

ACTS OF ANTI-RACISM, FEBRUARY 1942.

In the hours following Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, military and civilian police arrested and detained selected leaders and members of the Japanese American community in Hawai'i and along the West Coast. In February 1942, the Navy ordered Japanese Americans on Terminal Island, California to vacate their homes within forty-eight hours. Panic swept through the community, and profit-seeking whites offered to buy cars, boats, and household items at much reduced rates. But other whites tried to help their Japanese American neighbors. One of those was Virginia Swanson, a Baptist missionary on the island for five years before the war.

In anticipation of the forced eviction, Virginia Swanson wrote to various leaders in Washington, D.C., outlining the plight of the island's families and the difficulty of finding homes for them in communities hostile to Japanese Americans. "Could you work to find a place where they could move?" she asked. "Can you make sure families won't be broken up?" She received no reply. She phoned the Navy, when the eviction order was given, asking for an extension of the deadline without success. She and others of the Baptist Mission Board, whites from other religious groups, and Japanese Americans helped to secure the goods of the Terminal Islanders and arrange for their transportation and shelter.

Swanson described the scene. "The volunteers with trucks worked all night. The people had to go, ready or not. Some had to be pulled forcibly from their homes. They were afraid they were going to be handed over to a firing squad. Why should they have believed me, telling them to get into trucks with strangers?"

Another volunteer, Esther Rhoads, was at the temporary shelter for the Terminal Islanders: "All afternoon trucks and Japanese kept coming. They were tired and dazed as a result of the sudden exodus.... We have old men over seventy – retired fishermen whom the FBI considered ineffective, and we have little children – one baby a year old...practically no men between thirty-five and sixty-five, as they all are interned either in Montana or South Dakota.... I feel especially sorry for the old men. They seem so lost in the high-ceilinged rooms of the Forsyth School. I think they long for the low ceilings and the cozy feel of their little homes back on Terminal Island." And she noted: "Where are these people to go? There are many Japanese with young leaders able to face pioneer life, but those who have come to our hostels represent a group too old or too young to stand the rigors of beginning all over again."

As cited in Gary Y. Okihiro and Joan Myers, *Whispered Silences: Japanese Americans and World War II* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996), 177-78.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER:

1. What were conditions like in the months following Pearl Harbor for Japanese Americans? What were the roles of America's political leaders, the newspapers, and business and patriotic groups in fostering that climate?
2. What is anti-racism, and who benefits from those acts of anti-racism?
3. If you were a white person in the days following Pearl Harbor, would you have supported or worked against the mass detention of Japanese Americans?