

Japanese Internment in Arkansas

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In 1941 approximately 113,000 people of Japanese ancestry, two-thirds of whom were American-born citizens, lived in the California/Washington/Oregon region. They were only a tenth of a percent of the country's total population, and so concentrated in a narrow strip on the West Coast that most Americans in other parts of the country had never encountered them. However, the surprise attack on Pearl Harbor in late 1941 suddenly thrust this small group into the spotlight, and identified this group, which was already unpopular and unwelcome in the eyes of many West Coast residents, with the enemy with whom they shared only their ancestry. They consisted mainly of three groups: the Issei, Japanese aliens; the Nisei, the second generation, born in America; and the Kibei, who were Nisei that had been raised and educated for most of their lives in Japan (Nakatsu 1).

The US War Department, assuming that all persons of Japanese ancestry were possible saboteurs, ordered their evacuation from all three West Coast states and western

Arizona in early 1942 in an effort to aid in defending against an attack that never came.

Evacuation notices were posted in public and sent to the homes of the Japanese to be relocated, telling the head of each family to report to the local civil control station to receive tags bearing the family number that was to be attached to every person and piece of luggage in the group. Evacuees were told to take bedding, linens, toiletries, clothes, enough utensils for everyone, and whatever personal effects could fit into a sea bag and two suitcases per person. The head of the family was also given instructions on the date, time, and place to report for transportation to the assembly center (Girdner 135). Many were given as little as forty-eight hours to sell or otherwise get rid of their homes, businesses, and farms. Some were able to get friends and neighbors to watch over their businesses and belongings, but they more often fell prey to bargain hunters who seized on their desperation and only offered a fraction of what the properties were actually worth. Many lost almost everything they owned during the evacuation.

By far, most of the Japanese Americans were willing to be taken away to the camps to prove their loyalty to the United States. In fact, out of the over 100,000 people who were interned, only twelve tried to fight the decision in the courts. A few of these cases even made it to the Supreme Court, but at that time the court refused to declare the evacuation unconstitutional (Nakatsu 2).

At the beginning of the evacuation, primarily from March to May 1942, the

Japanese were kept in any large areas that could be found. Racetracks, fairgrounds, and the like

were hastily converted into "assembly centers" to house the local Japanese populations. Families lived in horse stalls at the Santa Anita and Tanforan racetracks, and pig sties at Puyallup (also known as Camp Harmony, ironically). At Stockton, housing was built on the track itself. Aside from the smell, the stables generally made better housing, though sometimes the extent of the cleaning was just some straw thrown on the ground to cover the manure. These centers were mainly intended to be a temporary solution, a place to keep the Japanese while more permanent housing could be constructed. By November 1, 1942, all of the assembly centers had been emptied of their Japanese inhabitants, who had been sent to the relocation centers farther inland. Many of the assembly centers were subsequently taken over and used by the armed forces.

Later that year, President Roosevelt signed an executive order creating the War

Relocation Agency (WRA) to evacuate and detain the Japanese-Americans from the West Coast to sites farther inland. The WRA ultimately built ten camps to serve the purpose of housing the evacuees, two of which were in southeast Arkansas near the towns of Jerome and Rohwer. Plans for a third center near Otwell were dropped before construction began. The other centers were Manzanar and Tule Lake in California,

Poston and Gila River in Arizona, Topaz in Utah, Amache in Colorado, Heart Mountain in

Wyoming, and Minidoka in Idaho (Girdner 216). The WRA tried to maintain the constitutional rights of the evacuees wherever possible. The citizens were still allowed to vote in the areas they had lived before. The mail was not censored. Virtual freedom of worship was also maintained. The evacuees themselves printed Camp newspapers.

Open meetings were allowed. There was even some degree of self-government among the internees (Vickers 171).

These ten sites were chosen from 300 possible sites by a number of government organizations, including the relocation service, Office of Indian Affairs, Soil Conservation

Service, Bureau of Reclamations, Bureau of Agricultural Economics, Farm Security

Administration, Forest Service, Public Health Service, and others. The sites needed to be away from military areas, but still accessible by rail or highway. They also needed an adequate water supply and at least 7500 acres of arable land. The land used also had to be government owned, and the camps could not displace white residents already in the area.

In other words, the centers were all built in places where no one else wanted to live.

Work was provided for the ninety percent of people who could work (Japanese-born aliens could not work under the Geneva Convention.) These jobs consisted of anything from building barracks to growing crops to making camouflage nets, cartridge belts, and airplane parts. The standard pay for these jobs was \$12, \$16, or \$19 a month, depending on personal ability and the job each was doing (Anderson 198). In a 1980 documentary film on the Rohwer camp, Joseph

Hunter, one of the assistant directors, spoke of the job opportunities and pay scale in the camps:

In our relocation center, we had physicians, dentists, teachers, technicians, wealthy farmers. We created work opportunities: schools, a hospital, dental clinic, legal counsel, and truck farming. The scale of wages had been set some place up the red tape line and handed down to us. We were to pay no more than \$21 per month. At that time \$21 was the monthly pay of a private in the United States Army. We were told that in fixing wages some government official said, "You are not going to pay any damn Jap more than the lowest paid American soldier."

