

## A Part of History Found on the Desert

The Baseball Home Plate from Gila River Japanese American Incarceration Camp

Following the air attack on Pearl Harbor by the Imperial Japanese Navy, December 7, 1941, approximately 120,000 Japanese and citizens of Japanese heritage living along the West Coast and the southern third of Arizona were removed from their homes and incarcerated in isolated camps across the country from 1942-1945. The all-American sport of baseball provided some normalcy in the newly formed communities. Baseball in the Gila River Incarceration Camp in Arizona was initiated by Kenichi Zenimura.

Kenichi was a prominent Nisei, second generation Japanese, promoter and player of baseball in Fresno, California, prior to WWII. Observing the need to lift everyone's morale in the camp, he chose baseball to attain it and succeeded! He and others in the camp cleared and graded the future baseball field, then gathered material to build the baseball viewer's stand. The venue provided encouraging escape from the stark rows of wooden barracks. Eventually, the nine other camps included baseball as a bonding recreation.

My life began in the Gila River Japanese Incarceration Camp, August 1942, and raised with my family in Cambrian Park, a suburb of San Jose, California. In 1986, my husband and sons settled in Arizona, and we occasionally visited my birthplace. It was years later that we learned that baseball was played in the Gila River Camp. My husband, James, and our eldest son, Stephen, who were both baseball players in their youth, were curious about the location of the baseball field.

In 1993, we went to Gila River to search for the possible site of the baseball field. The two men were attracted to a large, flat area at the edge of the remains of concrete foundations upon which barracks were built. Just beyond it the Indians were growing groves of olive trees, which were beginning to encroach the flat open area.

The younger James had played baseball and enjoyed working to master a variety of pitches. On this day, he identified a slightly raised mound. He determined it was neither a termite nor ant hill and decided it was the pitcher's mound. From there, father and son stepped off ninety feet and observed where home plate and the bases would logically have been placed.

Stephen, who played the catcher position in his youth, evaluated the lay of the land, the angle of the sun, then estimated the best orientation for such a field. He positioned himself where he naturally felt at home and envisioned the rest of the teams' positions. When Stephen arose from his catcher's crouch, he kicked at the sand where he stood. Suddenly, with hands stretched high over his head, exclaimed, "***I found it! I found the home plate!***" He carefully liberated the weathered, homemade wooden home plate

from the desert, dried weeds sticking out between the boards. Stephen, unsure what to do with it, preserved the home plate in a cardboard box in his garage.

In 1997 an Arizona Republic newspaper article by Rick Noguchi, Director of the Phoenix Japanese Resource Center, wrote that a program about Gila River Japanese Incarceration Camp would be presented in Phoenix. I contacted him and asked if he would be interested in the home plate from Gila River. Upon telling him about it, he suggested that it be placed in the care of the Phoenix JACL (Japanese American Citizens League).

Stephen presented the Zenimura home plate with this significant introduction in his letter to the JACL: ***“In the loving memory of those whose inalienable rights were stripped by a country of people fraught by the fears of a world at war.”*** In 2012, I met Lowell Bailey, pitcher for the Tucson High School state champion team that played in a challenge game with the Gila River High School team. Beneath a team picture Lowell wrote, ***“Stephen, thank you for saving a part of history!”***

The treasured artifact home plate from the Zenimura Baseball Field has traveled to Japan and to our states with major baseball teams. It was exhibited in the Cooperstown Baseball Hall of Fame from 2001-2003. The treasured home plate will again be featured from July 2025-2028 in the new Yakyu (“baseball” in Japanese) Exhibit Hall in Cooperstown, New York.

The Zenimura Baseball Field Home Plate is a memory of how the all-American sport of baseball lifted the spirits and morale of the Japanese during the darkest time in our country. The love of baseball also brought people, young and old, all races and color, together.