



**The surprise attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor on Sunday, December 7, 1941, by the Japanese Navy and the subsequent panic that was most actually felt on the West Coast, precipitated a series of decisions and events by both federal and civilian authorities and the United States military that would profoundly affect the lives and fortunes of more than 110,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans residing along that coastline during the Second World War.**

**The decision by the federal government to discriminate against an entire race of people-most of whom were American citizens-solely on the basis of unfounded suspicions regarding their patriotism during wartime and their physical proximity to what was considered a threatened and vulnerable area has since been widely criticized by many legal and social scholars as one of the darkest periods in the history of both the United States**

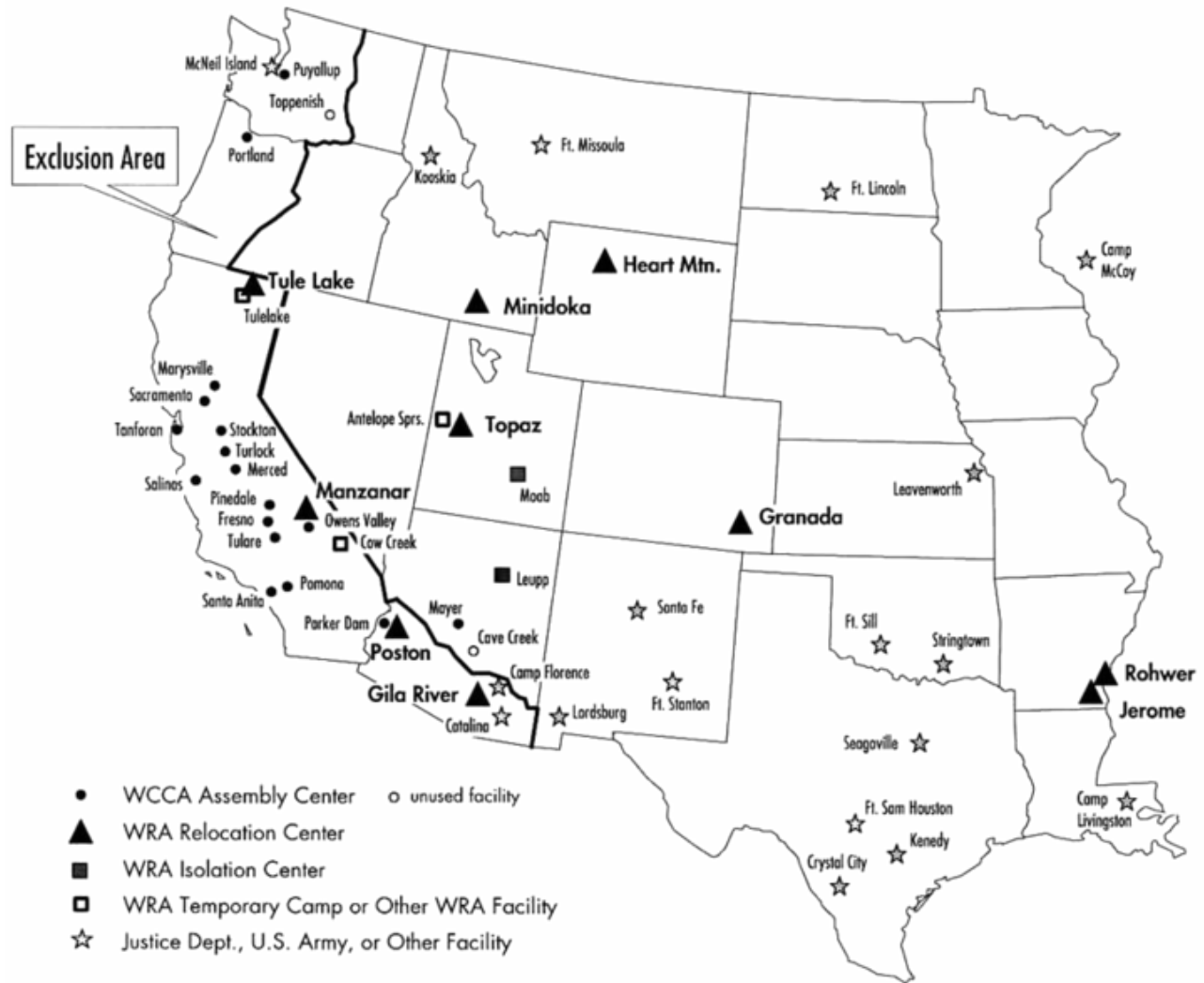
**and the Constitution, which ensures the fundamental rights of democracy and equality to all citizens.**

