

Wicked Cool Stories

Portraits, Interviews and Oral Histories

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Tad Hirozawa: Portraits of Japanese-American Internment Project

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Wicked Cool Stories
Oral Histories

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Trip To Salinas From Poston

I was in the barracks that the Army engineers built and we had canvas cots and we had straw mattresses. There was a mess hall, so I volunteered to be a waiter and they made me the head waiter. And so we were there from April 20, 1942 - June 30, 1942. And then from there they sent us to our permanent internment camp in Poston, Arizona. It took us four days from June 30 to the Fourth of July. We arrived in Poston on the Fourth of July, 1942.

We left Salinas by train about midday, and we started while it was still cool and comfortable in Salinas. As we got into the valley¹ we were getting pretty warm being in end of June and we had to... we could not look outside because they made us pull the shades down. There were MP's in every train to make sure that we didn't escape or do anything bad.

The first day was rather, not enjoyable, but different. It was something that we rarely rode on a train so it was a novelty for many of the people. But as we went along, the Army had served loaded dry sandwiches for us with water. That was our lunch or dinner. I don't recall what we had for dinner, but anyway we had to sleep in the coach seat all the way down when evening came. We went through Tulare, we went through Barstow, which is part of the Mojave Desert. And it was real... getting hotter and hotter as we approached the Arizona border.

It was very uncomfortable because we were in the train for four days and we didn't have our change of clothes. We had to carry our suitcases or whatever baggage we had. And we didn't have any showers and we couldn't... our hygiene was practically nil because we had no facilities to wash or anything. However, there was restrooms in the train so we were able to take care of that. But other than that, and it was rather boring because there was nothing to do but just ride the train. We had nothing to read because all the shades were drawn and it was rather dark in there. And so it was rather ... been pretty tired from the second day on until we got to Parker, Arizona.

¹ The San Joaquin Valley.

Trip From Salinas To Poston

When we got to Parker, Arizona, we were able to raise the blinds so we could see outside. We could see the sunshine, and it was hot. And it was very hot. But we all made it. And we weren't used to the hot climate because when we were in Salinas we wore heavier clothes to keep warm. When we got to Arizona, it was so hot. We weren't dressed for the summer heat.

Once we got from the train depot in Parker they loaded us in buses, which were very ancient buses. But anyway, they put about 30, maybe less than 30 people in a bus and bussed us to the Poston camp.

And I would like to backtrack a little bit that the trains we were on were mothball trains that the government brought back into service, so it was not very first-class at all. It was just very ancient trains. And we were sidetracked, it took us four days to get to Parker because we were sidetracked every so often because of the Army soldiers... the Army train that carried the troops took priority over our trains.

But we eventually got to Parker, Arizona and from there that's the start of our internment in Poston, Arizona.

The weather during the summer in Fourth of July was quite hot. It was over 100 degrees and from Parker, Arizona we were trucked and bussed to the camp which is about five miles from Parker, Arizona. And when we got to the camp they came aboard the bus and gave us instructions on where to register and what assignment we would have on our barracks and so forth. They gave us cots and straw mattresses to take to our barracks when we were assigned. And then when we got there, it was so hot we stayed outside. We couldn't be in the... because the barrack was so hot it was like an oven. There was three camps. Camp 1, Poston 1 had a population of 10,000. Camp 2 had a population of 5,000 and Camp 3 had a population of about 5,000 too. So basically, Poston was the second largest community in Arizona at the time because Phoenix was naturally more population than... but Poston, Arizona was the second.

Conditions at Poston

When we got to Poston by bus, the instructor came aboard and gave us instructions as to where to register, and we will be assigned certain barracks. And so when we got our instructions, we were given canvas cots and straw mattresses.

It was very hot in the bus. The people were passing out left and right, and I felt a little woozy myself. But fortunately, I was young and I was able to survive the heat. Once we got out of the bus, we had a little bit more air; cooler air.

We went to our barracks after we got assigned and we found that there was no partitions or anything. So we hung up ropes and hung blankets as partitions so we would have a little privacy.

