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Return to Mrs. Down *(Bio of evac)*
Parade

THE NISEI BEGIN AGAIN

It is seventeen miles from the railroad station of Parker, Arizona, out to the Colorado River Relocation Project called Poston. Most of the way lies through an Indian reservation, along a rough, unpaved road from which rose clouds of dust. My two companions on the army "lorry" that serves as a bus to the Project were Caucasians who had traveled the road before, and at once put handkerchiefs to their noses. I disdained such a gesture; I guessed I could stand a little dust again! I still liked to call myself a desert rat. Had I not spent many of my younger years in the state? But finally I, too, had to use a filter.

I had come over from California to spend a few days at Poston for several reasons: natural curiosity to see a place so much discussed, friendly interest in the Nisei, a desire to get journalistic copy on a subject that is controversial. I told myself that ten or twenty years from now there would be mighty few Caucasians who could say "I was there".

My first day in the Project was a week long in impressions and information received. Much has been written of the physical aspect and the way of life in the ten camps established by the War Relocation Authority. No doubt if one has read of any one he has read of the other nine. I had not been there a day till I realized that the hospitable people in the administrations offices were trying to tell me that really the big story now was relocation. Of course I had known that relocation was in full swing, but my mind was fixed on the panorama of life in camp and the reaction of the evacuees to it. What was it doing to them? I had thought that was my major question.

It is a vastly important one. But if the psychological effect of

camp life is bad, then the faster we get them out on their own the better, and we must concentrate now on that. Even after I got to that point, I was so busy absorbing a hundred facets of the scene that I could not organize my thinking toward that day when the evacuee went forth to his new life in a strange locality.

So for two days I went around like a child at a fair. Oh, I didn't forget that it was a fair built on other people's misfortunes, but it was all fascinating! Everyone was exceedingly helpful and friendly, the Caucasian administrative personnel, the nice Nisei office assistants, the evacuees I met on trips around the wide-flung camp areas who cheerfully gave me directions and often voluntarily chatted a bit, the Japanese-American friends I had known back in our mutual home town whom I was so pleased to see again. ^FI shall always remember the latticework arbors made from the desert ironwood; the flowers and rock pools around the tarpaper-covered barracks; the Plymouth Rock and Rhode Island Red and White Leghorn hens in the poultry yards that already furnish half the egg supply for the 13,000 people left in camp; the Junior High School play, "Growing Pains"; the lunch at a Japanese mess hall on Sunday with no dessert or drink and my hosts buying butter and jam in my honor (army rations?); the Girl Reserve Recognition and Ring Ceremony, with all the girls dressed in white and singing "Follow the Gleam"; the Buddhist young people's meeting in English with its flower-filled altar; the adobe school buildings that even mothers and grandmothers helped to repair when the storm of last August took off some roofs; the frail, white-haired old lady in the only kimono I saw, who wanted to go home to Japan to die, but who had to wait for another ship; the school children saluting the flag - let's see, how does it go? - "I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America, and to the Republic for which it stands, one nation indivisible, with liberty and justice for all".

It was on my third day that the Project librarian was taking me on a tour of the public, school and departmental libraries throughout the three camps (Poston is built in three units, each four miles apart). "This is

the Relocation Library for Camp III", she said, pointing to a couple of shelves of books in the alcove of that unit's administrative office. They consisted of the series of volumes written by the Writer's Project of the WPA, each one describing and illustrating a state of the union or a large American city. There were also maps and atlases, railroad timetables and advertising folders. Here was material for the relocation officers to consult. Here was America in a nutshell for those evacuees who were considering areas of relocation. Here they could open a door for a pre-view of that new world of the rest of America outside California. Perhaps they could weave enough glamour about a locality to tide them over those first lonely weeks as a stranger in it.

Probably no one but a librarian could realize how that little shelf of books could illuminate and orient the whole subject for me. In an instant relocation did become my big story, and I could scarcely wait to talk to those who could tell me the most about it. They gladly took time from their busy day (those people work like Trojans), and this is what they told me.

