

MINIDOKA: PRELIMINARY REPORT IN A NEW FRONTIER COMMUNITY

Administrators, Colonists Strive To Solve Immediate Problems of Dust, Crowded Barracks

Japanese Relocation Papers
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The Faces of Minidoka Reflect the Determination Of Its Residents to Meet the Challenge of Arid Sageland, Wind and Sun on the Idaho Desert

By Larry S. Tajiri

Last week we spent a day at Minidoka. We met its people and their administrators, tasted its food, choked in its dust.

This is a preliminary report. The story of Minidoka will be told in the months--perhaps years--to come. This is an impression of Minidoka as it is today, three weeks since the arrival of the first evacuee colonists.

Minidoka is a relocation center, one of the ten in Arizona, California, Idaho, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado and Arkansas which will be the wartime homes for most of the 110,000 Japanese who were evacuated by military order from the great coastal cities and farmlands west of Sierras and west of the Cascades.

Minidoka is located in Jerome county in southcentral Idaho. Its 68,000 acres of virgin desert sageland are some 4,000 feet above sea level. The longest distance from border to border in the relocation area is fifteen miles. When construction work is completed the community will have 35 blocks of 15 buildings each. Each of these block units will be composed of barracks, a dining hall and a recreation building. There will be 37 dining halls in all. A 200-bed hospital is nearing completion. Minidoka will have a fire department with water from two huge towers available for any emergency. It will have a telephone exchange and a community newspaper. There will be two grade schools and a high school. There will be stores, movies and meeting halls. Minidoka will have all the services which normally serve a community of ten thousand.

Minidoka will be a modern American city--frontier style.

From U.S. Hi hway 30 you can see the cloud-layers of dust which form an umbrella over Minidoka. Eden, a small community of several hundred persons, is the gateway to Minidoka. The War Relocation Authority has taken over a service station and garage for its office at Eden. The nearest "big town" is Twin Falls, about 30 miles away. Within a month Minidoka, with its capacity population of 10,000, will rival Twin Falls in size.

There is feverish activity at Minidoka as construction work is speeded to accommodate the trainloads of evacuees arriving from the Puyallup and Portland assembly centers. Trucks, churning dust, roar down its unpaved roads. Three thousand white construction workers are building Minidoka under the direction of U.S. Army Engineers. That is the explanation for the Army M. P.'s who stand on stolid guard throughout the center area. When construction is completed, the Army will relinquish control of the area to the WRA. The Army sentries will be withdrawn and stationed outside the relocation project.

Minidoka presents a great engineering problem--the construction of the physical features of a community of 10,000--and a great sociological challenge, the emergency relocation of ten thousand human beings on raw desert land.

The People of Minidoka

The story of a community is the story of its people. The people of Minidoka with the exception of a few non-Japanese administrators and specialists are of Japanese ancestry. But the distinction ends there. The people are young and old, strong and infirm, citizens and aliens. A few scant months ago they were farmers and white-collar workers, students and

cannery workers, housewives and domestics. Some were oystermen and clamdiggers who spent the dawn in the clear, icy waters of the Puget Sound. Others were CIO lumberjacks and sawmill workers. Some handled produce on Western Avenue in Seattle. Others hauled this same produce into the cities from the truck farms of the Japanese. The young men of Minidoka come from the campus of the University of Washington and from the poolhalls and cafes south of Yesler Way in Seattle. The people of Minidoka have a regional entity in their love of the Pacific Northwest which has been their home. Aside from this, however, they are as diversified in their talents and in their thinking as are the people of any American community or any community in the democratic world.

The common people are the strength of any democratic nation. The people of Minidoka are strong and eager and willing to attack the tremendous problems which face them. The faces of Minidoka reflect a determination to meet the challenge of desert and wind and sun. True, there were tears in the eyes of some and in some a defeatist acceptance of the inevitable. But the majority reiterate the words of one young colonist who said: "Minidoka has tremendous potentialities."

Administration Sympathetic

The people in their struggle to establish new homes in the saceland of southern Idaho have the help, sympathy and understanding of capable Caucasian administrators. The project director is Harry L. Stafford, an engineer from the Department of Agriculture. His assistant is Philip Schafer, formerly of the federal security administration. In three weeks they have won the confidence of the people of Minidoka.

Project administrators Stafford and Schafer are determined that concentration camp conditions shall not exist at Minidoka.

We spent several hours with the project administrators. Our impression of their attitude can be boiled down to this:

The people of Minidoka were evacuated from their homes because of wartime exigency. They will be relocated under conditions as normal as wartime conditions will permit. Most of the people will be confined in the relocation area for the duration but in no other aspect will Minidoka resemble a concentration camp.

The administrators refer to the people as "colonists" not as "internees." The mess halls are called "dining halls." The canteen is described as the "community store." There are other efforts to establish a community spirit.

Dust and housing are the immediate problems which face the people of Minidoka. The administrators recognize this. They say: "Until we can get roofs over all our people and lick the terrible dust, we aren't going to think about anything else."

Something is being done about the dust. The Miller-Gooding canal, which diverts water from the Snake river, flows through Minidoka. The canal is five miles away from the barrack city, but two hundred colonists are already at work on a shallow ditch which will bring enough water from the Miller-Gooding canal to water down the dust problem. This ditch is on its way. Last Saturday 5000 feet of it had been scooped out of the desert. In two weeks it is hoped that the ditch will have reached the barrack homes of Minidoka. Then grass will be planted.

