

Japanese American Internment Memorial, San Jose, 1990 - 1994

PETER COYOTE: “All of us had the same experience”. That’s how Ruth Asawa described the events she depicted on this remarkable Memorial that drew much of its imagery from Santa Clara County. It depicts the unjust internment of 120,000 Japanese Americans during World War Two – including Ruth’s own family.

The story begins before the war, as you come up the steps on the right side of the Memorial. The first thing you see is a huge ship’s prow. Here’s Ruth’s son Paul:

PAUL LANIER: *There’s the ship that our grandmother came to America in, and then they went to Angel Island for processing.*

PETER COYOTE: Ruth’s mother Haru was a “picture bride” - her marriage to Ruth’s father, who had already immigrated to the US, was brokered via photographs. Paul’s sister Addie:

ADDIE LANIER: *She put in a lot of her biography into this story because it was such a universal story for a lot of the people.*

PETER COYOTE: Below is the two-room farmhouse that Ruth’s father built.

ADDIE LANIER: *It was a very stark kind of existence. It was a two-room house, and then the bath house was outside. So that was her job as a child was to keep the fire going, chop the wood for the ofuro, the bath.*

PETER COYOTE: You can see a child stoking the bath in the little bath-house, with a couple of kids in the tub. Inside the farmhouse, everyone enjoys a meal together, boots lined up outside.

PETER COYOTE: But beyond the fields to the right, a terrible event takes place.

ADDIE LANIER: *The FBI comes and takes her father, and she’s left with her mother and her older siblings.*

PETER COYOTE: Ruth’s father is arrested by two FBI men as he kneels in the dirt. To the right again, there are more heartbreaking scenes. Japanese Americans are forced to leave their homes and businesses and sell what they can. One haunting memory that Ruth included was of the bonfire where her father burned their Japanese fencing equipment and books so that their loyalty to the United States wouldn’t be questioned. People leave for the camps in cars and buses. As for Ruth and her siblings -

ADDIE LANIER: *- her brother drove the car to the Santa Anita racetrack, and they were given blue book value and they went into the camp.*

PETER COYOTE: Now, we head around to the other side, where there’s imagery representing each of the camps, such as a mountain silhouette, or unmistakable gun

tower. Here, the memorial plunges us into the bleak new world of internment. Toward the left side of the memorial, Japanese American families line up for group meals in a mess hall. Up above is their cramped and dusty housing in endless rows of tarpaper barracks. Looming guard towers, huge US soldiers and barbed wire remind us of the government's total control over their lives. There's no chance of escape.

Yet within the camps, Ruth wanted to show that Japanese Americans drew on their inner resources to survive and to make the best of this dire situation. As her daughters Addie and Aiko point out,

ADDIE LANIER: her life on the farm was so difficult that it really was the first time she could just draw—

AIKO CUNEO: Play baseball – (over Addie)

ADDIE LANIER: Play baseball!

AIKO CUNEO: - curl her hair,

ADDIE LANIER:- go to school. And she didn't have to work to help support the family, which was what their childhood was.

PETER COYOTE: As we look, we find scenes of kids playing marbles, softball and volleyball. And drawing and painting. Ruth herself was thrilled to learn from three Disney artists who gave classes to fellow internees at her first camp, in California. And when it came to graduation for Rohwer camp's high school in Arkansas, Ruth drew cartoons of her classmates in the absence of traditional yearbook photos. Years later, she would repeat a similar endeavor at her granddaughter Emma's school:

EMMA LANIER: My grandmother, she came and drew portraits of all of my classmates in our first-grade class, and made these little bound booklets for everyone.

PETER COYOTE: The Memorial's story finishes with the grand, pillared building in the lower right corner of this side. That's the Supreme Court. Inside are activist Fred Korematsu and others at the US Government's formal apology and redress to the Japanese American community they had wronged. It took the US Government over forty years to formally apologize.

PETER COYOTE: As with other Japanese American families, the Asawas had put the internment behind them after the war, needing to move on and rebuild their lives.

ADDIE LANIER: She had never spoken about it to us very much.

PETER COYOTE: But making this memorial finally brought out her memories, good and bad. And as with so many of Ruth's public artworks, she drew in family and friends to help her. Her son Paul worked on it with her. And her daughter Addie did research, collecting the *mon*, or circular family crests you see at each end of the memorial. Her friend and fellow artist Nancy Thompson assisted throughout. The dedication of the memorial, in 1994, was an emotional moment. Ruth's friend Susan Stauter:

SUSAN STAUTER: *I remember hearing from far away these Taiko drums, it was like the heartbeat of the city. And as you walked closer and closer to the monument, there it was. And it was just incredible. It was so personal and yet, so public, and this was part of her genius too - that we bring our lives to our work.*

PETER COYOTE: In the words of activist Fred Korematsu: "I have heard people say that they didn't know anything about the internment. Well, here it is... And for those who don't want to talk about it, well, this will talk for them."