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World at War

Fall 2014

Japanese American Internment and the Jerome Relocation Center

The internment of Japanese Americans at the hands of the United States government during World War II is one of the darkest parts of our history. It is also a topic that, until recently, has been scarcely acknowledged by those involved. Although racism towards Japanese Americans was not uncommon, forced relocation and imprisonment solely based on their ancestry was unheard of before the war. When the Empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, Japanese Americans were perceived a national security threat and the government responded accordingly. Military areas were prescribed and those of Japanese ancestry living within them were forced from their homes into relocation centers, and then eventually sent to internment camps, where they were kept for most of the war years. Of these camps, two were located in Southeast Arkansas, just 27 miles apart: Rohwer and Jerome. Jerome, the last internment camp to open and the first to close, held 8,497 internees at its' height.¹

¹ Brian Niiya. "Jerome," Densho Encyclopedia.

Historiographically speaking, the internment of Japanese Americans during World War II did not start becoming a topic of interest until quite a while after the fact. It was generally not something the United States government wanted people to know about, nor was it something those victimized chose to discuss. Despite having very different memories of WWII from other Americans, many did not even bring this up with their own kids, viewing it as an unimportant part of the past.² Although much of the physical evidence is gone, the emotional scars from the experience are still very much so a part of the Japanese American legacy today. Museums and monuments have now sprung up across the country in memory of the victims, and a larger amount of literature is becoming available on the topic as more and more people open up with their stories. One of the best resources for information on this topic is a non-profit organization called Densho. Founded in 1996, this organization aims to collect and preserve as much oral history on the topic as possible. Their encyclopedia website, which was of great use to me during my research, contains tens of thousands of historical images and documents, as well as over a thousand hours of interviews with those who experienced the internment first hand. In addition to the contributions of Densho, several books recounting individual stories have also been published in the past few decades, many of which were very useful to me in my research.

² Erica Harth. *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, 35.

Before diving into the experiences of Japanese Americans at the Jerome internment camp itself, it is important to first examine the greater historical background and context. By the time of the Japanese attack at Pearl Harbor most Japanese Americans were second or third generation immigrants with little to no remaining connections to the Empire of Japan. Nonetheless, Japanese Americans still tended to have their own communities, speak their own language amongst each other, intermarry, and maintain much of their cultural heritage from Japan. Most of them were American citizens who considered themselves completely American and enjoyed harmonious relationships with white Americans. This all changed, however, when the empire of their ancestors launched an attack and declared war on their new home country. According to Ken Takemoto, a young Japanese American living in Hawaii at the time of the attack, they knew they were in trouble from the moment they heard the Empire of Japan was behind the attack. Anti-Japanese sentiment quickly rose to a dangerously high level, and some newspapers even began publishing articles written by people who wanted the Japanese Americans deported or incarcerated.³ One of the most vocal proponents for action against the Japanese American was General John Lesesne DeWitt, the man in charge of the Headquarters of the Western Defense Command and Fourth Army in Presidio, California. In a military conference on January 4, 1942, DeWitt

³ Paul Howard Takemoto. *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years*, 26.

referred to Japanese Americans as “enemy aliens” who were a threat to national security threat in the western parts of the United States. He advocated for arrangements that would make searching the homes of and arresting Japanese Americans much easier, and not subject to the same laws that protect other Americans from unjust treatment. He also believed Japanese Americans needed to be evacuated from the areas where they could be threats and incarcerated.⁴ Eventually DeWitt’s theories made their way to the president, who responded by taking immediate action.

On February 6th, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066. This order authorized and directed the Secretary of War to create “military areas” wherever he deemed necessary. The Secretary of War was given the power to decide who needed to be excluded from these areas and was also given the authorization to use Federal troops to enforce compliance.⁵ Military areas were created all along the West Coast, and of course all persons of Japanese ancestry were the ones chosen to be excluded from them. On March 18, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9102, ordering the formation of the War Relocation Authority (WRA). The WRA, tasked with coordinating and enforcing the implementation of Japanese American relocation and internment, immediately began planning the construction of ten different internment

⁴ Dewitt, John, and Ross. "Conference with General Dewitt." *National Archives*.

⁵ "The National Archives Experience: DocsTeach." Executive Order 9066 Dated February 19, 1942, in Which President Franklin D. Roosevelt Authorizes the Secretary of War to Prescribe Military Areas.

camps around the United States where the Japanese Americans were to be held.

