Meeting a Challenge

An English friend of mine often quoted these words, the war-time slogan of her countrymen and here in the United States during the agonizing war years: "Eat it up, Wear it out, Make it do, Do without." During those agonizing war years making 'it do' and doing 'without' epitomized life on the Minidoka Center of the War Relocation Authority--one of ten Japanese Relocation Centers--in southern Idaho.

This was the desolate desert center to which I came September 30, 1942. I was to teach, although as yet a school had not been built. But why were teachers necessary here? and why were ten thousand persons of Japanese ancestry here in the middle of nowhere? The edict that brought them to this bleak spot was Executive Order 9066. Pressure groups had succeeded in obtaining this decree offering no evidence of wrong doing among its victims. The victims never even had a hearing.

obtaining Executive Order 9066--an order signed by President Roosevelt February 1942--signing the order for evacuation the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry (including 70,000 American-born) from the west coast, and therefore American citizens and the army carried out the order--an order born of panic abetted by greed.

The persons interned at Minidoka were brought from Prtland, from Seattle, and parts of Alaska. They did not come directly to Idaho, but were taken to assembly areas--miserable places--where they had been detained for varying periods of time.

A Nisei friend, at the time a certified teacher living in Portland, recently wrote to me describing the eviction and mass evacuation--the expulsion from home and familiar surroundings. At the time she was a certified teacher living in Portland. Following the official orders of the official order all Japanese families were notified and told when and where to report, and they were to take only what they could carry. In her words: "We were herded into the North Portland Stockyard Building and arena from April and May to early September. On Labor Day weekend 1942 we were put on a train bound for Minnidoka." She wrote

After a long, demoralizing, and often terrifying train-ride the evacuees arrived at Minnidoka: dusty, univiting, dismal. The sage brush had been stripped from the volcanic ash; a canal to bring water from the mountains was completed, and so, too, were the hastily constructed barracks--housing for 10,000 person--one room per family. Barbed

wire enclosed the ~~camp, the~~ tarpapered buildings, people and all. ~~(Not a concentration camp--merely relocation--within barbed wire!)~~

How vividly I remember my first day at Minnidoka--later called Hunt. I can still visualize the desert, the MP's at the gate, the row on row of dreary looking barracks, the dust in the air, the dust in the air, the dust under foot--deep, deep dust through which we were to trudge for weeks. I visualize, too, the officer administrating my oath of allegiance, taking my photograph and thumb print for ~~the~~ ID card--my passport in and out of camp.

I also remember the tarpapered dormitory-barracks, my 9'x12' exposed ~~room~~--home for the next two years,--~~and~~ the ~~Caucasian~~ mess hall next door. (We actually were called "the Caucasians" until a directive came from Washington. There had been a slip-up. In one of the ten Centers housing the 100,000 Japanese there was at least one black nurse. Hence forth, said Washington, we were not "Caucasians" but the "appointed personnel".)

By the time I reached camp the workshop for certified teachers and assistants was in progress. Not all teachers had arrived, nor indeed had all been appointed. Each had had the evacuee assistants, persons with college degrees in disciplines other than education. There were lectures, small group discussions, large group discussions and still more discussions, but of most importance to me was the rubbing of elbows with those of a different culture from my own.

The work shop continued for weeks. More teachers arrived, but the school was still only in the planning stage. It was mid-November. The rains came. The dust ~~now was~~ had turned to mud--deep, deep mud. Building plans were abandoned. The workshop terminated.

School opened the sixth; We could wait no longer. After all, we did have essentials; We had teachers. We had students. A resident block was vacated and the faculty and students moved in determined to make 'do' with what we had or 'do without'. Indeed it was a challenge.

Because in science-teaching water was needed I was assigned the laundry room--unmodified. Furnishings included stationary tubs in one half of the room and chored ironing boards in the other half. There were two pot-bellied stoves and two dropcord lights--one each at either end of the building and two big wooden boxes for coal. A wide bench attached to the wall extended the full length of the 100-foot room. The bench was too wide for comfort, but there the students sat. Classroom chairs came much later.

During the first week workmen came while classes were in session, drilled holes in the concrete floor, and erected a partition. They installed a blackboard on each side of the dividing wall, and we now had the beginning of two classrooms.

