

James Sakoda
Sept. 16, 1942

SCRAP LUMBER CONFLICT

D.B

At Tule Lake--as at other Relocation Centers--the construction of barracks and public buildings was still in progress when the first colonists arrived. Construction work of various sorts was indeed, carried on coincidentally with the almost daily arrival of new cohorts of colonists. Obviously, an appreciable part of the lumber consigned for building could not be used by the contractors, and a very large scrap heap accumulated. By the time the first observers on the Evacuation and Resettlement Study reached the Center (June 15th) this pile had attained a size of at least 100 feet square. 1)

To the arriving colonists, the scrap lumber represented a commodity that filled many needs. The WRA provided them with barracks containing beds, mattresses and blankets but no other household equipment. They had been prohibited from bringing their own furniture with them (although plans were made later to send for such articles). All of them needed shelves, chairs, tables and desks. These and other similar articles could be made from lumber discarded by the construction workers. Most of them wanted privacy, a measure of which could be achieved by partitioning off the one-room family apartments. Many of them desired some scope for individualizing their living quarters, and this could be done to some extent by building verandas or otherwise ornamenting the barracks. But in addition to fulfilling these immediate needs, the scrap lumber pile also represented a means of allaying one of the prevalent fears of the colonists as to what the future might hold in store. The winter

Scrap
Lumber
Conflict

1) The observers were informed that an equally large pile had been burned some time before their arrival in order to make room immediately for construction.

climate at Tule Lake is known to be severe, and fear that the government would not provide adequate fuel for heating was fostered by rumors about coal shortages and transportation difficulties.

Lumber, then, was greatly desired, both for carpentry and as a safeguard against a potential fuel shortage. For the former purpose, smooth long pieces were needed, and because of scarcity, these were at a premium. For the latter, short irregular scraps were adequate, and for quite a period, the supply more than met the demand, but eventually shortages developed even here.

No rules were laid down by the administration regarding either ownership or distribution of the lumber. It was valuable, yet it was apparently free. The struggles that developed in the definition of ownership and the resulting inequalities and disorganization form an interesting episode in the history of the Tule Lake Project. The following running account has been prepared by one of the observers, who recorded the developments from June 15th to September 15th in his daily journal:

When I arrived at Tule Lake on June 15, I was surprised at the great scrap lumber pile by the warehouses. My surprise was due partly to the fact that there had been practically no lumber available in the Tulare Assembly Center from which I had come. I went through the pile and found short good pieces for making shelves, although it was more difficult to locate long pieces that were equally as good. But during the day trucks were constantly adding new scrap lumber to the pile. Although the better ones were quickly carried away, good pieces could be found by digging under the pile of lumber. A friend, who arrived at the same time that I did and who lived close to the scrap lumber pile, was able to accumulate sufficient lumber and insulating material in the first few days to partition his apartment into three rooms, besides making furniture.

The occupants of Ward I, the only ward filled when we came, had been here from 10 to 20 days, and evidently were no longer in acute need of lumber. Many had already built furniture and porches, and had sufficient lumber stored by the barrack to use as fuel during the winter. I had probably arrived when the interest of the resident group in the scrap lumber pile was at its lowest. Only four or five persons were to be seen gathering

lumber at the scrap pile at any one time. Only the good pieces were being picked up, and there was no reason to believe that the pile would diminish soon in size. For that reason my brother and I did not give much attention to storing up lumber. We felt that it would be sufficient if we went after lumber when we needed it.

The day after we arrived people from Walerga began to come into Ward II at the rate of 500 a day, first filling up Blocks 25, 26, and 27. At the same time trucks stopped unloading scrap lumber by the warehouse near Ward I, and began to take it out to the open space on the north side of the Colony, beyond Fire Station 2, and by Ward II and III. The incoming people were in need of lumber to build shelves and furniture, but still the number out at the lumber pile was not very large. A few days after our arrival my brother and I wandered out to the new scrap pile and found several loads of scrap lumber which had been untouched, probably because everyone had gone out to eat. There was a large pile of two by fours and another of one by fours. We brought home ^{as} much of each as we could carry on one trip, and did not bother to go back for more. We still felt that lumber would always be available, and there was no need to hoard any.

