

Nov. 6, 1942
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"COLONISTS IN WYOMING"

As the first light breaks the darkness, the roosters of a concentration camp suddenly come to life. First one, then another, then a chorus of dishes rattle and clatter the call to breakfast. It is partly clouded, and the deep pink in the Eastern sky suddenly gives way as the whole heavens blaze. The eyes are pulled up and up, above the drab barracks and the drab countryside, to this spectacle of the Great Plains. The color dies as quickly as it had lived. For a moment the whole world is gray, and then the sun catches the snow on the mountains to the southeast.

Inside the black barracks the people stir. Some groan and roll over. Others push back the covers and slip quickly into their clothes. Grabbing towel and toothbrush, they go outdoors where the bits of snow and ice crunch under their feet. "Cold," they say to one another, and hurry towards the warmth of the latrines. Soon they are lining up to get breakfast: grapefruit, cold cereal, French toast, coffee.

As the sunlight reaches the camp, a bell on one of the barracks starts ringing and the kids come down to school. Lacking a schoolhouse, they sit in barracks all day, many on benches without backs, sharing textbooks because there aren't enough to go around. The teachers try to get along under the primitive conditions, finding their classes noisy because the partitions separating the rooms are flimsy-- don't go up to the roof.

Over in the Administration Building the block administrators get together for their daily meeting. Appointed by the W.R.A., this group is all Nisei. It carries out the minor functions of government, taken the complaints of the people to the Administration. Like any governing body that doesn't have much power, its members sit and smoke and joke and appoint committees. The Isseis, who are not eligible to be block administrators, serve on a block council. And the people laugh, and call the block administrators stooges and the block council blockheads, for they know who really runs the government.

Out in a corridor two Caucasian members of the Administration talk with each other about the colonists. Unlike the army which ordered the evacuation, most of the W.R.A. staff want to see the Japanese really relocated. One of these men is from Washington and tells how well former colonists who have gone out under student relocation have fared. He hopes the W.R.A. will work on public opinion so that more and more colonists can get out. And the administrators are tall, clean-cut Caucasians who are rather embarrassed when they are asked why the camps are called "partnership enterprises", because they know as well as anyone the difference between voluntary partnership and coercion.

And two of the people overhear a snatch of their conversation as they pass, and one mutters: "Colonists! Jesus Christ! I wonder if they call tigers pussy cats?"

As the morning goes on, the sun becomes warmer and now it falls full on the ground which forms the streets and the spaces between the barracks. And the puddles of water which had been frozen hard all night long begin to melt. When a boot lands on them, they crack and break, and muddy water spurts up over the toe of the boot. Then the millions of little frozen water particles in the earth that had been holding the ground firm and hard, these too begin to melt, and the ground softens. As the sun continues to shine on it, and the people to walk over it, it becomes muddy. The people's feet get wet and dirty whenever they step outside a building.

Two nisei girls walking across the camp jump and slide in the mud, and try to keep in the shade of the barracks where the ground is still firm. They are social workers. Social workers in a place like this? What does a social worker do to prevent juvenile delinquency when kids are suddenly jerked from normal life to this? Recreation? When there's no item in the budget for recreational material and the recreation halls are even used as offices: Education? When they promise us school buildings and good equipment and we don't get them? Worthwhile work? When the majority of the jobs they give us are so meaningless that most of the kids act as if they were doing time?

How can you teach democracy in a concentration camp? Or praise American labor standards where people get \$4 for a 44-hour week and nothing for overtime? Or talk about racial equality when the Caucasians on the W.R.A. staff are setting up a whole Jim Crow system of their own?

Lodit these little boys. They used to worship football players. Remember when you were a little kid, how every little boy has a hero? Now they follow the toughest gang leaders, and the gangs get tougher and fight one another and steal lumber. New gangs are formed, and they look at the girls more often.....Lookit that girl, most gregarious damn person I ever saw. But even she needs to be off alone sometimes--but she never can. We're not individuals here, but cogs that eat and sleep and work and live all alike.... Lookit that mother---she used to be the core of her family, providing the meals, training her children, those little things that build a family unity. Now other people throw food us, the kids no longer eat with the parents, but learn their manners from the roughnecks, run wild most of the time. What kind of people will we be if our families break up?.....

I read in a paper how a minister said we oughta be satisfied because we were being well fed and housed and given a chance to work. Is that all living means to that guy? Is life just getting your belly filled and a hoe put on your hand? Betcha that same fellow talks a lot about liberty and spiritual values when he's thinking about Hitler!.....

And the social workers walks on across the camp. People change slowly, but being social workers, they can see the change. And the sun cuts into the shade of the barracks, and more and more of the ground becomes muddy and soft.

