

*McKean
Unit I Schools*

Report No. 69
April 17, 1945

Community Analysis Section
Colorado River Relocation Center
Poston, Arizona

APR 21 1945

THE JAPANESE FROM LANCASTER, CALIFORNIA

Geography and Climate

Lancaster, lying 85 miles north of Los Angeles in Antelope Valley, is one of the most northerly towns in Los Angeles County and is on the edge of the Mojave Desert. Most of the residents are farmers; the town is not very large. However, with its expanding alfalfa farming, Lancaster has grown considerably in the past 20 years. It has become the center of one of the most important alfalfa farming districts in the State of California.

The climate of this valley is not a favorable one in comparison with that of the other much-publicized towns and cities of Southern California that draw abundant tourists throughout the seasons. The temperature during the summer months rises to anywhere from 100° to 110°, and in the winter months it falls to about 20°; furthermore, there were even rare days when 10° below was registered.

Farms

The majority of the Japanese farmers migrated to Antelope Valley during the early 1920's; however, there were a few that came before 1920. Many of them came from the vicinity of Los Angeles. One family reported that they were originally from Pasadena, and another came from Montebello. During the earlier stages of their new farm life most of them were in orchard farming. As the years went by, they became accustomed to the more profitable alfalfa farming.

At the time of evacuation, there were farmers that had as much as 300 acres under cultivation, and the smallest farm is reported to have been 40 acres. All the Japanese owned their land and many of them had additional land leased to them by Caucasians.

The main crop of the valley was alfalfa, but there was a little asparagus grown by the Japanese also. Most of these tracts of land were first cleared and farmed by the pioneer Issei. Today, there are many Caucasians that still bear in mind the pioneering spirit and honesty of the Issei and respect them, consequently.

Most of the alfalfa was sold to the mill that was in the valley; some of it was trucked down to Los Angeles. The asparagus crop was marketed in Lancaster, and the surplus was trucked into the Los Angeles markets.

The months between April and November were considered harvest time. In that period, five to six, and even seven, crops of alfalfa were harvested. During the rest of the year, everyone was engaged in work such as plowing and making improvements on their farms. Because

these farms were owned by themselves, the Japanese tended to improve the land readily, rather than to limit the improvements, as was practiced in other Southern California localities. The only means of irrigation was from the wells located on the individual ranches in convenient places.

Usually the farmers had one or two hired helpers, who worked all year around. During the busy part of the year there were a few more hired to relieve some of the overflow of work that would be impossible to handle with only the regular helpers.

Education

Due to the many outlying farms in the Lancaster area, the countryside was divided into eight districts. In each of these districts, a small grammar school was erected to educate the children, thereby cutting down on the transportation problem immensely. The Japanese were not distributed evenly throughout the area; this meant that the Nisei attended five different grammar schools.

Upon completion of grammar school, everyone attended the Antelope Valley High School in the city of Lancaster. School buses for the numerous rural students were provided by the Board of Education. The enrollment of the school did not surpass nine hundred. At the school, the Nisei participated in various sports and acquired memberships in different clubs and activities; however, they were not very active in comparison with their Caucasian friends. The relationships amongst the students was a normal one. This is probably due to the handful of Nisei in the school. They were not noticeable and did not create competition.

A junior college was combined with the high school, and there were many that continued their education beyond the high school level. There were some, however, that went into farm work with their families; a few girls went into Los Angeles for employment.

The Japanese language school sponsored by the parents was conducted at the "hall." A language instructor from Los Angeles was hired, and was in Lancaster once a week for classes. Due to the infrequent class periods, the students did not satisfy their parents' original anticipations. Many of them were not interested in additional studies beyond their regular school work. However, a small amount of education was acquired--enough to improve the understanding within the family.

