



Residents of block 23 (Minidoka Interlude 1943)

Minidoka National Historic Site

As the 385th unit of the National Park System, Minidoka was established in 2001 to commemorate the hardships and sacrifices of Japanese Americans interned there during World War II. Also known as ‘Hunt Camp’, Minidoka Relocation Center was a 33,000-acre site with over 600 buildings and a total population of about 13,000 internees from Alaska, Washington, and Oregon. The Center was in operation from August 1942 until October 1945.

Executive Order 9066

In the 1800s, many emigrants from Japan crossed the Pacific Ocean to seek economic opportunity in America. While some originally intended to return to their birthplace, many eventually established families, farms, businesses, and communities in the United States. Although America became their new home, the pioneers (Issei) and their American-born children (Nisei) encountered various forms of racial prejudice in the United States. Congress passed laws prohibiting resident aliens from owning land or obtaining citizenship. Quotas were set restriction the flow of new arrivals. With the rise of militarism in Japan in the early 1900s, newspapers often fanned the flames of prejudice.

Japan’s attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 intensified hostility towards Japanese Americans. Some newspaper columnists, politicians and military personnel treated all people of Japanese ancestry as potential spies and saboteurs. As wartime hysteria mounted, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942.

Executive Order 9066 gave the Secretary of War and the military commanders the power to exclude any persons from designated areas in order to secure nation defense objectives against sabotage and espionage. Although the order could be applied to all people, the focus was on the persons of Japanese, German, and Italian decent. Due to public pressure the order was mainly used to exclude persons of Japanese ancestry, both American citizens and legal resident aliens, from coastal areas including portions of Alaska, Washington State, Oregon, southern Arizona, and all of California.

Japanese American Internment

Following the signing of Executive Order 9066, over 120,000 persons of Japanese ancestry (Nikkei) living on the West Coast were forced to leave their homes, jobs, and businesses behind and report to designated military holding areas. This constituted the single largest forced relocation in U.S. history.

Temporary assembly centers were located at fairgrounds, racetracks, and other make-shift facilities. Some 7,100 future Minidoka residents were first incarcerated at the Puyallup, Washington assembly center known as 'Camp Harmony'. Despite its innocuous name, it was no summer camp. Barbed wire fences surrounded the camp, armed guards patrolled the grounds, and movement between different areas of the camp was strictly controlled.

It would be five months before the ten relocation centers established by the Wartime Relocation Authority were ready for occupation.

Living Conditions at Minidoka

Minidoka's first internees arrived to find a camp still under construction. There was no hot running water and the sewage system had not been constructed. The initial reaction to the stark landscape by many was one of discouragement. Upon arriving, one internee wrote:

"When we first arrived here we almost cried, and thought that this is the land God had forgotten. The vast expanse of nothing but sagebrush and dust, a landscape so alien to our eyes, and a desolate, woe-begone feeling of being so far removed from home and fireside bogged us down mentally, as well as physically."

-Emory Andrews Collection

The camp consisted of administration and warehouse buildings, 36 residential blocks, schools, fire stations, an assortment of shops and stores, a hospital, and a cemetery. Each residential block included twelve barracks-style buildings (each divided into six small one-room apartments), a communal dining hall, a laundry facility with communal showers and toilets, and a recreation hall. Provisions within the barracks consisted of Army issue cots and a pot-bellied stove. Light was provided by a single hanging bulb.



Building Minidoka

Scraps of lumber and sage brush were utilized to make furniture. Coal from the stoves and water had to be hand carried. When coal supplies ran low, sagebrush was gathered and burned.

The hastily built barracks buildings were little more than wooden frames covered with tarpaper. They had no insulation. Temperatures during the winter of 1942 plunged to -21 degrees Fahrenheit. Over 100 tons of coal a day was needed for heating the buildings in the camp. Spring, with its ankle deep mud, was followed by scorching heat with temperatures soaring to 104 degrees Fahrenheit and blinding dust storms. Two accidental drownings in the nearby North Side canal prompted internees to build a swimming hole to cope with the oppressive heat.



Internee tending a garden

Many living in the rural communities outside the camp thought the internees, with their running water, indoor plumbing, and "free" supplies, were being "coddled", a view that still persists today. For those inside the camp, torn from their homes, friends and livelihoods, then confined within barbed wire fences and looking out at armed guards, the perception was considerably different.

Despite the harsh conditions at Minidoka, internees were resourceful. They built baseball diamonds and small parks with picnic areas. Their baseball team was virtually unbeatable. Taiko drumming and other musical groups were formed, and a newspaper was published, the *Minidoka Irrigator*.

To create beauty in an otherwise dismal landscape, paths were lined with decorative stones and traditional Japanese gardens were planted. Some of these remnants are still visible today, yet most traces of daily life at Minidoka are now gone.

