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The future U.S. secretary of transportation as a toddler.

ENEMY CHILD

The Story of Norman Mineta, a Boy Imprisoned
in a Japanese American Internment Camp
During World War II



Andrea Warren

MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS
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The publisher wishes to thank Dakota Russell, museum manager at Heart Mountain Interpretive Center; Professor Yoon Pak of the University of Illinois; and Steve Rabson, professor emeritus of East Asian Studies at Brown University for their expert reviews of the text.

MARGARET FERGUSON BOOKS

Unless otherwise noted, internment camp photos were taken at Heart Mountain.

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For Jack. Welcome, little one.



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“I want my children to understand in their bones what happened to their grandma and grandpa, and to pass that knowledge on to their children so that it doesn’t happen again.”

BARBARA YASUI, DAUGHTER OF HEART MOUNTAIN
AND TULE LAKE INTERNEES



*“Only what we could carry was the rule, so we carried Strength,
Dignity, and Soul.”*

—LAWSON FUSAO INADA, POET INTERNED AT JEROME
AND AMACHE INTERNMENT CAMPS



Introduction

I first saw Heart Mountain on a cloudless September afternoon in 2014. I was in Cody, Wyoming, to visit Yellowstone National Park, and learned that an interpretive center had just opened nearby at the former Heart Mountain War Relocation Center.

I was immediately curious. I knew that the government had said it was necessary to send Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II, but what had that experience been like for them? I decided to visit.

On the thirteen-mile drive to the site of the camp, I saw Heart Mountain gradually coming into view. By the time I arrived, the mountain dominated the horizon.

The interpretive center's displays told the story of the camp and its ten thousand internees. As I learned about their daily lives—the crowded barracks, bad food, endless lines to use communal restrooms, and suffering caused by weather that was dry, dusty, windy, and sometimes as cold as thirty degrees below zero—I could only shake my head that this had happened to them.

Their crime? Quite simply, they looked like the enemy. In 1942, America was at war with Japan. Fearing a Japanese invasion of the West Coast, the government imprisoned 120,000 Japanese Americans who lived along the coast so they could not collaborate with possible enemy invaders.

These people were persecuted, prosecuted, their businesses shut down, and their bank accounts frozen. They were registered, rounded up, put aboard trains and buses to unknown destinations, and kept behind barbed wire in ten different camps, all primitive and hastily built and all located in isolated, inhospitable, semi-populated areas far from public view. They were never found guilty of anything—or even charged with anything—yet they were treated like criminals because of their Japanese ancestry.

Even while imprisoned, most Japanese Americans remained patriots. They saluted the flag, raised money for the Red Cross, and knitted warm socks for American soldiers. When their sons were finally allowed to join the military, these young men became one of the most heroic fighting forces in our history and helped defeat both Germany and Japan.

I decided I wanted to write about this dark chapter of American history. I am most fortunate that Norman Mineta, a distinguished statesman and a ten-term member of Congress who also served in two presidential Cabinets, allowed me to tell his story of growing up Japanese American and his family's internment at Heart Mountain. As you read this book, I hope you will envision yourself in his shoes—a boy bewildered by Pearl Harbor, shamed by classmates who saw him as the enemy, worried for the safety of his parents, and finally forced from his home.

In large part because of Norman Mineta's work in Congress, the American government admitted its mistake and apologized for what

it had done to Japanese Americans. And yet we still single out certain groups for discrimination. As one example, Muslim Americans are sometimes targeted because they share a religion with small groups of violent extremists. We are a nation of immigrants, yet we are still often hostile to those seeking new lives in America.

The story of what this country did to our Japanese Americans can teach us the injustice of such actions and inspire us to find compassionate solutions. As Norman Mineta knows firsthand, hate and exclusion are not the answers.

CHAPTER 1



Before the Storm

All nine-year-old Norman Mineta wanted to do every day after school was play baseball. It was the fall of 1941, and California's blue skies and the baseball field beckoned.

Instead, his parents insisted that he go to Japanese language class. Five days a week, he and other Japanese American boys and girls from his neighborhood in San Jose met in a room at the Buddhist church for the hour-long class.