Japanese American families within the military areas were forced on short notice to pack up only what they could carry, and to meet at designated areas to be evacuated. Viewing themselves as being fully American, many did not comprehend why this was happening to them.⁶ One victim, a child at the time of the forced evacuation, stated that they “felt like prisoners in their own country”⁷. This idea of being “prisoners in their own country” was reinforced by the fact that they were put under armed guard from the moment they reported for initial evacuation, and they remained this way for the duration of their internment.⁸ Japanese Americans were quickly forced onto buses and confined in what were called “reception centers”. The WRA used these camps to hold the “enemy aliens” while they sorted out who would go where in terms of long-term internment. Because these camps were meant to be temporary, they were often times cramped and not very pleasant to live in. From here internees were generally put on trains or buses to one of the ten internment camps, where they would remain for most of the war.

In an interview with her son, Alice Takemoto recalls having a very unpleasant five day train ride from the Santa Anita relocation center to

⁶ Yoshiko Uchida. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, 65.

⁷ Erica Harth. *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, 129.

⁸ Yoshiko Uchida. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, 66.

Jerome. She remembers spending the entire long trip sitting in hard seats that could not recline. She also remembers the food being so bad on the train that everyone had bad diarrhea by the time they arrived at Jerome.⁹ In an interview with Densho, Masamizu Kitajima recalls first arriving at Jerome late at night and having no idea how anyone could tell where they were, since there was virtually nothing there. He also remembers there being a large bonfire with many internees gathered around it wrapped in blankets. According to Masamizu, the camp staff was quite friendly and helpful when welcoming them and getting them settled in. They showed his family to their barrack and even lit their pot-bellied stove for them¹⁰

Jerome relocation camp was opened on October 6, 1942. Located in southeastern Arkansas, it and the Rohwer relocation camp were the furthest east of the camps. Before the camp was built, the land was little more than an inhospitable marshland on the Mississippi River flood plain. Although a private company was contracted to clear the site and construct the camp, the work was still not finished by the time the first internees arrived, and they ended up having to help finish building their own prison. The residential area of Jerome was made up of twelve blocks holding a few hundred people each. Blocks had their own bathrooms and mess halls. Within these blocks were a number of barracks, which were further divided into small family

⁹ Paul Howard Takemoto. *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years*, 118.

¹⁰ Brian Niiya. "Jerome," *Densho Encyclopedia*.

rooms.¹¹ Family units were generally not separated, and each barrack held about six families, generally all in separate rooms. The barracks were quite primitive, with no running water or insulation in the walls. The cramped family rooms rarely had more than a few cots, mattresses, and blankets, leaving it up to the internees to build any additional furniture they may need on their own with scrap wood. Scrap wood was also used as fuel for the pot-bellied stoves in each room, as camp authorities provided no coal to them.¹² Although latrines and showers were available in each block, they had little to no privacy, were cramped and dirty, and the showers rarely had any hot water.¹³

The entire camp was surrounded by barbed wire and was constantly under watch from guarded towers--it was very militaristic. Rooms underwent regular army inspections for contraband, and troublemakers were not tolerated.¹⁴ A constant atmosphere of fear was created. One internee remembers his father being unjustly accused of starting a riot and being taken away. Because it was not uncommon for guards to fire into crowds of rioters, this young man was terrified that his accused father would be shot. Even though his father was eventually freed, this was still a very traumatizing experience as a child.¹⁵ In fact, according to Tateishi, the sight

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Paul Howard Takemoto. *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years*, 126.

¹³ Yoshiko Uchida. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, 76.

¹⁴ Yoshiko Uchida. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, 98.

¹⁵ Erica Harth. *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, 134.

of crying children was a very common part of life at Jerome. Most children did not understand what was going on and just wanted to be back home.¹⁶ Mothers were terrified of what might happen to their children if they were caught breaking rules, and most sternly warned their children to be compliant, and especially not to attempt going outside the fence.¹⁷

In an interview with a Densho representative, James A. Nakano recalls how a typical day at Jerome began: with a trip to the mess hall. Breakfast was served early, so Nakano generally went and picked up food for himself and his mother; they would eat together back in their room and then go back to sleep.¹⁸ According to Uchida, these meals “were uniformly bad and skimpy, with an abundance of starches such as beans and bread.”¹⁹ Along with long lines, a lack of rice in the food provided at the camp was one of the chief complaints pertaining to dining. Of course, waiting in long lines was not unique to the mess hall--it was a regular part of life at Jerome, whether it be for eating, using the latrine, or using the showers.²⁰

That being said, not every aspect of life in Jerome was dreary and mundane.

