THE TRUTH ABOUT JAP CAMPS

BY MAXINE DAVIS

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There has been much-to-do about the treatment accorded Japanese Americans in our Relocation Centers. Here are some *facts*.

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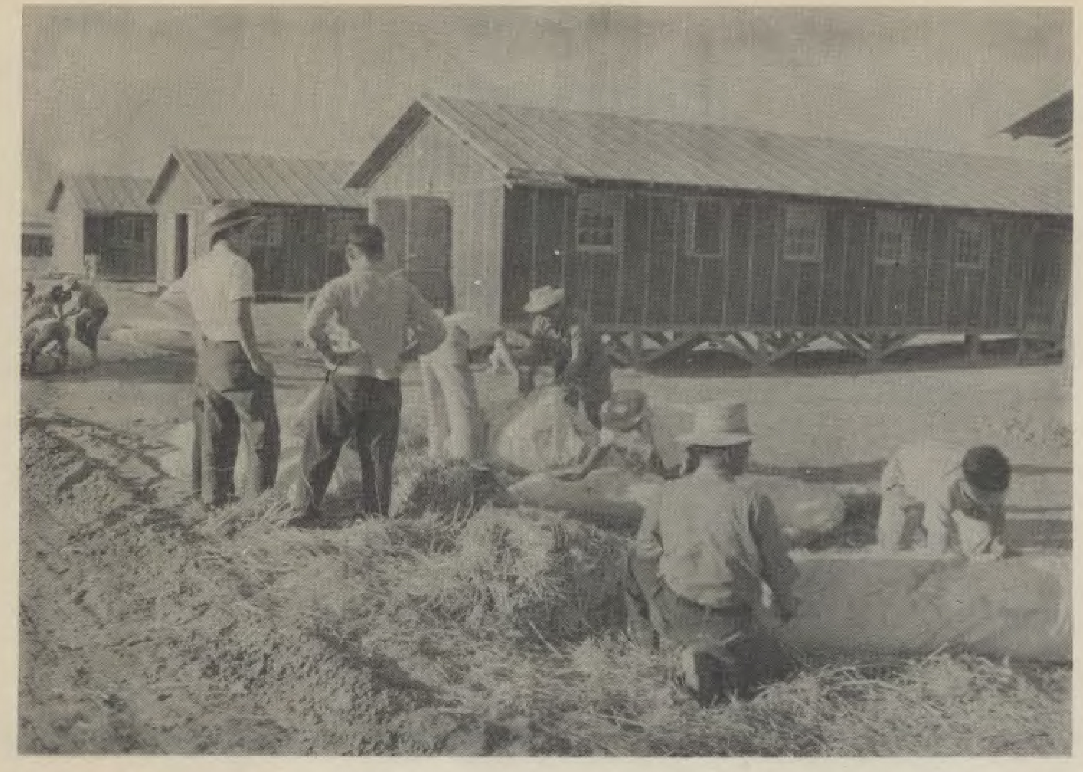

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These barracks for evacuated Japanese at Poston, Arizona, were built and furnished hastily—they had to be. Upon arrival, the Japanese were given straw and ticks for mattresses.

THE constitutional rights of American citizens of Japanese parentage have been, of necessity, curtailed in this war. How we handle this situation presents one of the gravest tests of the democracy we are fighting to preserve.

Never before in this country have American citizens been deprived, with the sanction of our government, of the rights we hold to be inalienable. And two thirds of the Japanese in this country are citizens of the United States. They were born on our soil. They have been educated in American schools. They speak the language of America. They grew up instructed in the belief that they were Americans, just as boys and girls whose parents were born in Ireland or Italy or Sweden are Americans. Yet a little over a year ago, in company with Japanese aliens, they were forcibly evacuated from their homes and herded into "relocation centers" prepared for them by the Army.

After a year, what has happened to these people? How are they being treated? What are they doing? How do they feel about this experience?

I went out to the relocation center at Poston, Arizona, to find the answers to these questions. I went with a bias; understand that at once. I went out with the American dream as a yardstick; with the conviction that America is a place where men may live in freedom, side by side without regard for race or color; with the belief in the traditional rights of minorities in this land. I kept in mind the fact that war inevitably infringes upon the rights of each and every one of us, but that the infringement is common to us all. These citizens have suffered special hardships because of their parentage. How we treat them is a test of our credo.