Wartime Efforts

The relocation centers were subject to the same wartime rationing as the rest of the country. Materials considered to be vital to the war effort were recycled. Minidoka was nearly an entirely self-sustaining community complete with vegetable gardens, hog and chicken farms. Japanese Americans interned at Minidoka were also an indispensable source of labor for southern Idaho's agricultural-based economy.

“The Hunt residents were credited with possibly saving hundreds of thousands of dollars in crop losses in the local sugar beet and potato crops as well as in canneries, lumber mills, etc. in the region during the three years the center existed.” -North Side News 8/5/82

By the time the center closed in 1945 internees had cleared and cultivated 950 acres of inhospitable land and constructed the ditches and canals need to irrigate them.

A Question of Loyalty

Segregation in the camps was achieved by employing what came to be known as the “loyalty questionnaire.” The questionnaires were originally designed for determining suitability for military service, however two problematic questions emerged.

Question 27 asked all internees if they would be willing to serve in the Armed Forces on combat duty “wherever ordered.” Women and legal aliens who were not allowed to serve in combat struggled with this question. Question 28 asked internees to fore swear allegiance to Japan. The Issei, forbidden to become US citizens, were troubled by the implications of this question.

Those who answered “no” to both questions were labeled the “No-No’s” and shipped to Tule Lake, California, the camp for ‘dissenters’. Many at Tule Lake who answered “yes” to both questions were shipped to Minidoka, a camp for ‘loyal’ internees.



Internees serving in the military

The 442nd Regimental Combat Unit



442nd Color Guard, U.S. Government Archives

Despite their internment, most Japanese Americans remained intensely loyal to the United States, and many demonstrated their loyalty by volunteering for military service. They were segregated into all Japanese American combat and intelligence units commanded by non-Japanese Americans. Of the ten relocation centers, Minidoka had the highest number of volunteers, about 1,000 internees - nearly ten percent of the camp's total peak population.

The 442nd combat unit fought in France and Italy alongside the 100th Infantry Battalion from Hawaii (also composed of Japanese Americans) and was the most highly decorated unit of its size in American military history. During WWII, 73 soldiers from Minidoka died while fighting for their country and two received the Congressional Medal of Honor.

“You fought not only the enemy but you fought prejudice - and you have won.” -President Truman addressing members of the 442nd at the White House in 1946

Camp Closing

During the years of incarceration the internees had transformed many acres of high desert into viable agricultural land. After the camp closed in October 1945, the land was subdivided into smaller farms and auctioned to the highest bidders or given to WWII veterans along with two barracks buildings and one smaller building. The drawing was by lottery. Preference was given to WWII veterans on both the lottery and sale of the farms. Many of the buildings from the camp were also disbursed to government agencies and nonprofit organizations. Today, most of the former Relocation Center remains privately owned farmland.

Could This Happen Again?

The incarceration of Japanese Americans during the 1940s has been described as one of the worst violations of constitutional rights in American history and yet few Americans raised their voices in protest of the removal order. More than two-thirds of the internees were American citizens by birth. The system of checks and balances that was suppose to protect their rights and freedoms had failed.

In 1988, the Civil Liberties Act acknowledged the fundamental injustice of the evacuation, relocation, and interment of citizens and permanent resident aliens of Japanese ancestry during World War II.

A formal apology by the U.S. Government was made, as well as restitution to those individuals who were interned. Most importantly, the Act provides for a public education fund to finance efforts to inform the public about the interment so as to prevent the recurrence of any similar event.



The Historic site preserves remnant features from the original camp, such as the waiting room at the entrance station

-NPS photo

All photographs courtesy of Records of the War Relocation Authority, Record Group 210; Nation Archives at College Park, College Park, MD 20740 -unless otherwise labeled.

Directions

Minidoka National Historic Site is located between the towns of Twin Falls and Jerome, Idaho in south central Idaho. The Historic Site is open to the public, port-a-potty and parking are located at the west entrance. Guided tours are by appointment only.

To get to the Historic Site from the intersection of Interstate 84 (I-84) and U.S. Highway 93 (US 93):

- Travel north on US 93 for 5 miles to the Eden exit.
- Travel east on Highway 25 for 9.5 miles to the Hunt Rd. exit.
- Travel east on Hunt Rd. for 2.2 miles to the small parking area on you right.

Map available at website or Visitor Center.

Preserving the Historic Site

Collecting of artifacts, rocks, plants, animals, or any other object within the Nation Historic Site is strictly prohibited. Help preserve your park by taking only memories and photographs. Report violations to the National Park Service at (208) 837-4793.

May We Also Suggest

Websites: www.nps.gov/manz

www.minidoka.org

www.historicaljeromecounty.com

Visit the Minidoka Relocation Center display a the Jerome County Museum and the “restored” barracks building at thee Idaho Farm and Ranch Museum (IFARM).

Jerome County Historical Society and IFARM

220 N. Lincoln

Jerome, Idaho 83338

(208) 324-5641

For More Information

Superintendent/Minidoka National Historic Site

P.O. Box 570

Hagerman, Idaho 83332

(208) 837-4793

www.nps.gov/miin