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Rohwer Camp

December 7, 1941 the Empire of Japan carried out a surprise attack on the U.S. held territory of Hawaii, destroying most of the U.S. military equipment stationed there, and killing more than 2,400 Americans and wounding another 1,170. This catastrophic event led to the United States involvement in WWII, the formation of concentration camps that tremendously effected the Japanese American people by testing their loyalty to the United States of America, tearing apart family and friendships, and moving them away from their established homes and business into entirely foreign living conditions across the nation as far as Camp Rohwer in Arkansas.

The internment of the Japanese Americans could have perhaps been avoided if a particular report had been taken more seriously. The Munson Report was an Intelligence report on Japanese Americans on the West Coast filed by businessman Curtis B. Munson in the weeks prior to the attack on Pearl Harbor at the request of presidential envoy John Franklin Carter. Based on first hand research and consultation with navy and Federal Bureau of Investigation agents, the report largely concluded that Japanese Americans presented no security risk. A misleading summary of the report sent by Carter to President Franklin D. Roosevelt may have contributed to the report and its conclusions

being largely ignored by the administration (Niiya). However, because of war time hysteria and prejudice toward the Japanese people after the attack on Pearl Harbor, President Roosevelt discarded the Munson report and went ahead with the relocation of all Japanese Americans then currently residing in the United States.

Just over two months after the attack on Pearl Harbor on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 which authorized the Secretary of War to designate military areas in which to relocate all peoples of Japanese descent living in the U.S. at the time. This was brought on by war time hysteria from the public after the Japanese bombing of Pearl Harbor and an urgency to keep the West Coast free of spies and traitors since the states of California, Oregon, and Washington would be the most likely area for a future attack. Roughly 120,000 Japanese American citizens and longtime residents were forced from their homes on the West Coast and indiscriminately incarcerated in the interior, some moved as far as South East Arkansas (Howard). The Munson report was ignored, and the innocent Japanese American people were forced into camps, leaving their lives behind.

Japanese Americans were classified into four groups to better regulate their individual potential danger to the U.S. Their classification determined their level of danger according to whether they were born in the U.S., time spent in the Mother land of Japan, and their potential quantity of loyalty to the U.S. vs Japan. Mr. Colburn Stuart, Superintendent of Schools at McGehee Arkansas 1941-45, the area in which Rohwer was located, wrote on the classifications;

Issei; this group is composed of the Japanese born in Japan who came to America before the Japanese exclusion act. They are old. There are many more men than women.

Many of them speak only the Japanese language. While it is to be expected that a percentage of this group will feel an allegiance to their mother country, Japan, it must be remembered that many of these Japanese chose to leave the mother country to gain opportunities here (Stuart).

Kibei; these are the American born Japanese who have been educated in Japan. It is difficult to determine which culture they favor. It should be remembered that before the war advocates of democracy were numerous in Japan and this group will be divided in allegiance (Stuart).

Nisei; this is the largest group. It is made up of American born children of the Issei. Therefore, all are citizens of the United States. These were all educated in America, although many have attended Japanese school in the United States. This group has had less contact with oriental Japanese culture and generally is considered as a group to be loyal to the American way of life (Stuart).

Sensei; the Sensei are the second generation born in America. They are the children of the Kibei and Nisei, and grandchildren of the Issei. For the most part they are young. They have had little contact with foreign culture except that gained in Japanese school in this country (Stuart).

The issue of relocating 120,000 people was not an easy one. The Japanese were first moved to assembly centers; usually racetracks, parks, and pavilions (Vickers). As they were not part of any preconceived plan, but as an expedient to meet a special emergency situation, since no such centers had been planned, and so were not in existence, it became necessary to locate sites and to construct buildings (Stuart). Two of these newly formed colonies were located in South East Arkansas, Jerome in Chicot

County and Rohwer in Desha County. The two camps located in Arkansas were the only camps not located in the west making them unique to the other eight. The United States government acted quickly however, and all the Japanese American people soon had been designated to their camps.

