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POSTON

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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR  
Office of Indian Affairs

COLORADO RIVER WAR RELOCATION PROJECT

Poston, Arizona

August 20, 1943

Mr. Russell T. Robinson  
Chief, Evacuee Property Office  
War Relocation Authority  
Whitcomb Hotel Bldg.  
San Francisco, California

Dear Mr. Robinson:

Enclosed find a copy of a special report which I prepared here and which was approved by the project director. This is similar to the narrative reports prepared by the Reports Officers at the various relocation centers and sent to Washington. Since this particular one concerns the work of the Evacuee Property Office at Poston, I thought you should have a copy.

Sincerely yours,

/s/ Allen Markley

Allen Markley  
Sr. Reports Officer

AM:km  
Enclosure

## COLORADO RIVER WAR RELOCATION PROJECT

Poston, Arizona  
August 14, 1943

## SPECIAL REPORT:

Many Evacuees Have Suffered Property Loss

Pathetic stories and real tragedy is written in the case histories of some of the people who have been moved from California to this desert land along the Colorado River, called Poston.

They came resenting their being sent here, as a measure of war necessity, but they came to make the desert blossom and they have re-adjusted their lives to the conditions around them. That is to say, most of them have. There are exceptions where resentment has bred hatreds which even fair treatment has not erased.

It is in the property officer's records where one will find some of the most pathetic stories. Often the savings of a lifetime have been erased by conditions over which these people have had very little control.

Many times personal property was left in the custody of people in whom the evacuee had faith, and later was to learn that it was next to impossible to recover their possessions. Numerous cases of theft and vandalism have been reported from the places where treasured possessions were stored. The WRA has had to arrange to move great quantities of personal property and household effects to Government storage, to protect their interests.

At this center now the Evacuee Property Officer has just arranged so that two evacuees may enter the restricted zone under special permit, in an effort to identify personal belongings of some 300 families. Their goods were stored in two Japanese church

buildings. Both were broken into and valuables stolen, trunks opened, boxes smashed, papers strewn about and some of the goods ruthlessly destroyed. Some cases have been reported where unknown persons breaking into storehouses have played Hallowe'en pranks by changing labels on trunks and boxes, so that if they are ultimately shipped they will go to the wrong persons.

The story of one family from a small community in Imperial County -- that is, their former home was in that community -- is typical and is repeated time and again in the case records of the Evacuee Property Office. A daughter of the family was working as a stenographer for \$16 a month for the administration of the WRA here at Poston. She had been transferred to the office of R.W. Schmitt, evacuee property officer.

One day the girl asked Mr. Schmitt this question:

"Why do people back home give our piano to the USO?"

"Well, I'm sure that you don't mind if they use the piano to entertain the boys, do you?", her employer replied.

"No", the girl said, "but I can't understand how they got it out of the house without letting us know."

Then the Evacuee Property Officer began to suspect the truth. Someone living in the community where this family had resided before evacuation had written that their piano was being used at the USO. Later when Mr. Schmitt made one of his trips to California to try and untangle some of the property affairs of the people of Poston, he included a stop at this small town on his schedule.

His first call was at the police station in the town where he inquired about the piano. He was told that it had not been turned

over to the USO. Finally after some questioning the chief of police, who claimed that the vandalism had been committed before he took office, accompanied him to the house where the family had lived -- only two short blocks from the police station.

It was a modest little home and when the family left they put padlocks on the doors. All of these locks had been removed and everything in the house had been taken away or badly damaged. There was a large oak bureau in one of the rooms, the top drawer of which had a lock. This drawer had been used by the head of the family as a place to store important papers, records, letters, insurance policies, and the few things which would make it possible for him to gather up the reins of his past life and resume his former position in the community after the war is over. This drawer had been pried open and the oak front was split. The papers had been removed and were scattered hither and yon over the room. Those things which may have been of real value were doubtless missing.

A new stove which had been the pride and joy of the mother of the house had been smashed. Most of the articles of furniture had been carted away.

"Well, they certainly cleaned this place out," declared the police officer as he strode across the room. "When I was here the last time there was a good washing machine in the corner of the kitchen. Now even that's gone."

The total cash value of the goods stolen was probably not great, but to this evacuee family it was the accumulation of worldly goods of a lifetime. It was those things with which they had lived and which had been endeared to them by their very use.

The saddest commentary on the whole situation not only in this small California town but in others where similar cases have been investigated by the Evacuee Property Officer from Poston, is that local authorities apparently do very little to restrain the vandals. The attitude has been, in too many cases, that if it belonged to an evacuee family, no one cared what happened to it. One police official in a southern California town is reported to have openly stated that he was not intending to protect property left by the evacuees.

Vandalism, serious as it has been, is not the only hardship which has caused these people material loss. Many of them were forced by the evacuation to leave tangled business affairs behind them. Often they gave a power of attorney to persons who neglected to carry out the trust.

The case of a contractor who was just finishing up a large building job in the city of El Centro, California, at the time of the evacuation, gives some idea of the difficulties encountered. All of these cases were different, but alike only in respect to their very complex nature. WRA officials are attempting to clear up some of these problems and to recover values in cases where this is possible. Luckily, in this particular case, a final settlement is apparently to be reached now, so that some \$3,500 will be paid over to the contractor and all liens satisfied.

