Behind Barbed Wire

by Frances E. Haglund

On September 30, 1942, I arrived at the Minidoka Center of the War Relocation Authority in southern Idaho. I took an oath of allegiance. I raised my right hand and declared my intention of upholding the constitution of the United States. I was fingerprinted and photographed, and the photo and thumbprint were both put on my ID card. An ID card or pass was required of anyone entering or leaving camp. Military police checked us at the gate.

Why did I, and others, have to have identification out here in the middle of an Idaho desert? I was to teach, although as yet a school had not been built. But why were teachers necessary and why were 10,000 persons of Japanese ancestry also out here in the middle of nowhere?

Pearl Harbor was attacked on December 7, 1941. On February 13, 1942, the Pacific Coast congressional delegation recommended to the President that all persons of Japanese ancestry be evacuated from strategic areas. Six days later President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 authorizing designated military commanders to prescribe military areas from which any or all persons might be excluded. On March 2, Lieutenant General J.L. DeWitt designated military areas in Washington, Oregon, California, and Arizona and restrictions were placed on the Japanese. On August 7, De Witt announced that 110,000 persons of Japanese descent in military areas 1 and 2 had been removed from their homes;[1] of these 70,000 were American-born. The evacuation had been completed without so much as an investigation of any kind and without evidence of any sabotage. The round-up included anyone of Japanese descent: Issei, Nisei, and Kibei.[2] It even included two children who had been adopted by a Caucasian couple. The children were separated from their parents and sent to Minidoka!

The persons interned at Minidoka came from Portland, from Seattle or from parts of Alaska. They were not brought directly to Idaho. They were taken to assembly areas--miserable places--for varying periods of time.

A Nisei friend, at the time a certified teacher living in Portland, recently wrote to me describing tne eviction and mass evacuation--the expulsion from home and familiar surroundings. Following the official orders all Japanese families were notified and told when and where to report and what they were permitted to take with them. 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 train bound for Minidoka."

Uprooted from home, trying to settle business affairs in much too much of a hurry--in some cases only a few days had been allowed-- and under the strain of packing only what they could carry, the evacuees suffered an experience necessarily demoralizing. And for some of the older persons, who knew little or no English, the enforced dislocation and the subsequent train ride was more than demoralizing--it was terrifying. They believed, I was told, that they were to be thrown out of the train to die in an inhospitable desert, the habitat of deadly rattlesnakes.

The disheartened evacuees finally reached their destination, Minidoka: dusty, uninviting, 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 persons. Barbed wire enclosed the camp, the tar-papered buildings, people and all. (Not a concentration camp-merely relocation--within barbed wire!)

Whatever the evacuees had had before coming to Idaho each family now had only one room--some small, some larger--and a pot-bellied stove. Two rows of six

barracks--each to accommodate several families--were built on either side of the central mess hall, and combined laundry room and toilet facilities. ("Sanitary facilities" it was called, but hardly adequate.) A recreational building completed the arrangement of a residential unit and was typical of most of the 44 blocks in Minidoka.[3] Minidoka also had meeting places for Buddhist, Shinto, and Christian services. There was no jail--only the barbed wire fence.

Those of us who were Civil Service employees living at the Center fared much better than did the evacuees. The exteriors of the dormitory-barracks were covered with the same dull tar-paper, as were all the buildings, but the interiors were differently arranged. Each of the barracks had ten rooms, a "foyer" of sorts, a bathroom and a furnace to be faithfully stoked by an evacuee. The 9' x 12' unpainted rooms, with the studs exposed, had one small window each, and the rooms were furnished with a cot equipped with a mattress and two woolen blankets. Japanese women cleaned the dorms and fought the dust. Often our rooms were cleaned twice a day, but by bedtime dust again had sifted through every tiny crack.

In this housing area there was a mess hall for the administrators and all the Caucasian employees. (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 other 100,000 Japanese there was at least one black nurse. Henceforth, we were not "Caucasians" but the "appointed personnel.")