For the next week we noticed increasing activity at the lumber pile. As the trucks unloaded the lumber, the better pieces were immediately

snatched up by eager hands. The quickest ones got the best lumber. Many accumulated as much good lumber as they could into a pile and laid claim to it by putting their names on the pile. Several WRA trucks were aiding the colonists in carrying home their pile of lumber. Others used wheelbarrows, often making several trips. A familiar sight was a man wheeling a load of wood, while his wife pulled the wheelbarrow in front by means of a rope. Others just carried home what they could in their arms.

But good lumber was rapidly becoming harder to get. Smooth lumber used in constructing additional units for the hospital was especially at a premium. There were also long pieces of two by fours, one by six, one by four, one by twelve, and triply wood that people scrambled for. To get these I learned that you had to be there when the truck came in with them. At first, it has been related, people waited till the lumber was thrown off the truck before they grabbed it. One afternoon my brother and I decided that if we wanted lumber to make a closet and a porch we would have to go and wait for the trucks, as the others were doing. When a truck did come in, I stood by the rear end, and grabbed good pieces as they were thrown off the truck, or pulled them out myself, and handed them to my brother who piled them up.

Then we waited for other trucks to come in, and did the same thing over again. When the pile on a truck became low, I jumped on with others and we began unloading the truck ourselves. When dump trucks came in, people were tugging at the lumber before they were unloaded, running the risk of being hurt. My sister sat on our pile and guarded it, and some of the Caucasian workers on the truck gave her some good pieces. That day we carried home three loads on a wheelbarrow.

Around June 21 the people in several of the blocks got together and made plans to store lumber for their winter fuel supply. Word was passed around that pretty soon construction within the Colony would end and the supply of scrap lumber would be exhausted. Men were recruited from various blocks to go to the wood pile and stack up lumber of any kind, and transport it back to their block. In our block, as in many others, it was stacked up between the restrooms. Where formerly it had been a scramble by individuals, collecting was now done on a wholesale scale by blocks. The scrap pile dwindled considerably, and soon nothing but little pieces could be got unless one waited for the trucks. People were still coming in from Sacramento, but most of the 5000 were here. Ikuo, a fireman stationed at Firehouse 2, describes the increasing competition for scrap lumber in the following fashion:¹

"At first the truck brought out the lumber and dump it on the ground, and people picked it up from the ground. Then they began to pick pieces off the truck before they were dumped. Soon some began to jump on the truck in order to pick out the good lumber for themselves. Finally, the more aggressive learned to jump on the truck at the edge of the field and throw off the good pieces while the truck was moving toward the scrap pile and have their relatives and friends pick up the pieces for them."

On June 24, the day before the final group from Walerga came in, it was announced that colonists would be allowed to go after lumber only after six p.m. This was done probably because of the danger involved when colonists were jumping on the trucks and grabbing lumber before they were unloaded. It was obviously a fairer way, for more people would have an opportunity in getting at least a few pieces of good lumber, instead of the few aggressive ones snatching most of the good ones. That evening I went to see how the new system was working. I was too late to get in on the start. Some people were carrying home good long pieces, and others were running toward the pile. People were clustered around the pile like flies, and when I got there, I looked in vain for decent pieces. Ikuo, the fireman, relates:¹

"Then the rule that noone was to get lumber until 6 p.m. was put into effect. The wardens had a difficult time in holding the line back till six. The firemen tried to help them. But about 5:45 someone yelled, "Let's go!" and the whole mob broke through the cordon of guards. There have been some complaints that people would go into the scrap pile with a requisition filed at the office to get lumber for recreational purposes, and then carry off more pieces for themselves and deliver them at their apartment than they got for recreational purposes." On June 30 I wrote in my journal:

"I heard that the dash for lumber at six p.m. was something to see, so I went out there after 5:30 without eating. There weren't very many people when I got there, and I felt rather sheepish about being there. If I had thought that I was only an observer, I wouldn't have felt that way, but I was there as another of the group, and figured on getting some lumber for myself, too. I sat down in the shade by myself. The guards had been increased from the original four to I don't know how many. But not very many people appeared, it was remarked, and the guards noted that there wasn't very much good lumber out there in the pile. I saw Dr. Jacoby, Chief of Internal Security, out by the road in a car, and went to speak to him.