Poston is about seventy miles from Needles, California. It is located on an Indian reservation. You reach it through Arizona desert country, cold in winter, hot in spring and summer. The empty desert spaces reach toward the mountains that rim the horizon.

There are no fences around Poston, but there might as well be. Guards are posted on the roads, and you must have a pass to enter or leave. The Japanese may not leave, as a rule, until they go for good.

Once on the reservation, you pass some irrigated land with vegetables growing on it. Then you see the barracks where the évacuées live. You may think you have gotten into an Army camp by mistake, for the barracks were built according to Regular Army design and construction. True, they were built hastily of green lumber which split apart. The floor boards are not close together, and the Japanese use the spaces between them for ash trays. When the Army first came to make the camp, they used great bulldozers to clear the desert. The land is silt, so when dust storms come, the dust seeps through the crevices into the barracks—"Arizona fog," the evacues call it. But the quarters were needed urgently and this could not be helped. Gradually the évacués are getting linoleum for their floors.

The barracks are in blocks. The buildings have been divided into "apartments," and about 260 men, women, and children live in an average block. The "apartments" are rooms twenty by twenty-five feet in size, and families of from two to five or more occupy each of them. In each block there are two latrines, one for men, one for women; one laundry room, one ironing room. In each block there is a mess hall—for food is supplied by the government through the Army Quartermaster Corps and eating is communal—and a recreation hall. There are seventy-two blocks in the Poston center.

IT is not quite so grim now as it was in the beginning. The évacués, young and old, hearty and frail, had come from the moderate West Coast climate to this desert when the temperature was 120 degrees. The government had offered them their rooms, cots, straw with which to make mattresses, and Army blankets. They had no furniture. They needed soap, brooms, pails, everything. Most of them had to make furniture out of scraps of lumber left when the barracks were finished. After a while those who still had furniture at home got some of it moved here. Some got plyboard from a mail-order house and partitioned their apartments. In some blocks the men secured air conditioners for the mess halls. The inevitable Japanese gardens began to bloom in window boxes and around the blocks and between them. Most of the comfort you see has been created by the Japanese themselves; it has not been donated by the government.

At best, this is not the lavish luxury in which many of us have heard that the War Relocation Authority has pillowed the Japanese. Except for the lack of privacy, it is, however, as much as many of them—especially the tenant farmers—had ever known. It is scarcely the way of life of the prosperous merchants and professional men in the group.

The water came into Poston on the Fourth of July a year ago. There is enough for 1,200 acres. The Japanese planted mulberry trees around a sign reading, "Here on July 4 stood the pioneers of Poston," to commemorate the coming of the water. There is a swimming pool which is merely a wide place in the ditch. From the uproar in Congress, I had expected a marble pool with umbrella-shaded tables beside it and liveried waiters serving champagne. But it's only a ditch and there is no alcoholic beverages of any sort; they are not allowed in Poston. Indeed, there isn't even any soft drink or candy to be had, as a rule.

And recreation is whatever the people make for themselves. There is a library, a movie—admission one cent—and a traditional Japanese drama occasionally for the older folks. That's all.

But then, the évacués don't have much money to spend for anything. The highly trained earn nineteen dollars a month, the unskilled sixteen dollars, and apprentices twelve dollars. This rate was based on Army pay. So long as enlisted men in the Army received only twenty-one dollars a month the Japanese were satisfied. When Army pay was increased to fifty dollars but theirs remained the same, they became resentful.

In addition to their pay, each adult of sixteen or over is granted three dollars and fifty cents a month clothing allowance, and every youngster from eight to sixteen is allowed three dollars a month.

The shop has a scanty stock—but not much less than is to be found in small poor rural communities. In it the évacués can buy thread and shoes, a few dresses and baby clothes, men's hats, shirts, and khaki trousers; and there are always paper flowers for weddings and funerals.

The Japanese have established a few community enterprises. They now operate barbershops, watch-repair shops, shoe-repair establishments, and beauty parlors. The shoe-repair shops do an enormous business, for Poston is big and the évacués are not allowed to have automobiles. The seven beauty parlors are the greatest success. You can get a shampoo and finger wave for forty-five cents and a permanent wave for from a dollar ninety-five to two fifty; but you must make your appointment thirty days in advance.

