



Arai Fish Pond



The National Park Service has repaired and stabilized the pond, but it is still fragile. Please do not enter the pond or step on any of the surrounding rocks.

Recently uncovered by archeological excavations, the Arai fish pond is located in Block 33 between Barracks 3 and 4. The pond, a short (100-yard) walk from the Driving Tour Road, was discovered by the National Park Service thanks to information and photographs provided by Mrs. Madelon Arai Yamamoto, the daughter of the pond's creator. Madelon came to Manzanar with her family when she was 10 years old.

The Manzanar Relocation Center is justifiably infamous for dust and wind, flimsy wooden barracks, one-room "apartments" that lacked indoor plumbing and privacy, and the social and cultural tension generated by incarceration. But archeological investigations and oral histories reveal a different side of Manzanar. To improve their harsh surroundings, some of those confined in the Relocation Center built gardens, ponds, and community parks. Vegetable gardens, called "Victory gardens" because they would free up food for the troops, supplemented the crops grown in the surrounding fields. Small flower gardens decorated barracks entryways. Mess hall gardens provided something pretty to view during the long waits for meals. Decorative Japanese gardens, parks, picnic areas, cherry and other trees, and rose gardens provided a respite from the prison-like setting.

After the Relocation Center closed in 1945, many of the gardens at Manzanar disappeared. The buildings were removed or demolished, and building debris was often pushed into ponds and buried. Wind-blown and water-deposited sands and silts covered much of the site, and vegetation obscured other traces of the 10,000 people who had been confined here.

A Family Pond

The Arai fish pond was built by Jack Hanshiro Arai for his family. Mr. Arai had immigrated to the U.S. in 1915, when he was about 16 years old. Fluent in both Japanese and English, Jack Arai had farmed rice in Texas and worked at a wholesale produce market in downtown Los Angeles before he, his wife, their three children, and his sister-in-law and nephew were interned at Manzanar.

At Manzanar, Jack Arai worked first as a carpenter to help finish construction within the camp. In that job, he also worked outside the camp confines, and it was an assignment in the Inyo Mountains that inspired him to build a pond and stock it with local fish. The Arai children trained the fish to come up to them to eat, and the pond became a favorite place to congregate, not only for the children of Block 33 but for children in the surrounding blocks as well. Mr. Arai had a small garden next to the pond where he grew chrysanthemums and Japanese vegetables like nasubi, the elongated eggplant, green onions, and cucumbers; in the pond itself he grew some Japanese water vegetables and water lilies he had ordered through the mail.



All the family photographs of the pond were taken by Madelon's uncle, Tosh Yoshizaki. Yoshizaki (pictured above in uniform) was in the Army, and visited his sister and her family at Manzanar while he was on leave in 1943.



The Pond Uncovered

Volunteers helped uncover the Arai pond during an archeological excavation led by the Park Service in 2011. When it was built, the Arai fish pond was located between two barracks, and Jack Arai incorporated some of the pre-Relocation Center apple trees that remained from the town of Manzanar into his garden. Today, the apple trees are gone and large cottonwood and locust trees grow where the barracks once stood. Before the excavation, only a few rocks marked the location of the pond. But just below the ground surface, the pond was found relatively intact, lined with concrete and edged with boulders, and encompassing three small islands. During the archeological project, Mrs. Yamamoto pointed out where a fish tunnel was, and identified the remains of some large wooden trays as the boxes where her father grew water lilies. Her descriptions also led to the discovery of a rock-lined concrete channel that led from the water faucet at the north end of the barracks to the pond. Today boulders in the family snapshots can be seen again, as can the deep area that the fish preferred.

A Place of Beauty and Serenity

Manzanar National Historic Site has become renowned the world over for the gardens that Japanese Americans constructed there while they were confined during World War II. The archeological excavation of the Arai fish pond was featured in a documentary produced by Japanese Public Television (NHK). In the documentary, Mrs. Yamamoto reflected about why her father had built the pond at Manzanar:

"The garden was really a place of beauty and serenity and I think it would remind him a little bit about Japan. And then to be able to put koi, carp, even though it was not the Japanese carp, in it he thought it would be an accomplishment. And he wanted something for us to enjoy other than just having the green grass. And it was a project that brought many of his friends together to work on something that was so beautiful and really enjoyed by so many people here in camp. And he took pride in the fact that people would come to look at it and speak to him about it. And I'm sure that he went to look at all the other ponds that were here in Manzanar too. And it's really thrilling to see that he left an accomplishment that can be seen today ... it's really a tremendous memorial for his respect for the Japanese garden and the heritage that he brought from Japan to Manzanar."



The Pond Remembered

"When Jack Hanshiro Arai was a carpenter he had to go across to the Inyo Range to help the outside people build bridges and that's where he found the carp and the perch and he said, 'oh if I could only have a pond!' Well, he didn't have a pond but he wanted to bring the carp home and I don't know how he got the concrete and everything but he got all of that and he got friends to help him ...

"... before I knew it they were in front of the house digging it out. And then before I knew it they arrived with the concrete, and then before I knew it there were boulders all around there. And then once the pond was built, it took almost half a day to fill it with water. He put a little concrete river all the way up to the water tap.

"The carp grew to as long as twelve inches, and they loved to rub their backs against the side of the concrete wall. We had an island in the center with a fish tunnel, and they would swim through it all the time. We could see them do that. They wouldn't come too much to the shallow end, they liked the deeper water. My father hung a hammock between the apple trees at the shallow end of the pond."

Madelon Arai Yamamoto