Most of the camps were built in rather desolate areas, where trees and such things were not a problem. This was not the case at Rohwer and Jerome, as the 10,000-acre areas they received from the Farm Security Administration were still fairly heavily forested in places. The first objective, naturally, was to clear away the forest enough for construction to begin on the camps themselves. The use of evacuee labor in this task caused some problems. The local people, who were unaware of the government's plans to build the center at Rohwer, encountered the Japanese work crew and thought they were paratroopers. The entire crew was marched into the town jail at gunpoint, and there they remained until the project director came down to get his surveying crew out (Girdner 219). An eight-mile long canal was dug at Jerome, where drainage was a problem. There were plans for thirty varieties of vegetable crops to be planted on the resulting 1,000 acres of drained swampland.

The "relocation centers," as they were called, were hardly luxurious. Housing generally consisted of a small 20'x24' room (which could house a family of 7) in a wooden barracks covered in tarpaper. While generally well built, these structures were not expected to last throughout the war. However, they were fast to build, relatively inexpensive, and did not use large amounts of critical materials. Each block of barracks contained twelve buildings, each around 20'x120'. The barracks were divided into six apartments of varying sizes for large or small families. Each person received a cot, mattress, and three blankets. All other furniture was made from scrap lumber left over from the initial construction. Each block also had a mess hall, laundry, bath, and toilet building. The only running water in the camps was in the bathhouses and the mess hall kitchens. Two blocks were schools, three were offices for administration, and the camp hospital took up two (Vickers 173). Rohwer was typical of most of the other camps in its layout. The better part of 500 acres was covered in buildings. The north-south streets were numbered, and the east-west streets were arranged alphabetically. The street names were not used in the addresses, however. Since the barracks were arranged in blocks, an address might read 42-11-3, the block number, the barracks number, and the apartment number respectively (Vickers 172).

A recreation area was provided for various sports contests in season. There were tournaments between the three girls' basketball leagues and the boys' two. There was a community workshop where the women made rugs and other household items. Classes such as knitting and sewing clothes were held, as well as adult education courses like shorthand and typing (Vickers 174).

The danger of fire in the centers was great, especially in the winter when the small heaters in the barracks were on. The flimsy shacks of tar paper, celotex, and pine beams could easily burn to the ground in under ten minutes. To combat this danger, each center also built its own fire

department. The cost of building the ten centers and moving all the

Japanese evacuees to them eventually came to be about \$350 million (Bosworth 124).

Most of the people living near the centers were somewhat tolerant of the evacuees and realized their situation. However, during the first two years of the war especially, emotions ran a bit high, and people looked for someone to take it out on. Some chose to take out their hatred of the Japanese enemy on the conveniently located Japanese American internees. On November 7, a contractor's guard shot and injured three boys who had thrown rocks at him. On November 12, a Dermott farmer shot and slightly injured a Japanese American soldier who had been visiting relatives in Jerome. On November 13, a farmer near McGehee saw three Japanese boys and a guard and, thinking the guard was helping the boys escape, shot at them, hitting two of the boys in the leg. On

December 2, a black employee of the Jerome contractors tore the coat off one of two Japanese girls he had solicited, and received a \$100 fine and a year in prison (Anderson

205).

Rumors were spread that the Arkansas centers did not observe the food-rationing program. Eventually, word of this reached US Senator Hattie Caraway, who ordered an investigation of the food rationing in the camps. As things turned out, the rumor was false. Camp meals were equivalent to an army "B" ration. When the camps started, food was scarce, but the ration program was still in effect (Anderson 200).

Bad press was also a problem on occasion. A reporter for a Memphis paper spent a week at Jerome and wrote that the entire camp was full of sabotage and unrest, that the evacuees were destroying equipment and refused to work. He also wrote that the few who did work frequently took long tea breaks. The article made it to many papers across the country, and many people believed it even though there was little to no truth in it. This article led to several discriminatory bills being brought up in the Arkansas General Assembly, mostly to prevent Japanese people from owning land in Arkansas (Anderson 208).