**On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, leading to the wartime incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese Americans. Soon after, more than 16,000 men, women, and children were shipped to concentration camps in Arkansas. They were loyal citizens, taxpayers, but most of all, they were Americans. They just didn't look like it. You thought that this couldn't happen in America, but it did.**

**The Jerome Relocation Center was located in Chicot and Drew Counties, Arkansas, 18 miles south of McGehee, and 120 miles southeast of Little Rock. The Center was named after the town of Jerome, which was one-half mile south. The official post office designation for the Center was Denson.**

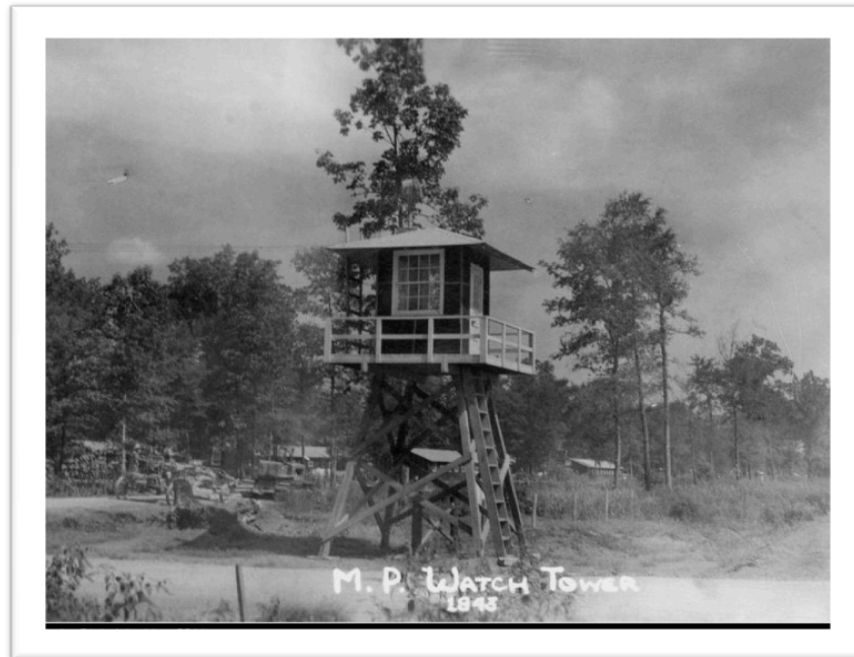


**Jerome today**



(Note: This map shows the location of all Assembly Centers and Relocation Centers.)

Jerome Camp was located in the Mississippi River delta region about 12 miles west of the river. At an elevation of 130 feet, the area was laced with cut-off meanders and bayous. The Big and Crooked Bayous flow north to south in the central and eastern part of the former relocation center reserve. Today the forests that once covered the area are now mostly gone, replaced by rice and soybean fields and fish farms.



**The center reserve encompassed 10,000 acres of tax-delinquent lands purchased through a trust agreement in the late 1930's by the Farm Security Administration (FSA). Plans had been to develop the lands by clearing trees and draining swampy areas so that they could provide subsistence for low-income farm families.**

**The roughly 500-acre central area was on the western edge of the reserve along U. S. Highway 165. Construction by A. J. Rife Construction Company of Dallas, Texas, began July 15, 1942, and the center was ready for use on October 6, 1942.**

**Jerome was chosen for closure for three reasons: it was the least developed of the centers, it had one of the smallest populations, and the nearby Rohwer Relocation Center could absorb most of the Jerome residents reducing the amount of transportation needed.**

