kumamoto, Japan, Herzig Yoshinaga was a senior in high school in Los Angeles when the United States entered the war. She still remembers her high school principal scolding her and the other Nisei in her class that they didn't deserve their diplomas "because your people bombed Pearl Harbor." Faced with the government's forced removal, she married her boyfriend and wound up in Manzanar where her daughter was born. When her marriage ended, Herzig Yoshinaga and her daughter transferred to the Arkansas camps to be closer to her family, only to see her father pass away.

After the war, she resettled in New York City where she remarried and had two more children. When that marriage ended, Herzig Yoshinaga was a single mother with three children. Fortunately, she found work as a clerical worker, an experience that prepared her to navigate the sea of documents at the National Archives. In 1978, she married Jack Herzig and moved to Virginia, a short trip to Washington, DC.

Inspired by her friend Michi Weglyn's landmark book *Years of Infamy*, Herzig Yoshinaga initially started to visit the National Archives to find her family's records. Her interest grew as she began to uncover the hidden story behind the government's expulsion of Japanese Americans. After she methodically filled one notebook after another, Herzig Yoshinaga in her almost daily visits to the archives collected more and more material which overflowed "many books, and then it became dozens of Xerox boxes."

When Congress created the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC) in 1980, Herzig Yoshinaga had already completed years of research. She was hired to be the Senior Research Associate by the Commission, which adopted her catalog and index system.

In 1982, she found a document that immediately grabbed her attention: a copy of the original "unsanitized" *Final Report: Japanese Evacuation from the West Coast* from the Fourth Western Defense Command and General John DeWitt. "I realized that I was holding

one of the ten copies of the original version that were all thought to have been destroyed,” Herzig Yoshinaga recalled. “This original version of the *Final Report* proved that the US government had suppressed evidence from the US Supreme Court in the wartime *coram nobis* cases of [Gordon] Hirabayashi, [Fred] Korematsu, and [Minoru] Yasui and that Japanese Americans posed no military threat.”

That “smoking gun” document provided the foundation for the *coram nobis* cases, the class action lawsuit by the National Council for Japanese American Redress (NCJAR), the CWRIC report that condemned the government’s actions, and ultimately the passage of the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, which provided a government apology and reparations to Japanese Americans. Herzig Yoshinaga worked for the Dept. of Justice’s Office of Redress Administration and helped identify Japanese Americans eligible for reparations.

After the passing of her husband Jack, Herzig Yoshinaga moved to Southern California. Besides her three children, she has six grandchildren and one great grandchild. An in-demand public speaker, she was the subject of a 2016 documentary, *Rebel with a Cause: The Life of Aiko Herzig Yoshinaga*, which was directed by Janice D. Tanaka.