Religion

All the Japanese residents in this valley were Buddhist. This was probably due to the fact that Christian influences did not reach the Japanese people easily, since they were always busy on their farms; in towns, in other areas, a number of Japanese became Christians. The Issei were the only ones that took an actual interest in the Buddhist church. The Nisei did not find themselves interested in it, but they attended services with the rest of their families whenever there were such services. For the Issei, it was a continuation of their religion from Japan.

The Shin sect of Buddhism (Shin-Shū) was the most popular. Whenever a special occasion arose that called for a service, a Shin-Shū priest from Los Angeles would come and conduct services in the church, more often called the "hall", as it was used as a school, meeting place, and for "socials."

These Japanese were so isolated from other communities that Buddhist festivals, such as the hana-matsuri and o-bon while observed, were not celebrated on such a large scale as in larger Japanese communities.

Recreation

Opportunities for recreation were limited for the Japanese. The Nisei, however, were fortunate in being able to have the recreational facilities of the school at their disposal (while attending school), and this was a great help in adding to their limited recreational program. While boys were able to participate in various sports, the girls were reluctant to do so. Outside of their school activities, the Nisei did not have many recreational interests. A Nisei commented, "We lived a hermit's life in Lancaster."

Occasionally the Nisei would have a "get-together" of their own which consisted of an evening of games and refreshments, but, on the whole, recreation was confined to the family circle for the Issei and Nisei alike. At home, they took up reading, writing, radio-listening, card games, and different hobbies as their main pastimes. Occasionally, they went to movies as a means of entertainment and relaxation.

There were many boys that found the companionship of Caucasian boys to their liking and spent much of their spare time with them.

During the months of December to March, some took short trips. For example, they would go into Los Angeles for shopping and relaxation from the strain of the continuous farm work.

Association

There were hardly any vigorous associations or clubs in this valley amongst the Japanese. The Issei naturally had formed their Japanese Association within their own ranks, and this association also acted in the capacity of a Farmers' Association. The main business of the meetings usually tended to be farm problems, as all the members were farmers.

The Nisei also had a club, but theirs was of a social nature. The annual picnic sponsored by the Japanese Association was participated in by the Nisei in the planning for the outing and the activities for the day. The occasional meetings of the club were limited to plans for their parties.

There were three Nisei that held membership in the Lancaster Junior Chamber of Commerce; they proved themselves good members. Both Issei and Nisei names were on the membership rolls of the West Side.

Farmers' Association of Lancaster, a group originated by the Caucasian farmers.

Race Relation

Most of the Japanese farmers had closely-knit social and economic relations with each other; favorable understandings with their Caucasian neighbors also existed. The farmers always helping out their neighbors, regardless of their race or creed, was one of the factors in bringing about this excellent relationship. After Pearl Harbor, the feelings of the neighboring non-Japanese farmers remained the same.

After a recent trip to Lancaster, a Nisei observed that he foresees a generally favorable reception from the old neighbors of the Japanese, but that some opposition would have to be expected from a few misled residents.

The Nisei had even better relations with the Caucasians than the Issei through their contacts at school, but after graduation these ties lessened to a certain extent, because farm work kept the Nisei busy.

Prior to Pearl Harbor many of the Nisei held positions in the Civilian Defense program as Air Raid Wardens and Civilian Police. Through civic and business contacts individual relationships were strengthened greatly. Contacts still continue through the medium of letters and local newspapers.

Evacuation

Evacuation, for the people of Lancaster, was not the cause of as much as suffering as it was in other communities. It was on the morning of May 25, 1942, that they were uprooted from their homes and friends and were removed to this center. Before the notice came, there was ample time to lease their farms to Caucasian friends and to other non-Japanese. Many of them have leased them on a yearly basis and some did so with the understanding that when the lessor returns to the farm, the lessee would have to leave the farm on 30 days' notice. Many of the farmers have stated recently that they are not anticipating a return to their former homes until the camp closes and they are forced to leave. An Issei man remarked at one time that it was not possible for him to return now because his sons are in the Army, and it would be impracticable to run the farm himself when the supply of farm hands is so uncertain in California.

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