WHAT HAPPENED AT MANZANAR

BY A REPORTER

When the military police marched into the Manzanar, California, Relocation Center on December 6 to quiet a disturbance among evacuees of Japanese ancestry, it was a relatively simple matter to label the disturbance a "pro-Axis demonstration" and let it go at that. Americans have not lost their love of the catch-phrase or their aptitude for finding what seems to be a simple explanation for the most complex of situations. The further fact that the outbreak ocurred on the eve of the first anniversary of Pearl Habor was also regarded as something more than mere coincedence and accepted as proof per se that Manzanar was a hotbed of pro-Axis sentiment.

The facts in the case do not warrant such an assumption. There were other factors present in the situation which were much more important and far too complicated and involved to be dismissed by a simple catch-phrase explanation. Officials of the War Relocation Authority have since made a careful investigation of the whole affair, and they are convinced that while manifestation of pro-Axis agitation was not entirely lacking, it was a minor factor, not a primary force, in the events leading up to the disturbance.

First of all, it is significant and worth noting that this disturbance at the oldest of the relocation centers was the first really serious outbreak of violence since 110,000 persons of Japanese ancestry were removed from their homes in strategic military areas along the West Coast and placed under guard in new, rough communities called relocation centers. In considering the problems involved in that movement it is also important to remember that nearly two-thirds of those evacuated were American citizens by right of birth.

The incident which opened this turbulent chapter in Manzanar history occurred on the evening of December 5, when six masked men, all evacuees, entered the apartment of Fred Tayama and gave him a severe beating. Later that night, members of the center police force arrested Harry Ueno, popular kitchen worker and former labor organizer, named by Tayama as one of the men who had attacked him.

Ueno was taken to the Inyo county jail ar Independence, about five miles from the center. This was in accord with WRA policy concerning the handling of felony cases.

Next morning, Ueno's co-workers in the mess-hall kitchen and friends in the block where he lived called a meeting to discuss the situation and consider ways in which they could protest his arrest since they felt it had been unjustified and that Ueno was innocent. It was decided to call a larger meeting that afternnon.

A crowd of about 2,000 people turned out for this general mass meeting held in one of the open spaces on the center grounds. A public-address system was set up and speakers brought accusations against Tayama of having been an informer, violently denounced the arrest of Ueno, and urged the crowd to demand his release from the Independence jail. A committee of five was chosen, and, headed by this committee, the crowd marched off to the Administration Building to present its demands. Ralph P. Meritt, WRA project director, refused to meet with the committee unless the crowd first agree to disperse. More speeches followed, many of them in Japanese and violently attacking the administration and certain members of the project staff. After about three-quarters of an hour of this, with the crowd becoming more unruly and giving no indication that it intended to disperse, Merritt discussed the situation with the captain of the military police and agreed to

meet with the committee.

An agreement was reached that Ueno would be brought back to the center jail on a pledge by the committee, representing the crowd, that there would be no attempt made later to free him, that there would be no further mass meeting held with respect to his arrest, and that the committee would help to find Tayama's assailants. The committee agreed to these conditions, and a spokesman adressed the crowd in Japanese, advising it to disperse, and supposedly explaining the conditions under which Ueno would be brought back and to which the committee had agreed. It was learned later that the speaker referred to the negotiations as a victory for the evacuees, omitting the conditions of the agreement, and that he instructed the crowd to assemble again at six o'clock that evening.

After the crowd had dispersed, Ueno was brought back to the center jail. But at dusk that evening the crowd began assambling again, cheering and shouting and milling about, listening to more inflammatory speeches by its leaders. It then separated into two groups, one of which descended on the hospital with a demand that Fred Tayama, the man who had been beaten, be turned over to them. Tayama had been hidden, and the rep resentatives of the croud were unable to find him.

Thus thwarted, this part of the crowd joined the second group which had gone to the police station to demand the unconditioal release of Ueno. It was estimated that the total group massed in fron t of the station numbered between 2,000 and 3,000 persons. Threats were made against evacuee policemen on duty at the station, and spokesmen said that unless Ueno was released the mob would take matters into its own hands.