Before relocation was ever started, extensive surveys were made of the aptitudes and training of the evacuees, and records were collected of their attitudes toward Japan and affiliations with any Japanese organization, political, commercial or educational. So that considerable information was available about each person of Japanese descent. The WRA organized a corps of field officers to study the whole country with the possibilities of relocation in mind. Under these people worked a corps of local officers, both groups being Caucasian. With this preliminary work accomplished, it is possible to do a much better job of placing people. Each camp has a man in charge of relocation from that end. Besides an assistant, he has a leave officer, relocation advisers, interviewers, and escorts to go along with persons who must travel through restricted military areas.

Field estimates of job opportunities come in regularly from some

areas, as for instance the big cities like Chicago. Often definite offers come from smaller communities, businesses or individuals. When this happens, the community is carefully checked by the field officers for attitudes on acceptance of the Japanese. No one is relocated in a community where there is evidence of hostility, though of course a few mistakes have been made on this.

Job offers are posted daily, and interested people come to inquire. If the person decides he would like to try a certain job, he applies for relocation. His record is checked from every possible angle, and if nothing is found against him, he is allowed to go, at least for a trial period.

Sometimes the individual comes in and asks for relocation. If he wishes to go to a particular area, it is checked for possible openings. Or if he has no special choice, all fields are queried. The relocation office is trying to get away from definitely assigning a job to a person before he leaves camp, as the evacuee is usually much happier when he goes into a job he has found for himself. Some take temporary jobs, hoping that later they will find niches that suit them better.

There has been little difficulty in gaining acceptance of the Japanese in the larger cities like New York, Chicago, Denver, Salt Lake, Cleveland. New England has been tolerant and many Mid-West and Eastern areas. The Scandinavian and the Mormon communities have been particularly hospitable. But the Southern states have not been friendly, probably because they have all the race problem they wish to handle, and because they are anti-anything not Caucasian. One should not forget, however, that Japanese-American training post at Shelby, Mississippi. I do not know what the local attitude is toward it, but at least wives are able to join their husbands there. Innumerable small towns in the Mid-West (Kansas, for example) have evidenced strong objection to any infiltration of people of Japanese blood. Delaware was originally on the list as accepting relocation, but later events made it a ~~closed~~ ^{difficult} area. Northern Utah and Northern Colorado have reached the saturation point in accepting the Nisei and are now

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open
closed to them on a limited basis.

No state wishes to accept so many that it would upset the political or economic status quo. Arizona, for instance, is next to the bottom of the list in population, and fears a post-war minority that might vote as a bloc. No one may relocate there now, but the present theory on the subject seems to be that any Japanese who lived there when war was declared may come home, but they do not plan to take overflows from other states.

Here we come to a situation that has made things difficult in the administration of Poston. Arizona has always felt that she had many reasons to be annoyed with her larger, richer neighbor to the west (Colorado River water is one instance of a high-tension subject of long standing). She objected in the beginning to the formation of "enemy alien" camps within her borders, saying that California had no right to dump excess population on other states. But though the camps have now been established for two years, the ill-feeling towards them still exists. Things are a little better in the Gila Valley Project (that's strong Mormon country), but around Parker the general public is still antagonistic, though there is evidence lately of a lessening of feeling in some quarters, particularly among the religious and cultural groups. (A group from the Woman's Club recently came out to visit, and just a day or two before my arrival an organization had sent in asking for someone to entertain on a program. A cute little six or seven year old boy went in as an ambassador. He sang "This is My Flag".)

The Christian homes in the Projects have been ^{among} the leaders in relocation. I suppose that the very fact of having adopted a Western religion makes them feel more at home in an Occidental environment. Also there is always a group to which they can turn for companionship and understanding. The Buddhists are not so likely to find an affiliation. Very few Christians

but went to Tule Lake.

later was
promoted when KRA intervened & explained the situation
All in all there have been few "incidents" involving the Japanese when they went outside. One boy in St. Louis was kept out of school.

Usually any discrimination shown is in restaurants and stores by refusal of

service. There are reports that even Nisei in uniform have occasionally been thus snubbed, but there are also many stories of a most friendly reception.

