

Crystal City Internment Camp History

Operation, with development at some later date, was a necessity from the standpoint of providing food for the opening hospital, as well as, to the new employees arriving periodically to undertake the duties required by the ever increasing camp population.

Four roughly made tables, with a seating capacity of six each, dishes gathered from odds and ends in the warehouses, and a one-oven stove is symbolic of the early Officer-Hospital Mess Kitchen and Dining Room.

The kitchen personnel was scarcely better equipped with skill, for the eight Japanese cooks were by trade, truck farmers, grocery men, and florists or nursery operators, to whom kitchen work was both new and very complicated by the American way of preparation. These men were to be trained and supervised by a Steward, employed to plan the meals, order food, equip the facility.

Office equipment had been ordered, but, shipment was slow. A round dining table, an apple box, pen, and pencil served as desk, file case, and typewriter, respectively.

On July 1, 1943, the first meals were served. This, in itself, was uneventful, the morning's preparation was. Chatter, not understandable, for it was in Japanese ran riot. It developed that cooking was the least desired occupation, after once being tried, even a full day was too much. They wanted to stop work immediately.

After a morning of conference, it was agreed that cooking would go on, the mistrust and skepticism were obvious.

By September a routine was established which proved quite satisfactory. The increasing hospital census and new civilian employees, especially teachers, and the opening of a second dining room for internee orderlies and nurses aides brought about the need for a larger force of cooks.

With this addition, two shifts were formed, each shift taking turns working on the morning and evening schedule by the week. Some of the men began to show skill in management, some developed as followers, thus a chief dining room cook and a chief hospital cook were selected for each group, along with cook's helpers, dish washers, dining room attendants, and clean-up men.

Cook's uniforms consisting of white shirts, white trousers, caps, and aprons brought about pride to the extent that a group picture was requested by the men themselves.

New Years Day 1944 was declared a cook's holiday, in keeping with the Japanese tradition. The dining rooms were closed, the hospital mess was served with the assistance of German orderlies and nurses aides.

Repatriation in February brought long lines of official employees to the Officer's Mess. The cooks showed the greatest cooperation for the difficult task. The hours were long and the dining room with a capacity of sixty, for new tables and chairs had been secured, was filled three to four times with people impatient to return to their work.

By May, the skills of the cooks had come quite a long way. The Federal High School requested their services in providing food for the Junior-Senior Banquet. This has since become an annual obligation, which is performed with enthusiasm on the part of the kitchen staff.

Most of the divisions having been placed in working order, time could at last be taken for improvement from a physical standpoint. The walls were painted a subdued blue, curtains made of sacks colored maize with onion skin were designed, and window boxes to enhance the hard lines of the prefabricated window frames were placed. The rooms took on a friendly personal touch when an employee used his talents in painting Texas wild flowers on each of the window placements. The kitchen received its first coat of enamel, having previously had a coat of water paint.

The day that colorful pottery in bright reds, greens, yellows, and blues arrived had long been awaited. The esthetic sense of the cooks was satisfied quite as much as their practical sense had been when a second stove and refrigerator were installed earlier in the year.

The summer of '44 was quite the busiest witnessed. The camp population was increased by a large group coming from South America, many of whom were sent to the hospital upon arrival. Additional cooks were employed.

January 1, 1945 had been planned upon by the cooks as a true holiday, but, all were due for disappointment. A second German repatriation occurred. Once again, the long lines returned to the hospital mess.

Overall, cooperation and desire to please on the part of all was evidenced by one of the head cooks who answered, "I do the best we can", when complimented on his cherry pie. Another, "I Sure glad," when told that the day's noon meal was good.

A second mess under the supervision of the Steward was opened with German Internee assistance.

The dining room served to provide food for single males, families who were not physically able to provide meals for themselves, families awaiting housekeeping facilities, and the major purpose, a nucleus for preparing food for large parties, both incoming and outgoing.

Except on occasions of transfer, the mess is under supervision from the standpoint of equipment care, control of people served, sanitation, employment, and timekeeping.

The food is provided thro the local ration system, with the cooks being allowed to follow their national foods habits.

New parties called for alterations. The meals are planned by the Steward and appropriate foods are ordered. Additional internees are assigned throughout the serving period, which most often lasts three days.

The repatriation groups complicated the procedure. In both instances the groups consisted of five hundred upwards, all of whom had to be checked and isolated. This meant that feeding had to take place in a building used for that purpose, in which there was a 12'x10' kitchen provided with a single domestic type gas range.

The problem was cared for by preparing the food in the German Internee Mess, transporting it immediately to the isolation center, and serving cafeteria style. Since both repatriations occurred in mid-winter, hot meals seemed desirable. The domestic type stove was used for heating the transported food, babies', and small children's food.

In both instances teachers were allowed to assist the Steward inside the isolation area.

The Internee Mess Hall is used by both groups, German and Japanese for community parties and gatherings. A satisfactory arrangement, whereby an employed representative from each group appears at each gathering, keeps the building and equipment in good order.

The spirit of cooperation has been excellent whether called upon to serve at five or eight in the morning according to the needs of the camp.