There were nearly 10,000 Japanese Americans designated to each of the make shift cities that were thrown into existence in a shockingly short amount of time. In the case of Rohwer, the land that would soon house 10,000 Japanese American people, was not selected as a first choice, but one of convenience that was easily accessible. The two camps in Arkansas were the only ones not in the desert West. This was because the government needed to move quickly and didn't have the luxury of buying or condemning land - so they had to use land already in federal hands. In the west, that consisted of BLM (Bureau of Land Management) land. But in Arkansas, the Farm Security Administration owned several large tracts of land that were acquired due to tax delinquent that they had planned to build Depression Era resettlement farms on - they never used it, so they used these tracts for Rohwer and Jerome (Schiffer). An interview with a lifelong resident of McGehee, the town which Rohwer was built, Vivienne Schiffer, revealed that in the case of Rohwer, they didn't have quite enough land obtained by the Farm Security Administration, so they bought the remainder from her grandfather Joe Gould Sr. (Schiffer).

Once the land was obtained, the task of erecting a city capable of housing 10,000 occupants, including schools, homes, shops, recreational areas, community buildings, and bathhouses began. These camps needed to meet the demands of an established city in the matter of weeks. They were designed to the specifications of federal bureaucrats and

build by government contractors. Rohwer Camp was managed by a firm out of Little Rock named Linebarger Senne. The firm relied on local workers, black and white, to plot the land and put up the principal buildings (Gallion). As Camp Rohwer was located in the rural South, black workers could be hired cheaper than white, however, both were required for the construction of the camp in the allotted time.

Due to the urgency and lack of time to construct the camp, and temporarily of the camp, it was laid out in military fashion. Because it was a military type colony, Rohwer was equipped with electricity, modern water system, and telephones. In 1941 rural south Arkansas, power, water and sewage, and telephone communications were extremely rare for the local population. Susan Gallion, resident and president of the Desha County Historical Society and the WWII Japanese American Internment Museum recalls that in the small town of McGehee, most citizens in southern rural Arkansas did not have electricity until the late 1950's, and telephones until the early 1960's (Gallion). The Japanese Americans who were forced to Rohwer were the focus of resent by the locals for the "luxuries" they had in the camp. These luxuries were however a necessity for the military type camp to properly function.

This was also a time and place where separate restrooms and restaurants for "coloreds" and whites were still very much in place and enforced. In the eye of the local population, the "Japs" were equivalent to the black population. Therefore one can imagine the reaction to the Japanese American's so called "luxuries" compared to that of the local people who in many cases were forced to collect and save rain water to ensure clean water for their families. The culture of the South was unique to Jerome and

Rohwer camps in that the other 8 camps throughout the United States were located much further west, while these two were placed in the very much prejudice south.

There was one incident between a local man and a group of Japanese internees in which two men were shot and injured. Two Japanese men from Rohwer were wounded by a tendent farmer, M.C. Brown, who while returning from a deer hunt met a group of Japanese workers under supervision of a government engineer in the woods near the camp. He did not hesitate to fire upon them, thinking they were escaping, wounding one in the hip and one in the calf (Vickers). In the eye of a local in south east Arkansas in the 1940's, considering the war, Pearl Harbor, and the already imbedded prejudiced southerners held, the Japanese Americans were not welcomed.

Regardless of the local populations' feelings on the camps being erected in their community, the camps were assembled and Rohwer was operational on September 18th, 1942. A local McGehee historian, Colburn Stuart, described the sight upon arriving at Rohwer Camp; when a person first arrives, he is met by the army guard, who protects the Relocation Center. One must have a properly authorized pass to be admitted or to leave the confines of the center. The army is a sort of buffer between the world at large and the life in the center. It maintains a guard around the boundaries of the camp, but otherwise it only slightly affects the life of the people in the Relocation Center. Within the center, the War Relocation Authority has the responsibility for the smooth functioning of all phases of community life (Stuart). Once inside the camp, it looked very much like that of a camp of wartime, row after row of identical houses and buildings. The barracks were 20' wide by 120' long and housed from 4 to 6 families, depending on the size of the family. They received one cot per family member, three blankets each, one light bulb, and

a pot belly stove (Gallion). The barracks were arranged in blocks consisting of 14 resident barracks. Each block of 14 barracks were divided in to 2 rows of 7, separated by an alleyway. They ally contained the community showers, lavatories and laundry facilities (Stuart). At the time of Rohwer's opening, nearly 10,000 Japanese Americans were moved to the camp in Southern Arkansas. The camp had to become a fully functioning city to accommodate its new residents, the only difference of that of a normal community was that Rohwer was set up in military fashion.

