

The Japanese Evacuation and
The Relocation Center at Rohwer, Arkansas

I feel that some personal reflections and observations of mine may belong with the accumulated documents concerning the above tragedy and project.

After the first World War I resigned my commission in the U.S. Army and went to Japan to study, to teach, and to get acquainted with an older culture. Fifty eight years ago my wife and I were living in Tokyo when an earthquake and fire destroyed more than half of that great city and left over 100,000 people dead and burned beyond recognition. Strong fortitude was manifest in the stoical way in which the people accepted that tragedy without whimper or overflowing tears. Instead there was resolve to meet this crisis with courage.

Some 20 years later we were living in Los Angeles when the tragedy and shame of Pearl Harbor came into history. In California there was shame and sorrow, and some anger, but no panic. The people went on conducting their business as usual. Then a pressure group began to play upon selfishness, racism, and some fear, and persuaded the U.S. Government to order an evacuation of the Japanese-American people from the coastal area. The first order was that they move back 90 miles from the coast. The people in those further inland valleys objected to such an influx of new people. This threw the situation back into the lap of the army. The army resorted to what it knew it could do well, which was to build typical army barrack villages, ten of them, eight in the western section of our country and two in Arkansas. This enormous construction project, including hospitals, schools, roads and water systems, comprised an enormous outlay of government funds. My way of referring to this has been, "That it would have been less costly to place an Army Major General at each Japanese-American front door than to have taken 100,000 citizens from offices, shops, and farms."

The first order was for the Japanese along the coast to move into fairgrounds and racetracks as temporary quarters while these barrack towns were under construction. When they were completed the people were ordered to meet at certain places where they would be picked up by busses and trains and taken to their assigned imprisonment. During all of this there was solemn acceptance of what they knew was wrong. The people were humble, but refused to be humiliated. They knew that this was not the real America, nor the America that would be.

It was my good fortune to be asked by the American Government to become one of the Assistant Directors of the Rohwer Relocation Center at Rohwer, Arkansas. My major assignments were the schools and hospitals, and the general health and welfare. One of my early observations was the changes that began to take place as other government officials became acquainted with these people whom they had not known before. The Center was fortunate in having as its General Manager Ray D. Johnston, as experienced administrator and as exceedingly modest and fair man. Other officials were influenced by his spirit. The Japanese accepted work assignments with very little pay. They did original things such as weaving rugs out of grass and creating ornamental flower vases out of cypress knees. They cultivated 1000 acres of rich soil and were amazed at the abundance of vegetable produce.

The special area of concern which I would like to discuss now is the establishment of a cemetery for those who were passing away while surrounded by barbed wire. There are 25 such graves and a very skillful workman with concrete became an employee under my direction and built beautiful markers which are still firmly established. He and the other evacuees built two monuments, a tall shaft dedicated to those who had died in Rohwer, and the other towards the end of the occupation period, a large monument dedicated to the 442nd Combat Unit and the 32 young men from the Arkansas Centers who gave their lives in Europe for justice and freedom while their parents and sweethearts were surrounded by barbed wire.

When I returned to Arkansas from college teaching in Virginia I found this cemetery area with its graves and headstone and these large monuments simply lost in the tall grass and young trees which practically covered them. This wounded me deeply. I had known personally some of the young men, buried in Europe, whose names were on the monument. I asked a businessman in Maghee, Robert Adcock, to hire workmen to clean off the entire area and I would pay the bill. This was quickly repaid by concerned evacuees. That was the beginning of the rescue which is approaching a climax now.

Two Japanese-American farmers, Miki Nakamura and Sam Yada, remained in Arkansas and immediately became the leaders in trying to preserve this sacred acre with its monuments and memories. Mike Masaoka and I visited officials in Washington seeking to have this place made a part of the National ~~Historic~~ ^{Fair} Service. Officials were hesitant to talk about this event in history which they knew should not have happened. A unit of the American

Legion composed of Japanese-American Veterans came to Arkansas and conducted an appropriate dedication service. The large gathering was addressed by the late Miki Nakamura, who with Sam Yada, prepared for what is now an immediate goal.

The plan is to erect a marble shaft bearing the names of the 32 young soldiers who were buried abroad. This, I believe, is the only place in America where their names are preserved.

Joseph B. Hunter

Assistant Director
Rohwer Relocation Authority