

CHAPTER VII

THE PROGRESS OF WORK

The work was progressing well and the crew was working together smoothly. By July 20, we moved into the field near the warehouses (area e). By then I was getting free from the departmental interference; and I had the complete responsibility for and authority over the crew, which they sensed and were convinced. Meecham disappeared from the picture entirely. Frasier came to see me for a short chat now and then -- about twice a week -- and the conversation was limited to gossiping.

It was on July 21, when we were working in that field. It was extremely hot humid day. About 2 p.m. a man came to me and complained of dizziness. I carried him to the hut, which we had built in the middle, and instructed him to lie down and relax. I was alarmed and began to inquire around. Two reported that they had a nauseating feeling. One said that he did not feel "just right." I myself did not feel "just right," although I never picked up even a piece of scrap lumber. I immediately suspended the operations and loaded them on a trailer to join the unloading crew in their larger hut on the other side of the creek, where it was much cooler. There I ordered them to lie down and to go to sleep. I lay down myself, too, among them, so that they would feel that I was one of them.

Around 3 p.m. when I heard a car approaching, I acted as if I were dozing. Soon there was a little commotion among the men. I could hear one say in a low tone, "There's that white guy."

"Hey, better wake 'boss' up," another said.

Then someone shook me and said, "'Boss,' get up! The white guy is here."

I got up sleepily and with a deliberate slow pace, walked to the car, which was parked some 50 feet away. Frasier was there and wanted to know what was the meaning of all this. After my explanation, he agreed that my procedure

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was proper, half skeptically, and drove away.

As I re-entered the hut many of them began to speak all at once. They said, "What did he say?"

"Was he sore?"

"Did he scold you?"

I answered them calmly, "No, he just wanted to know where he could find a certain tractor."

They were very much concerned as to what the white "slave driver" would have said. After this incident, they erased the last doubt from their mind that I was a white-man's "stooge" and they felt stronger than ever that I was their friend and was anxious to protect them. If I had reported to them that he was "sore," they would have flared up.

On or about July 31, I sent in the morning a gang of 8 men to clean up some brush and trash scattered around near the Post Office and along Block 34, in charge of the Nisei assistant. I expected them to finish the work in one hour or one hour and a half. When I went there about 10 a.m., they were all sitting around the small canteen. When I asked the assistant what had happened, he told me that they did not like to work there and that he did not coerce them, as "no coercion" was my standing order to him.

One Kibei said on my questioning, "Oh, these Nisei punks make me sick."

Another reply from a farmer evacuee was milder, "It's too dusty and noisy."

To all I said, "Come on! Come on! There is only a little more work left. Let's get it over quick and join the rest of the gang."

They went back to the work without any trace of defiance. I stayed with them another half-hour and returned to the rest together.

This abhorrence of working around the Administration Buildings had an important bearing on two decisions we had to make later on.

One of the occasions was like this. On August 4, Frasier brought two

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propositions between which we were to pick one, as we were completing the firebreak cleaning work.

1. To construct raised walks, ditches for electric cooler drains, and do other dust control work around the Administration Buildings.

2. To subjugate high school and farm grounds.³⁹

Without hesitation, I knew which work we would doing next. However, as a matter of procedure, I assembled the men and consulted them. Before I could finish with the presentation of the former proposal, I was overwhelmed with objections. Comments started to fly thick and fast from all directions:

"Not around there."

"I hate the sight of Niseis and 'Ketos' around the Administration Buildings."

"Too many cars go by."

"It's too noisy and too dusty around there."

Some had more sincere tone and said, "It doesn't look nice to be sitting down and resting out there. And I can't work without a rest now and then."

One extremist said, "We fixed our Blocks ourselves. Hell! I don't see why those guys -- meaning the employees in the administration -- can't do the same. It's good for them to do a little outdoor work. Besides, the place doesn't look any worse than our own." And I knew there were two others who shared the same view.

Thus, the proposal was snowed under, However, I noticed particularly that the migratory laborers did not offer any comment. I was curious. When I questioned them later on the subject individually, they invariably replied, "I didn't mind working there, but I just wanted to 'string along' with the rest."

