

# Chapter 19: The Minetas\_California, 1942

Chapter 19 introduces the early life of Norman Mineta, who, in 1942, was a ten-year-old boy with a passion for baseball and Boy Scouts. Growing up in a devout Methodist family, he was deeply influenced by his father, Kunisaku "Kay" Mineta, an immigrant from Japan. Kay arrived in the U.S. at the age of fourteen, originally intending to reach San Francisco but ended up in Seattle. After struggling with the English language and working his way south, Kay enrolled in first grade at sixteen, marking the beginning of his journey in America. By twenty-four, he had married Kane, a "picture bride" who traveled across the Pacific to meet him. This connection laid the foundation for Norman's upbringing, shaped by his father's determination and the challenges of adjusting to a new life in America.

As World War II unfolded, Japanese Americans like the Minetas faced the harsh reality of internment camps following the attack on Pearl Harbor. Despite the looming threat, Kay reassured his children of their citizenship, urging them to remain strong. However, Executive Order 9066 soon led to the forced relocation of Japanese Americans, starting with brutal eviction notices and searches for contraband. Families were coerced into selling their belongings at a fraction of their value, with little ability to resist the overwhelming discrimination they faced. The Minetas, along with other Japanese Americans, were forcibly relocated, marking the beginning of their difficult journey into internment. This chapter reflects the devastating effects of wartime paranoia on families who were uprooted from their homes and communities simply because of their heritage.

The Minetas were initially sent to the Santa Anita racetrack, which had been converted into a makeshift internment camp. Life in the camp was harsh and dehumanizing, and

Norm was forced to leave behind his beloved dog, Skippy, a painful memory that stayed with him. The family was assigned cramped quarters that offered only straw mattresses, and they were placed under constant surveillance by guards. This environment felt more like imprisonment than an evacuation, and the lack of privacy and dignity took a toll on the families. The conditions were overcrowded and uncomfortable, with families enduring long lines for food and little sense of stability. Despite this, the Minetas managed to maintain their resilience, even though the stark contrast between their lives before and after the internment was a profound shock.

Eventually, the Minetas were transferred to the Heart Mountain internment camp, a larger facility housing over fourteen thousand people. The camp was surrounded by barbed wire, and the constant presence of armed guards created a feeling of confinement and helplessness. Life at Heart Mountain was somber, and the oppressive conditions weighed heavily on the residents. However, amidst the bleakness, the mothers found ways to bond and share experiences, offering a sense of community in the face of hardship. Despite the hardships, these interactions helped individuals maintain a sense of humanity and solidarity, even in such trying circumstances. For the children, the lack of proper recreational activities was a challenge, but there were still moments of connection that helped alleviate the emotional strain.

In an attempt to provide some form of normalcy, Scoutmaster Glenn Livingston initiated interactions between local Boy Scouts and the interned children. However, initial hostility from white families complicated these interactions, reflecting the deep-seated prejudice of the time. Over time, though, the tensions eased, and a Boy Scout jamboree was organized within Heart Mountain. This event allowed the boys to form friendships despite the racial divides, bonding over shared activities and overcoming the initial mistrust. It was a testament to the power of youth to rise above societal barriers, finding common ground in the simplest of activities. This chapter underscores how, even in the face of tremendous adversity, connections and friendships can be formed that transcend the boundaries of prejudice and hatred.

Despite the hardships of the internment, the Minetas were fortunate in some ways. After the war ended, they were able to return to California, unlike many other Japanese families whose lives had been permanently shattered by their time in the camps. The experiences of Norman Mineta and his family reflect the resilience of the human spirit in the face of systemic injustice and the deep scars left by wartime paranoia. This narrative serves as a powerful reminder of the impact that discrimination can have on individuals and families, yet it also highlights the strength and perseverance that allowed many to rebuild their lives. Norman's story, both personal and historical, stands as a testament to the endurance of families who, despite facing unimaginable challenges, continued to fight for a better future.