How well I remember my first day in Idaho. I remember the ride from Twin Falls to Minidoka, the bridge over the Snake River Canyon, the desert, the M.P.'s at the gate, the row on row of dreary-looking barracks, the dust in the air, the dust under foot. Before leaving Twin Falls I had carefully brushed my brown suede shoes, but as I stepped out of the car into the powdery laval soil my shoes were no longer brown nor did they look like suede. For weeks I, like others

camp, trudged almost ankle-deep through loose desert sands. By the time I reached Minidoka the teachers' workshop was already in progress. Not all teachers had arrived, nor indeed had all been appointed. The teaching staff included evacuees who had a college degree, but not a teacher's certificate. They were appointed as assistants at the generous sum of $19.00 a month! Two or three prominent educators lectured, and the core method was explained to those of us who were not familiar with that kind of program. We were also given many idealistic goals--so many that I was glad that I was not a beginning teacher.

During the first week, in particular, I was impressed by the few comments made by the assistants--most of them said very little--but I well remember the question of one courageous young woman. We had had a long discussion on democratic procedures in the classroom when she cautiously asked if it were not ironic to be talking of democracy while living behind barbed wire fences.

Equal opportunities had been denied the evacuees long before they arrived at camp. A very large percentage of the young people were college-trained, but as one of my assistants remarked: "After college--what? They must follow in the old man's footsteps because no other course is open to them."

At the workshops and at a few general meetings more questions were asked: "Why weren't the Italians and the Germans interned? The U.S. was at war with both Germany and Italy as well as with Japan." "Not all the Japanese in Hawaii were put in concentrations camps. Why not?" In spite of the rhetoric of the administration and the frequent use of the term a "relocation center," many internees thought of the place--and with good reason--as a concentration camp.

At one of the public meetings a few young men--I vaguely remember that they were either lawyers of law students--questioned the constitutionality of the evacu-

ation, and though they spoke without violence, they spoke with intense conviction. I have no way of knowing, but this awareness of their rights may have been a bit of leaven to produce change--change that came too slowly.

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It was mid-November. The rains came, and there was mud everywhere--deep, shoe-pulling mud. The workshop was terminated.

School opened the sixteenth. It was useless to wait longer for the materialization of a building. We had students. We had teachers. One of the resident blocks was vacated, and we went to work. Because water was needed in science teaching I was assigned to the laundry room. Home Economics was located in the mess hall. Partitions were removed in one of the barracks, which thereupon became the library. Core classes, mathematics, languages, art, shop, agriculture, and physical education were conducted in other barracks. The situation, to say the least, was challenging.

The science building was still equipped as a laundry. The 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 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. 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. The assistants had no credits for courses in education, but in their own fields they were will qualified. One was an organic chemist, another an engineer, and the third a pharmacist. They had classes of their own and helped me with the chore work. I seldom corrected a paper. (What a boon for a teacher!) My assistants also took the initiative and designed and constructed simple lab equipment from tin cans, scrap wood, and wire. Later in the year wood 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 text books. Without materials and without books there was little that I could do 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. Like many children of foreign parentage they felt, I am sure, that they must work diligently to succeed and to prove themselves. Too, the youngsters 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. When camp began to function as a genuine "relocation" center, adults and young people left for jobs or to attend schools in the midwest and east, and students then were able to take many responsibilities. During the spring season especially, this work program had an advantage for me, too. Often while the students were on the job, they found specimens to bring ~~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 arm 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 the use of any kind of stimulation or solutions. 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 speciments covered a fairly large table. Our pair of rockchucks, however, were kept on the floor in a hand-made 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 specimenss in jars had been knocked over or were on the floor mixed with broken glass, alcohol or formaldehyde. A mess! Now the animals were frantically running round 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 just 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. A month after school opened the journalism class had put out its first mimeographed school paper, and in the two years I was at Hunt (the name given to the Project Post Office and High School) the young journalists had published two year-books. Both bring back vivid memories. A temporary student council yielded to the permanent Council. The freshman class was the first to be organized, then in turn sophomores, juniors and seniors. Each of the classes including the junior high had its mixers and dances. The music department put on concerts, and there were exchange programs with the Twin Falls High School and others near-by. The May Day celebration was a festivity presided over by a King and Queen. Another day in May was a work day. Students and faculty cleared sage brush--sage brush on which I watched a few crawling scorpions until the brush was burned. Wonderful things happened on Beautification Day. Students planted grass, made gravel paths, and painted.[4] As each class convened the students picked up a paint brush and went to work. The interior of the science rooms became a soft green.