"Dr. Jacoby seemed to be taking quite an interest in the phenomenon, too. He said that Sunday there were only four guards and a lot of good lumber and a large crowd. The line broke through the guards before the time was up. Monday the crowd was orderly and the line was held back till the set time. Today people came up and tried to get the guards to let them in, but they said nothing doing because the boss was around, meaning Dr. Jacoby. Today he noticed that there weren't many people gathered. The lack of good lumber and the fact that they figured that the line wouldn't be able to get into the pile till six were probably factors accounting for it. At six the line made a running dash for the lumber, only to find that there weren't very many good pieces to be had. My brother was there when I hurriedly left Dr. Jacoby and got to the pile myself. We came across what appeared to be a pile of slats for a venetian blind, and we picked up a load and also a few odd pieces. I tried to find some tar paper for our porch roof, but could find only a little piece. Our load, however, was heavy. Many people were digging around for pieces when we left,"

On July 6 I noted:

"I went out to the scrap pile to see whether there would be a rush for lumber at six, but found out that for some reason or another there wasn't. A few people were searching the pile for scrap pieces, and at about six a few more came. Evidently they are not holding

back the line till six now. Perhaps there is not enough good lumber being dumped to bother about now." Evidently construction had ended, and no more scrap lumber was being produced. The scramble on the scrap lumber pile had ceased. Gradually even small pieces were carted home by colonists, till nothing was left of the original pile.

In the meantime lumber accumulated by the various blocks and piled up between restrooms was condemned as a fire hazard by the Fire Department. I donot know how other blocks got rid of their pile, whether it was the same sort of mad rush which characterized the dividing of the larger scrap lumber pile, but in Block 25, (my block) it was done cooperatively and with some planning. The journal ~~account~~ for June 28 gives a clear account of this:

"The piles of lumber gathered by the blocks were condemned by the fire department and an announcement was made by the block manager in the mess hall that they were to be taken away. His announcements are never clear, so that I still don't know whether he outlined how they should be distributed. My brother and I thought that it would be again a matter of first come first served. We got to the pile and began to select good ones for ourselves, but we noticed that others were merely piling up all of the lumber into eight piles, from each large pile. (There were two

piles, and enough small piles were made so that there would be one for each barrack.) We felt funny just getting our own, but we brought home a load each, anyway. Then I returned and helped the others pile up the lumber into separate piles. I finally caught on that they were dividing the scrap lumber so that each barrack would get its due share, since the whole thing was gathered by the block as a whole. Then each apartment came after its share laid aside for its barrack, and the whole thing worked out cooperatively and fairly."

After the six P.M. rule was put into effect loads of good lumber continued to be unloaded in various blocks at different times. The pattern of behavior was similar, however, the first ones usually grabbing as much as they could, leaving nothing for the late-comers. One load of smooth one by four pieces which was brought to our block was carefully piled up between the restrooms, with the advice from the block manager that it would be used as necessity arose. But the pile disappeared before we could get any at all. On June 27 several loads were dumped in front of our barrack and my journal relates:

"Two loads of good lumber were dumped in front of our barrack. The first time we were inside and learned about it too late. The second time I was out shaving, and again missed out. Interesting accounts

of the rush to grab as much as possible are going around. My sister says that there was one fellow with such a big pile that he couldn't possibly take them all home at once. So he just sat there on his pile. She thought that he might give her some, but he didn't seem to notice her. Another story told by an Issei is that a man grabbed a great/~~many~~^{many pieces} and began to pile them up behind him. When the original pile was all taken he looked behind for his pile, which had dwindled considerably in the meantime. He saw some other piles which he thought might be his and inquired, but learned that they belonged to other people. He was puzzled, because he was sure that he had piled up more than the little bunch that he ended up with. Other loads were dumped in different sections of the Colony, and we could see people scurrying this way and that. My brother and I thought we might go after some for ourselves and started out, but not knowing which way to go, on second thought, we gave up the quest."