Some families go out one by one. In one family a boy went into the army and two of his brothers went outside to work. Three sisters went to Chicago. This left the mother alone in camp, but after a while the oldest brother returned and took his mother out to a sister who had lived in Utah before the evacuation.

Some of the relocated evacuees return. At the present time an average of about forty go out every week and about four return. Many of these latter are wives whose husbands have been drafted. Some come back because of illness or some other emergency among members of the family. A few cannot adjust themselves to a new environment and occupation, or become discouraged from the effort relocation takes. Some of these latter are ready to go out again after a stay among friends and families.

At present there is some lull in relocation activities. About 3000 have already gone out, among them practically all the college trained and especially skilled persons. Many young couples hesitate to start life outside till they know whether the husband will be drafted or not. The Japanese atrocities announcement gave pause to some, for they know that prejudice against all Japanese was at fever-height at that time. A few of the younger ones, after two years of adjustment to life at the Project, have become almost too well adjusted, so that they would really rather stay in camp than make the plunge to the outside. It is the job and purpose of the administrative personnel to make the center live up to its name of Relocation Project, so that they are constantly urging the younger ones to take the step, most of them even being anxious to send out their own most valued assistants, and there is no greater unselfishness than that!

About 2000 at Poston are on the "stop list", simply a list of people who cannot leave without further hearing. These are not necessarily persons against whom there is any suspicion, but merely Japanese whose past record

and experience might lend itself to question by someone. A Nisei might have been taken to Japan for a time in childhood, and there are a dozen other possible reasons for inclusion in the list. However that may be, it is right that all these reasons be thoroughly run down. And they are, very, very carefully, until the exact status is established.

One family was ready to go, but at the last minute the father was put on the stop list. He is still in camp, and his family has been located a year now. They keep hoping he will be able to clear his record up and be able to join them. He probably will in time, but the incident shows how careful the examining committees are.

Many evacuees relocate into colleges. There are more Nisei in college now than ever before. About forty-five per cent of those relocated are women, though many of the latter have gone out merely to join their husbands at military camp. A lot of girls have gone to nursing school or have become nurses aides.

Farming was one of the chief occupations among the West Coast Japanese, but they have not done so well with this in other sections. Crops are different, soil is different, marketing methods are different. It is hard for a farmer to adjust himself to this at first, so that the general tendency has been to go out to farm labor or to share-cropping until the new methods and conditions can be learned.

Factories have taken many, even some defense factories. For instance, a radio technician is now working on ~~critical materials~~ in a defense plant as a radio man. Another Poston Nisei, Smoot Katow, was an engineering graduate, who at the time of evacuation was working on the 200-inch telescope at California Institute of Technology. He was one of the few Japanese-Americans who had secured a real engineering job in California. He is now in Chicago in defense work. He was out a while when someone wanted a complete investigation, but he is now back in the plant. A good many men have gone out to jobs as automobile mechanics. Two shoe repair men now manage shops. Doctors have been very easily placed.

In general, secretaries have had the most immediate placement of anybody. The Japanese, with good memories and close attention to detail, make good clerical workers. Also they have a polite way with the public and an unobtrusive manner of working with their associates in an office. Many of them speak and write English without a trace of their foreign language background. The clerical workers in the administrative offices have no trouble relocating to white collar jobs in many areas.

Retail businesses have usually been hard to establish. For one thing, the evacuees usually lack capital, and for another they meet more antagonism when they start to compete in that field.

The Project has set up a program of adult education that has been a great help in preparing Nisei for outside jobs. Classes in nursing, radio, beauty operating, barbering, needlework, artificial flowers, shoe repairing, automobile mechanics are only part of the list. Most of these classes are taught by volunteer Japanese. Of course any Project is a good cross section of Japanese-American life, so that leaders in various fields are sure to be found.

One of the Caucasian supervisors told me that the finest artificial flowers he had ever seen were made at Poston, and I could well believe it. I saw chrysanthemums, cherry blossoms and pine branches that looked real when I was within a yard of them. With the pine branches and cones I probably would never have realized the truth if I hadn't been told beforehand and looked carefully for the evidence. The bark on artificial branches was so lifelike I could scarcely believe it wasn't genuine even when I investigated with a questioning finger.

