

THE FENCE AT MINIDOKA

April, 1943

The Fence and Watchtowers

Until a few weeks ago, a five strand barbed wire fence completely surrounded the center area. This fence is approximately five feet in height, the last foot forming an overhang. The fence had been placed very close to the outer limits of the center with the result that certain playground areas and proposed farm plots were cut off from the center area. In accordance with an agreement between the local administrative officials and Army engineers, the fence has now been removed in these areas.

At the present time, then, approximately $2\frac{1}{2}$ miles of the barbed wire fence has been removed from the areas that border on the farm plots.

The fence was constructed during the first weeks of November, 1942, fully three months after the residents had entered the camp. The sudden appearance of the fence was greatly resented by the residents. A short history of the fence is given here for it throws light on the attitudes of the residents.

History of Fence

The Minidoka project lies along the north bank of the Twin Falls North Side Canal. The center is surrounded by miles of desolate desert country dotted with sage brush and lava outcroppings. A branch road connects the project with a state highway which runs to the nearby towns. The boundary line along the Twin Falls North Side Canal lies a few hundred feet from the north bank of the canal, but by mutual agreement with the military police, the north bank of the canal is regarded as the boundary line of the relocation center. This was done in order that the residents could utilize the north bank of the canal for recreational purposes. Thus, although a barbed wire fence cuts off the center from the canal, during the day this fence boundary is ignored. On the other side of the center, the project land extends for miles and the residents are allowed in this area during the day.

Watch Towers

Eight watchtowers have been constructed at strategic points around the barbed wire fence. Original plans called for equipping these sentry towers with searchlights and phones, and the towers were to be manned on a 24 hour basis. The necessary equipment could not be obtained by local W.R.A. authorities and as a result the watchtowers are not completed and have never been used by the military police.

Attitudes of Residents Regarding Fence

The residents are unanimous in possessing deep and bitter resentment against the fence. This feeling was accentuated by the fact that

for three months before the fence was built the residents had felt they were on their honor and had cooperated with the local administration in staying within bounds. Further, there was apparently no practical purpose for the barbed wire fence since it merely sets off one desolate patch of ground from a still more desolate sage brush area. The reason offered by some that the fence was more to keep outsiders out than the people in was not accepted since the camp is situated in an isolated area, and the fence is of such construction that a few clips of a wire cutter would effectively open wide gaps.

The fence immediately became a symbol of their confinement for the residents. The Nisei especially felt this. With a barbed wire fence surrounding them, they could only feel that the "Relocation Camp" had become a "Concentration Camp".

This resentment almost immediately evidenced itself in protests. Vocal protests were loud and long and overt acts against the fence followed closely. The wire was cut and fence posts uprooted. This cutting of the fence was in part due to the policy of the contractor in putting in the fence without allowing for roads and playground areas. As a result the residents found themselves encircled by practically impenetrable fence. Roads leading to outside garbage dumps, for instance, were blocked by this barbed wire fence. Thus, in part, the cutting of the wire was to provide egress at certain points. Trouble came thick and fast as a result. Two incidents stand out in this connection:

1. Threat of pitched battle between resident work crew and Army Contract Crew.

During one stage of the construction of the fence, the Army construction crew lined up with pick axes handles along one section of the fence which crossed a road leading to a garbage dump. At this particular point, the fence had been cut several times by resident workers. Trouble was averted by the chance appearance of a Caucasian public works official who finally straightened the matter out with the Army engineers.

2. Electrification of the Fence.

The electrification of the fence by the contractor created a furor that could easily have led to a major incident. One November 12, the contractor became so incensed by the continual sabotage of the fence by the residents that an electric generator was hooked up and the fence charged. This was done without knowledge or consent of either Army or local W.R.A. authorities. A Caucasian public works official discovered the generator and immediately informed the Assistant Project Director who got in touch with Colonel Lechey of the Army Engineers to discover that the charging was strictly the contractor's idea. With the Army's cooperation, the electrification was discontinued. While the charged fence was only in operation a few hours, the news of this new development spread like a prairie fire and wild rumors circulated throughout the camp. Feeling ran high and if the fence had continued to be charged, trouble might have resulted. At this stage the local military police authorities issued sharp warnings to residents against tampering with the fence, pointing out that they faced heavy fines and imprisonment since they would be charged with malicious destruction of government property.

Some attempt was made by organized groups of residents to oppose the fence. The Fair Labor Board met and resolved that they would take some action to oppose the erection of guard towers and barbed wire fences. The residents of six blocks, early in the year, unanimously decided to request the W.R.A. through the local administration to discontinue the barbed wire fence and watchtowers. The block managers of these respective blocks introduced this decision at a meeting of the block managers. The block managers resolved to convey this request to the Washington office of W.R.A. through the local administration. There is no doubt that the same feeling exists at the present time. Members of the community who conferred with the Spanish Embassy representative lodged a protest to him against the barbed wire fence and sentry towers.

The local project newspaper reported the erection of the watchtowers, the barbed wire fence and the electrification of the fence as straight news and there was no editorializing on the subject. Once the fence was completed, the paper was asked by the local administration authorities not to print any more stories about the fence. There were no letters to editors or editorial protests registered in the newspaper.