Ralph Merritt, director of the center, realizing that the evacuees had broken their promise concerning mass meetings and further efforts to obtain Ueno's release, and that the evacuee police force was powerless to handle the mob, called in military police and asked the captain in command to take charge of the situation. The company of military police deployed in front of the station. The commanding officer talked with leaders of the crowd at considerable lenght, and finally adressed the crowd as a whole, ordering them to disperse. The crowd remained, even tough it was informed that tear gas would be used. Upon orders, the soldiers threw tear gas bombs. At almost the same moment, some evacuees released the brake on an automobile and started it rolling down grade toward the police station, where it hit the corner of the building and careened off. One of the lieutenants, being unable to see in the darkness that the car was driverless, fired at the tires with a sub-machine gun. Concurrently, the crowd scattered in all directions to escape the tear gas, and some of those in the front of the crowd moved in the direction of the soldiers. The latter, armed with shotguns, apparently thought they were being rushed by the crowd and three shots were fired. The crowd dispersed immediately, leaving an 18-year-old boy dead, and a 21-year-old youth mortally wounded. Eight others were injured by the shots and one broken leg was suffered, apparently as a result of crushing by the crowd.

During the days that followed, a pall hung over Manzanar. Only the essential work acctivities, operation of the mess halls, the hospital, fuel delivery, etc., were carried on. Schools were closed. All the evacuees who appeared out of doors wore black arm bands, ostensibly in mourning for James Ito, the young boy who was killed.

The military police took over the responsibility of guarding the area of the center in which the administrative buildings and warehouses

were located and retained this responsibility until January 1, when they withdrew. Martial law was not declared, however, and the WAR staff retained administrative supervision of the center.

After a week, the evacuees were permitted to choose representatives, and the 108 chosen from the various blocks then selected a committee to negotiate with the administration for a return to normal conditions. Terms of agreement were not easily arrived at, however, and no concesions on fundimentals were made by Director Merritt.

Meanwhile, the administrative staff was gathering evidence on truble makers and agitators. Over a period of a few days, 22 men were arrested and logged in jail outside the center. In the same period, some 65 persons who had been most active in collaborating with the WRA adminstration, and who had been threatened with physical violence by the agitators, sought protection and were moved temporarily to another location outside Manzanar. With the removal of extremists of both factions, tension gradually subsided, and negotiations between the evacuee committee and the administrative staff progressed slowly but surely toward an agreement.

In the negotiation, the committee of spokesmen aired the underlying causes of discontent: discrimination against Issei (alien) in favor of the younger, less experienced Nisei (American citizen) in administrative positions and also in the community goverment; pre-evacuation quarrels and factional disputes; delays in payment of wages and of clothing allowance; variations in quality of food between mess halls; the pro-administration and pro-goverment policy of the center newspaper; the separation of many families from thier breadwinner, held in internment camps; trial of evacuees by civil courts outside the relocation center; uncertainty about the future in this country; financial loss in disposing of property at the time of evacuation; an unfriedly press outside the relocation centers.

The conbination of these influences had made the entire community extremely volatile, ready to explode if a spark touched it off. The spark was provided by the arest of Ueno, who was popular with most elements of the community, on charge of beating Tayama, who was unpopular because of the suspicion that he was an informer.

The presence of a pro-Japanese element in the center was indicated before the disturbance, but individuals who were taking part in any pro-Japanese agitation succeeded in keeping thier identities well concealed. Little by little, however, their activities came to light. Over a period of days after the disturbance of December 6, twenty-two arrests were made. Two of the men later were released because of mistaken identity, four others because of insufficient evidence. The remaining 16 were taking to an isolation center established in a former CCC camp, near Moab, Utah. Some will be held there indefinitely; others will be turned over to the Department of Justice or the Army for internment for the duration of the war.

The 65 who were moved for their own protection to another location have been granted indefinite leave from the relocation center, most of them are now placed in private employment.

Thus, the War Relocation Authority has taken the first tentative steps toward segregation of the population in its ten relocation centers. Cases of individuals who are trouble makers or who are suspected of pro-Axis agitation are being reviewed, and it is probable that others will join the first group of residents in the isolation center. Formal segregation procedure have not been announced, but WRA officials admit they are being worked out as this is written.

"We have a cross section of a people," a WRA spokesman said.

"There is a small group that must be regarded as definitely dangerous --trouble makers so long as they are in ewlocation centers, and possibly dangerous to society and to our national security if they are out. It is our intention to find them and see they are put in the proper place-and the proper place is not a relocation center. We are just as convinced that most of the evacuees are loyal to the principles of democracy and are desirable residents for any community. Our hope is to give them an opportunity to make new lives for themselves in normal communities in private employment."

