



Construction crews convert the horse stalls at Santa Anita racetrack into living quarters for Japanese families in 1942. *Courtesy University of Southern California Libraries, Japanese-American Relocation Digital Archive Collection.*

# THE HISTORIAN'S EYE

*What does a historian notice in a photo from the past?*

Ordinary places sometimes serve as sites for extraordinary events. And historical figures justifiably famous for their achievements sometimes played darker roles. The Santa Anita racetrack in Arcadia opened in 1934, its racing season a high point on the social and sporting scene. In 1942, the federal government shut down racetracks nationwide as a war measure. Following President Franklin Roosevelt's Order 9066 mandating the evacuation of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast, the vacant racetrack was hastily converted into an assembly center where the detainees were held until internment camps (America's concentration camps) could be constructed at remote inland locations. The contract to convert Santa Anita's horse stalls into "rooms" for Japanese families was given to prominent L.A. architect Stiles O. Clements, according to records at the Navy Construction Battalion (Seabee) Museum. Clements had considerable expertise on equestrian topics: he was an avid horseman himself, a member of the L.A. Saddle and Sirloin Club, and the designer of Hollywood Park racetrack's clubhouse and grandstand (1937) across town in Inglewood. But the sorry task of converting stalls into family living quarters was new. His long list of works, including the Art Deco Richfield Oil Company Building (1928–1929, demolished); the neo-Assyrian Samson Tyre factory (1929–1930); the Moderne-style Jefferson High School (1936); and the Spanish-Churrigueresque Revival Chapman Park Market (1929), has left a distinguished legacy on the local landscape. For those channeled through Santa Anita on their way to Manzanar and other prison camps, and for the 1,100 Hawaiian Japanese who were returned from inland camps to Santa Anita in 1945 to await the ship that would return them to the islands, Stiles O. Clements was a collaborator in a monumental injustice. Horse racing at Santa Anita resumed later that same year.