The barbed wire fence has become a symbol of forced confinement. The removal of portions of the fence early in April, 1943 was occasion of deep satisfaction for the workers involved. It is reported that never on the project was a job attacked so willingly. It may be significant to note that the residents believe the fence in these areas to be permanently out. As one resident phrased it, "there will be revolution if the fence is put back again." This is exaggeration but illustrates the depth of feeling with respect to the fence. At the present time it is still rumored that the fence can be electrified at any time W.R.A. desires. The latest rumor concerning the fence is to the effect that at the Heart Mountain Center, the barbed wire has been completely removed. The bitter feeling about the fence runs through the entire resident group from children in school to the oldest issei. It creeps out in school children's themes, in art work, in letters written by the residents.

Everywhere the feeling is found that the fence has and will have a deep psychological effect on the younger people.

Here in Minidoka, it is impossible to point out any practical value of the fence. True, there is a canal and there is danger of small children drowning. To defend the fence in this area on those grounds is to have an answer flung back: "Safety for children is fine, but it is a funny way to protect small children with barbed-wire on which they can cut themselves."

As a defense measure, the fence is useless. A man can easily roll under it or can clip the wires with a small plier. Further, the camp is isolated in a desolate desert region. The fence does not follow sound geographical lines and is constructed across useable areas such as recreation grounds and farm plots. It can not be defended on the basis of defining the center area for on one side the barbed fence is completely ignored and the bank of a canal acts as the boundary. On

the other sides of the project, the fence merely sets off one stretch of drab sage brush from another. The residents put it this way: "Who would want to go over the fence anyway? There are no Seattles or Portlands on the other side. Besides there are ticks and rattlesnakes all over the place."

Many of the residents feel that the erection of the fence was done to line someone's pocket.

Attitude toward Watchtowers

The attitude of the residents towards the watchtowers is the same as that towards the fence. When these sentry towers were first being built, feeling against them ran high. Vividly implanted in the majority of the residents' minds were the sentry towers of the assembly centers with the guards, searchlights and mounted machine guns. Probably no other single factor has had as serious effect on the resident's morale as the erection of the guard towers. The residents were told that these towers were to be used as fire lookouts. The local military police authorities announced that the M.P. sentries would be under strict orders not to throw searchlights into the center area. This did little or nothing to counteract the feeling of being treated as criminals. Much of this resentment against the watchtowers was later relieved by the fact that the towers have never been used. However, as a symbol they carry the same weight as the fence - perhaps even more. The barbed wire fence can only be seen at certain points. The sentry towers are always silhouetted in the distance. It is not enough that they are not being used -- to the residents they stand waiting for the day when they will be used. The eight sentry towers are ever present as a symbol of their confinement.

Previous History of Relations Between Project

Staff and Residents and Military Police.

Contact with Military Police during Construction days of Center.

When Minidoka project first began to receive residents, certain areas of the center were still under construction. The blocks under construction were guarded by the military police. These construction areas were prohibited areas for the residents. In order to facilitate necessary travel between blocks and to the administrative area, purple arm bands bearing numbers were issued whenever they left their blocks. There was no fence at this time. In addition, military guards were placed at such places as the lumber piles, generator, warehouse area, etc. This meant that during the early days of construction, a certain amount of fraternization went on between the M.P. and the residents. This was especially true in regard to young girls who took to hanging around the posts where guards were stationed. However, nothing beyond flirting appears to be recorded.

Shooting incident during construction days

An incident in which a military police guard on duty shot at an elderly Japanese man who wandered into a restricted construction area

was recorded on September 2, 1942 during the early days of construction.

An elderly Japanese man, aged 63, was on his way to the hospital and passed through an area then under construction and guarded by the military police. The guard did not notice the trespasser until the man had passed his post and was about 100 yards away. He whistled several times to attract the old man's attention but apparently the old man did not hear the signal and kept going. The guard then fired his shotgun in the direction of the old man. The man became panic-stricken and began to run and soon was out of the range. The shooting was witnessed by the project reports officer who at the request of the M.P. guard picked up the Japanese man and turned him over to the guard. The guard admonished the man for entering a restricted area without a permit and for failing to heed his signal. The old man apologized and was released. This is the only incident on record in which actual shooting occurred.

A rather friendly relation existed between many of the residents and some individual guards. There does not appear to have been a great deal of resentment against the guards during this early construction period. One Issei phrased this as: "It was O.K. to have guards at the warehouses and around the construction areas. There were no fences then and things might have been stolen." This attitude would appear to be the one generally held by the residents during this early period. After the completion of the barbed wire fence, the military guards were withdrawn from within the center area. From then on, contact was less frequent and almost entirely official at the main gate.

Center Area Boundaries

Although the barbed wire fence on the north bank of the canal marks the boundary of the project, by tacit agreement with the military police, the residents are allowed use of the north bank of the canal. Residents are allowed to go into the outer area limits during the day, but after sunset are restricted to the center limits.

Since the residents had been used to wandering around on the banks of the canal after sunset, the barbed wire fence after it was erected in November did not deter them. The commanding officer of the military police issued a warning immediately after the fence was erected that unless this trespassing of the center limits after sunset was stopped the borders of the center limits would be patrolled and any necessary force needed to enforce the regulations would be used. This warning does not appear to have been enforced.

Patrolling of the Center Area by the M.P.

The duties of the military police call for a patrol around the perimeter of the relocation area in the daytime. This refers to the entire area not merely the center area. The residents have access to any of the relocation area during the daytime. After sunset the M.P. move in and maintain a patrol around the center area. This is by definition around the outside perimeter of the fence. Since there is no road on the outside of the fence at this project, the military police by mutual agreement with project authorities patrol inside the center area but as close to the fence as possible.