



Women Make History:

Stories we should have learned in school

"...Nights in the open, lying in a snug sleeping bag, I soon learned the charm of a Joshua Forest...Above, the bright desert constellations wheeled majestically toward the west, a timepiece for the wakeful."

Minerva Hamilton Hoyt



Mural, Minerva Hamilton Hoyt



Minerva Hamilton Hoyt and child

The Desert Visionary

[Minerva Hamilton Hoyt](#) (1866–1945) became the champion of desert ecosystems when she moved to Pasadena from New York in the late 1890s. When her husband and son died in close succession, she found comfort sleeping under the desert sky, listening to the winds blow through the Joshua trees. She later [remarked](#) that this landscape was one of "...strange and inexpressible beauty, of mystery and singular aloofness, which is yet so filled with peace."

Hoyt became concerned for the desert's fragile ecosystem when the population of Southern California exploded after 1910. Cacti and other plants were ripped up and carted to backyard gardens for the wealthy. Large swaths of the desert were destroyed to make room for homes and highways. Determined to educate others about the desert's unique beauty, Hoyt organized conservation exhibits in major U.S. cities and also in London.

In 1930, Hoyt founded the [International Deserts Conservation League](#). Soon after, she was asked to serve on a commission tasked with recommending new state parks. Hoyt hired and supervised teams of biologists and ecologists to gather scientific data for her report, and hired photographers to document the landscapes. Hoyt's recommendation was to create parks in Death Valley, the Anza-Borrego Desert, and the Joshua tree forests of

the San Bernardino Mountains. When she realized these desert areas would be better protected as national parks, she pursued that goal but was rebuffed by the director of the National Park Service.

Undaunted, Hoyt lobbied President Franklin Roosevelt whose New Deal included the designation of national parks. Her persistence paid off. In 1933, Death Valley and the Anza-Borrego Desert became National Monuments. [Anza-Borrego](#) became a National Landmark in 1974 and [Death Valley](#) a National Park in 1994. In 1936, President Roosevelt created the [Joshua Tree National Monument](#) and it became a national park in 1994.

The Woman Who Exposed American Concentration Camps

In 1941, when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, Japanese-American [Sue Kunitomi Embrey](#) was eighteen years old. A few months later, President Roosevelt [ordered](#) the evacuation of all Japanese-Americans from the West Coast. Embrey and her family reported to Manzanar, a camp in the California desert in 1942. The experience ignited Embrey's passion for political and social activism. She became a teacher, author, and organizer to ensure that the sacrifices and stories of those in internment camps were never forgotten.



Sue Kunitomi Embrey

Embrey was born Sueko Kunitomi to Japanese immigrant parents in Los Angeles. She graduated from high school in 1941 and postponed college to help her mother run the family business, a grocery store. She was at work when news of [Pearl Harbor](#) was announced. The following year, Embrey's family was given six days to sell their business and dispose of all personal possessions.

In 1943, Embrey was granted permission to leave the camp. She moved alone to Wisconsin where she had hoped to attend college. Embrey was denied admission to the University of Wisconsin on the grounds that a Japanese American would endanger war-related projects on campus. She battled racism and even blame for WWII the rest of her life.

After the war, Embrey returned to Los Angeles and married in 1950. She never gave up her dream of attending college. Embrey earned her bachelor's degree in 1969 and three years later, her master's. She taught in Los Angeles public schools and advocated for inclusion of the history of Japanese-American incarceration in grade school and college classrooms.

In 1969, twenty-six years after her incarceration, and after having just received her first university degree, Embrey made her first pilgrimage to Manzanar. Of the [120,000 people](#) sent to such camps, more than 60% were born in the US and were citizens—just like her.

Embrey co-founded the [Manzanar Committee](#) in 1970 and eventually became its director. For the next thirty-six years, she organized an annual pilgrimage to Manzanar while spearheading efforts to have the camp declared a state and national historic landmark.



Censored Photo of Manzanar by Dorothea Lange

In 1972, [Manzanar](#) received the state recognition Embrey fought to win. Sixteen years later, her efforts contributed to a [Congressional commission](#) declaring the internment of Japanese Americans "unjust and motivated by racism rather than real military necessity." In 1992, Manzanar became a national historic landmark. Embrey then devoted herself to developing an interpretive history center which opened in 2004.

Embrey also wrote *The Lost Years, 1942-1946*, a compilation of materials and interviews about Manzanar, and she co-authored, *Manzanar Martyr, An Interview with Harry Y. Ueno*. She died in 2006 at age 83.

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Minerva Hamilton Hoyt channeled her grief into activism using science and public awareness to achieve her mission.

Ask A Friend: Have you ever turned a painful emotion into force for change?

Ask Yourself: What is the greatest sacrifice you've made to follow your heart?

Sue Kunitomi Embrey battled life-long racism, including being blamed for WWII just because she was a Japanese American.

Ask a Friend: How do you handle false accusations?

Ask Yourself: Would you have had the fortitude and stamina to continue a decades-long fight for justice?



[Sharon Spaulding](#) discovered the hidden story of Mary Ware Dennett, suffragist, sex ed, and reproductive rights activist, after she married Dennett's great-grandson. Last year, [Time magazine](#) included Dennett as one of the most important women in American history.

Sharon has spent ten years researching first-wave feminism, the battle for reproductive rights, and Mary's life in the context of politics and social mores from 1914–1947. She received a grant from Radcliffe College's Schlesinger Library to support her research and the creation of a manuscript. Her journalism has appeared in [New Hampshire Magazine](#), BOLD and Utah Stories. She lives near Salt Lake City with her family and two dogs.

Sharon is available to speak on the forgotten stories of remarkable women and the history of the suffrage and reproductive rights movements of the early 20th century. Contact her at: Sharon@SharonSpaulding.com.

Help reclaim the lives of remarkable women. Share the newsletter and invite others to subscribe. Follow me on social media. www.SharonSpaulding.com