There was no faucet at all. It was just a bare room. There were latrines in between the barracks which we were able to use. However, when we got there, the barracks were just barely finished and the water system was not on a regular basis. We only had about an hour or two to take care of whatever water we needed, and they shut it off after that because they had to preserve the water because the supply was not on a regular continuous basis. We would have to make the best of the time the water was available to us.

And a few days later, we had a dust storm that came up and we couldn't see the barrack next to us, with about 10 feet between the barracks. We couldn't see the next barrack because of the dust storm.

Conditions At Poston

When the engineers built the barracks they used raw lumber, so as the wood dried up it left a floor space about a quarter of an inch. When the dust storm came, the dust came not through only the floor, but through the window sills. When the dust storm subsided, we would have a sea of dust on the window sills and on the floor. We would have to sweep it out. Since we didn't have any water, we only had to sweep it out. But we didn't have what you called real brooms, so we had makeshift brooms. We took branches to sweep out the dust and then we proceeded to build our partitions and to make the barrack a little bit more livable. It was pretty trying. When the evening came it was still very hot. We could not stand it in the barrack so we put our canvas cots outside and we slept outdoors. It was much cooler outdoors next to the barrack. But after we were able to get acclimated, we were able to go back into the barrack.

Conditions at Poston

When we got to Poston we got settled. We found no fences, no guard towers, because it would be foolish for anyone to try to escape from camp because we were in the middle of a desert and it was so hot that we couldn't survive more than a day out in the sun. Other camps had fences and guard towers, but Poston did not. The Poston internment camp was located about five miles from the Colorado River, about just east of the Colorado River in the Arizona side. And since there were no fences or any restrictions, we were able to... the young people that had the stamina would be able to walk to the Colorado River and swim in the river or fish or whatever if they had fishing equipment. But it was a different atmosphere; they were not in camp, they were, so to speak, out of camp when they were at

the Colorado River. It was very tenuous because when you went to the river, and it was still pretty warm, so on the way or coming back we got bit by what they called No-See-Ums², which is real small black insects that stuck onto your skin and sucked blood and you got pretty itchy. So that's one of the bad parts of going to. But then in our camp in Arizona, there was a lot of scorpions. And if you left your shoes open and the scorpions would go in there, you wouldn't know it and you would have to shake it before you put your shoes on because they weren't big, but they had a poisonous tail so you had to be careful. Other than that, there was no snakes, I didn't see any horned toads, but there were lizards. That was the extent of wildlife.

Weather At Poston

In the wintertime in January and February, the temperature was in the 70's which is very temperate for that time of year. Other than the summertime, the fall and winter was one of the better times that we were used to. But it got cold too, sometimes. We never did have any frost, but it got cold. I remember between the barracks, between the latrines there was a laundry room, women's and men's latrine, right in the middle of the two barracks. There [were] spaces in between the barracks. I remember there were many evenings when we didn't have anything to do. They would start a bonfire from the cottonwood lumber and we would sit around, not sit but we would stand around and talk about different things and pass the time away. It got cold in the evenings many times.

Pool At Poston

When the camp people first rerouted some of the water from the Colorado River, they made a canal that went through the two camps to supply water to the different camps. Not only did they use it for agricultural purposes but also for recreational purposes. The canal was widened in our camp so that it could be formed into a swimming pool. They took a lot of cottonwood trees. They chopped it down and they'd shade a shelter. They made a sidewalk of a side of the canal to be safe so you could just sit there and not be in the sand. So as I say, during the summertime it was a very popular area because it was so hot. People swam, I'd say, mid-day to mid-evening. In fact, I remember swimming there at midnight and it was still so hot. The water was, I would say, 60 to 70 degrees because it was so hot. And that was our recreation.

School At Poston

They built a school because the engineers did not build any schools for the internees. So the people of camp built the clay tiles, clay bricks. They made bricks out of the sand around. They made bricks every day, they built cement blocks, they built the walls, and then they had the roof put on. It was all done within the labor of camp labor. Then the camp

² No-See-Ums are also referred to as Biting Midges, Biting Gnats, Punkies or Sand Flies

supervisor sent in, like a superintendent, and all the teachers were qualified internees that had a college education. They didn't have teachers' degree, but they were college-educated and were capable of teaching younger kids. One of my classmates was a teacher in the school and educated the kids from grammar school all the way up to high school.