The seniors had their class banquet and prom in the Home Ec. dining hall. On July 23, commencement was celebrated out of doors in a dustbowl amphitheater. Teaching our required 180 days and being able to close school in late July had meant steady going--no vacations except Christmas Day and the Fourth of July--but in spite of handicaps our students received credits from an accredited high school. Accreditation had come in the spring or early summer.

School started again on August 23. What a difference! Camp itself looked more liveable. The grass had grown and was green. Many of the evacuees had planted miniature gardens near their doorsteps. One such garden I can still visualize. Squash vines were growing up the barracks wall, and shelves along the wall supported the squash--the biggest I had --or ever have--seen.

School, too, was different. We had desks. We had books. The room with its painted walls was more cheerful and paper flowers made by the cleaning woman were on my desk. (As the season changed so, too, did the bouquet of flowers.) We still lacked a great deal of lab material; red tape had not been sufficiently cut, but things were picking up. There were three certified teachers in the science department. Several assistant teachers including some in our department, had been resettled in the midwest or in the east. More clubs had been and were being organized. The sports program especially had been expanded. This was Hunt High School in 1943-1944.

Respite from school routine came with harvest vacation. There was a manpower shortage, and the older high school students were permitted to leave camp to help with the area harvesting. (The previous year many of the Japanese had worked in the nearby sugar beet fields.) The younger children, under faculty supervision, helped on the Project Farm. My "gang" and I picked beautiful, big Idaho potatoes and huge, huge onions--onions that perfumed the hands for days.

A few days--maybe a week before New Year's excitement began with preparations for the traditional festivities--the making of mochi, a rice cake of pounded glutinous rice. Taking time from an occasional class some of our high school boys assisted in the mochi-pounding ritual. My interest and curiosity were aroused, and three or four of my colleagues, too, were interested. One day we watched the process.

A special rice with high gluten content was steamed in huge trays--four or

five trays deep--over a steam bath or vat. After the steaming, the rice was emptied into the depression of a large wooden block. much like a chopping block except for the depression, and three young men with big wooden mallets squeezed and pressed a while before they started the actual pounding. Counting three, each man in turn swung his mallet. A triple rhythm was maintained and the tempo increased. It became very fast, and as an accompaniment the overseerer occasionally sang an oriental song. When the rice became the proper consistency it was thrown onto a table where women pinched off little globs and patted them into shape. The finished product looked much like a baking powder biscuit. A portion of the rice was also made into a special cake with a sweetened bean paste center. This delicacy was to be served with soup for breakfast on New Year's Day, (With characteristic Japanese hospitality theygave us a special cake to take home.) Each family was also to have a big cake topped by a small one. The stacked cakes decorated with lobster and seaweed were to be eaten the seventh day. The bent back of the lobster signifies longevity and the seaweed, "Kombu," symbolizes happiness.

The paying off of debts before New Year's Day was also part of the Japanese tradition.

