

HARADA HOUSE
AN APPRECIATION
Remarks Prepared for April 11, 2017
Meeting of the Metropolitan Museum Board
By Venita Jorgensen

Thank you for letting me speak to you about Harada House. I feel strongly about it. My name is Venita Jorgensen, I am a former member and chair of your Board. I am also the current President of the Friends of the Mission Inn and a resident of Ward One since 1969.

Not so long ago I sat where you are sitting now as a steward of Riverside's material culture represented by the collections of the Metropolitan Museum. My duty was, as yours is, to protect and preserve Riverside's historical objects and records for our fellow citizens. People remember history through objects as well as words. In our present era of fake news it is more important than ever to protect our historic sites because objects allow people to relate to the past in a tangible manner. Objects are evidence.

I first became aware of the injustice of our Japanese internment camps through an object. My mother gave me a Japanese doll that had been given to her by a classmate who had been incarcerated in the camps. The doll was all the more evocative since we often drove by the ruins of the gate to the abandoned Manzanar Relocation Camp, nine miles north of Lone Pine, California on Highway 395. For many years the building which was the Camp's theater was used as a truck shed for the Inyo County Road Department. This building now houses the Visitor Center of the Manzanar National Historic Site. The Site is run by the National Park Service and last year had 105,000 visitors.

While I was on the Board we had a wonderful exhibit of the massive amount of materials that came from the Harada House. Among these were the letters that Jess Stebler had written to Sumi Harada. He is the man who watched over their property and protected it during the war. He paid the tax bills, dealt with tenants and sent needed items to the Haradas in their camp. We have only his side of the correspondence, but it is a touching record of an ordinary man doing the right thing in troubled times.

The Harada House offers a rare glance at the fate of the internees through the life of one family. It literally contains the writing on the wall that recorded the forced departure of the Haradas. That scrawl bears witness to the reality of what happened. You can see it and reflect on the dangerous path the United States started down with Executive Order 9066.

When my husband and I traveled to Vienna, we saw another physical reminder of what happens when citizens are singled out. Just outside the apartment where we stayed was a brass plaque on the side walk. It read (in German), "Reflect on the 44 Jewish women and men, who in this house were forced to live collectively before being deported and murdered by the Nazis." Of course the building is gone due to the war. How much more fortunate we are to have the intact Harada house and its contents. But the point is the same, the site bears witness that an event took place, and it took place right where we are standing.

The Harada House is one of two National Historical Landmarks in Riverside. The other is the Historic Mission Inn Hotel & Spa. National Historic Landmarks are designated because they have significance for the whole nation, not just the immediate community. The Harada House and its collection is an unusually rich trove of objects that document the history of Japanese Americans in the United States. Consider that the Haradas had to keep fighting to preserve their property. They won the right to own the house in 1918, only to have all their rights wiped out in 1942. In 1988 President Reagan apologized to the Japanese Americans incarcerated during the war. But in 2016 politicians cited the internment camps favorably as a possible solution to fears of Muslim subversion. It is necessary to preserve the evidence of past mistakes

to keep the cycle of mistreatment from repeating. The voices of victims may go silent with age, but the evidence of the physical house still remains. That is why we must preserve it.

It is true that maintaining historical sites costs money, but the rewards of doing so can be large and lasting. Consider the fate of Riverside's National Historic Landmark Number One. The economic and cultural benefits the Mission Inn has brought to Riverside are undeniable, but at the time there were many who felt that it was too expensive to fix and should be torn down. Forty or more years later that idea seems absurd. To see what that destruction would have looked like, visit the Mission Inn Foundation Museum's current display with the picture of entrance arch being demolished. It took many years to get the right combination of circumstances to save the Inn, but in the end it was worth it. Patience and perseverance is what is needed to realize the potential of the Harada House. I ask you to persevere in your support of the Harada House.