

BY-PRODUCT OF WAR

By

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Scattered from eastern California to southeastern Arkansas on the map of America, there are today ten wartime communities. Until the spring of 1942 not one of them existed: there was unrelieved wilderness where autumn was to find rows of barracks containing populations of from seven thousand to seventeen thousand men, women, and children. These cities, sprung virtually overnight from arid, unreclaimed stretches of American earth, offer temporary shelter to the 110,000 people of Japanese ancestry whom fortune of war drove from their homes on the Pacific Coast in the first mass evacuation of a racial minority ever authorized by the United States Government. They are called Relocation Centers.

From spring through autumn of 1942 large contingents of Japanese-American evacuees poured into the centers, the majority of arrivals taking place in the heat and drought of summer. Haste and economy dictated the mass construction of army theater-of-operations barracks to house the evacuated families. Public opinion within the states where the centers were located dictated the enclosure of the communities with barbed wire fences and the presence of military guards at the boundaries. The sites had been chosen in regions awaiting reclamation, where the use of the land by the evacuees would necessitate no displacement of other persons; hence the isolation of the centers from other communities; hence, also, the fact that to the newly arrived resident the area that he must for an unknown period of time regard as home resembled a wasteland.

* Prepared by the War Relocation Authority for the Exhibition of Relocation Center Art, Cambridge, Massachusetts.

Dispossessed families, arriving in a strange place after a tedious, uncomfortable journey, saw block after identical block of low-roofed, tar-paper-covered barracks, each block surrounded by a wide fire break. Construction was in progress. The earth was torn up. Dust was ankle deep and at each gust of desert wind rose in smothering clouds. Large families were assigned to the larger barrack apartments--a large apartment in a relocation center is a single room measuring 20 by 28 feet; small families were assigned to small apartments--a small apartment is a single room 16 by 20 feet. Those who had known prosperity in other days and those who had known extreme poverty shared alike in the new community. In many cases three generations of a family found themselves crowded together in a single room. Each block of barracks has a community laundry, bath house, mess hall, and recreation hall, but at the time of occupation most centers had not yet had utilities installed.

The newcomer looking beyond the limits of the community for relief from the dusty disorder of this early period might or might not be afforded solace in the scene, depending upon his location. At Manzanar, he could gaze upon the majestic grandeur of the Sierras; at Tule Lake, in northern California, a few low buttes were all that met the view; at the Colorado River and Gila River centers, the Arizona desert was broken by a few mountains in the dim distance and the view was hardly changed at the Central Utah center, or at Minidoka, in Idaho; at Heart Mountain, in Wyoming, he could see the impressive mountain peak from which the camp took its name; at Jerome and Rohwer, in Arkansas, he could see scrub forest of second growth timber; at Granada, in Colorado, he gazed straight to the rim of the horizon and saw nothing at all to break the monotony of endless wastes of barren, flat terrain.

Under such circumstances the evacuated people began their life in the relocation centers. Under the supervision of a small Civil Service staff, the able-bodied evacuees performed all essential services required in any community of similar size. Many were engaged in the work of feeding the population in mess halls, and of transporting, storing, and distributing supplies. Doctors, nurses, pharmacists, dentists, lawyers, stenographers, typists, accountants, teachers, mechanics, agricultural workers, plumbers, carpenters, and engineers were soon carrying on their accustomed work--at wages ranging from twelve to nineteen dollars a month plus food, shelter, medical care, and clothing allowance. The residents have organized cooperative enterprises to supply needs which are not supplied by the government. These enterprises include general stores, school supply centers, shoe and radio repair shops, barber shops, beauty parlours, dry cleaning service, and community newspapers that are edited by the evacuees. There are schools from kindergarten through high school, held in barracks ill-suited to classroom use. Adult education groups formed early in the restricted world of the center. The evacuees have flocked to classes in arts and crafts, Americanization, history, English, commercial subjects, psychology, and child care. Discussion groups have been popular at all centers.

Gradually the dust of the raw new centers has been brought under control. Some of the residents carried seeds from their old homes to the new; the people went out into the surrounding country and brought back saplings and cuttings and roots of whatever the region offered. They sowed grass and flowers, and they planted victory gardens. Little can be done to change the outward appearance of an army barrack, but careful planting and landscaping of the ground around the barracks

have gone far toward softening the grimness of these communities. And inside the barracks, patience and skill and ingenuity have in many cases served to bestow surprising graciousness and charm upon quarters better suited to the needs of soldiers than to those of family groups.

Among these people, as among any varied group of human beings, are a few who suffer the strange necessity to create--with words, with paints, with wood, or with clay; and in the center as elsewhere the authentic creator makes use of the materials at hand, the materials that are indigenous to the particular world he inhabits. The compulsion to create beauty where seemingly none exists is not readily thwarted, nor is it in the centers where to the casual eye the materials at hand do not seem to be the conventional stuff of art: tar paper barracks set in precise rows, barbed wire fences, angular guard towers, ugly outgrowths of a wasteland. The artist in the center has worked quietly and with absorption, fulfilling the law that governs his kind: he has taken the everyday landmarks and details of his immediate world and transformed them in the subtle alchemy of his artistic perception. On the one hand he has preserved the essence of bleak landscape and restricted living, and on the other hand he has caught that essence at the elusive, critical moment when some refraction of light, some fleeting condition of atmosphere, or some heightened and luminous awareness of his own has touched it with special significance or beauty. And so, in the limited and isolated world of the relocation center, the artist aligns himself with the universal order of creators by transcending limitations with the valid legerdemain of his calling.