The layout of Rohwer Camp included wide streets all around the blocks, not for cars, as internees were not allowed cars, but for a firebreak. It was 200 feet wide and nothing that might help a fire jump from one block to another was allowed to remain in the space. There was actually 40 ft. between each barracks and it made a lot of space for gardens and for family groups to relax or play together (Stuart). Every detail of the camp was positioned for practicality.

It must be remembered that many of the Japanese Americans who were relocated to Rohwer and alike camps were successful businessmen and home owners in their previous towns and cities. The conditions of the camps they were forced to relocate to, while in most cases much superior to those of the surrounding citizens, were often far inferior to that in which they had become accustomed. Imagine coming from a comfortable home on the West Coast, perhaps even having a housekeeper, to living in a one room barrack and sharing your shower, lavatory, and laundry area with 13 other families. It was a culture shock for many Japanese Americans, as it would be for anyone forced into such a drastic lifestyle change so quickly.

Just like any community, many facilities were needed. In Rohwer, the roads, or firebreaks, led to a hospital, clinics, fire station, systems for supplying and distributing water, and an adequate sewage disposal plant (Stuart). There was also a farm on the edge of the community that provided the community with fresh fruits and vegetables. All of these establishments employed Japanese Americans. Internees built all furniture in their barracks, and eventually most men and women held jobs in the camps, they were encouraged to work. Unskilled workers such as cleaning, farming, and stock raising were paid \$12 per month, clerical jobs in administrative offices were paid \$16 per month, then doctors, dentists, and legal aides received \$19 per month (Gallion). Many residents of Rohwer and other camps throughout the U.S. were struggling to keep up on property payments out West where they had homes and business. Making money while detained in a relocation camp was extremely difficult. Other positions included teachers, postal clerks, police, firefighters, mess hall attendants, and editors on the camp newspaper, *The Rohwer Outpost*.

When the relocation of the Japanese Americans was ordered, Executive Order 9066 did not discriminate. Entire families were required to participate, regardless of their children's current level in school. Over 40% of the Rohwer Camp population were children born in the U.S. ages birth to age 17, so the need for schools was a necessity. Contrary to what some would believe the camps had excellent schools. Japanese Americans as well as Caucasians taught in the schools, and at times adults attended school at night (Gallion).

The superintendent of education of the Rohwer Center Schools was inducted at the regional office in Little Rock, August 18, 1942. A board of 5 people and the

superintendent worked together at the regional office until the first contingent of evacuees arrived at the center. During this time the equipment and supply lists for the enrollment of 2,500 pupils were being prepared (Stuart). New schools across the ten camps would have to assemble entirely new facility and begin operation in a very short time.

After the school was organized, there would be a new need for teachers. Because of the need, the WRA, War Relocation Authority, offered higher pay than the State Department of Education could. With some of the best teachers from public schools going to the camps to teach, there an uproar in the State Department of Education. Teachers that taught in Rohwer Camp received \$2,000 per year from the WRA and this far exceeded those in segregated schools, which at times, was as much as three times those of black teachers (Gallion). The pay teachers were receiving at Rohwer Camp compared to the local white schools was also reason for the local inhabitants to be envious of the situation.

Japanese American teachers would work alongside Caucasian teachers at a fraction of the pay. This was a great opportunity for Japanese women as before the war, most women continued to work under the authority of their husbands. They earned no income, so they had little control over economic resources. Women were prevented from meeting new people and forming relationships outside the family. All that would change with incarceration (Gallion). This being one of the few positives to come of the Japanese American internment.

Internees were permitted day passes to do nearby shopping, fishing or other recreation. Before they were granted a pass however, they first had to fill out a Loyalty

Questionnaire/War Relocation Authority Application for Leave Clearance. This was a lengthy questionnaire to determine their identities, personal histories, and national allegiances. Two questions in particular caused family breaks and tore some camps apart. The questionnaire contained a series of questions about one's past affiliates in American and Japan as well as current connections to Japan. The questions that had the most effect on the prisoners were #27-if the opportunity presents itself and you are found qualified, would you be willing to volunteer for the Army Nurse Corps or the WAAC? And #28- will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor or any other foreign government power or organization? (DENSHO The Japanese American Legacy Project). Those who answered yes to both would earn the right to day passes, short term leave, or long term leave to study at universities. If one answered no to these questions however, they would be restricted to the camp and find their privileges withdrawn or in some cases sent to other camps. Many times if the answer was "no" and "no," prisoners would be sent to Tule Lake Camp in California for closer supervision.