Norm dreaded it. The Japanese alphabet was torture. Trying to memorize it made his head spin. He wasn't fluent like his parents, but he could speak some Japanese because he'd grown up with it, so why did it matter if he ever learned how to read and write it? English was his language and the only one he cared about. A glance in the mirror might remind him of his Japanese heritage, but he was all American.

He had never met his grandparents, aunts, uncles, and cousins living in Japan. His parents stayed in close touch with them through letters—all written in Japanese, of course. Norm had white friends whose grandparents lived close by, and he supposed it would be nice

if his did, too. But most of his Japanese American friends were like him, with their grandparents back in the old country.

Still, he had plenty of family: Mama, Papa, his three older sisters, and his older brother. And they got together regularly with the Kimura family and other friends for birthday parties, ball games, holidays, and movie outings. “They were our extended family,” Norm said. “We were at each other’s houses all the time. We took turns hosting Easter, Thanksgiving, and Christmas, but the Fourth of July was always a cookout in our backyard around the brick barbecue pit that Papa had built.”

Because the parents of these families had been born in Japan, they were known as Issei (*Ee-say*), meaning first generation. Norm and all of the other children had been born in America and were Nisei (*Nee-say*)—second generation. The families lived in an area of San Jose known as Japantown. It had its own stores, businesses, and churches, and was home to several thousand Japanese Americans. Nearby were Filipino American and Chinese American communities. Norm’s father had his own business, the Mineta Insurance Agency.

As American as their lives were, Norm understood his parents’ emotional ties to their homeland. Three years before his birth, Papa and Mama had taken his sisters and brother to visit family in Japan. Growing up, Norm had seen small, grainy photos from this trip. One was of a six-year-old boy in a white sailor suit—his brother, Albert, staring solemnly at the camera.

Norm sensed that this visit had been very important for his parents, particularly Papa. In Japan the father was accorded great respect as head of the family. Papa wanted his relatives to see that even though he lived in America, he was an honorable Japanese family man. When each of his children was born, he followed ancient custom, seeing to it that the announcement of the birth was relayed to

the Buddhist temple in Japan where relatives from both sides of the family still worshipped, exactly as their ancestors had done. Norm’s birth was recorded in the family’s official registry at the temple: Norman Yoshio Mineta, born November 12, 1931.

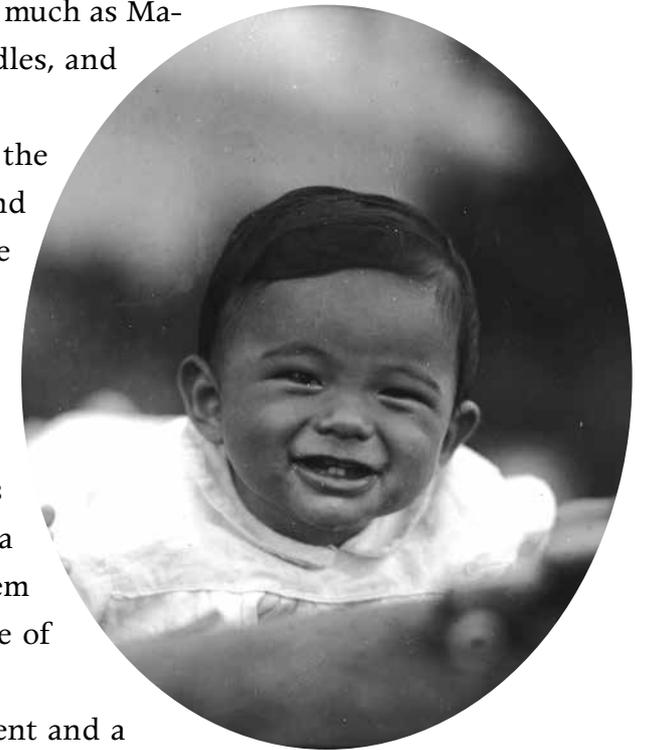
In other ways, Papa was fully Americanized. Unlike most Issei, he spoke excellent English. Mama struggled to read and write English and had a heavy accent. “She always called me ‘No-man’ because like many Japanese raised in Japan she had trouble pronouncing the letter *r*,” Norm said. “I thought of it as her special name for me, even though I knew she couldn’t help the way she said it.”