As in other centers, housing is the most tragic problem of all. Because of crowded conditions it has been necessary in some cases, as at other centers, to place strangers with family groups in the same unpartitioned barrack room. One reason for this is that the barracks were planned on the

basis of family groups existing in the Japanese community at the time of the census of 1930. At that time there were many large families, and few nisei were married. Today there are few large families, since the children have grown up, have married and have families of their own. So there are many large Barrack apartments for families of seven people but not enough large families to fill them. They are many young family units of two or three persons and not enough barracks to accommodate them. This has necessitated the practice of placing more than one family group together in the same unpartitioned barrack room. The effect on morale and on morals of such a practice is obvious. The administrators realize this but their hands have been tied because they haven't had enough roofs for everybody to live in separate family units. The story of Minidoka in this respect is the story of Manzanar and Poston and Tule Lake.

Trying to Solve Problems

But it can be said that at Minidoka the administrators are sincerely working to solve this problem of housing. One plan is to cut up the large unpartitioned dormitories for bachelors and single girls into small "apartments" for young married couples. The large "apartment", suitable for families of seven, will then accommodate the single persons who will be classified in groups of similar background and interests.

According to the people of Minidoka, food has not been the problem to date that it has been in other relocation centers and in many assembly centers. The food in the dining halls has been of sufficient quantity and has been well-prepared.

No Class Distinctions

To date there has been no "class distinction" in the dining halls between the food for the Caucasian administrative personnel and the food for the colonists. There has been no steak for the administrators and hash for the evacuees.

The non-Japanese personnel eat in the same dining hall with the colonists. They go to the counter and are served the same food in the same cafeteria style. After the meal they take their dishes, just as the colonists do, to the dishwashers.

We had a noon meal at Minidoka. It was the same meal served to the administrative personnel. It happened to be, according to the colonists, the poorest meal served since the day Minidoka was opened to the evacuees. We were served a plate of rice and beans. There was lettuce and tomato salad on the table and an apple at each place. Hot tea was served. There were "seconds" for those who wanted them. As visitors we were charged 25 cents for our plate of rice and beans.

Future Lies in the Land

The future of Minidoka lies in the 68,000 acres of sagebrush covered land on which the project is located. Most of this acreage is tillable and will soon be cleared for agricultural production. The first 200 acres which will be plowed will produce subsistence crops for the use of the center. Truck crops, tomatoes, corn, cereal grains, beans, carrots, onions and potatoes will be planted. The present policy on agricultural production will probably be to discourage the planting of farm commodities which will compete with the produce of the farms in the adjacent agricultural district. Surplus produce will be sent to other relocation centers.

Minidoka has a farm labor problem of its own. Most of the people have been evacuated from urban district and there are relatively few farmers among them.

The relocation community is proud of its 200-bed hospital which is nearing completion. The various wings of the hospital

unit are linked together by a great single corridor which is 750 feet long. This hospital will be staffed by Japanese personnel under the direction of a young Caucasian doctor and a young Caucasian head nurse.

Barrack Apartments

The barracks are of the Army's T. O. (theatre of operations) type with slight modifications for family occupancy. We saw two barrack apartments. One 16 by 20 feet was designed for three persons. It consisted of a rectangular room with a coal stove for heating. The room was lined with colotex. Contrasted with the reports of barracks at Manzanar and Poston, these seem of better construction. The barracks, however, have the usual outer covering of tarpaper.

Because of priorities, the flush toilets had not yet arrived, although sewer pipes have already been laid. Crude latrines have temporarily been put up to serve until the flush toilets are installed. The toilets, when they are constructed, will be partitioned.

Each block has its shower rooms and its laundry and wash rooms. The women's showers (an improvement over the first centers in California) are partitioned, although the men's showers are not. There are four bathtubs in every unit "for the older people."

Only Beds Supplied

As in other centers, the colonists upon arrival at their new barracks home are given a bare room and only beds and mattresses. They are not issued a single piece of furniture. A scrap pile of lumber left by the construction workers will serve as the raw material supply for the furniture which the evacuees will build. At present this scrap lumber is being classified so that a more equitable distribution of the wood can be made.

"For God's sake," one of the administrators said, "please tell the people to stop shipping food and lumber to Minidoka. We have enough wood and we will have enough food even if we have to buy it ourselves."

Water for Minidoka's kitchens come from two deep wells. Three other wells are being drilled. Water for irrigation will be taken from the Miller-Gooding canal, the maintenance of which will be one of the public service projects on which the colonists will be employed.

Minidoka today is an experiment. It is a twentieth century repetition of the frontier struggle of pioneers against the land and the elements. The Japanese colonists have one advantage, however. They will have modern tools, barring wartime priorities and shortages, to wield in their struggle to subjugate the wild land and to build new homes.

Minidoka is not a concentration camp. But we remember the words of one young colonist as we left the relocation center: "I'm a free-born American, accused of no crime. Why must I remain here?"

This is just a preliminary report, hastily written to meet a newspaper deadline. We would like to see Minidoka in six months, in a year from today. The War Relocation Authority and its administrators need those six months and that year before full judgment can be given. This first impression, in Minidoka's first month of life, is encouraging to us.