Of course there were artists among the evacuees. Gene Sogioka was a Disney animator in California before the war and is now relocated to the Disney Studio in New York City. He was a prizewinner in a competition that included all the centers, and has had pictures published in Asia Magazine. He was a pupil of the well-known California artist, Millard Sheets.

sp Another artist was Kakunen Tsur^uoka, who was trained both in Japan and

in America and who has hung in several museums. He left a series of paintings that are a pictorial history of Poston from the month of May, 1942, when busloads of evacuees came in weary with heat and dust. His own spiritual reactions are plainly recorded there. His first pictures were drab and gloomy, but his last ones show his final realization of the beauty of the desert. Tsuroka was the spirit back of the establishment of an art exhibit for Poston, housed in a barrack called "The Mohave Room". Here art and craft objects are placed on exhibit for eventual sale.

Mr. Kato, one of the best teachers of flower arrangement in California was originally in Poston and conducted classes, but he has now relocated to Denver and opened an art store there. Mr. Orikawa, one of the finest printers in the Southwest, is still at Poston. A highly skilled embroiderer held classes in needlework as a volunteer as long as she was in camp, but she now holds a position in that line in New York City.

Of course a number of Nisei have been employed as instructors in the Japanese language. One Poston girl is teaching at the University of Chicago. Another is at Boulder, Colorado, instructing in the Navy Language School. One Japanese-American is working on a basic Japanese that will correlate with basic English.

The YWCA has taken at least two Poston Nisei. "Tee" Mikani, a Pomona College graduate who used to serve as a voluntary worker in the Los Angeles Y, is now assistant director of the YWCA in Kansas City. Another, Maki Ichiyasu, formerly secretary of the Japanese YW in Los Angeles has gone to the Milwaukee Y. Incidentally, it was Maki who came voluntarily to Poston ahead of most of the evacuees in order to help get certain social services ready for the arrival, and to help organize them for their new community life that first hard summer.

Several girls have obtained jobs in libraries, one of them being head of a branch library in Hartford, Connecticut. The Caucasian librarian runs this library as her assistants. She gives them as much training as she can and they get a lot of good experience. She told me she had placed girls

in New York, Washington, Cleveland, Toledo, Chicago and Utah, and had more offers of page jobs than she could fill.

So runs the main thread of the story of relocation as seen through the eyes of the administrative officers of Poston. They are a fine lot, that personnel. It would be a wonderful thing for the country if the people who criticise the "Social Service Set-up" in the Japanese camps could learn the same devotion to both the long view and the present need that these people have.

Two big facts emerge from the story of evacuation and relocation. One is that persons of Japanese descent, who formerly were barred by custom and racial competition from most jobs except truck farming and fruit markets, are now going to a wide range of occupations. Someone remarked that the country east of the Rockies was already giving the Nisei a better chance than the West Coast ever did. The other fact is that among the 110,000 persons evacuated from the Defense Area, 10,000 of them have at present ~~19,000~~ ^{many} writing been relocated to other parts of the United States, where undoubtedly many of them will remain after the war is over. One young man who returned to camp recently on a visit from New York City remarked, "I never knew what America was really like until I crossed the continent. My idea of the United States has changed entirely."

There is still another factor that will influence the future lives of these people. Members of a family do not always relocate together. Brothers and sisters often go to separate areas, and children leave parents in camp. It is the first step ^{to a lessening} in that family solidarity that has been at once an admirable trait and a social hindrance to complete identification with American life. Actually the signs have been visible ever since evacuation. The Nisei, thrown back upon the old customs and influences with scarcely any of the Caucasians contacts they formerly had, have chafed under them.

I am reminded of the boy pointed out to me as he ran the motion picture machine in the high school assembly. His family wished to go to Tule Lake, but he held out against all seven of them. "You go your way and I'll

go mine", he said. "I'm an American, and I'm going to stay here." The family are still there, and I understand they intend to stay. The person who told me the story said that if all the Nisei at Tule Lake had shown that much courage, very few of them would be there now. I was told of one boy who practically collapsed when he boarded the bus for Tule.