So the second proposal was adopted although it meant also two days of working around the Post Office and the canteen area at the start. They said laughingly, "Well, that's all right. We will just walk through, out there."

And they did walk through. The neatness and thoroughness of their work in that area were much below their standard.

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With the start of this work I discarded the idea of giving 15 minutes rest every hour on the hour. Instead, I gave them 15-20 minutes once in the morning and 30-45 minutes once in the afternoon. They always rested in a single group, which fact made it easy for me to talk with all the men.

The length of the rest varied as there was no one to coerce them to resume the work. They must get up from their own volition. On two occasions, I made them lie down and sleep -- the majority dozed and some snored. The result was, however, disappointing to me, as the men failed to get up for 45 minutes and worked without "pep" or enthusiasm afterward. Henceforth, the relaxation of this form was avoided unless it was necessary.

Once someone started a conversation on the "Battle of Midway," which was currently all over the newspapers. From this, a discussion of the duration of the war ensued. Their estimates, as I remember, varied from 4 months to 3 years. Many of them could not agree and it resulted in an argument; especially, between two men -- one a Kibei, and the other a younger Issei. They exchanged words heatedly. I interceded and brought the discussion to a close in time with, "After all we are in America. However long and the war may last, we are protected and safe here."

The two men kept on arguing while they worked with an axe and a shovel. Contrary to my fear that this would result in some ill-feeling, they were working happily together in a group the next morning. Since then I avoided talks on the war, and so did the men.

It was about this time the lectures on the "co-op" principles were held in various Quads. Some man mentioned that he attended one of these meetings and repeated what he had learned. Few showed any interest. However, as soon as one Issei began attacking the present community store, the interest of the men greatly increased. The sentiments were expressed in such statements as:

"They are robbing the people."

"Some white 'go-betweens' are pocketing a big profit."

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"O is making side-money."

"The employees are dividing among themselves the \$20.00 per week rebate from a ice cream company."

On other occasions, the "co-op" was mentioned, but it always ended happily and joyfully in scathing harsh accusations of the present store.

Once in a while we spent the time gossiping about women in the camp. Beauty of this or that person and shape and figure of this or that girl drew many laughs and light air prevailed among them even after they had resumed the work.

As the weather became cooler, after the middle of August, the crew was working with better speed and steadier constancy in swinging axes and digging with shovels. I was satisfied with and thankful of the manner they worked and the acreage they covered (5-7 acres per day). I was certain that their efficiency during the last few weeks of the assignment, would have compared favorably, if not better, with that of any group of men employed elsewhere in the country at higher wartime wages.

It was announced by the paymaster that Aug. 27 was the pay day for Block 12. It was a great event for all of them, as all except a few had never received wages in the camp. This was to be the occasion to receive cash for the first time since the evacuation. I informed seven men from Block 12 the night before that they would be excused for the morning and kidded them, "What are you going to do with all the dough?"

And, "Let's see what the government money looks like when you get it."

They beamed. Yet when they returned the next afternoon, they were furious and disappointed men. Two men reported that they received only \$7.83 for 196 hours of work in the month of July. Another said that he was paid \$10.81 for 180 hours. Two complained that their names were not listed on the payroll.

"Of all the people! The one who needed the cash most failed to get his pay," I said to myself, thinking of one of the men who did not receive the

payment. As he was indigent and destitute, I had asked Evans for a personal loan. ⁴⁰

"That means another begging trip to Evans for a few more dollars," I thought.

Others gathered around and began commenting, "They are a bunch of imbeciles," they said, meaning the people in the accounting department.

"They should all be fired."

Another one suspected and said knowingly, "I bet they are manipulating their books. I bet some guys there are putting the money in their pocket. That's easily done, you know."

"There they go again," I thought. I was afraid that these mistakes caused a disturbing effect upon the state of mind of my crew. I felt as if all my efforts to create more confidence and trust in the administrative people was destroyed by a single stroke of carelessness and inefficiency of its department. I did not want to argue with the men, because I thought that they were rightfully indignant after they had worked so hard in the scorching sun.