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Ralph P. Merritt, now project director at Manzanar, has an outstanding record of public and humanitarian service in California. He helped build the University of California, was Food Administrator of the State in the last war, made the name "Sun Maid" on raisins known the world over when he was president of that co-operative, and was brought out of retirement on a ranch in Nevada to take over the Manzanar job. Robert L. Brown, assistant project director and author of an earlier artical on Manzanar in our pages (Autumn 1942), sends us a copy of a letter Mr. Merritt wrote his aunt on Christmas Day, which perhaps better than anything else reflects the spirit of the administrative staff in dealing with the explosive situation before and after the riot. With his permission, we quote the letter here:

Dear Aunt--:

It is Christmas morning at Manzanar. The sun has not yet topped the Inyos but its rays have turned the gray granite peaks of the Sierra to rose. Below is a white band of new snow. Still in the dark shadows are the rows of barracks that house our ten thousand Japanese evacuees.

Your father was the pioneer of Manzanar. He was the first white man to break the ground of this desert. He built this home where our barracks stand and here you were born. In those years following the Civil War there also were soldiers in Owens Valley to protect the settlers from the Indians. This was the first time Manzanar faced the problem of race relationship. You and your brothers and sister solved that problem by playing with Indian children. Your father solved it by becoming "the Captain" to every Indian in the Valley and the most honored man of his day among his Indian friends. Today Manzanar has again become the scene of a test of racial tolerance-the greatest test a domocracy has ever met. We are face to face with the question of whether we can live in peace and security with American citizens of Japanese ancestry and Japanese who by virtue of our laws are non-citizens. To all of them we have pointed to American democracy as a better way of living. These people-ten thousand of them-are now held inside barbed-wire fence as a measure of national protection in this time of war.

The reality of this great drama is on my mind this Christmas morning because only thirty days ago the War Relocation Authority sent me here to Manzanar as Project Director with full administrative authority. It was like coming home to be back on the desert of Inyo that I have loved, and once again to see the seven miles shadow of Mount Williamson. But Manzanar was a volcano about to erupt. I knew that too when I came. Evil work had been done by the slow boiling of many bitternesses. Some were old-some as new as yesterday. These ten thousand people had no grudge in common. Many people were filled with many hates about many things-race hates-war hates-political hates-

class hates such as those between Japanese born in America to whom Japan is a foreign country and Japanese born in America but educated in Japan who have become pro-Japanese--and just the common kind of hates we all know too well.

On a Sunday morning not three weeks ago a mob gathered like the summer thunder storm that sweeps from the Sierra. As darkness came on, mob violence grew and broke from control of its leaders. As I walked in that mob at noon talking with people here and there and urging them to be calm and go home, I thought of many things. I thought of you and the happy ranch life here of years ago. I thought of our men overseas who might be more cruelly treated by Japan if tear gas failed to break up this mob. I thought of the innocent who might be killed while the guilty escaped, if I had to turn to the military as a last resort. But after dark there was no other course. Soon there was the rattle of gunfire. Men fell in the blackness.

For days we lived under the military-no Japanese were seen outside the barracks-none came to work-sullen difiance hung over the Camp. What would break the tension? How could these ten thousand people be led to want to work and play again? Could the real spirit of America be made to live among them?

Last Monday we buried the dead. At the Buddhist funeral held in the woods beyond the Lacey Ranch, we mourned with thier families the death of the two boys-innocent of wrongdoing-the victims of the riot. The only soldier present stood at the head of one of the coffins-the brother of the dead boy. This Japanese American soldier, a member of Uncle Sam's Army, was on active duty at a distant point, but the Army granted my request to bring him home to his family. The Buddhist priest prayed that the lives of these young men might be a sacrifice for the sins of all the camp. May thier God and our God hear that prayer!

The next day the Japanese workers-four thousand men and women-were back at work. On Wenesday I suggested that the tragedy should not rob little children of Christmas trees and presents or young people of singing carols.

Last evening we visited our Children's Village with its 65 orphans. They sang "Jingle Bells" and "Away in the Manger" and we helped them open packages that were greeted with usual shrieks of joy while Santa Clause with a Japanese accent shouted greetings to all. Before the door of our home in the barracks, there was no mob but a hundred young people singing "Oh, Come All Ye Faithful."

The star was overhead and the ragged crest of the Sierra was shining in the moonlight of Christmas Eve. Peace and good will had come to Manzanar.

So we greet this Christmas morning. Shall the problems of keeping this peace and good will be solved by the military-or by being overtrustful of this show of goodness-or is there some safe middle course through which the ideals of peace and good will can mingle with the realities of race tolerance? If there is an answer, it will be the cornerstone upon which a future peace of the world will rest.

This story of your old home is my Christmas present to you.

Affectionately,

Ralph