

“With Liberty and Justice for All:” Remembering Amache

By Analisa Goodmann

Executive Order 9066 was signed by Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942. The executive order allowed for the creation of military areas from which “any or all persons [could] be excluded.” This resulted in the evacuation of citizens and residents of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast of the United States. The evacuees were sent to “assembly centers” (temporary camps), before being sent to internment camps that were located throughout the country.ⁱ

“Amache” or the Granada Relocation Center was located in Colorado. It opened August 27, 1942 and closed October 15, 1945.ⁱⁱ Here are a few stories from the survivors of Amache.

Arriving: The Camp and the Cold

Margarette Masukoa Murakami:

When we left we were only allowed a suitcase. Just imagine looking into your bedroom, you have one suitcase that you can carry—what would you put into it besides clothes? We didn’t know where we were going, so we didn’t know if it was going to be hot or cold or what. By the time you put your clothes in, there’s not much room left.

Minoru Tonai:

In May 1941, I was sent to the Santa Anita Assembly Center. They kept telling us that they were putting us, putting the Japanese, into these camps to protect us from the American public. When I got into Santa Anita I saw the barbed wire fence. It looked like it was 10 foot high and was all around the whole camp. I saw guard towers with MPs on top with machine

guns pointed inward toward us. So I thought “Oh, they aren’t here to protect us. They are making sure we stay inside.” I was thirteen when I realized that and my next thought was, “Are they putting us in here to kill us all?” Now they caged us, now they can kill us, right?

But of course that was not really the intent. On September 27, 1942, they boarded us on trains, and we went to Amache. As we rode the trains, any time we went to a place where there were towns, we had to close the shades. They didn’t want anyone to know we were going by. On top of that, there weren’t enough trains. The trains we rode on were old trains. There were no sleeping quarters, so we had to sleep on these wooden slates. We used jackets as pillows, so we could sleep. It was the only thing we could do.

It took us about four and a half days. So we arrived there, and we got on army trucks, which took us to a place where they signed us up for where we would stay. I stayed at Block 9L, Barrack 3, Room B. 9L3B. We went there—my mother, my sister, my younger brother, and myself.

The Japanese had a terminology that got them through hardship before. They would say, “It can’t be helped.” So that means: *don’t complain and work hard and do things*. So that’s what they all did.

Life at Amache

Minoru Tonai:

In Amache, they gave us a folding canvas cot for each person and an army mattress. They gave us two blankets. In the room there was a potbelly stove and one 60-watt bulb. That was it. Most of the rooms had two windows, front and back.

It got cold; we were there in late September. Two blankets just wasn't enough, so we would initially sleep with our clothes or a jacket on. Then our mothers would buy, through the Sears Warbucks or Montgomery Ward magazines, bats of cotton material and they would make comforters. That's how we finally got warm.

The Army provided a clothing allowance: about four dollars a month for each person. You had to buy your socks and shorts and jacket and whatever have you. If the Army didn't provide it, you had to buy it.

Robert Uragami:

One thing I want to discuss is my dad's attitude at the time. He used to say, "You're driving your car and the signal turns red and you stop. When it turns green you went ahead—that was the law. You obeyed the law. The government says you went to camp, you obeyed the law." So that's basically what was instilled in me, we just followed what we were told to do. Obey the law.

The School

Minoru Tonai:

When we first went to Amache, they took one block and named that one the school. Most of the teachers were white. But in some cases they hired the Japanese Americans to be teachers in the camp because they were college graduates or whatever have you. But they were still prisoners. We had varying degrees of teachers. Some of them were really good. Some couldn't get a job anywhere else.

To tell you how bad it was, when I was in 9th grade I was taking Algebra, and one day I was called to the principal's office. I thought, "Gee,

what did I do wrong?” So I went in there, and he said that our teacher (a Japanese American) had volunteered to go into the service and the teacher who was to replace him was coming from Jermone, the Arkansas camp. But she couldn’t arrive for one month. So he said, “You teach the class.” I’m taking the class, and he tells me to teach it! What am I suppose to do? He doesn’t give me any lesson plans. So I said, “Well, the only thing I can do is what the other teacher did.” So I read one day, one lesson ahead and I did that and I would give homework. I would give tests—just like the other teacher. I copied what he was doing. The beauty of the thing was nobody ever, ever gave me a problem. I explained to them what happened. They all did what I told them. I got homework; I corrected it. I prepared for the next day. Then when the teacher came, I was back in my seat doing the same thing I had before. It was crazy, but it just happened.