The loyalty questionnaire was administered to the internees in 1943. It was made in part to allay fears of the public, who didn't want potential "spies and saboteurs" released into their midst. Of all the questions, the most controversial of them all were numbers 27 and 28. Question 27 (for Nisei men of draftable age) was, "Are you willing to serve in the armed forces of the United States on combat duty, wherever ordered?" Question 28 was, "Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and faithfully defend the United States from any and all attack from foreign or domestic forces, and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor, or any other foreign government, power, or organization?" (Girdner 285) Only those who had applied for repatriation to Japan were not required to fill out the questionnaire. Many answered "no" to these questions simply because it was rumored that those who answered "yes" would be made to leave the camp, possibly without their families. Twenty-six percent of the population at Jerome answered "no" to question 28, and only 1,181 Nisei were recruited from the camps (the quota was 3,000). In Hawaii, where most of the Japanese were not

sent to camps, the recruitment quota was exceeded by several thousand (Girdner 290). Though much closer to the enemy and of greater strategic importance, Hawaii needed every worker it could get. As a result, fewer than 2,000 Japanese were moved from Hawaii, mostly aliens and those considered security risks. Approximately one-third of those evacuated from Hawaii were citizens, and mostly Kibei at that. While still being treated with suspicion, the Hawaiian Japanese generally fared better than their mainland counterparts (Nakatsu 2).

Eventually, the 100th Infantry Battalion was formed in Hawaii, as was the 442nd combat unit; an all-Nisei squad made from volunteers from the camps. They were active in Italy and France, suffering the highest casualty rate of any unit in the war.

The 442nd sustained 9,486 wounded and over 600 killed. However, the unit also won fifty-two Distinguished Service Crosses, 560 Silver Stars, seven Presidential Unit Citations, and one posthumous Congressional Medal of Honor. The 100th Battalion received 900 Purple Hearts, thirty-six Silver Stars, twenty-one Bronze Stars, and three Distinguished Service Crosses (Nakatsu 3).

The top population in Jerome was 8,497, in 1943. Jerome was emptied of

Japanese after only 634 days to make room for German POWs. Rohwer's peak population was 8,475, and continued operating until November of 1945, a total of 1,170 days (Vickers 175).

On December 18, 1944, the Supreme Court declared the evacuation and detention of loyal citizens illegal. The WRA started to close the relocation program before the war was over, moving the more troublesome of the "disloyal" internees to Tule Lake (often at their request) and resettling the rest. The WRA had released around 9,000 internees to outside businesses such as the sugar beet industry. Internee labor was also vital to the poultry industry, as most of the nation's skilled chicken sexers were Japanese. Emphasis was being placed more on moving people to places outside the centers instead of keeping them inside. Each departing person got a train ticket and \$25 (plus \$3 per day of travel) for whatever travel expenses might arise. By the end of 1944, 35,000 internees had been relocated across the Midwest, east, and south. By the end of 1944, the army had revoked the mass exclusion act, allowing the Japanese to return to the West Coast as well, in many cases to open hostility and bigotry. Through 1945 and early 1946, the WRA moved 70,000 more people out of the centers (Vickers 171). Approximately 8,000 people decided to leave the US altogether.

In all, the WRA had had over 120,000 people under its control. Assembly centers transferred 90,491 people; 17,419 were taken from their homes directly; 5,918 were born in the centers; 1,735 were transferred from INS camps; 1,579 were moved into the camps after being sent to work crops from the assembly centers; 1,275 were transferred from other institutions; 1,118 were taken from Hawaii; and 219 (most of them non-Japanese spouses) entered the system voluntarily (Yu 4).

Of these, 54,127 returned to the West Coast; 52,798 moved into the interior; 4,724 moved (or were moved) to Japan; 3,121 went to INS camps; 2,355 joined the armed forces; 1,862 died

during imprisonment; and 4 were "unauthorized departures" (Yu 4).

Some of the internees chose to stay where they were, many of them having lost everything they owned in the evacuation. Some just felt that the only safe place anymore was the camp itself because of the anti-Japanese feeling at that time, lack of jobs, fear of the draft, and the inability of the old people to care for themselves. Many used the same skills they used in the camps to make a living once they were released. Several internees became successful "truck farmers" in the area around Dermott. Sam Yada, who was interviewed on the video, started farming as a sharecropper. His family lived in an old house where, as he said, "We can see chickens walking through the floor." Once they had saved enough money, they started a nursery near Jacksonville, which was still open at the time the video was made.

In 1992, the cemetery at Rohwer was named a national landmark. Twenty-four of the internees who died while at Rohwer are buried here. There are also two monuments, which were built by the internees during the war. One is to the men of the 442nd regiment who died in France and Italy, and a second to the twenty-four who died in the camp. Also in 1992, a group of 175 former internees revisited the Jerome and Rohwer sites, dedicating a monument at Jerome and visiting the newly renovated ones at Rohwer.



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Biography

Jeff Sorrells is currently a sophomore at Henderson, and will probably major in Computer Science.

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