Tule Lake became a Segregation Center to imprison Japanese-Americans deemed potential enemies of America because of their response to an infamous, misguided loyalty questionnaire intended to distinguish loyal American citizens from enemy alien supporters of Japan. As a method to separate the loyal from the disloyal, the questionnaire asked two clumsily worded questions. The questions, number 27 and 28, caused sharp conflicts and division within each camp, and led to agonizing turmoil within many families. This questionnaire became known as the Loyalty Review Program, which initiated the most wrenching and divisive crisis of

the entire incarceration, and led to creation of the high-security, conflict-ridden Tule Lake Segregation Center (Tule Lake Committee). The Japanese people are a very proud culture. If a family member were to answer “no” to these two questions and be sent to Tule Lake and viewed as a possible enemy of the U.S. government, it would put great shame on the family. In many cases, the rest of the Japanese American community would actually shun the family members of the person who answered “no” on the questionnaire. Imagine a family in which an older member, and Issei or Kibei, would answer “no” to one or both #27 and #28, while their sons or grandsons, Nisei or Sensei, would answer “yes” and some cases join the 442nd Regimental Combat Team. This situation absolutely devastated many Japanese American families.

By the time of Executive Order 9066, many American Japanese had already volunteered for the War Effort. They would be trained in the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team at Camp Shelby, Mississippi (Howard). Surprisingly even after the internment of the Japanese Americans, there were still volunteers among the camps who would travel to Camp Shelby and train to aid a nation who had deemed their people as unloyal. Two hundred and seventy four men from Camp Rohwer alone volunteered or were inducted into the armed forces during WWII (Vickers).

From 1942-1945 Rohwer was operational in rural Arkansas. When the war was over, the remaining Japanese Americans were released to pick up the pieces of their former lives, while a small few stayed in Arkansas and became crop sharers.

There are two things that were unique to Rohwer; interestingly, the camp at Rohwer went by two different names - it was called Rohwer Relocation Camp, but the post office address was "Relocation, Arkansas." Further, the thing that makes Rohwer

unique is the cemetery. The residents built 2 large monuments by hand as the camp was closing - of the 10 WRA camps, Rohwer is the only one with anything like it (Schiffer). The cemetery still stands today and holds the memories of lost Japanese Americans who died in combat abroad as well as those who passed while in the camp.

The internment of the Japanese Americans during WWII was a dishonorable and possibly avoidable time in America's past. Hitler and Nazi Germany, the Japanese in China, and Stalin in the Soviet Union were all rounding up their own prisoners of war and locking them away in camps, the United States was no exception. Although our prisoners of war were fed, schooled, and allowed a small level of independence, they were still prisoners, imprisoned by their own government who swore to protect them. They were required to leave their homes, business, friends, and lives and relocate into strange and foreign communities.

There is no innocent party in times of war. History is written by the winners, therefore bringing great attention to the loser's faults but conveniently excluding the wrong doings of the victors. The Japanese American Internment tested the cultures' loyalty to this nation in an extreme manner in which any Caucasian American would be greatly offended while bringing vivid attention to the unconstitutionality of the circumstance. The nearly 120,000 Japanese American people that were imprisoned in the 1940's during WWII are a tribute to a patriotic and proud culture.

Almost 50 years later, through the efforts of leaders and advocates of the Japanese American community, Congress passed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988. Popularly known as the Japanese American Redress Bill, this act acknowledged that "a grave injustice was done" and mandated Congress to pay each victim of internment \$20,000 in reparations

(Satsuki). While President Regan's formal apology and compensation was appreciated by the Japanese American community, there were only half of the 120,000 who were original detained still living to receive compensation.

The U.S. government thought they were taking measures to better protect this nation, when in the end caused the Japanese Americans interned great heart ache and lasting emotional and financial damage. While Camp Rohwer only held a fraction of the interned, and was unique in its location, name, and monument left there, the internees shared the dark experience with 110,000 other Japanese Americans. There are many published and unpublished stories among the Japanese American community on the incident, and some who would perhaps just like to forget.

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