A subcommittee of the Dies Committee on Un-American Activities visited, or I should say, investigated Hunt. I saw the men only in the mess hall. The three--maybe four men were in camp for only a few days. I wondered how anyone could learn much about this community, or as a matter of fact, about any community in such a short time. When the report was published, I, and others of my colleagues questioned their objectivity and their findings. So too, did Representative Herman P. Eberharter (D.) Pa., when he "denounced on March 16, the House Committee probe of the WRA as a 'painful parody of fairminded and constructive Congressional inquiry' and 'a serious disservice to the American people.'"5

Newspaper articles at the time were often no more complimentary to the teaching and administrative personnel in the camps that they were to the Japanese. One such referred to them as "do-gooders" with the implication that we were all soft-headed simpletons. The author of the statement could never have really known either a Japanese or our situation. Certainly he could not speak with authority as did H.E. Stafford, Project Director at Hunt, who wrote of the Spirit of Minidoka in the Minidoka Irrigator:[6] "You may strip these people of the blessings of freedom, their economic security, their worldly goods, their peace of mind, enshroud them with the shackles of detention; all this, and then --of their own volition they have produced a code of ethics predicated upon the Ten Commandments. The prayer of Minidoka is that the record here will help vindicate the cause of its less fortunate folk in the other camps."

The spirit of the internees at Minidoka was again demonstrated by the excellent response to the Red Cross War Funds drive as well as by the response of the young men who volunteered for the armed services. The first Japanese volunteers left Hunt in May 1943. Later a number of my boys enlisted. Several were sent to the Army Language School in Minnesota; one I know was a parachutist. Another received a purple heart for action in southern Europe. How many more of my students were in the Army I do not know, but "in all, more than 25,000 Japanese Americans served--and many died--in the armed forces during the war."[7]

An outstanding honor, the Presidential Distinguished Units citation, was awarded to the 442nd Japanese American Combat team for their drive against the Nazis in the Alsace Campaign.[8] There were other honors, too, but no matter in what branch of the service the Nisei were assigned they proved their loyalty to the American cause.

I left Hunt in July, 1944. My experience there had been strenuous but rewarding. I had lived in a completely new physical environment and I had rubbed elbows

with others having a different cultural heritage from my own. I was the richer for it.

I do not now remember how I felt as I entered the barbed wire enclosure and swore to uphold the constitution of the United States. It was war time--life was different, but now as I look back and remember my pledge of allegiance I am uncomfortable. Little people like me had had to take that pledge--not the persons responsible for denying the Nisei their rights as citizens, including the right to due process of law. (Fortunately action started in California to deny American-born Japanese the right to vote was unsuccessful.)[9] The Issei, the Nisei, and the Kibei had been uprooted and deprived of much of their property and personal possessions, yet many people in the United States were unaware of the enforced evacuation. If persons away from the West Coast did know, they may have, in the irrational thinking in war-times, considered it a form of patriotism to hate "Japs," although 70,000 of the Japanese were American-born. The "Jap haters" may have believed that national security was imperiled, but there was not a single case of sabotage committed by the mainland Japanese. Many of the Japanese were shocked by events, and many were shocked and hurt that they were not regarded as American citizens. That kind of hurt, I am sure, was expressed by one of my students whom I overheard on the first anniversary of Pearl Harbor Day. Poignantly he queried his companion, "I wonder what it would be like to be a real American?"

During the time we were living in Hunt many of us on the teaching staff felt that the evacuation was the result of panic and greed--the Japanese properties were valuable. We felt, too, that the mass evacuation was a mistake. It was a gross injustice to the Japanese, and an unnecessary expense to the American tax payer. This opinion was also expressed by a Hunt resident, William Taki, in a letter published in the Seattle, P.I. January 22, 1943, and two weeks later

reprinted in the Minidoka Irrigator. He wrote: "For the first year of evacuation of West Coast Japanese, the people of the United States have paid two hundred million dollars. This is equivalent to $1,964 per Japanese or about $10,000 per family. In other words, much of this money which is being appropriated by the government for the Japanese and the maintenance of the desert concentration camps in which they live could be diverted to war use."

To me it seems clear that Executive Order 9066 and the subsequent evacuation and confinement were not justified. Other tragic events in our history unfortunately, are similar in too many ways to the 1942 evacuation. As I see it, Order 9066 was just another example of our history's repeating itself. Our native Americans have undergone similar deprivation and discrimination.

