MEETING A CHALLENGE

by Frances E. Haglund

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

It was to this desolate center that I came September 30, 1942. I was to teach, although as yet a school had not been built. But why were teachers necessary? Why were ten thousand persons of Japanese ancestry here in the middle of nowhere?

The edict that brought them to this spot was Executive Order 9066. Pressure groups had succeeded in obtaining this decree without offering evidence of wrong doing and without a hearing. In February 1942 President Roosevelt signed the order for evacuation of all persons of Japanese ancestry (including 70,000 American-born) from the west coast, and the army carried out the order--an order born of panic abetted by greed.

The internees at Minidoka were brought from Portland, from Seattle and from parts of Alaska. They did not come directly to Idaho, but by way of assembly areas--miserable places--where they were detained for varying periods of time.

A Nisei friend 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. All Japanese families were notified of the official orders and told when and where to report. They were to take only what they could carry. She wrote: "We were herded into the North Portland Stock-

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 workshop 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 had turned to mud--deep, deep mud. Building plans were abandoned. The workshop terminated.

We could wait no longer. School opened the sixteenth. After all, we did have the 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 anchored ironing boards in the other half. There were two pot-bellied stoves and two drop-cord 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 class-rooms.

That first fall, 380 students 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!) The assistants had classes of their own and helped me with chore work. 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 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 themselves. 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. Usually they reflected the traditional Japanese attitude towards older persons--respect.

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 in the 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.

The first specimen was, I think, a young rattlesnake. While one of the boys was driving a truck, probably in or near the Project Farm, he saw the little creature on the ground. He stopped, found a milk bottle in the truck, and placed it in front of the snake. The snake obligingly crawled in. He brought it to class.

After we had all observed the reptile's appearance and behavior we set the bottle on the long attached bench, and proceeded with our assigned discussion. But not for long. A student gasped, "The snake! The snake!" The milk bottle had had no cap when it was brought into class, and because in the midwest I had seen garter snakes struggle on glass, I presumed too much about this little rattler. His body now extended upward along the inside of the bottle, his head stretched outside and above the top! I happened to be at the board using a meter stick as a pointer. I extended my arm and the stick to a boy seated midway between the bottle and me. He in turn extended his farm and the stick and pushed the snake back into the bottle. We found a cover all right! It remained on until after school. A group of students came in, and using ether, we put the creature permanently to sleep and then in a bottle of alcohol.

Another specimen came to us not from the desert but from the hospital where one of the students was an aide. It was a very tiny human fetus in a jar of preservative. I had asked that students bring in anything that seemed interesting, and this was. Reactions were varied. Some were disturbed, and thought it should not have been brought to the classroom but should have been given a "decent burial." Many were noncommittal, others were interested, but all were curious enough to take at least one good look.

At another time a girl came to class and told me that a big rattlesnake--

about two or three feet in length--had been killed in their block the night before. She asked if I would help her dissect it. The following morning she brought it to school, but since I did not have a free period that day we wrapped the snake in newspaper and with permission we put it in the Home Ec refrigerator. It had been there a day or two--fortunately no one came upon it unexpectedly--before we were able to go to work. The snake with its crushed head was pinned to a long board, and the dissection proceeded. As the student opened the body cavity we were amazed to see that the heart was still beating. In fact, the heart continued to beat for hours, and without any kind of artificial stimulation. I think all the science classes had a chance to see the demonstration, and then my little lady asked permission to take the snake--board and all--home to show her mother.

By spring of the second year, our collection of specimens covered a fairly large table. Our pair of rockchucks, however, were kept on the floor in a handmade cage of wood. They were interesting creatures--the first that I had ever seen. They were active, too. One Saturday when another teacher and I were on our way to our regular Saturday morning faculty meeting we stepped into the biology room. It was a shambles! The chucks had chewed their way out of the bottom of the cage. They had played on top of my desk knocking over books and scattering papers. Our collection of dried specimens or specimens in jars had been knocked over or were on the floor mixed with broken glass, alcohol or formaldehyde. What a mess! Now the animals were frantically running around the room. My fellow teacher and I quickly snatched brooms and tried to get them back into their cages. We were not effective. We, too, did too much running. The chucks ran under the table, under chairs, from corner to corner and back and then suddenly hopped on the edge of the coal box, bared their incisors and

vented a snarl--maybe it was a kind of bark. At that moment the door opened and in came a student who was to take a make up test. Mr. B. turned to him and asked, "George, will you help us?" Without a word, George calmly walked over to the coal box and picked up both animals by the tail. With heads down, the chucks became amazingly quiet--almost limp. Maybe George's wearing a leather jacket and gloves gave him confidence that I did not have, or maybe he knew more about rodents than I did. Anyway, I felt chagrinned.

We could no longer keep our wild friends. They were caged, taken way out on the desert and released.

The school sponsored many of the usual activities. Only the buildings and grounds were unusual. But one spring day, normal activities were abandoned so that faculty and students might clear and burn sagebrush. I watched scorpions crawling in and around the brush and I watched as flames approached their moving bodies. They seemed not to sense fire as a hazard. Stories of their reactions to danger are questionable. The scorpions did not sting themselves to death; they sizzled and died!

On Beautificiation Day -- a day that made a difference -- students planted grass, made gravel paths, and painted. As each class convened the students picked up paintbrushes 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 proved their loyalty.

On another day in the late spring of our first year word got around that the inspectors from the State Depatment of Education were in the barracks-library. Next they visited one of my classes. They asked to see lab reports (unfortunatly uncorrected). Then they went on to check our meager supplies and equipment--still mostly the ingenuous, 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. Serendipity--maybe. At the end of the day we 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 our required 180 days of teaching before closing school in late July had meant steady going--no vacations except Christmas Day and the Fourth of July--but we had made it. Our students were graduated from an accepted, bona fide high school. With work and the determination to "make it do," we had met the challenge.