The contract was for the erection of a block of stores and in some cases tenants had ordered extras. When the Japanese man who had the construction contract was forced to leave by the evacuation, he arranged for completion of the work. But the party for whom the work was being done was an alien and his name was placed on the list of

blocked nationals. No final payment could be made on the contract. Immediately suppliers and others began putting liens on the building. Disputes arose over bills. Affairs were in a hopeless mess and forced sale of the property was impending. Federal authorities finally stepped in and arranged for a bank to take over the property and pay off the liens. At long last a settlement with the evacuee contractor has been tentatively agreed upon.

Lately several fire insurance companies holding policies on property owned by evacuees have refused to renew these policies, basing their refusal not on discrimination against the evacuees, but that the character of the risk was changed by the absentee ownership. When the Evacuee Property Officer at Poston recently inquired if policies on property in southern California owned by evacuees, could be placed with a company in Arizona, the offer of the business was promptly and emphatically refused. Some eastern insurance companies, however, have been willing to write policies in several of these cases.

There are many cases coming up constantly where evacuees had arranged to loan farm machinery and other personal property, and are now unable to recover it. Cases where leases have failed to pay the rent. Cases where crops in the ground had been assigned by the evacuee owner and now he has been unable to get a settlement or even answers to his letters. Cases where property has been foreclosed and equities washed away. Cases where tax payments have been neglected, when evacuees anticipated that they would be paid from rentals due.

The matter of farm machinery owned by evacuees has been a difficult one. In the first place, many of the farm people wanted, at the time of evacuation, to retain possession of those machines for

future use. They made all sorts of arrangements; storing the goods in neighbor's sheds, or in some cases letting them stand in the open; loaning them to some friend or renting them for the period they would be away -- expecting to return to California -- making verbal agreements in many cases. Sometimes a hastily drawn contract would be entered into calling for certain payments of deferred notes to implement dealers or banks. Sometimes, too, they attempted to hide their ownership of the farm machinery, or to transfer title merely for the purpose of saving their property with an "understanding" that they would be able to recover it when they returned to their former homes.

When the critical shortage of farm machinery developed in California as a result of the restricted manufacture, there was a clamor from over the state for confiscation of all Japanese owned farm implements. The WRA undertook an inventory at all relocation centers. At first the evacuees at Poston were unwilling to reveal the ownership of the implements, apparently fearing that the Government would confiscate it. Some of them knew of the Army's requisition of a number of automobiles owned by the evacuees.

It took a series of meetings in the various blocks at all three units of the Poston center to convince any number of the owners of farm machinery that the WRA inventory was for their protection against threatened confiscation rather than for the purpose of it. The California newspapers which come to Poston were widely read and the articles demanding seizure of idle farm machinery "owned by the Japs", at first served only to incense the people. Later these same stories had the effect of making them willing to reveal ownership in the hope of protection.

After the California law was passed providing for the requisitioning of idle farm machinery and in effect was made to apply over the United States by the Federal authorities, there seems to have been no great resentment. Again the evacuees here at Poston accepted the outcome, although some of them who had made arrangements for use of their machinery by neighboring farmers or ranchers, hope yet to be able to retain it.

It is interesting to note that in one particular case which has been handled by the Evacuee Property Officer here, the Japanese owner who has now relocated in Colorado, may yet be able to ship his farm machinery to that state for his own use. He had arranged to farm land in Colorado and went to the County Farm agent there, on the suggestion of the Evacuee Property Officer, and secured a letter to the County War Board in California certifying that he needed the machinery for food protection.

This story has been widely circulated in Poston and other farmers here hope to be as fortunate. One evacuee who has a brother who had relocated in Colorado wanted to arrange an assignment and issue a bill of sale for his farm machinery so that his brother might have it shipped. The Property Officer here at Poston, however, refused to approve any such subterfuge and the assignment of title has not been made.

There have been a number of instances, especially in San Diego and Orange Counties, where the War Boards have moved to certify for sale to other farmers, machinery owned by Poston residents. In some cases the "red tags" would be placed only on tractors and trucks, while the evacuee farmer may have a miscellaneous collection of other

farm implements all of which would be necessary to the operation of his business prior to evacuation. To take out only the tractor and truck would so cripple the farm operating equipment as a whole so that should the evacuee return to farming on relocation, he would not have sufficient implements to resume food production. It has been pointed out in many of these cases by the Evacuee Property Officer, that the whole lot of machinery should be purchased or none of it. This has usually led to some agreement whereby the offer made and approved by the County War Board would be increased to include the harrows, cultivators, plows, etc., or a sufficiently higher price would be offered to partially at least compensate for the broken lot sale.

Evacuees have complained in some cases, that the approved prices offered through the War Boards have been lower than they would be able to negotiate at private sale. In the matter of the sale of privately owned automobiles, especially those of fairly late models, the evacuees have had better financial returns. Late model automobiles have been bringing prices considerably higher than the original cost price when new. There is no Office of Price Administration ceiling on used automobiles. This factor has worked to the advantage of the evacuee owners of cars.

All evacuee employees of the Evacuee Property Office are required to sign a pledge that they will keep all property information entirely confidential. All records are kept in locked files.

It is not uncommon to have entirely new cases come to the attention of the office although the aid rendered through this office has been available for nearly four months. Some of the residents have

several different cases, on which they need assistance. The problems presented cover every phase of human activity and some even concern the caring for the remains of deceased persons.

Prepared by: \_\_\_\_\_  
Allan Markley  
Sr. Reports Officer

Approved by: \_\_\_\_\_