

C H A P T E R    I I I

"SPECIAL TULE LAKE BEGINNINGS"

## Introduction to Chapters III and IV

Students in a junior-level class were asked to write briefly on what each one of them considered to be "special Tule Lake beginnings," that is, distinctive aspects of their earliest experience at Tule Lake. They record in Chapter III some of their first impressions of the Relocation Center and insights into the settling-in process by which raw barracks "apartments" were made habitable. The <sup>next</sup> second series of essays, those included in Chapter IV, deal more fully with the transformation of barracks into homes.

As family units and single individuals entered Tule Lake, they were assigned housing by the Project housing office largely in patterns reflecting time of arrival. Larger family units were generally provided additional space. There were from four to six apartments in each of the bare structures; the barracks themselves were twenty feet wide and sixty feet long. Fourteen barracks comprised a block. In each block there were latrines for men and <sup>for</sup> women, a laundry-ironing room, a recreation hall, a mess hall and a place for the office of the block manager who was the factotum of the block community. Outside barracks walls were covered by black tar paper held in place by narrow wooden strips. When the evacuees arrived, the interior walls showed the bare studs. Gradually wallboard was provided to protect the inhabitants from the cold winter winds soon to come and screens to keep out the present menace of what one student calls "the dangerous insects."

Nine blocks comprised a ward. Fire breaks separated groups of structures in order to reduce the danger of fires sweeping through large segments of the barracks community before they could be brought under control. Obvious to everyone was the orderliness of the community's geometric physical design.

There was much that the new residents found appalling in the physical aspects of the Tule Lake Relocation Center although many people recognized potentialities for improvement at least and were stimulated by them. Added to the aesthetic deficiencies was the lack of almost all the accoutrement of daily life familiar to the Japanese Americans in their former homes. Most of the families were living in relatively modest circumstances in their home communities before the evacuation, but the Relocation Center provisions stood in sharp contrast. The W.R.A. was able to provide only iron beds and straw mattresses. Most other things had to be provided by themselves, the chairs, tables, shelves, desks, curtains and so on.

Ray Billington in his America's Frontier Heritage brilliantly describes the way in which families established themselves on the western frontier, how households were organized and the regimen of household routines was originated and maintained. He speaks of the crucial role that women played in providing for the conditions that made family life possible under primitive frontier conditions. "The West," he writes, "rewarded women for the civilization that they carried in their handbags by allowing them political as well as social rights denied them in the East."<sup>1</sup> Japanese men and

---

<sup>1</sup>Ray A. Billington, America's Frontier Heritage (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1966) 216-217.

women, especially women, who arrived in Relocation Centers brought their notions, imbedded in culture and habit, about making a home along with the few pieces of baggage they were allowed to bring with them. In this case, the women were not as substantially rewarded as Billington describes as occurring on the frontier, except that most Issei women had in the Relocation Center a greater measure of leisure time than they had ever had before.

Comparisons are occasionally made in these and other Nisei essays in this collection between the lives of pioneers under the rugged conditions of the Old West and the present circumstances of Japanese Americans. These later, reluctant migrants found themselves in Relocation Centers established in some of the hardest and least developed areas--areas that the earlier pioneers had largely passed over. If the Japanese did not live in crude log cabin dwellings on some remote frontier, they were forced to live in something that seemed almost equally primitive in terms of what they had known and possessed before. The similarities in condition and response doubtlessly provide comfort to some Nisei, for the very comparisons themselves suggested challenge and ultimate success in dealing with primitive conditions; moreover, pioneering seems quintessentially American. Perhaps this association, noted by some of the Nisei well-schooled in American history, was difficult to share with those Issei parents who had a vaguer knowledge of the settlement of the American frontier and a poorer understanding of the symbolic meanings in the comparisons.



There was no doubt in any one's mind that the primitive conditions found in the residential quarters at Tule Lake represented a challenge if anything resembling normal life was to be created there. The positive aspects of the available quarters were that they were new, though dusty, and that they were basically clean.

The response of the new inhabitants as is revealed in the essays reflects the desire for cleanliness, order, and at least some measure of what they would define as comfort and attractiveness. Few perhaps rose so promptly to the problems of establishing a home as one of the young Nisei writers in this section, "I entered the room, put the baggage on the floor, sat down on the dusty bed and thought how to arrange the room." Whether or not people in general mobilized themselves so quickly for the tasks at hand, the work proceeded quickly at first.

The essays, then, reveal what indeed took place upon the assignment of living quarters, that is, an immediate explosion of activities directed toward making the apartments livable according to the established patterns brought with them relating to what is the proper order and placement of the physical accoutrement of the household, what are the first necessities, what are the most practical arrangements, how can basic comforts be provided, what can be done to add beauty and grace to the austerity of "camp life."