Robert Uragami:

The school at Amache was a regular school. I had this “going to camp” attitude; studying wasn’t high on my priority. So it was easy. I remember this gal who eventually became my wife, we were in the same class. We had a project and she came up with something she had to write; it was about ten pages with an “A” plus, and my mine came back with a minus “C” with a red “Lazy” written across it. School—we had to go to school—and well you get my point about not studying or whatever ’cause we’re there to have fun.

I had one unit short of graduating when the war ended. I was seventeen by then, but I was a naïve kid; I didn’t know which way was up. Being in camp wasn’t a hardship. The transition to living at Amache and in a rural area was no problem. Basically my parents, the first generation, they

had all the hardship. But for a kid like me it was like prolonged summer camp. It was gonna be fun for somebody my age. A fun place to go.

The Boy Scouts

Minoru Tonai:

We had a Boy Scout group in Amache. Near the end of camp, boys my age and older liked to dance. So the girls' club would invite us. There were these two clubs and so we would go dancing and have a great time. One day I said, "You know, we've been getting invited to dances by these two clubs. We have enough guys that dance now, let's sponsor a dance and invite these two clubs." Everyone said, "That's great. Let's do that."

The rule for the dance was you're going to go down and pick up the girl from her barrack, bring her to the dance, and then when the dance is over you take her home. You don't have to have the last dance with her. So all the guys wanted to take the pretty girls. I said, "Stop, that's not going to work. That's not good." So I said, "Alright. We're gonna go by height." We put all the guys by height and all the girls by height and we matched them off. And there was this one girl and nobody wanted to take her. She had no personality at all. Very shy. And besides that she was a little plumb and you know all the other attributes that boys didn't want. So I said, "Ok, I'll take her." I took her to the dance and took her home. She really appreciated that. She knew that she was not very popular. Years later she became a very well known singer, and when I saw her one time performing, I went to see if she remembered me. She said, "Hi, Min." She was very kind to me. I think she remembers that I was kind to her.

The Band:

Minoru Tonai:

Mr. Uragami was a commissioner, and he would do all kinds of stuff to get us privilege to do things. The Boy Scout troop that he was involved with before the war had their bugle equipment, and he got the government to pay for bringing it out of storage and to our camp—so we had a bugle choir. I played the snare drums. We used to play at all the occasions at camp. We were terrible. We made a lot of noise. We used to see the guys off when they went to the army. They would go to Granada to get on the train there, and it was like four in the morning and we would leave camp, get up there, and play. Mr. Uragami would tell us to play as loud as we can. I'd think, "Gee, we'll wake up the people in Granada. They'll be mad at us." I didn't realize what the purpose was. The purpose was to tell the people of Granada: we are sending our sons to the army also.

After Amache: Prejudice and Reparations

The exclusion of Japanese residents from the West Coast of the U.S. was lifted on January 2, 1945. The War Relocation Authority announced that the internment camps would be closed by the end of 1945.ⁱⁱⁱ

On August 10, 1988, President Ronald Reagan signed the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, giving redress of \$20,000 and an apology to every surviving Japanese individual who was incarcerated during World War II.^{iv}

Alyce Yamasaki Sugiyama:

I don't think there's any amount of money that could compensate. You're taking a person's freedom away, and for me it was, I'd say, pretty devastating to know you're not free to leave beyond these gates, beyond the barbed wire fence and you think, "What did I do wrong?"

Naturally you wished that it had never happened. But I think once it has happened, it has happened and you either learn from it or you don't. Maybe you try hiding it all the time, but it's not going to get any better. It will repeat then. The word needs to be out all the time and people need to be aware of what really happened and aware that we, as a country, have flaws.

Rose Taniguchi Fujii:

One thing I regret is that my father didn't receive the reparations because he had passed on. That's what my Mom was always saying: "Oh, too bad he didn't get anything 'cause he suffered the most." He suffered the most, because he was taken and was deprived of family life until we got together. Like many of our generation, I think that something like this should never happen to future generations.

Robert Uragami:

When the camp was going to close, the government took records and gave you 25 bucks and a one-way ticket back from wherever you were picked up. That didn't bother me 'cause we were going back to Los Angeles and at the time 25 bucks was 25 bucks.