The Removal Bill of 1830 also denied persons their rights. In May of that year Congress as urged by President Andrew Jackson, passed the Bill giving the President power to exchange lands west of the Mississippi for territory held by Indian Tribes in the Southeast. The Removal affected thousands of Indians, many of whom owned homes and livestock. It affected the Cherokee, a people who had their own newspaper, a constitution and legislature, and like most of the other Five Tribes of the Southeast had their codes in writing. The genius Sequoyah, a Cherokee whose father was a white man, had invented a syllabary for the Cherokee. Many had learned to read.

The Cherokee took their case to court and almost won. The Supreme Court sustained their rights to the lands--their own lands--but President Jackson refused to accept the decision and ordered the Indians removed. The army implemented the order and was merciless in its treatment of the Cherokee. During the migration to Oklahoma one fourth of the Indians died of disease, starvation, or grueling hardships. This cruel westward trek came to be known as the "Trail of Tears."[10]

"Why did white man do this to the Indians?" This was a question posed by an Indian woman, a Cherokee with whom I talked and whom I met only briefly. She had told me of the tragedy of her people and of the "Trail of Tears." We too may ask, "Why? Why, indeed?" ~~guaranteed to the~~

The Nez Perce fared no better. In 1855, a reservation had been guaranteed to the Nez Perces of the Northwest. Later, gold was found in the territory. The chicanery of the government agents forced the headmen to sign a new treaty in 1863, reducing the size of the reservation. The Chiefs refused to sign and Chief Joseph's band of Nez Perces refused to leave until 1872. In 1873, President Grant had issued an executive order allowing Chief Joseph's people to remain in their valley. Two years later the order was revoked.

Events led to reprisals and the U.S. troops attacked Chief Joseph. The troops were defeated. Joseph was pursued for 1300 miles but did not surrender until he had almost reached the Canadian border. Some of the Indians escaped; those including Joseph who were not annihilated were sent into exile and treated like prisoners of war.[11] Although Joseph, regarded as the Red Napoleon, was considered to be too dangerous to be penned up with his people he was permitted to go to Washington to talk with many of the white chiefs. In one magnificent speech recorded by sympathizers, this dangerous man said: "If white man wants to live in peace with the Indian he can live in peace. . . Treat all men alike. . . The earth is the mother of all people, and all people should have equal rights upon it."[12]

The Cherokee, the Nez Perce, and the Nisei were all American-born, but their skins were of a different color from that of most Americans. So, too, were their cultures different. In each instance hatred, greed, propaganda, and pressure were successful in humiliating, even dehumanizing a people. An executive order was issued, and the army enforced the order. Human rights were denied.

We are saddened by these stories, but have we the courage to face the black pages of our history? Will we manage somehow to rationalize those pages, gloss over the errors? Will we even comfort ourselves by ignoring them? Do we honestly believe in "liberty and justice for all" or will we again repeat our history? Another time--who knows--it may be you, it may be me.

FOOTNOTES

1. Chronology of Evacuation and Relocation. 1941-1942. (Bulletin to Personnel.)

2. Issei are persons born in Japan; Nisei are American-born; Kibei are the American-born who have studied in Japan--some for a short time only, others longer.

3. Map. Minidoka Irrigator, September 25, 1943.

4. Memoirs. 1943. Hunt High School.

5. Clipping. Paper unknown. Maybe Twin Falls. Probably March, 1944.

6. Clipping. Probably 1944.

7. Maisie and Richard Conrat, Executive Order 9066. MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass. 1972.

8. Minidoka Irrigator. March 10, 1945.

9. Chronology. Bulletin to personnel.

10. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. The Indian Heritage of America. Pub. Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y. 1968.

11. Dee Brown. Bury My Heart at Wounded Knee, An Indian History of the American West. Holt, Reinhart, and Winston. 1970.

12. Alvin M. Josephy, Jr. The Indian Heritage of America. Alfred A. Knopf, N.Y. 1968.