**The Center was divided into 50 blocks surrounded by a barbed wire fence, patrol road, and seven (7) watch towers. The lonely entrances were from the main highway on the west and on the backside (east) of the center. Only the residential blocks were consistent in size, but all the blocks were on a north-south grid, except for the warehouse block which was aligned with the Missouri Pacific railroad.**

**Almost sixty percent of the internees had U. S. citizenship and approximately thirty-nine percent were below nineteen years of age. The camp had 2,483 school age children, one-third of the population. There were approximately 2061 students and ninety-five teachers. Arkansas and Japanese teachers taught the students.**

**The students excelled in their studies and the teachers had to look for sufficient materials to keep their students busy. Class attendance was excellent. They organized school clubs and honor societies, elected school officers, and published a school newspaper, and a yearbook. Friendships, dating and romances were part of the scene. The Center witnessed 103 weddings and no divorces.**

**Henry Sugimoto and his family were moved to Jerome from the Fresno Assembly Center in October 1942. Being a devoted painter/artist, Sugimoto became an art teacher at the Center's high school. At night he also taught adult classes. He was paid nineteen dollars a month. The rest of the time, he sketched and painted. Government officials used his paintings of camp life as an example to show the freedom internees enjoyed. In February 1944, his paintings were exhibited at Hendrix College in Conway, Arkansas. He and his wife, Susie, were permitted to attend the exhibit escorted by the Director of Jerome Center, Paul Taylor.**

**He and his family were transferred to Rohwer when Jerome closed June 1944. By the end of the war, the internees were allowed to reestablish themselves anywhere in the country. Being an artist, Sugimoto wanted to move to New York and their family left for Upper Manhattan in August 1945.**

**In all of his ninety years, he called several places in several countries home. He used his western-style painting to tell the story of Japanese Americans. Many institutions have housed his works and they include the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California, and the Smithsonian National Museum of American History in Washington, D. C.**

**Of the massive barracks and buildings that made up Jerome Center, all that remains is a 'relocation house', probably from administration, and the 'famous'**

**smokestack from the hospital boiler. The stack is in poor condition and internees have requested that, although it is in disrepair, the stack remain.**



**Hospital boiler house and smokestack**



**Smokestack at Jerome today**

**Jerome was the last of the centers to open, October 6, 1942, and the first to close, June 30, 1944. After the center closed, it was converted into a Prisoner of War Camp for Germans, although the POW's were confined to the central area and did not work the surrounding fields. All of Block 1 was occupied by a German general captured at the Battle of the Bulge and his orderlies. Another block was isolated from the rest of the camp to house SS troops. More than 23,000 captured soldiers were distributed among 30 POW camps throughout Arkansas.**

**When the occupants of Jerome developed a curious pride in their wartime home, were informed that they were to be sent to the Rohwer facility and their camp converted to a German POW camp, they reacted angrily. In a letter of protest to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior, Jerome internees argued they were 'actual if not technical prisoners of war' and had as much right to their camp as the Germans. They also argued**

their camp should be kept open because of the tremendous amount of physical labor they had put into the facility in order to make it livable and its psychological importance to Nissei soldiers stationed nearby. They were not protesting the closing of the camp because they wanted to remain in the hot, unhealthy, and swampy facility; rather they were protesting because they were being forced to give up their camp for the benefit of real enemies of the nation—German POW's.

A tenth grade English student at Jerome described his feelings far better than any adult could. He wrote, "Many of us feel that the mass evacuation of the Japanese, both citizen and non-citizens, in the name of military necessity was not a just and adequate way to handle the situation. They, the first generation of Issei, without the least knowledge of the English language nor the new surroundings, came to this land with the dominant pioneering spirit of settling. They worked hard to give their children the necessities of life... only to be shattered by the order of evacuation."

Florrie Wakenight Lyle spoke at the Saline County History and Heritage Society on September 20, 2012 and related her experiences as a teacher at Jerome and just after she turned 99. Following is what she shared:

'Attempt to walk in the shoes of the Japanese-Americans here before Pearl Harbor. The Great Depression was ending and things were getting better. Then you are told you will have to leave. All you can take is one suitcase per person. You have no ties to the Emperor, but you are burning family pictures from Japan because you are ashamed of being connected with your heritage.'