A few days later, I received \$9.28 for about 220 hours of work. And similar mistakes were reported one after another, as the Paymaster moved on. They were hurt; they were more indignant. One Nisei tractor driver came up to me and complained, "I only got \$12.00 whereas I should be getting \$16.00.

I replied to him, "You know, I am your foreman, yet I was paid at \$12.00 per month rate."

"Yeah, but that doesn't do me any good. We ought to go and fight," he said.

"Fight? Why not?" I said with determination.

I went to see Palmer and presented the fact to him. He did not repent his mistakes beyond saying nonchalantly and mockingly, "We should be doing a little better than that, shouldn't we?"

As to my request that the foreman, the assistant foreman, and the tractor operators should be paid at the rate of \$16.00 per month, he said that after all

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they were "just common laborers pulling stumps out." I was refused and I was angry.

I walked out of the office with rage, saying to myself, "Bastard! So we are common laborers, eh? I'll get him yet."

Afterwards, upon Evans' advice, I wrote a report on the situation, with which I attached the composite time sheets of the entire crew for the months of June, July, and August. ^W I worked on the report many hours, setting forth arguments and accusations. When I finished it, I was relieved and satisfied with the feeling that I "got even" with Palmer. Yet my thought was, "This is the last straw. I've had enough of it. Hell with the administration people for all I care."

CHAPTER VIII

THE END OF THE ROAD

We were in sight of the end of our assignment. I wondered what sort of work would be assigned to us next. The men were curious and inquisitive too. Among themselves, they discussed what they wanted to do. Some expressed the desire to take up the subjugation and construction of the Poston Memorial Park, which had been abandoned.⁴² The rest agreed that they were willing to "go along." It was evident that their primary desire was to be together; their utmost concern was to be separated from each other.

On September 10, Thursday, Frasier came to see me for the first time in the week. He informed me that we were to be transferred to the Agricultural Department and that for further detail I must see Sharp.⁴³ When I met Sharp, he was busy conversing with other officials and said, "You just report to me Monday morning. I will tell you then what you are going to do."

When I returned to the field, the men were more inquisitive. As I could not answer most of their questions, I promised them that I would make further inquiries. Meanwhile, Sharp was gone for the week and the staff of the Agricultural Department could offer little information except: "Hell! we just want the two tractors you got." K, the Farm Manager, said.

"So that's it!"

I wondered what would become of the crew when the work was completed Saturday per schedule and we did not know what to do next. A few more queries on Saturday afternoon brought out that we were to be merged with "Yakura's gang"--the crew engaged in the landscaping work around the Administration Buildings. "What? Again?" I was bewildered.

I knew that if they reported Monday morning and were told to work around here, the men would balk and revolt. That would mean "showing up" Sharp and would be injurious to the reputation of the "gang" or to the dignity of the

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administration. I decided, hence, to call a holiday on Monday and passed the word around to the effect among the men.

That Monday morning, I consulted with Evans and Sharp and reached a compromise: That we were to take up a municipal park project, but no tractors.

Subsequently, all the members of the "firebreak gang" met in a recreation hall and to them I reported what had taken place and presented the park proposal, which was duly accepted. I added, then, the two following points:

1. That no transportation is provided to and from the work.
2. That I am relinquishing the foremanship.

A young Nisei driver got up and commented, "Last night K said, 'I just want the tractors and hell with you guys.'"

I elaborated on the situation that the Agricultural Department had only two tractors for their farm use and was in great need of more. And no trucks were available for us on account of the tire conservation restrictions. They were not satisfied with these explanations and expressed their resentful reactions, "Hell, I see lots of guys riding," one Nisei said. "If that's the case why don't they take the cars away from the Nisei 'big shots'?" one Hawaiian born Japanese inquired irritably.

"I don't think they appreciate what we have been doing. We worked so hard, yet they don't give a damn about us," an Issei farmer commented.