Like her husband and children, Mama readily blended the new with the old. Sometimes the Minetas used silverware, but mostly they preferred chopsticks, even to eat chicken casserole, beef stew, and other American favorites that they enjoyed as much as Mama’s Japanese specialties like sukiyaki, udon noodles, and spicy tofu.

Norm thought of himself as the caboose of the family. His sister Aya (*Eye-ya*), who was serious and smart, was sixteen years older than he. Etsu, the fun sister who loved to laugh and joke, was fifteen years older. Helen was twelve years older; she was the peacemaker, the one who always made sure everyone was okay. Albert, who was quiet and shy and usually had his nose in a book, was eight years older. “I was so much younger that I did not share a childhood with my siblings. I only really knew them as adults,” Norm said. “They took very good care of me when I was little. I was spoiled.”

Each of Norm’s siblings was an excellent student and a dutiful child. Albert planned to be a doctor, and Norm’s sisters

Norm as an infant.





This 1935 photo was taken in front of the Minetas' home. Back row: Helen, Etsu, and Aya. Front row: Albert, Norm, and their parents.

were all college educated. "Issei friends questioned why my parents would send my sisters to college, for this was uncommon in Japanese families, both in Japan and here in America," Norm said. "But Papa wanted to ensure that his daughters never had to do field work to put food on the table. He said college degrees would help them take advantage of the opportunities America offered. At the same time, their studies included secretarial courses because jobs could be limited for women—and especially for Asian women—and there were always openings for good secretaries."

With such strong role models, Norm had much to live up to. He tried not to complain about having to go to Japanese language class. He also had a weekly violin lesson, which he dreaded. He went only to please Mama and because Papa had bought a violin for him and expected him to do his best to learn it. "When I practiced, my playing sounded like loud screeching," Norm said. "I never got better, and I don't know how my family stood it."

Most of Norm's classmates at Jefferson Grammar School were white, but he also had Asian classmates who were Japanese, Chinese, Korean, or Filipino. Their fathers, like Norm's, had come to the United States to labor in California's agricultural fields, and many still did. There were also a few African American and Hispanic classmates.

Norm took his lunch to school each day and sat with friends of all different ethnic backgrounds while they ate their sack lunches. Sometimes he brought bologna or peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, and sometimes he brought his favorite rice rolls. "None of us thought anything of it," Norm said. "We kids easily accepted this cultural mix. At home in my neighborhood I played with my Japanese American friends. At school I had both Asian and other friends. It didn't matter."

School was hard for Norm—even harder than Japanese or violin lessons. When he tried to read, letters jumbled together. In math class, numbers reversed themselves. He spent long, frustrating hours on his studies, not daring to come home with a grade below a B. His parents and teachers insisted he wasn't working hard enough, and he blamed himself for his difficulties.

"I felt like a dummy. I'd tell myself, *You're stupid! You can't even write numbers down right!* Mama thought that if I just kept trying, in time I would overcome my problems. That never truly happened. School was a struggle for me."

Papa always told him, “Plan your work, and work your plan,” so that’s what Norm did. “I found that if I went very slowly, I could puzzle the letters into words. I was never formally diagnosed with dyslexia, but based on what we know now, I believe that was my problem. To this day, I read slowly, working out the words. If you give me a telephone number, I’ve trained myself to jot it down and then read it back several times to be certain I have the numbers in the right sequence.”

Away from school and lessons, Norm played hard. He romped with his dog, Skippy, a mixed-breed stray that showed up one day at the Mineta home. Norm and his best friend, Eddie Kimura, often hung out with Tom Kitazawa, Richard Omishi, and Eddie’s younger brother, John. The boys were baseball crazy. They improvised pickup games and begged their parents to take them to see San Jose’s minor league team when it played, cheering loudly for the several Japanese American players. They loved other sports, too, and during football season Tom’s sister, who was old enough to drive, would sometimes take them to football games at nearby Stanford University, which had a special section in the end zone just for kids.