Down by the mess halls, the people line up for lunch. One of the girls tells a story she had read in a paper about a barber named Vic. Vic liked to show people his draft registration card, because on it ^{he} was checked as a member of the draft white race. The color of his skin was black, but he was a Cuban. Often when he went into restaurants or bars, the proprietor would shout: "Scram! We don't serve niggers here!" Then Vic would produce the little piece of paper which was his passport to equality, and invariably the proprietor would feel like a dolt. And the proprietor should feel like a dolt. Does a colored man have to be a foreigner to get equality in this democracy? What is the race line? Obviously it isn't the color line---Vic's case proves that. So does the familiar fact that a Negro who wears a turban can ride in the same streetcar with Southern white folks. Is it a hat prejudice? Is it a draft card prejudice?

And the people laugh at the story, because they have learned to laugh at the things that hurt them most. Whenever anyone mentions that they may stay here permanently, "like Indians on a reservation," everyone always laughs. But they do not think the subject of Indian reservations is funny.

What is the race line? The people would like to know. They tell about the time the Elks had a party for the teachers -- but only the Caucasians were invited. The next day, one of the women (Caucasian) was telling another of the women teachers (Nisei) what a wonderful party they had had. The first Nisei girl smiled and laughed, but later she went home and cried.

And they tell about the two washrooms at the Pomona Center. Over the big washroom was a sign which read: "Caucasian Administrative Staff Only," and over the little washroom, "Japanese Administrative Staff Only."

Then there's the story about the Caucasian history teacher who told her class: "Today we will study the Constitution." And the class laughed and tittered so that they never did.

And the people who have been hurt make cracks about the number of Jews on the W.R.A. staff, and they say to one another: "Did you see the two new Hebes who are here?" And they make disparaging remarks about Negroes, and point out the economic degradation of the Mexicans.

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In the afternoon many persons crowd into the "Courthouse" for a public forum. The Niseis who run it have hopefully hung a sign which proclaims Voltaire's famous statement about free speech. Toward the end of the speech a Caucasian walks in, and one woman whispers to another: "Here comes an administrative stooge. Now we can't say what we want." But the other, sizing the newcomer up, disagrees: "Naw, he's only a kid highschool teacher."

The discussion begins, and the chairman is nervous. He wants it to be frank enough to satisfy the people, but is scared of

future censorship if it gets out of hand. A tall, lean fellow with a block goatee rises again and again. "Are you going to participate in this camp government? Do you still think you're citizens of this country? Do you have the right of citizens? Isn't the government just going to coddle you and make you into another bunch of people on an Indian Reservation? Or will they ship you all back to Japan? What sort of jobs could you get if you could go outside? What are you, citizens or Japs? Or are you donkeys?"

The fears that lurks in the people have been touched, and they stir nervously. The chairman raps for order. A block administrator jumps up: "I read in a novel once where Kathleen Norris or some one said a man and his wife with chickens could live on the praries as happily as in New York City. We've got plenty of prarie here. All we need is the chickens!"

The crowd roars. The chairman relaxes a little. The talk goes on, and Niseis ask each other about Nisei problems and discuss "Japanese-American Salvation," as if the Japanese-American problem was the only problem in an otherwise unimportant world.

It is Hallowe'en, and across the camp are many parties. In one mess hall, gay streamers enliven the walls, and the people crowd together as the orchestra comes in. Ten Nisei boys, each wearing a red-and-black-checked flannel shirt, and a girl at the piano, start to play remarkably good music. But no one dances. Finally a boy says to a girl: "Hell! Let's dance!" The ice is broken, and the floor is suddenly jammed with couples dancing or watching a hot jitterbug exhibition. People laugh and joke, and a boy says to a girl he is dancing with: "I almost forget where I am!" "I never do," the girl replies, as the smile goes from her face.

Sitting on a bench in one corner watching are Caucasian members of the Administrative personnel. Everyone else is standing, for there are no other seats. Every so often one woman in a fur coat stands on the bench to get a better view, and waving her corsage, shrills gayly at her Caucasian companions below. Several of their faces are flushed, their breaths heavy with the aroma of wine. Liquor is strictly contraband within the camp, and the people turn and look and turn away again.

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What will these camps produce? Out of them can come leaders and prophets, men and women of great faith and great patience, blazing new paths in overcoming racial prejudice. Will the hardship burn and temper their faith and make it strong? Will there be men like Phillippe Vernier, whose love and strength came out of four years of solitary?

The people do not know. In one of the barracks, a late bull session is going on around the warm stove. "It's too easy," said one boy. "We get food, there's no rent to pay, the routine is deadening. Everything leads to a degenerative life instead of an invigorative one. Everyone is grabbing for himself. We grab

the coal, grab bits of wood lying around, grab for clothing allotments, grab our food. No wonder the little kids are getting so that they do it, too, and think only of themselves. No wonder we're apathetic and ingrown."

The people walk quickly home through the sharp cold of the night. The ground is hard under their feet along the brightly-lighted streets and alleys. From a thousand chimneys the harsh coal smoke tries to rise, curls under the weight of the cold air, and settles like a blanket close to the ground. A train whistle sounds in the darkness. Music comes from a guard tower where a bored soldier listens to the radio. From the floodlights a oatheof light surrounds the camp.

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