Family members divided functions as luggage was stored where it would not be unsightly and in the way. Under the circumstances utilitarian concerns were bound to predominate in decisions about

the placement of beds, tables, and chairs. Attention was given to the obvious need to devise partitions that could serve both the necessity for privacy and separation of function yet at the same time provided color and design. The tasks were made easier by the fact that there were neither bathrooms nor kitchens in the apartments; bathing and toilet as well as laundry facilities were provided in special barracks and common mess halls provided food and dining facilities.

If women were the major designers of interior improvements in most instances, men were engaged in the necessities of constructing tables, chairs, shelves, and other indispensable items out of bits of scrap lumber. Girls old enough to sew or make paper flowers and boys old enough to carve or aid in carpentry made their contributions. The interiors of the barracks began to reflect in an important measure the tastes and interests of individual families. The depressing monotony of the dwellings in the first weeks of habitation gradually altered through bursts of family activity. Doubtlessly the process of home-making was accelerated by the fact that the house wife, in some instances for the first time in her life, was freed both from work in the fields and garden and from the necessity of preparing family meals.

Without question as to whether it should be done at all, without deferring tasks for a more propitious time, the Japanese Americans, as if moved by instinct, were impelled by habit and culture to make their dwellings as much like those they had known before as conditions permitted. While the transformation of housing units into "homes" was largely the product of family interests and values reflecting general group culture, there was a good deal of stimulation to improvement produced by comparisons with the accomplishments of others. Dwellings were side by side;

comparison and competitiveness were inevitable. One can see in the essays the appreciation that many of the young writers had for the creativity expressed in the dwellings of their friends and neighbors. One can note a measure of appreciation and pride at the extent of utilitarian provision, comfort, and even adornment that had been achieved in their homes and those of people around them through family efforts and access to Montgomery Ward and Sears order catalogues.

The competitiveness produced conflicts over access to miserable scraps of lumber; fights occurred among people who had long been friends or neighbors before coming to Tule Lake. This led Rev. Kitagawa to ask, "Where were their manners, their sense of mutual respect and courtesy, so characteristic of Japanese people? All those finer things of life were left behind, along with excess baggage."<sup>1</sup>

One of the remaining, pervasive problems was the lack of privacy which was suffered by all members of the family. Cartoons in the Tulean Dispatch's literary supplement reveal in humorous depiction the difficulties involved when members of a family engaged in different activities are confined to a single room of modest proportions; sewing, studying, playing records, conversing and arguing, cleaning, and a variety of other activities including some requiring much privacy all were performed in a confined arena.

"The senior high school students were faced with their own peculiar problems." Rev. Kitagawa writes. "In addition to their

---

<sup>1</sup> Kitagawa, op. cit., 96.



own peculiar problems. In addition to their basic education and vocational training, they were to learn how to be citizens in a free society, prospective homemakers, and parents. But how could they have a wholesome social life through which to get to know their peers of the opposite sex? Boys and girls whose interest in the opposite sex was duly awakened found themselves in an extremely awkward position. They wanted and needed privacy as well as some sort of guidance, if not supervision."<sup>1</sup> Under the conditions of Center life, it was difficult for youths to entertain one another and especially for young men and women to secure enough privacy to allow them to converse at ease. "In this sort of society, if one could still call it a society, how could adolescents learn to fall in love, court, marry, and make a home according to the way of a civilized people? In order to enjoy the desired and necessary privacy, youngsters had to run away from other people--friends, neighbors, parents. They could not find one spot under the sun, so they felt, where they could be just with each other, without offending somebody or without becoming an object of scandalous talk."<sup>2</sup>

*Grammatical form*

Note: Most of the following compositions bear a date in early December but several were first submitted somewhat earlier. It appears that some of the essays were either written initially in unacceptable form or, after they were corrected, were re-written and submitted again to the teacher. A number of essays, however, bear the marks of correction by the teacher or the teacher's aides. A number of the letters' "corrections" are not correct and numerous errors apparently went unrecognized. The errors and corrections are included as they appear on the original sheets in our possession.

---

<sup>1</sup> Ibid., 95.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., 96.



(corrected)

Takako Makishima  
Dec. 1, 1942.

### Making a Home

"Oh! what an ugly little room," was the first comment made upon entering the little black house in Tule Lake. The baggage was lying down everywhere. I didn't know how to begin making a home out of the little room. All my neighbors were having the same trouble, too. Just how I do not know, but we made a bench and a table out of what little wood we had. We all felt like the Swiss Family Robinsons stranded on the island and trying to make things out of the driftwood.

As the weeks went by they started putting plaster boards around the room. It made the room look so much brighter than before that I thought with a little more effort I could look forward to the room that would someday become a very pleasant place to live.

One day I came home and found that the foundation for a closet was being laid. In a few days it was finished. The baggage lying around became very few after the closet was filled. Then came the making of shelves, dressers, partitions and some more tables. The hammering seemed to continue long into the night and start early in the morning. Everyone seemed to be busy. The youngsters would complain, "I never seem to get enough sleep with that hammering" but they all knew that this was the very beginning of our beautiful new home in an entirely new kind of a life.