At the end of four days I had to return to California, but I wished I could stay four weeks, so rich was the experience in new understandings. I said I felt ploughed up, harrowed, and planted to seed. Even my going out was a fitting climax to all I had been absorbing about relocation. For I left camp with two bus loads of Japanese-Americans who were leaving for outside.

About seven o'clock that evening groups of people began streaming to the spot near the Relocation Office door where the two buses were lined up. I knew that a seat in the last bus was being saved for me, so I went inside to watch the departure proceedings. On the table behind the counter at the other door the final papers were laid out. These were handed to the evacuee by one Nisei and checked by another. Among them were his identification certificate with his photograph, his permit for a ration book, his travel request. Then he came over to the desk near where I was sitting and signed a receipt for his subsistence money in the presence of a Caucasian clerk. This signature was checked by a Nisei clerk and she recounted the money. Ruby must have been well-known and popular, for nearly everyone stopped to shake hands and say goodbye. (You weren't surprised, for she was one of those rare people in the world that all warmed to at once.) The money (a small amount allotted for traveling expenses and those first days till a pay check came in) seemed to surprise some of the people, and they asked what it was for.

As they passed out the door they handed a paper to another Nisei, and they went down the path to the bus door. Friends and relatives crowded the ropes, and the travelers had to stop for last handclasps and to answer last goodbyes. As the bus pulled away some of them looked back as long as the

camp was in sight, but some had set their faces ahead and talked with others of casual matters. There were a few children in the group. In our bus was a small boy in a sailor's uniform and cap, proud as anything.

No one paid any attention to me, and I tried to be unobtrusive. I should have interviewed everybody wholesale, but somehow it seemed indelicate. I finally mustered courage to ask the boy next to me where he was going. He said Nebraska, to work on a sheep ranch. After a moment he volunteered that he was going back to a job he had been out on before. Soon we came to the dust road again. I held my handkerchief to my nose, but scarcely anyone else did.

At the station the line formed at the ticket window with a Caucasian Project officer at one side to assist. This was why we had come in a couple of hours early. The women's lavatory had a sign, "Out of order". I went in anyway to change to warmer clothes for my night in the chair car, and a test proved that it was in order all right, just as I (and incidentally the Nisei girls) had suspected. But the place was so filthy that no one would have used it except in extreme emergency, anyway.

As I looked around me at the group, I was struck as I had been at camp by the increased stature of the younger generation, and by the lessening in what we call "slant eyes". I was also reminded again of the diversity of physical types. Some looked more Spanish, or Philippino, or Chinese, or even Caucasian than our usual idea of what a Japanese looks like.

The charming girl sitting beside me on the bench might almost have passed for French. Not a trace of the foreign in her voice or phrasing or manner. She was going to a temporary domestic job first till she could arrange to join her husband at Camp Shelby. Later she hoped to get a better job. Were her parents going to relocate? Probably not, they were too old to start over in a strange community. Of the several I talked to that night I asked the same question and got the same answer.

On the wall was a poster showing a picture of a big hotel on the Lake Front. One of the boys and two of the girls seemed to know Chicago fairly

well, and discussed places and things there with all the enthusiasm of home-towners on their way back. I heard not one word of Japanese, and reflected that I had scarcely heard any young person say a word in it all the time I was in Poston. Out on the sidetrack stood their special car, and most of them went on out and found a seat when they had their tickets.

When the train arrived and I found a seat I could look across into their car, which had not yet been switched and attached to our train. My seatmate said there was already a carload of Japanese-Americans with us. I was sure they were from the Gila Valley Center, and I could imagine the visits the two cars would have. Everyone seemed to think that Gila Valley was one of the best Projects. For one thing, it was in more settled country and was greener, freer from dust and not nearly so hot. But best of all, the barracks were painted white!

At last we were on our way, I back to a state where many people are signing petitions to bar Japanese-American citizens forever from returning to their former homes, they to change at Cadiz for an east-bound train and life "outside". I wondered if, after all, in spite of the hardship, the disillusion, and the emotional conflict engendered by evacuation, relocation might not be a means of realizing a fuller, freer life than they had ever known before in their America.