The amount of the reparations was twenty thousand. And at that time you could buy a car at twenty thousand, but here again being a young kid and everything, I didn't take into account all the things that our parents had lost and that twenty thousand would cover just a portion of that. But by the time they came out, all the Issei, they were dying off. They'd never got the benefit. So that sticks in my mind.

Minoru Tonai:

I was glad to leave camp. But I was also apprehensive. How will people treat me? Are they going to be very prejudiced? Will they say things

to me? How will people treat me in school? I didn't know. So when I went to school, I was very apprehensive. The day I arrived, they told me where my homeroom was. So I walked into that homeroom and the teacher said, "I want you to meet Minoru Tonai." One guy, one burly guy, runs up from the back of the room and hugs me. I didn't know who he was! He said, "I'm Bill." I said, "Bill?" He was a small guy I knew in junior high school. Some guys wanted to pick on him, wanted to beat him up. I happened to be the star of the basketball team. So when they started picking on Bill, I said, "Stop, stop. Bill's ok. Just leave him alone." And they stopped, and Bill couldn't forget that, never forgot that. So when I was up there, he suddenly rushed up to the front. I didn't know who it was. I thought I was gonna get beat up, but it was like, oh, I'm safe now. He was a star of the football team then. And if he liked me then other people are gonna like me, right? So that's how it happened. But you still have this behind you, that people are still prejudice, 'cause you see it all the time.

You know, every day at camp we had to say the pledge of allegiance in class. Every day. You know the pledge of allegiance says "and justice for all." What justice? We were in camp. We were behind barbed wire fences.

Frances Palmer:

I have no animosity toward the federal government. I think what happened is that it's my parents' generation—the ones that were born here, who were in their 20s and 30s in the 1940s—they had the hardest adjustment. They were born here, yet because of their race they were treated less than a U.S. citizen. That really is an atrocity.

That generation said, never again. So if anything, that was good. It was a lesson learned. I think that other people have benefitted from our

experience. As to the reparations, most of the people said, “It’s too late” because the people who really got hurt were my grandparents and they’re dead. Those who were younger we went along with our lives, but we appreciate the gesture and the acknowledgement of the wrong committed by the government.

Marie Sugiyama:

My family used to talk about things that happened in camp. What was really interesting was, my sister Eva, when she was in camp she had this embroidery done, and ten different people did the embroidery. It wasn’t beautiful, but it said, “With liberty and justice for all.” It was in my mother’s trunk for years and years. My sister really felt like there was an injustice, but she didn’t talk about it that way. They talked about camp, but they didn’t talk about it that way. They talked about how cold it was. They talked about how there was no ceiling. They talked about how they had gang showers, and how they were shy so they’d go take their showers in the middle of the night and those kinds of things.

I knew that we were forced to go to camp, but I didn’t realize it until later when I got older. I said, “You know, that was against all the civil rights of all of us.” After learning about the internment, I really feel like it was hysteria—war hysteria. I think the most important thing was the apology.

I don’t think any amount of money could compensate for what happened. The civil rights of all of the Japanese were taken away. The only reason they were in prison was because of their ethnic background. They can’t give you enough money for what they took away. It’s not so much the property; I think it’s the mindset of how it affected people. People lost property. We lost a lot. We lost money in the move. But we were lucky

because we came back to Sonoma County. No one lost their property in Sonoma County because people in the greater community took care of the property and paid the taxes. When we came back from camp, they gave the property back. I know one girl whose family came back, and the family that was living in their house had a bag of groceries waiting for them and their dog was there and all that.

One last thing: I remember my father really getting mad about the politics that happened, but he would tell us, “You know what, you can’t dwell in that place. You can’t do anything about what happened before, so move on with your life.” I thought that was a great philosophy.

ⁱ Iwata, Adrienne. “Merced (detention facility).” (n.d.). In *Densho Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Merced_%28detention_facility%29/

ⁱⁱ Clark, Bonnie. “Amache (Granada).” (n.d.). In *Densho Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from [http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Amache%20\(Granada\)/](http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Amache%20(Granada)/)

ⁱⁱⁱ Robinson, Greg. “War Relocation Authority.” (n.d.) In *Densho Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from http://encyclopedia.densho.org/War_Relocation_Authority/#Encouraging_Resettlement

^{iv} Yamato, Sharon. “Civil Liberties Act of 1988.” (n.d.). In *Densho Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from http://encyclopedia.densho.org/Civil_Liberties_Act_of_1988/