An interesting sidelight is thrown on the scrap lumber conflict by cases of "stealing" lumber, where the ownership was more definite than in the case of the scrap lumber. On June 15 in the Dispatch Colonists were warned to keep away from all construction areas:

"Good lumber is not to be used at any time for making furniture. Wood for the scrap pile is available to anyone wishing to do carpentering work. Please take notice."

This was written before the Sacramento group came in, and hence applicable to the occupants of Ward I, who had had access to sufficient scrap lumber for most purposes.

On June 27, after the Sacramento group had all arrived, an article appeared on the front page of the Dispatch, declaring:

"LUMBER AFFAIR SERIOUS, COUNCIL WARNS

A serious situation arising from continuous missing of screens and lumber belonging to the building contractors in the Project was the center of discussion at the special Community Council meeting held Thursday night with Morton Gaba, Community Activities Supervisor, presiding in the absence of Gerry Wakayama, chairman.

It was suggested to have block managers make a house-to-house canvass explaining the situation, and to place wardens at all areas under construction.

The Army, it was reported, warned that unless the matter was immediately attended to it may be necessary to import a group of soldiers to guard the material.

The Council also discussed an important matter concerning the large wood piles the residents have collected between the buildings near laundries in their blocks. Fire Marshall Rhodes is about to condemn these piles as a safety precaution.

Gaba informed the Council that a contract with a lumber mill for wood supply for the colony is completed and assured the residents a sufficient fuel

supply without piling wood in the alleys. He suggested thatⁱⁿ each block residents fill their boxes with wood from their pile and leave the remaining to other colonists. This suggestion is now under consideration by the different blocks and decisions will be made."

On the same day appeared this amusing item under the caption of WARDEN'S DILEMMA:

"A warden was confronted with a peculiar problem recently. Detailed to guard the new building materials, he saw three women disappearing into a pile of new lumber. Upon confronting the vandals with the hope of returning the possession, he was startled by an enthusiastic cry, "Gee, you're just in time. Will ypu pile these on your trucks and take them to my apartment?"

"Needless to say, the lumber was duly returned. 'It was a ticklish situation,' declared the warden. Cooperation on the part of the people would eliminate such embarrassing moments for hard-working wardens."

There have been other instances of stealing. Occupants in Ward V have complained that not only were they left without enough scrap lumber to make shelves, but that even their fire wood boxes were stolen. The first batch of lumber designed for ping-pong tables was reported missing. A keg of nails also disappeared from the fire station. There have been reports that even table tops in unused messhalls were ripped off.

More recently a respectable newcomer stripped stoves in front of empty apartments of their wooden crates to make necessary furniture. In some apartments sheet-rocks were found hoarded. In each of these cases the same disorganized pattern of behavior seems to be repeated in slightly modified form.

Public Opinion

On July 8 after most of the rush for the lumber was over because of the lack of scrap lumber, an editorial was written by Howard Imazeki on the "complete lack of social consciousness when they go about collecting scrap lumber in the yard." He said in part:

"Their attitude and conduct in messhalls and their spirit of helpfulness on matters affecting their blocks and neighbors have already won sincere commendation from the administration office.

"But their conduct and manifestation of rugged individualism at the scrap lumber yard is anti-social to say the least. It is sickening to watch them "go to town" like a pack of wolves go after prey.

"It is hard to imagine that a group of Japanese people could be so selfish and so forgetful of their dignity as they do in the lumber yard. But the scene is repeated day after day.

"Students of social pathology call it mass psychology. But this is no time for an editorial

writer to discuss the situation disinterestedly. It is a subject for the Community Council to take immediate action in cooperation with block managers."