Neighbor Jack Matsuoka

In camp, he was a neighbor of mine in the same barrack, only in the third apartment from where I was. I was in block 2A, and I believe Jack was in block 2C. We grew up there in camp as I recall. We played basketball. He was a few years younger than I. He was not on the varsity team, so to speak, but in the grade below. But even in camp he was doing his cartoons and he had his artistic ability. After we got out of the internment camp, he studied in Japan for several years. The outcome of that, from Japan, he was instrumental in making this cartoon book, [Camp II, Block 211](#) because many people asked him, "You should put a book together." And so that's how this book came out.

Questionnaires and No-No's

Internment camp, when the Army came in to recruit soldiers, there was a big hullabaloo about pro and con of that. Among the internees there was a lot of frustration between the two sides, the 'yes' and 'no' sides, which caused a lot of anxiety and fear. Actually, some of what I called 'agitators' in camp were put in... imprisoned in camp. It was quite a bit of animosity at that time. It was kind of scary at one time but then things started to quiet down. When the questionnaire was completed, all internees who had to answer these questions, if they answered 'no no,' they were given two or three times whether to change their thinking, you know, from 'no no' to 'yes yes.' The ones that didn't change their minds, they were eventually send to Tule Lake and then all of the people at Tule Lake that were 'yes yes' people were sent out to other camps and so Tule Lake was in this lighter part of the internment camp. They were the sympathizers to Japan. They were eventually sent back to Japan. I don't know for what reason, but after a few years when the war was over, they were able to come back, because I have a cousin, a couple cousins that were sent back to Japan. But they were back in California. After the war was over, they came back.

MIS Reassignment

When I was reclassified 1A after my questionnaire answered 'yes yes' and they realized that I was loyal to this country, so when I got my induction notice I had three alternatives. Being in the infantry, the paratroops, or the MIS³, which is the Japanese language school to do interpret[-ation] in the South Pacific.

³ Military Intelligence Service - [Wikipedia](#)

When I was inducted into the army in Fort Douglas, Utah, the induction center, I was there for about a month and my name never did come up. I wasn't assigned to any basic training camp and so the sergeant asked me what my rank and serial number was. And I gave him my serial number and he said, he checked it out from the office and he says, "You are not supposed to be here. You should have been sent to Minneapolis to the MIS school." And by the time I was ready to get shipped out, the war was ending in the South Pacific. And so I was assigned one of the last classes but I never did get to Minnesota to the MIS camp.

Thoughts On Draft Resisters

A lot of internees in Heart Mountain, they were conscientious objectors but they refused to serve in the Army because... I don't blame them because they had their right. When you get interned, you're not treated like a citizen so I don't blame them for not being able to go. But I'd never been to Japan and I'm educated here in America, and I knew nothing about Japan other than what my parents told me and so I said... I answered my questions, "Yes, yes, I will serve in the Armed Forces and that I'll be loyal to U.S. and forego the Emperor of Japan." And so I don't blame the fellow internees one bit for not going.

Impact Of Internment On Japanese-American Careers

... bittersweet because it changed the lives of all the Japanese-Americans. In fact, many of them would still be in Salinas in the farm but the government forced us out to go into new areas and new careers. And so before the war, there were many college graduates that couldn't find a job because no one would hire them even though they had a college degree. They were helping their fathers working in the field doing garden, doing remedial tasks. So when the internment came, it forced us to change our lives forever. Because as I said in an earlier part, I was able to go out to Lincoln, Nebraska and I saw a different future completely there. I worked in retailing, and I would never be in retailing if I was back in Salinas although I was an inventory clerk before the war. But I wouldn't be here today if it weren't for my field that I was in and fortunately I worked for 32 years and I was in good health and I was employed steadily so I was able to educate my two kids, put them through college. I'm living the American Dream of having a home, educating my kids, and living a comfortable life.