

Basics, few comforts for internees

By Sabine Goerke-Shrode

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On May 1st and 2nd, 1942, after weeks of rumors, feverish sorting and packing, and many heartbreaking goodbyes to friends and neighbors, 254 Japanese-American families from Solano County boarded a train that would carry them to the Assembly Center in Turlock and eventually to the Gila River Relocation Center in Arizona.

A small advance group already had left by bus on April 29 to help set up campgrounds. The Turlock Assembly Center was meant to be a temporary station only. Ten camps, intended to hold more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans, still needed to be constructed.

Accommodations were sketchy. While some barracks existed, most internees had to make do with horse stalls, one stall to a family, with a blanket as separation. Cots and mattresses provided the only furnishings. Corrugated tin roofs, tar paper walls, cracked asphalt floors and the San Joaquin Valley sunshine made quarters stiflingly hot in the summer. Open showers, outhouses with 18-inch stalls, eating in a mess hall - it all needed getting used to, as can be read between the lines of a letter Ineko (Handa) Nakamura wrote to the Rogers family in May 1942.

"Dear Mr. and Mrs. Rogers:

"Thank you very kindly for giving us a ride to the depot. It was very nice as, we were able to get there early.

"We arrived at the entrance of the camp about 2 o'clock. We had to go through medical exams and have our luggage inspected, then we were assigned to our rooms. I am in the same room with my sister and her two children. We have nice new cots and mattresses and the room is clean because the barracks are new.

"Food is fair, but it bothers me because we have to wait in line. It will be better when we get organized here. We can have shower baths anytime we want. There is a wash house where we can do our laundry, too.

"I wanted to write to you as soon as I got here, but I was so miserable I stayed in bed most of the three days. Today I feel fine for a change, so I think I'll visit some of my friends in this camp. I guess this change of water and food upset my stomach and the terrific heat gave me a headache ..."

Eventually, some form of normalcy settled in. Senior students from all over the West Coast, who had to leave their high schools before their graduation, received their diplomas by mail. Vacaville's Japanese baseball team, the 'Rough Riders,' won the Turlock Center baseball championship.

By August, the Gila River Relocation Camp opened, eventually housing 13,348 internees. Most former Vacaville residents were assigned to the so-called Canal Camp, Blocks 3, 4, and 5. Each block consisted of several barracks, a mess hall, and a combination toilet, bath and laundry building. Again, families made do with cramped spaces, blankets serving as doors and separation walls, unrelenting heat, water pipes exposed to the sun, sand and wind, rattlesnakes and scorpions.

The internees had to organize the internal running of the camps. They managed and staffed the mess hall, cooked, cleaned, taught school, ran theaters, worked as doctors, dentists or pot scrubbers.

Food was rationed and the War Relocation Authority was very interested in the camps growing their own food. Joseph Saito, who had majored in horticulture at the University of California, Davis, recalls their efforts:

"The first crop we raised was five acres of radish ... Then they decided that we needed daikon - long white radishes the Japanese use in so many ways. They decided they couldn't buy enough daikon on the open market for the different camps, so our duty was to raise daikon. We raised 10 acres of daikon. Here again, they said this was the biggest acreage of daikon ever made in Arizona.

"Then they decided we should raise chickens. Our Caucasian friends, the so-called supervisors, said, 'No, you can't raise chickens in Gila. It gets too hot. It gets up to 110 degrees during the day. Your chickens are going to die.' Well, the higher-ups in our organization said, 'No, we've got to raise chickens, period.' So we finally found a system where we built two roofs, one roof on top of the other, and that provided enough air current and it lowered temperature so we were able to raise chickens. Then they decided with all this garbage, you've got to raise hogs. So we started a hog department and we did raise hogs. Then they decided that with all this pasture land available, we've got to raise cattle to provide meat for the other camps."

Not only did this help improve their own food supplies, they were also able to trade foods such as watermelons from other camps.

Leaving the camps while the war was on proved a difficult process. Some internees, like Ben Matsuura, had special jobs that let them travel outside occasionally.

"I was a special buyer," he remembered. "They called it 'special order.' I bought wedding dresses and wedding rings. I went from the camp to Phoenix, and I used to spend nights there and eat steaks and go to the movies - except for a couple of places where they wouldn't serve me. I remember the Mormon people; they were very, very nice. They went out of their way to help me. When I got married, this fellow made the wedding cake and two big sheet cakes and brought it all the way into the camp, about 20 miles."

Some families were able to relocate to the Midwest or the East Coast. Young men were drafted into the U.S. Army, serving both in Europe and in the Pacific. Ultimately, more than 600 American-Japanese servicemen were killed in action and nearly 10,000 were injured.

Most of the internees stayed in the camps until the war ended and restrictions were lifted in January 1945. When finally, they were able to leave, many did not know where to go. Could they go back to their old lives?

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