That first fall 380 students were registered in Science. I had 250 of these young people in Biology, Chemistry, Physics, and General Science (six classes daily), and the assistants had the remainder. In their own fields the assistants were well qualified. One was an organic chemist with a master's degree, another an engineer, and the third a pharmacist. (Their salaries? Nineteen dollars per month.) They had classes of their own and helped me with ~~the~~ chore work. ~~My assistants~~ They also took the initiative and designed and constructed simple lab equipment from tin cans, scrap wood, and wire. Later in the year tops were built for the laundry tubs, and Uncle Sam supplied a few pieces of "boughten" equipment and some chemicals. We felt that we now really had a laboratory.

For ten weeks we had no textbooks. Without materials and without books ~~there was little that~~ I could do little but talk and talk some more. For a long time I seemed to get nowhere. I talked; I interspersed explanations with questions. The students did not respond. They looked at me with expressions that I could not interpret. I answered my own questions and then the youngsters buzzed among theselves. Of course, their behavior was understandable; I represented the race that had put them where they were. It took time, but eventually they cast aside their reserve and became like any other group of students I had had. They were friendly, had a sense of humor, and for the most part were conscientious, ~~and usually~~ They usually reflected the

traditional Japanese attitude, of respect ~~for older persons~~.

Many of our students enrolled in a work program. The program not only afforded training but gave the students opportunity to contribute to the welfare of the community, particularly when adults were relocated in the midwest and east. During the spring season, especially, the program had an advantage for me, too. Often while the students were on the job, they found specimens to enliven my Biology class.

(I am not sending you the stories of my classroom experiences with: the rattlesnake in a milk bottle, the preserved human fetus, rattlesnake dissection, rockchucks running wild in my classroom. These you have edited, and I am not changing them. Doesn't mean so much work for you nor so much typing for me.)

The school sponsored many of the usual activities; only the building and grounds were unusual. ~~None the less~~ But normal activities were ~~disbanded~~ abandoned so the ~~one~~ spring day ~~that~~ when faculty and students cleared and burned sage brush. I watched crawling scorpions in and round the brush and I watched as flames approached their moving bodies. ~~Either~~ They ~~did~~ not seemed to sense fire as a hazzard. ~~or~~ Stories of their reactions to danger are exaggerated. They ~~did not~~ sting themselves to death; they sizzled ~~and fried~~ died, under the flames. The scorpions did not

On Beautification Day--a day that made a difference--students planted grass, made gravel paths, and painted. As each class convened the students picked up paint brushs and went to work. The interior of the science rooms became a soft, restful green.

In May eleven students who volunteered for service in the Armed Forces presented their new alma mater with an American flag. (Later many graduates from the classes of 1943 and 1944 joined various branches of the Service. Several of my boys were in the Army Language School in Minnesota; one, I know, was a parachutist, one received the purple heart while in the famed 442nd American Japanese Combat team--the team honored with the Presidential Distinguished Units Citation in 1945. The boys had fought for democracy at home and abroad. They had proved their loyalty, ~~to the American cause~~.)

On another
Another day in the late spring of our first year word ~~go round~~ got around that the inspectors from the State Department of Education were in the barracks-library. Next they visited one of my classes, asked to see lab reports (unfortunately uncorrected), ~~and~~ then went on to check our meager supplies and equipment--still mostly the ingenous, functional tin can supports, wooden holders and wire clamps made by the assistants. During the passing period a small group of students commented on their own participation and responses. They were pleased; they thought they had done unusually well, and so did I. ~~Our~~ Serendipity--maybe. At the end of the day ~~we're~~ were all jubilant. The State of Idaho had granted Hunt High School its accreditation.

On July 23 the school year terminated with commencement ceremonies held out ~~of~~ doors in a dust bowl amphitheater. To accomplish ~~Teaching~~ our required 180 days ~~and being able to close~~ before school in late July had meant steady going--no vacations except Christmas Day and the Fourth of July-- but in spite of handicaps, ~~with determination and the co-operation of many~~, we had made it. Our students were graduated from an accepted, bona fide high school. We had met our challenge.

It had taken labor, self-discipline, even gallantry. But we had met the challenge.

determination - ~~self-discipline~~ work and the co-operation of many

with work + determination to "make it do"