¹⁶ John Tateishi. *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps*, 15.

¹⁷ Erica Harth. *Last Witnesses: Reflections on the Wartime Internment of Japanese Americans*, 132.

¹⁸ Brian Niiya. "Jerome," *Densho Encyclopedia*.

¹⁹ Yoshiko Uchida. *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family*, 77.

²⁰ John Tateishi. *And Justice for All: An Oral History of the Japanese American Detention Camps*, 12.

As Japanese Americans were held in these camps for an extended period of time, many aspects of "normal" life were maintained within them. Religious internees were able to practice their religions freely and many different services were routinely held at Jerome. Various Christian denominations as well as a variety of Buddhist ones were represented amongst the camp population. Jerome even became known as the "center of American Buddhist publishing during the war, under the local leadership of the Young Buddhists' Association"²¹ Sports and recreation were also a big part of life at Jerome. Baseball and softball, as well as some Japanese martial arts, were some of the most popular sports. Sports teams were able to compete amongst other teams within the camp, as well as against the teams of other camps. One of Jerome High School's biggest rivals was Rohwer High School, and games were frequently arranged between the two schools due to their close proximity to one another.

Another exciting activity for internees was the occasional trip to the world outside camp life. Internees were sometimes issued day passes and allowed to explore and shop in the area surrounding the camp. In an interview with a Densho representative about leaving the camp for a day, Grace Sugita Hawley explained, "the stores were so small, and nothing special, but for us, it was a thrill to get out and go to real stores, 'cause we

²¹ Brian Niiya. "Jerome," Densho Encyclopedia.

never got to see real stores."²² Hawley also recalled being first introduced to enforced segregation between whites and blacks while on one of these trips. She remembered getting on a bus that was segregated and being told by the bus driver to sit with the white people; being from the West Coast this was something entirely new to her.

Because there were a large number of kids who were still school-aged, both elementary and high schools were set up at all the camps. When Alice Takemoto arrived in Jerome in October the schools had not been set up yet, and this remained the case until January. Like most things at Jerome, the schools were set up in barracks. They were primarily made up of white American faculty, but according to Alice the teachers were generally kind. Many extracurricular activities were also offered through the school. These included athletics, band, and even some social clubs.²³

If qualified, Japanese American internees at Jerome also had the possibility of being employed by the camp. Although paid much less than white Americans, internees could work as dishwashers, teachers, nurses, doctors, school secretaries, or various other jobs that were needed around the camp. Alice Takemoto remembers all of her older sisters holding jobs around the camp. She also remembers much of the hospital staff being

²² Ibid.

²³ Paul Howard Takemoto. *Nisei Memories: My Parents Talk about the War Years*, 132.

made up of internees, and that although poorly equipped, they were generally very good and competent.²⁴

Jerome closed as a relocation center for Japanese Americans on June 30, 1944. It was the first of the ten relocation camps to close, and the remaining internees were either resettled outside the "military areas" or sent to other internment camps.²⁵ The Jerome campground itself was reopened shortly after as a Prisoner of War camp for German soldiers, called Camp Dermott. After the war the campground was sold off to private landowners, and little else became of it until a monument was built in the 1990s commemorating the events that had taken place there.

The treatment of Japanese Americans by the United States government during World War II was appalling. Their human rights were blatantly violated, as well as their constitutional rights as Americans for the vast majority of them who were in fact United States citizens. Forced from their homes and imprisoned in their own country, many did not even fully understand what was happening to them. Thousands were incarcerated in southeastern Arkansas in the Jerome War Relocation Center. Most lost nearly all of their possessions while away, even if they did return back to their home cities on the West Coast after the war. It is a blot in our history

²⁴ Ibid, 132.

²⁵ Brian Niiya. "Jerome," Densho Encyclopedia.

that many may not want brought back up, but it is a very important blot that needs not be forgotten lest we repeat the same mistake again.

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