Structural Report
Chapter I
Shibutani, 11/10/42

An Introduction to Tule Lake

The Oregon Trail passed nearby. The area was once full of Indians. In the vicinity one can find bones and remains of covered wagons. Into this barren and inaccessible valley with a colorful history came the unwanted hordes, pushed on the crest of the tide of modern intolerance and ignorance. How strange it must seem to the silent walls of rock that loom ponderously nearby. Once again in 1942 was this land visited by Mongoloids after the decades that had gone by.

Within a few months this pioneer community at Newell had sprung up and had become the largest city north of Sacramento in California. The Tule Lake Relocation Center for Japanese evacuees is located in extreme northern California, only a few miles south of the Oregon border, in an old lake bed reclaimed by the Federal Bureau of Reclamation.[1] Not too many years ago the entire area was under water and the surrounding region was little more than wilderness. The lake had been drained in the past two decades and the region was gradually settled by homesteaders, mostly ex-soldiers of another war for democracy and their families.

The project area, including the huge farm, has a gross acreage of more than 26,000 acres. Water is abundant and is drawn from a diversion dam on Lost River, a mountain stream nearby.

There is one large town toward which the community leans. Klamath Falls, Oregon, is but 35 miles away. The town of Tulelake, seven miles away, is no more

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1. The terms and conditions of the lease of land were determined in the Memorandum of Understanding between the Director of the War Relocation Authority and the Secretary of Interior on June 22 and June 25, 1942.

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than a one-horse town and obviously cannot supply the needs of the Newell project, with its population of about 15,000 people.

A general description of Tule Lake Project

As one drives along the highway adjoining the Project, he can see the barbed wires and one guardtower after another (called "firetowers"), occupied by armed soldiers on guard duty. As he turns off the highway and enters the project, he is challenged by the armed sentry who challenges all who enter. If a visitor should arrive between the hours of 8 a.m. to 8 p.m., he is given a permit to enter. As he drives down the street, he can see the green wooden post office, the homes of the administrative personnel with their porches and lawns, and the administration building with its driveway and fountain. Then one passes huge piles of lumber and sheet rock to be used for construction of various items throughout the camp. As he drives on, he can see rows upon rows of warehouses for evacuee property. Then there is the Base Hospital, sprawled out between the gate and the living quarters of the evacuees. Finally, after crossing a huge firebreak, one can see the barracks -- hundreds of monotonously uniform barracks, rows upon rows of barracks -- lying in repetitious serenity. These barracks are black, covered with tar paper. In the center of the camp is a huge flagpole, presented to the colony by the administration, with the American flag waving majestically above.

One looks in vain for trees and grass in Tule Lake. There are no trees in the colony, nor is there any grass other than what the individuals brought and that which was planted by evacuee gardeners for the homes of the administrative personnel. One looks around in vain for scenery, for the place is surrounded by barren and rolling hills going on in never-ending monotony. "Firetowers" crop up in view now and then. Unless one is fortunate, he will find dust aplenty and more than he had expected of wind. Around him he will see Orientals -- yellow, white, and black -- stolidly or gaily going about in their ways. Children romp in the firebreaks while the older generation hobble in the gravel streets, moving aside only for the trucks

that dash by in the mad hurry to go somewhere. Young girls walk arm in arm clad voluptuously in slacks, drawing whistles and stares from those who look longingly on. Gangs of boys dash about vociferously, joking and swearing and adding to the filth of their dirty work clothes. Occasionally one sees a relatively well-dressed person -- a teacher or a minister.

In the northwestern corner of the camp one encounters a sickening stench and learns to his dismay that the cesspool had been placed where the wind carries the odor back into the camp. Huge piles of coal can be seen here and there in the firebreak. In the southern section of the town he can see the beginnings of a cemetery for those who would be free elsewhere. Nearby he can see the furniture factory, a garage, a packing shed, and more lumber piled high and guarded by wardens with colorful blue and gold armbands.

On the southeastern part of the camp one finds an irrigation ditch cutting off one row of blocks from the rest of the camp. The isolated region is referred to as "Alaska," and the most inaccessible place in the corner is known as the "Eta Village." On the outskirts one sees more firetowers.

Physical facilities and setting

The weather is quite often the topic of conversation in Tule Lake. The temperature varies from well over 100 degrees in the summer to the record cold of 27 degrees below zero in the winter. Sometimes in one day, a person experiences extreme hot and cold. During the summer only the shades provide relief, for the barracks turn to baking ovens. In the winter the camp is befogged with smoke from the hundreds of chimneys. The biting cold and the wind are more than many can bear.

Rain falls in Tule Lake until early in June and until then the weather is cold. In the summer months the relentless heat is accompanied by whirlwinds, sometimes 100 feet in diameter, which twist their way through the camp. Often

hurling up dirt for hundreds of feet, they spin their way madly through the camp wreaking havoc wherever they go. Windows are broken if not shut in time, and the rooms are blackened with dust.

Late in August, the first frost arrives and is followed by a period of slight cold. Then the autumn of tolerable times lasts for a few months. Gradually the days become shorter and colder and by November it becomes necessary to use anti-freeze and to let the waterpipes run to prevent freezing. Light snow and rain falls but is blown about by the icy wind. Nights become bitterly cold and the days are not much better.

In the summer the attention of many is turned to hunting rattle-snakes and scorpions. In autumn, the monotony of looking at flat-bottomed clouds and purple, magenta and gold sunsets is broken by the flight of formations of geese winging for the southland. There are generally but few birds other than seagulls in Tule Lake.