As the arguments were not leading to a conclusion, I proposed to send a delegation to see Evans and Sharp on the transportation question.

With a sigh, I said to myself, "I knew they would be sore."

Then, they demanded an explanation for my action of retiring from the crew. I told them:

1. I had no complaints against the men. My feelings toward them were all in appreciation and admiration.
2. I was tired of "red-tape" and departmental inefficiency.

3. I was afraid that I must fight through the "bureaucracy" again to regain a "free hand" in a new department. I had exhausted courage and patience to go on.

4. "I am getting to like this dump. That means I am deteriorating mentally. I must find some job in which I can do a clear and constructive thinking."

One Hawaiian-born Japanese stood up and said, "I was working just because you are the foreman."

"I don't want to work for anybody else," a Kibei followed.

"We are appreciative of what you have been doing. You know that we are getting along fine. Why can't you reconsider your decision and stay with us?" an elderly farmer said.

It was difficult for me to turn down these kind sentiments, so I offered as a compromise, "All right. If you can get transportation for yourselves, I will stay on." But I was absolutely certain that they would not get it.

The delegation was chosen and was instructed without any alternative that the crew would disband, if they failed to get either an automobile or a tractor to transport them to and from the work.

Thus, the "firebreak gang" breathed the last knell, as their request was refused.

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The War Relocation Project is an extremely novel and extraordinary enterprise, on which the American government embarked as an emergency measure. By the necessity and the circumstance, it was conceived and was put into operation in the shortest possible time. It is so novel that the government lacked the concrete data and precedents to base their plannings in advance. The authority at Poston, therefore, was unable to formulate definite theories or principles in regard to the problem of the Japanese evacuees. Their orders and regulations

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varied from time to time as a situation demanded. It was inevitable that the chaos and confusion existed at the early stage.

They lacked the complete understanding of the Japanese and the Japanese ways, which resulted in many misunderstandings between them. The fact that its staff was manned on a short notice and the departments were set up hurriedly resulted in lack of coordination and cooperation between the departments. It was unfortunate that, as the consequence, incompetency and inefficiency were noticeable. They, in turn, created necessarily distrust and skepticism on the part of the evacuees toward the staff.

With better planning and understanding, I, too, could have done a better job. I would not have lost those 109 men assigned to me at the outset. With better cooperation from other departments, I would have carried out my duties with more contentedness and happiness.

However, I am happy to note that at this writing these defects are corrected one by one by the courageous and tireless officials. I am grateful to note that the whole picture at Poston is improving in every aspect.

The men of the "firebreak gang" were diligent and obedient people of good stock. Although they worked under abnormal strain and extraordinary circumstance, they were friendly and cooperative people; their association resulted in warm lasting friendship among themselves. They were industrious people, who would be of great value to the American agriculture and industry after the duration. These men, especially the Isseis, would have enjoyed the American ways of life, if they had had closer association and contact with the Caucasian Americans. It is, indeed, unfortunate that the financial and environmental requirements had made it impossible or impractical for them to appreciate the American civilization. It is regrettable that they had kept themselves in a circle of their own people where the old Japanese habits and customs predominated. They retained the Japanese ways of reacting, with which they had been imbued in their

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adolescent days. This is the aspect which gives the Caucasian people the impression that the Japanese are difficult to understand and hard to associate with. It is my belief, however, that with thorough understanding and better appreciation of their ways, the Caucasians would find the Japanese easy to intermingle.

In managing the Isseis and others, I believe as a labor policy at Poston that it is impractical to enforce the continual labor for 8 hours a day for the summer months. It is absolutely necessary to provide them with rests at frequent intervals. It is my observation that they were accustomed to the faster pace of working than that one would find in a non-Japanese labor group; and they are ignorant of how to conserve their energy.

In closing, I wish to add that Evans was always anxious to give me valuable advice and encouragement. I am thankful and proud that I have found a great friend in John G. Evans. With utmost sincerity, I say to my men, "Thank you, fellows," and to him, "Thank you, Mr. Evans."