ON FEBRUARY 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed an Executive Order requiring all Japanese Americans and Japanese living within 100 miles of the west coast of the US to be relocated to internment camps.

In March, the government rounded up more than 110,000 people and transported them to ten internment camps scattered inland across seven western states. This seizure of US citizens is an infamous stain on the nation’s history.

Subsequent events reveal a better side to human nature — although it’s a story that remains largely untold. Happily, that story involves the co-operative spirit.

The camps were, in effect, towns of more than 10,000 people which had sprung up almost overnight in remote rural areas. With a range of social and economic requirements, they needed a service structure — but the government knew full well that the internees would be reluctant to use any state-run stores.

It is thought the First Lady, Eleanor Roosevelt, a long-time champion of co-operatives, suggested that if the stores were co-ops owned by the internees there would be more participation. So Associated Cooperatives (AC) of Oakland, California, set up consumer co-ops in each camp.

The initial groundwork on many of the co-ops was done by conscientious objectors, who had agreed to do alternative service. Many of them were Quakers or Mennonites who had already organised co-ops during the Great Depression.

The first camp to open was at Manzanar, California, 4,000 feet up in the desert mountains. Members invested a five dollar share and elected a congress to run operations — which included the food store, department store, magazine stand, newspaper, barber shop and laundry. With 220 full-time staff, it was the camp’s largest civilian employer. In 1943, a year after it opened, the Manzanar was the second-largest consumer co-op by volume in the USA.

Like all co-ops of that era, Manzanar was set up with a dividend system — and, because it was an efficient enterprise with a monopoly position, it was immediately profitable and a substantial divi was paid at the end of 1943. Prior to being moved into the camps, most of the Japanese-Americans had been farmers or engaged in agriculture. Sadly, most of their farms and homes were taken away from them, grabbed by neighbors or sold on the open market. Many of the internees knew they would not be returning to farming after the war — and, in many cases, not to California where there was a strong anti-Japanese bias. The co-op was therefore a place for them to learn new skills and prepare for a life in retail or service industries.

At the end of the war, consumer co-ops on the west coast were the only places where Japanese-Americans could get jobs — and student co-ops in California were the only places for younger internees to live when they went back to college. Thanks to this, California’s co-ops gained many loyal members and employees from among the returning internees; AC of Oakland is still operating today.

But while the co-ops had done the right thing, the country had had committed a tragic, undemocratic violation of citizens’ constitutional rights. It should never have occurred — and, in 1988, the US government finally acknowledged this and disbursed more than $1.6 billion in reparations to the Japanese-Americans who had been interned.

THE US government forbade people from taking photos of the camps. The commander of Manzanar, however, was a friend and admirer of the work of the great American photographer, Ansel Adams.

At the time, Adams lived on the other side of the Sierra Nevada mountains, in Yosemite Valley, and the commander gave him permission to take photographs of life in the Manzanar camp. Adams took hundreds of photographs of all types of activities at the camp, including many of the co-op enterprises. The photographs were handed over to the Library of Congress where they lay stored and forgotten.

Fortunately, the Adams photos were located and published in 1988 in a book called “Manzanar”, with commentary by author John Hersey (whose father had worked with co-operatives in China).