The camp is divided by huge firebreaks into seven wards, six of which have nine blocks each, while the last has ten. Each block has a recreation hall, usually used for other purposes, a mess hall, latrines for men and for women, and rooms for laundry. The older blocks have separate rooms for ironing and washing, one men's latrine and two women's latrines. The new blocks have only two buildings in the center, one for latrines and one for the laundry. There are fourteen barracks for living quarters in each block and each barrack has four or six rooms. Some of the newer blocks have barracks with rooms for five. There are generally about 250 people in each block. One barrack away from the recreation hall is the red light of the block manager's office. Here one can get advice and supplies, and the mail.

Closer examination of the living quarters reveals that in some sections of the camp several of the rooms have porches, some constructed with the professional skill of a carpenter and others banged together in idle moments. Within the

rooms one finds furniture ingeniously pieced together from scrap lumber and wood acquired sometimes dishonestly. Floors are generally bare, but sometimes are covered with a small rug or linoleum. The walls are covered with either firtex or sheet rock, and sometimes extra pieces of the material are used to form partitions to provide some privacy. In the center of the room is a huge steel stove, three feet high and at least a foot in diameter. The beds are cots of canvas or steel (if one is fortunate); cotton mattresses are provided.

Outside the barrack sand is banked against the side to prevent the cold wind from seeping through the floors. The floors themselves are double. Weak electricity (1500 watts) is provided for lighting and for radios in each barrack.

As one enters a latrine, he finds the room divided. There is a long metal shelf over which several faucets (half for hot water and half for cold) hang. One of the faucets is turned upward for those who wish to take a drink. Generally the men's latrines have no partitions and even the women do not have much privacy. The shower room is adjoining and one finds there that the concrete floors had been covered by removable wooden planks placed to keep one's feet clean. Nails hang in the bare wooden walls for clothes. The water is warm if one is fortunate enough to go while the boiler man is on duty.

In such a place the life in Tule Lake goes on.

A Day in Tule Lake

In the morning the activity begins at 7 o'clock. While some begin their work earlier, all is in silence until that time. Then, the breakfast bells begin throughout the camp in a din and at once the camp seems to be aroused. From the open doors pour unwashed faces with uncombed hair hurriedly rushing to the wash room, half dressed, in the hopes of cleaning up before eating. In ten minutes everyone who cares to get up is in the mess hall for their breakfast

which is gobbled down in another ten minutes. Hot cakes, cereals, sometimes fruits, sometimes potatoes, and occasionally eggs are gulped down. About 7:45 the rush begins for work. By this time the camp is fogged with the smoke from the various chimneys. Groups of young people, laughing and joking, start out for their days work -- most of them in the direction of the administration building or the warehouses. Groups of old-timers plod along chuckling among themselves. Children with books start on their long trek to school on the other side of the project. It is a motley group indeed.

The noise quiets at about 8:15. The trucks cease to run as regularly. About 10 the housewives open their doors and sweep out the ever-accumulating dust or gossip with their neighbors or do their laundry. The din grows continuously until noon when the noon siren outs through the air. The trek begins again, this time from the administration building toward home. In about ten minutes the mess hall gongs ring out in their own peculiar manner -- a manner that distinguishes them from the others: "gong, gong, gong, gong," or "gong ... gong ... gong, gong, gong." Once again the rush and once again the food is crammed down between sputters of laughter and conversation. Some solemnly stuff down the stew (most common), beans, "slop suey," fish (three times weekly), noodles of some kind, or an occasional roast. Once again there is the rush to the administration building; then once again, quiet reigns.

About three or four the children begin to pour out of school. Games of softball or football begin in the firebreaks. Marbles, cops and robbers, "jin tori," digging sand, and other activities begin where they left off the day before. The din mounts again until 5:15 when the evening siren blows and the rush for home begins again. From this time on the shower rooms are crowded; girls primping and the boys shaving in preparation for their evening enjoyment. The mess hall bell rings out once more and the crowd heads there. The meals

at supper are very much like those served for lunch. In ten minutes the mess halls are practically empty and only a few stray gluttons and late-comers are left.

In the evenings there is much visiting, courting and other things to do. Every night there is some meeting, some activity for the young and old. For those academically inclined there are classes, taught generally by someone in the evacuee personnel. Groups gather about the fire to chat, to eat something, or to discuss the camp life. Quite often there are block meetings and the Issei men go there. In the summer the gaiety goes on until ten or eleven; in the cold days there is relative quiet after eight. By ten o'clock most of the lights are out and the community — except for stray lovers — is once again in peace.

The adjustment to Tule Lake

Thus, in such an atmosphere the pioneer community of the Japanese evacuees was set up, under conditions unlike anything that they or their parents had ever faced. It is indeed a unique environment with a strange hybridisation of cultural traits.

True, the evacuees were not prisoners of war, but they cannot leave the center without the permission of the Army. There are inconveniences in sanitation facilities; home furnishings are different; the houses are monotonously similar; most families are cramped into a single room; the usual modes of transportation and communications are lacking or limited; personal possessions are limited since most people sold everything that they could not carry. One would expect that the modes of living would change in such circumstances. The dust, the heat, the cold, and the high climate make things difficult. The centralized control by Caucasians also makes a difference.

In the face of these changed conditions, in the face of unaccustomed problems and new situations, how did the Japanese evacuees adjust to the camp life? How did the Japanese and their American-born children continue to fulfill their basic desires? How did the process of adjustment work in Tule Lake?