## My New Home

"Klamath Falls!"

"All out for Klamath Falls," bellowed the conductor as the train hissed to a stop. Then it was true that after all these months I would actually be in Tule Lake in less than an hour. There my family and friends eagerly waited to welcome me to my new home, which only a few months ago had been just as strange and new to them as it would be for me.

Arriving at night with only the moon as my light, the camp seemed to loom up before me like an immense, unfriendly creature of prehistoric times. In the morning, however, with the sun shining so brightly overhead and surrounded by friends both old and new, my impression of the night before was replaced by an entirely different one.

My first trip to the mess hall, canteen, the rec hall,--all, I seemed to have gone through in a daze until a week after my arrival, I decided that it was about time I resumed my "larnin' of the three R's."

The contrast between the "Tri-State Hi" with ~~7,500~~ pupils, and the one I had previously attended with 30 pupils was as great as jitterbugging and waltzing. The friendliness and the kindness of both teachers and classmates surprised and touched me very deeply. I found my old fear and dread of attending such a large school with unknown classmates fading as the days went by. Informality and companionship between teacher and pupils I think, is one of the greatest assets of which this school can justly boast. Consequently, humor and goodwill prevail. One day when the Science teacher asked what the moon was, "all I can say is it sure is pretty at night," sighed a masculine voice from the back of the room.

(continued)

Heard again is the rumor that we will be moved to another center, but whether or not it is true, regardless of where Uncle Sam decides to send us, a place with my family and friends,--to me--is "home."

B+

U.S. Const. and English

Katherine Oyama

Fifth, Sixth period

Our Problems

Our problem here is a mutal problem. We are here is the question before us, and we must make the most of it(?) When we first came here on the 16th of July from Pinedale, it was rather a chilly and cloudy morning much to our surprise as compared to the hot and dusty weather we have had in Pinedale, California. This new city of ours was surprisingly large and much different from any community we have been acquainted with.

Since arrival in this city we have been faced with several problems which we have faced like a pioneer. One of which is housekeeping in a(n) unfurnished apartment. It was very bare inside. The structure of the building were bare without stoves, furniture~~s~~ or any necessity of any sort except for a bed. The floors were filled with space, which is very hard to sweep or mop. The dust from the sands of our front lawn are very dry and loose, so that a person walking kicks up a considerable amount of dust, which blows into our rooms, unaccounting for the childrens of the block running and playing football, etc. Dusting twice a day wouldn't even keep a room very clean. The northwest wind we have here blows all the smoke and soot from the chimney of the shower-house boiler.

Once settled with our bare necessity, we began adding shelves, curtains, buying chairs, tables etc. from our local community store only to learn to our disappointment that we would have to take them all out to have our room plastered. Waiting patiently for the Carpenters several weeks, the carpenters finally arrived to our block. Once plastered,



(continued)

our room began to have a more home-like atmosphere with the addition of a huge coal stove several days later. Once again we had to rearrange our beds to stay away from the stove and yet have plenty of space for our other furnitures. Adding closets, shelves, etc. with our meager supply of lumber we picked up from here and there were soon completed. Curtains hung, windows washed, the room given a once over spring cleaning, it has now began to look more like a real home to us. Our housework are now in smooth order, but yet we still miss the luxury of washing machines, the autos, the corner drug store where we use(d) to go so often, and everything we left behind when we left our community of Auburn in Washington.

This is war; so a little hardship, a little longing, a little to wishing and a little praying of all of us will help to win this war, even if we can't help directly in the aid of our allied force.

153  
Mary Myamoto  
Dec. 1, 1942  
(corrected)

### Living Quarters

The living in Tule Lake was much different from those back home. It seemed very different because back home we lived in a house, and here we live in a apartment in barracks. The apartments are not only one but four or five to one barrack.

The only thing we brought from back home was our blankets and clothing. When we got here, they gave us two blankets to a person. These blankets were given to us for warmth.

The barracks were not for only one family, but for 2 or three families. If you have a large family, you may have two apartments.

The apartment were not decorated in the present matter as we have it now. We had to make furniture and shelves and closet to make it more like a living quarter. The apartments were not ready for winter, so the Carpentors had to fix it up. They put the plaster boards in to keep us warm for the season. They put up screens to keep out all the dangerous insects.

We had to make our own clothes lines. We brought shades and curtains to decorate our windows.

This is all I could tell you about the living quarters. Maybe there are some more things but I can't think of anymore.

CAMP LIFE  
THE BARRACKS

The barracks were just one long house divided by a wall. Some of these barracks are divided into four, five, or six rooms. Each family is entitled to one of these rooms depending on the size of the family.

There are hardly any furniture except for a few chairs since you have to make all your own furniture.

But later on, each room is to be plastered up with sheet rock. This would improve the room and can be developed into a better home. It would also keep the wind from coming in through the wall. There are stoves for each room also, since the winter here is very cold.

Some people have victory gardens, porches, ect; which improves the appearance of the environment.