When she and her future husband learned of the WRA's need for teachers, she went about recruiting teachers for the camp. They had all grades for elementary school through high school.

In August 1942, she and Tom Lyle, who later she would marry, moved to Jerome, which was still being completed. The two Arkansas camps, Jerome and Rohwer, were the last centers built and the only internment facilities east of the Rockies for the Japanese-American families. The camps were placed in Arkansas because the Delta region had an 'abundance of federal land and was relatively remote but still close enough to rail lines

used to transport the internees, according to the Life Interrupted history project at the University of Arkansas at Little Rock.

By November, they came in one train at a time with the blinds closed so they could not see where they were or where they had been. She sat a perfect example to her students and showed genuine concern for the children's welfare.

Evacuees were arriving from California and Hawaii in shorts and sandals. One of those children, Ester Kinta Noguchi, who would be in Lyle's class, stated her teacher was instrumental in getting warmer clothing for them.

Noguchi, although unable to attend but interviewed by phone, expressed her feelings for her third-grade teacher she met inside the barbed-wire enclosure. 'I wanted to grow up to be like her, with her warmth and love without prejudice. She was a model for me and all who knew her. I guess I followed in her footsteps, I, too became a teacher.' Noguchi is a college professor living in Hilo, Hawaii.

Lyle had to be removed from camp for two weeks due to mumps. She returned to the camp in Jerome that held as many as 8,497 people, including 2,483 school-age children. She and Tom remained at the camp until it closed in June 30, 1944, but neither the couple nor the remaining residents went home. She and Tom went to Arizona to work at another relocation center on Gila River Apache Reservation until the end of the war.

'I told him I would marry him and go there, if I got to see the Grand Canyon and Mexico, and if I could dig my big toe in the Pacific Ocean. I went to the Grand Canyon and Mexico many times, but I never got to the Pacific.'

In 2005 she was honored by the Japanese American Museum in Los Angeles for her service to the families incarcerated at Jerome. During that celebration, Lyle was reunited with a former student, Ester Kinta Noguchi, who expressed Lyle's concern for the children's welfare. While in Los Angeles, Lyle and Noguchi made the long awaited trip to the beach and they waded in the Pacific Ocean.



**After the Lyle's left Jerome, it was used for German POW's until the end of the war in Europe. More than 23,000 captured soldiers were distributed among 30 POW camps throughout Arkansas, including Jerome, during World War II.**

**'One fact to remember is that they were Americans, like you and me. Their lives were interrupted, but they still served their country.'**



**The experiences of the POW's in Arkansas were far more agreeable than prisoners might expect, but the hostility shown the Japanese Americans represented the failure of Arkansas and the nation to come to terms with the nation's multiculturalism. Few Americans and fewer Arkansans seemed to realize that the great majority of Japanese Americans were loyal citizens and that their ancestry was not a major factor in determining that loyalty. How soon we forget.**

## **Sources**

**“My Autobiography” written by A. Higake for Mrs. Virginia Tidball, August 12, 1943. Mrs. Tidball was English instructor for the WRA at Jerome.**

**The Response of Arkansans to Prisoners of War and Japanese Americans in Arkansas in Arkansas 1942-1945. C. Calvin Smith, Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Volume LIII, No. 3, Autumn 1994.**

**Life Inside Arkansas’s Japanese-American Relocation Centers. Russell Bearden, Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Volume XLVIII, No. 2, Summer 1989.**

**Early Relocation in Arkansas to the Relocation of Japanese in the State. William Cary Anderson, Arkansas Historical Quarterly, Volume XXIII, No. 3, Autumn 1964.**

**Benton Courier, September 27, 2012, by Wayne Bryan. (He wrote the article, used in part, about Lyle. She is retired from Benton High School and recently turned 99. She is well-known in Saline County and she still participates in Veterans Day Ceremonies at the Saline County Courthouse.)**

