

DOROTHEA LANGE

*Japanese Internment Detainees,
Hayward, California, May 8, 1942*
photographic print, 11 x 17 in



courtesy: Jane Diamond and the National Archive

Bearing Witness: Dan White interviews Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston on war, ancestry, and the enduring power of memory

**“It’s a dead issue ...
People are issued out.”**

A New York City-based literary agent made this glib pronouncement in the early '70s when he found out that Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston and her husband, the novelist James D. Houston, wanted to collaborate on *Farewell to Manzanar*, chronicling her family's relocation to an internment camp for Japanese-Americans.

Dead issue? This was news to Jeanne, who was opening up to her husband about her family's time at the Manzanar War Relocation Center in a heat-blasted piece of Owens Valley near the Sierra Nevada range. She was one of 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry—most of them citizens—who ended up in relocation camps after President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 in 1942, declaring certain areas of the United States as military zones “from which any or all persons may be excluded.”

As an adult, Jeanne told her writer husband what it was like to watch her father burn a Japanese flag in a fruitless effort to protect his family from relocation, the sounds of a dust storm as the bus made its way into the desert, the beating and shaming of internees branded as traitors or “inu” by

their own people, the armed guards, the heat, and tumbleweeds piled on a barbed-wire fence.

Ignoring the agent's reaction, the Houstons began their now-legendary collaboration inside their Victorian house overlooking a sandy beach and bird-filled lagoon near the Santa Cruz city limits.

As a seven-year-old in camp, Jeanne was a camera, recording impressions and details for later use. But she'd stuffed many of her best stories in a mental attic with a Do Not Enter sign on the door. It's hard to access memories when you've forgotten you have them, or have no desire to dust them off. Her husband drew her out. With a journalist's patience, and a novelist's love of story, he pressed forward with questions and would not relent when Jeanne turned to him and asked him, “Why on earth do you want to know that?”

This year marks the 40th anniversary of the resulting book, *Farewell to Manzanar*, which has sold over a million copies, and wound up on several “best memoirs of the 20th century” lists. Last year, the nonprofit Cal Humanities chose *Farewell* and four other books from more than 300 titles, encouraging young readers and librarians to rediscover the work. Since publication, the book has become much more than the best-read account of an American tragedy. It's also a foundational text for the author, who revisits Manzanar thematically while finding new ways to tell the story.

This winter, I met with Jeanne to talk about her work's enduring power. She opened a beveled glass door and led me into the Victorian. She has high cheekbones, flowing dark hair and a smile as radiant as the one you see on the 1973 author's photo for *Farewell To Manzanar*. Redwood planks creaked as she headed for the living room. Hand-carved railings set off an intimidating display of books, row after row of them, rising to the ceiling. The house felt like a hard-earned place of refuge. This might have something to do with Patty Reed Lewis, who survived the winter of 1846-7 with the Donner Party. Lewis spent her last ten years in the house.

James Houston, her husband of fifty-two years, died in 2009 but you sense his creative presence in every corner. He still informs her work. Every year, Jeanne continues to build on the scaffolding they created with *Farewell to Manzanar*. While the memoir hinges on the impact of relocation and incarceration on her proud father, *Beyond Manzanar* (1985), a collection of short pieces, shifts the focus to her mother,