There was something to do all the time and someone to do it with. The boys played marbles endlessly. Each had a baseball card collection and they regularly traded cards. Norm was always on the lookout for Chicago Cubs players, because the Cubbies were *his* team. The boys borrowed each other’s comic books, especially favorites like Superman, Batman, and Green Lantern. They tuned in to *Captain Midnight* on the radio, listening for clues to help decipher coded messages with their Ovaltine decoder badges. Ovaltine, the show’s sponsor, was a chocolate powder they mixed into milk. “To get a decoder, we had to send a certain number of Ovaltine labels to the company. So we all drank an awful lot of it,” Norm said.

Sometimes the boys walked the ten blocks to downtown San Jose to see a movie, then headed to a nearby hot-dog stand to treat themselves to hot dogs smothered in onions. Norm was also an enthusiastic Cub Scout. “My uniform was my favorite outfit. I loved to wear it and was very proud of the badges I’d earned. My mother sewed each one on my shirt. No one ever had to force me to go to Scouts.”

The only time Norm gave much thought to being Asian was when he experienced subtle discrimination. Usually it was in a store while waiting for help from a white clerk who assisted white customers first, even if they’d come in after Norm. He knew without being told

Norm and several buddies posed for a picture during the summer of 1941 on the steps of the Kimura home. Left to right: John Kimura, Norm, Eddie Kimura, and Richard Omishi.



not to say anything. It was just the way it was, and besides, most whites were nice. His sister Helen had thought about discrimination in a more serious way, however, for she wanted to be a teacher, and California schools did not hire Asians.

Because he was outgoing and talkative, but also polite and mannerly, Norm was well liked by everyone. He did what he was told. “My parents were strict and I rarely disobeyed them,” he said. Although there was the one time that he, Eddie, Tom, Richard, and John took a cigar belonging to Mr. Kimura and smoked it under the Kimuras’ front porch. “We would have been punished if we’d gotten caught. But we didn’t like that cigar very much. I’m surprised none of us got sick.”

It was Norm who had suggested the cigar. “I was usually the instigator. I was an imp and loved to tease.”

His sister Etsu knew this well. She lived at home and worked at an art store. Her boyfriend, Mike Masaoka (*Ma-sah-o-ka*), lived in nearby San Francisco and visited on weekends. When they sat together in the living room to talk, Norm hid behind the sofa, knowing that Mike would give him a dime to go away. “I could be a real pest,” Norm said. “One time I got a quarter because Mike didn’t have any other change. That was a great day.”

On Sundays Norm went to Sunday school at the Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church before attending the morning’s service with his family. Whenever he went somewhere with his parents, he loved being seen with his stylish mother. “Mama dressed very nicely in the latest fashions, and she always wore a hat and gloves,” Norm said. “She was careful of how much she spent on clothes, although she didn’t need to worry about that.”

Indeed, the Minetas were well enough off that they took road trips each summer, visiting places like Yosemite National Park, the Grand

Canyon, and Lake Tahoe. Apart from summer vacations, Norm’s favorite trip was to visit Aya at her apartment in San Francisco. She had earned a business degree from the University of California at Berkeley and worked as an assistant for an executive at a shipping firm.

Norm was proud that Aya had won the California State Spelling Bee in high school. “At the time, people couldn’t get over a Japanese girl winning it,” said Norm, “but Aya was actually an American who won it. She just happened to have Japanese ancestry.”

In Europe and Asia, war was raging that fall of 1941. Norm paid little attention. He heard reports on the radio, and at the movies he saw newsreels of Adolf Hitler speaking at huge Nazi rallies, along with bombs falling from the sky and fleeing refugees. But it wasn’t America’s war and none of it had anything to do with him. He was busy with school, lessons, baseball, and friends, and he was looking forward to his tenth birthday in November.

“I believed that nothing bad could happen to me—that my parents would always take care of me,” he said. “I took pride in their stories of coming to America. Papa, especially, had overcome many obstacles. He was my hero. In my eyes, he could do anything.”