This feeling of disgust toward the whole scrap lumber spectacle is certainly not the opinion of one person alone. My brother and I would not have gone out after the lumber and done our share of grabbing, if it could have been done in a more civilized fashion. At first we missed good pieces of lumber because we stood around and were not aggressive enough. We had to make a closet and a porch, and faced with the necessity of getting good pieces, we plunged in for the lumber as others were doing. But the feeling of being silly did not leave me, except in the heat of grabbing. Tony, working on the agriculture technician staff, was urged by his mother to get some more lumber, but he refused to on the ground that "he didn't want to make a fool of himself."

On July 11 another editorial, this time quoting Mr. Shirrell, the Project Director, appeared in the Dispatch:

DON'T HOARD LUMBER

"There is no necessity for residents of Newell to hoard kindling wood or scrap lumber," Elmer L. Shirrell, project director, said today. There will be a sufficient supply of both wood and coal for cold weather.

"Details of provisions for fuel was described by Gilbert L. Niesse, chief, administrative

division, as follows:

"At the present time, we have our requisition to the Quartermaster at Oakland for 57,600 tons of coal, which is a year's supply for this project ...!"

By this time there ^{was} ~~were~~ no more lumber to make furniture to be gotten. People coming in from Marysville could find no lumber available. For those who came later from the white zone and from Pinedale it was the same story. On the other hand, occupants in Ward I had much furniture and elaborate porches, and many of them also had stacks of good lumber hoarded away. Many felt that it was unfair of these people to hoard lumber, when others were in acute need of material to build necessary shelves, chairs and tables. Some of the new arrivals were able to obtain lumber from friends who had some stored away, but the majority of those in Ward I (who had lumber) were from the northwest, and did not know the incoming Californians. Nothing happened. The piles of hoarded lumber are still there.

Fearing public opinion my brother and I accumulated only sufficient lumber to make the furniture we needed and the porch. Although we are the only family in our barrack that has a porch, our woodpile is smaller than that of most apartments. Some of the better pieces of lumber that remained we gave to our sister who came in later.

In analyzing this spectacle of disorganization some of the important factors involved should be kept in mind. These may be briefly summarized as follows:

Uses of the lumber Two general uses of the scrap lumber can be listed. One was for various kinds of furniture, partitions, porches, and other household articles, both necessary and ornamental. For these purposes smooth lumber and good long pieces were at a premium. The other purpose was for storage for winter purposes. For this scrap pieces were sufficient. These two uses created an acute demand.

Scarcity of lumber There was always a scarcity of good, smooth, long lumber, even before the Walerga group started to come in. After the latter group started to come in, there ^{wasn't} ~~were~~ enough lumber to go around, and only the smarter ones were getting the better sorts. There was a fear of depletion because it was known that construction within the Colony would come to an end.

Lack of ownership In the outside world people were not used to seeing anything with value not being owned by someone. To most colonists the scrap lumber apparently had no owner. While a few realized that it belonged to the community as a whole, no method was worked out to put this novel idea into effect, except, at a late stage, when a blockwise distribution of accumulations was effected. With the necessity and scarcity of scrap lumber existing, there

was need for determining private ownership.

Determination of ownership Since no definite ruling was laid down as to which lumber belonged to whom, the most aggressive obtained the best and most lumber. Ownership was claimed by merely going into the pile and stacking up the desirable pieces in a pile. With increase in competition, method of claiming ownership became more aggressive, till finally people were clambering on the trucks before **they** came to a stop. Lumber which had been gathered by an organized group of block workers ~~was~~ thought to belong to the block as a whole.

Feeling of disgust Through the rush there seems to have been a feeling of shame and silliness on the part of participants and disgust on the part of those who looked on. While it may have deterred many, the need for getting lumber was too great to restrain the majority. After the mode of claiming ownership was determined by the more aggressive ones, those who desired lumber had to follow suit. Those who weren't willing to make the dash at 6 p.m. after that ruling went into effect, just could not get hold of any good pieces.