The War Relocation Authority, responsible for these évacués, has tried to preserve every right consistent with military necessity. The Japanese are assured freedom of worship. They are guaranteed freedom of speech and freedom of the press. The Poston Chronicle is a mimeographed newspaper published in the camp, partly in English, partly in Japanese. Open meetings are held, and discussion is in both English and Japanese. No restrictions on what may be printed or spoken have been laid down. Nor has the right of assembly been curtailed. These Japanese citizens have not been disenfranchised. They have the right to vote in their former residences by absentee ballot, and they have not failed, according to the available evidence, to exercise that right.

THE authorities have tried to establish actual self-government. A community council of second-generation Japanese, composed of representatives from each block, has been formed. It is not truly a success, because the Japanese are new to actual self-government and reluctant to assume any real responsibility or leadership. Also, they are young and accustomed to having their elders give orders. The old folk are Japanese-born aliens and, according to WRA regulations, are prohibited from holding office. To pull the Issei, the first generation, into the organization, an Issei advisory council was established. Promptly political factions which make Washington look politically placid arose. However, the experiment offers opportunity for political activity and experience which never existed for the Japanese before.

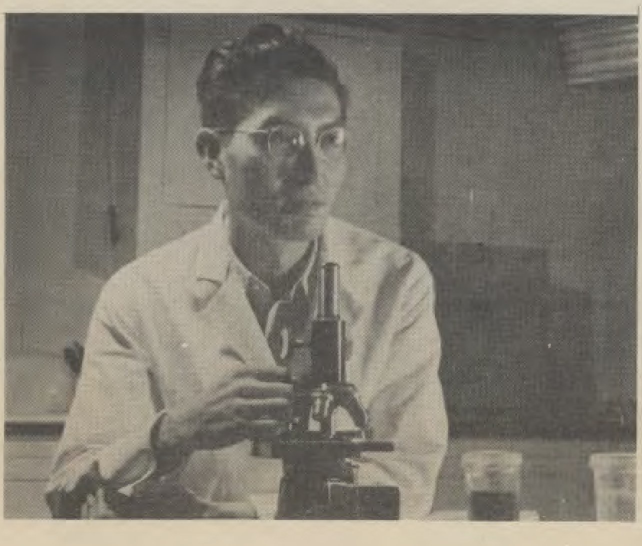
Work presents the worst problem, for WRA policy has shifted like a weather vane. There are 17,000 people at Poston now. Before any of them were permitted to leave for jobs elsewhere, there were 18,200. About half of them are farmers. Most of the others were employed in various service occupations for the Japanese communities on the West Coast.

There are 100,000 acres available for agriculture at Poston, but thus far only a small portion of the land has been irrigated. At first the plan was that the Japanese should farm the land and grow produce both for themselves and for sale. Then the WRA changed its mind and ruled that there should be only subsistence farming and that any agricultural workers who wanted to farm for a living might get jobs outside. Consequently only a relatively small amount of the land is farmed. The farmers don't work very hard, and although some have gone out to the beet fields and potato fields, many who might be highly productive in the present shortage of farm labor work only a few hours a day. The Japanese are not used to working big farms, and they don't like it. They will be fed whether they work hard or not, and they get neither extra food nor extra money. so why trouble too much? Therefore, while the land is productive and while nothing is spoiling for lack of attention, the superintendents are always worried for fear they will not have enough labor from day to day.

By WRA rules, the Japanese are not allowed to earn more than the government allots them. Exception is made for work in a camouflage factory which has been established on the reservation by a private company. The Japanese who work there may keep 60 per cent of their earnings; the remaining 40 per cent must go into a community fund.

The government will not employ the Japanese. Roads are being built on the reservation, but no Japanese may have jobs on the roads. Outside labor is brought in.

Dr. Kido, evacuated to Poston, has to his credit a device for control of mosquitoes that spread sleeping sickness.



Of these young welders in the Center's machine shop, one was a U. of C. undergraduate. The other was in high school.

THE net result of this policy is that good farm laborers work far less than they had ever worked before. The young people resent the fact that they cannot make an independent living and get married under relatively normal circumstances. (They do marry, of course. There is a "honeymoon cottage" at Poston where young couples may stay for two weeks. It is almost always occupied.) Only the women have a fine time. Wives and mothers who always before had raised their children, kept their homes, and done stoop labor on the farm, now go to classes, learn English, cooking, dietetics, sewing, flower arrangement, and generally have a whirl.

Free schools for children have been established. Medical care is available. There is a hospital so good that it is on the American Medical Association's list of registered hospitals. It is staffed chiefly by Japanese doctors and nurses from among the évacués. True, a genitourinary specialist is practicing general medicine, a lawyer is handling the vital statistics, and a Ph. D. in etymology is in charge of sanitation; but the service is good. The doctors do resent earning only nineteen dollars a month, for were they in the Army they would be commissioned.

Relatively few of those eligible for the Army have volunteered. Rightly or wrongly they maintain, "The draft is the privilege of American citizens. Why shouldn't we be drafted like every one else?" Told that they were offered a special privilege when granted the right to volunteer, they shake their solemn heads and repeat their statement.

Altogether, it is plain that, while the Japanese évacués at this fairly typical center have not been pampered, as many claim, neither have they been made to suffer any cruel or inhuman treatment. What, then, is their attitude? How do they feel about all this?

Well, they've had time to think. At first most of them understood the necessity for the evacuation, even though it was hastily and not too well done. They understood it was essential both for their own protection and for the national security. They realized that because a few out of their number were disloyal they must all suffer. They know that's the way of war.

Now they can leave, as some do, or they can stay on. Either way, their predominant emotion is fear. They are afraid to stay. Afraid they will stagnate. Afraid they will not have enough to eat. Afraid of the present and afraid of the future. What will happen to them if they get jobs outside in a hostile world? What will happen to them after the war if they have not established themselves and found a way to earn a normal living? They are afraid of communities where there are no other Japanese, and afraid to herd together for fear of violence.

The loyal Japanese citizens—and these comprise from 80 to 85 per cent, according to Milton Eisenhower, former WRA director—have never transferred their allegiance to Japan, but their faith in America has been shaken.

The old folk are also afraid. They have no desire to move. They want to stay in the centers until the war is over. Then they want to go back to California or Washington or Oregon.

Parents are afraid for the way their children will grow up. With no real homes, with community meals, they are losing control of their young people, who are developing bad manners and the habits of little toughs.

Another American-born professional man at the Poston Center, Dr. Richard H. Iwata, is shown instructing a nurse's aide class in anatomy.

Professional men and women and merchants particularly worry about their futures. Will there ever again be Japanese communities? Will they be dispersed, and if so, how ever can they make their living? For white people never go to a Japanese doctor or a Japanese lawyer.

These fears color the lives of all the évacués who are still in the center. They regard the future with trepidation and the present with resentment.

The present policy of the War Relocation Authority is to encourage the American-born to leave for jobs in areas where they are permitted to go by the Army. But the first-generation must stay. If the young people go, it means the break-up of families. Sons and daughters must leave their parents. Often the young father must leave his family behind him until he becomes established.

This policy is, nevertheless, a good one—the only answer to the problem of the American citizens of Japanese parentage.

For those who stay in the centers, however, the situation leaves much to be desired. There is no reality in the centers. They are like big WPA projects. There is not enough real work to do. There is no economic compulsion or economic advantage in work. There is nothing to do and nothing to buy, and no one will starve or freeze or go without a doctor if he sits all day with folded hands.

The most serious valid criticism of the situation at Poston is that the government policy is confusing. It fluctuates too much. It offers little that is definite. No one is sure what the rules will be tomorrow.

The second criticism is that the centers deprive the Japanese, American and foreign-born alike, of the right to work as men outside work, with the prevailing wage for the job they do. This is at the heart of much resentment.

FINALLY, there is little excuse for keeping the American-born in the center. The FBI has satisfied itself that it has combed out all who were disloyal and interned them elsewhere for the duration. The rest should be allowed to go where they please, subject only to restrictions in the interest of their security.

On the whole, our government, through the War Relocation Authority, is trying steadfastly and not too ineptly to preserve the Constitutional rights of these people. That they were uprooted was a misfortune of war. They are not treated at Poston as enemies or as aliens.

The camp is not so bad as it might be. It can be improved for the benefit of those who will remain until the last gun is fired, and to the advantage of all of us who might benefit from the honest labors of hard-working men and women.

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