



Digging for my roots: A journey into the past

Editor's note: Carlene Tanigoshi Tinker has been a Fresno Chaffee Zoo docent since 2005. She had shared some photos with me from her time with the Amache Field Schools project, which is conducting an archaeological research study of the Granada Relocation Center in Colorado, and I asked her if she would be willing to share some of her story with Lynxline. Carlene was among the thousands of people sent to internment camps during World War II and, while not zoo related, I believe you will find her story compelling.

— Editor Kris Eldred

By Carlene Tanigoshi Tinker

On the morning of Dec. 7, 1941, Pearl Harbor was bombed by Japan. The following day, Dec. 8, 1941, our president, Franklin Delano Roosevelt, declared war on Japan.

Then, on Feb. 19, 1942, based on the ill-founded reports by some racist military advisers, FDR signed Executive Order 9066 (EO 9066). EO 9066 established military zones all along the West Coast of the United States. Although not explicitly identifying West Coast residents, who happened to be of Japanese ancestry, EO 9066 stated that the “enemy” must be removed from the West Coast states (California, Oregon, Washington and part of Arizona). (Incidentally, there were people of German and Italian descent who were impacted as well.)

About 120,000 Japanese Americans and resident aliens were to be evacuated. Some voluntarily left when allowed to do so. But those remaining were then given only a few days to pack up their belongings and get ready to leave. The orders to evacuate began some time in May 1942.

Where were they to go? The U.S. government designated 10 internment camps in various states to which these people would be sent. My family and I, living in the Los Angeles area at the time, were designated to go to the Granada Relocation Center (aka “Amache”) in southeastern Colorado, located



Photo courtesy of docent Carleen Tanigoshi Tinker

Carleen Tanigoshi Tinker, shown with Queenie, was 3 in 1939 when her family was sent to Granada Relocation Center/Amache in Colorado.

along the Santa Fe Trail (Highway 50). “Evacuees” from some Northern California cities were also assigned to Amache.

Most states resisted “our” coming, but Gov. Carr, then governor of Colorado, welcomed “us.” It was to be his undoing as his benevolence ruined his political career: He never regained his former political status.

Because the 10 internment camps were not yet built (most were not completed until the summer — ours was still unfinished when we arrived in late August), the U.S. government provided temporary “housing” in various Assembly Centers. There were two in Fresno — one at the Pinedale Assembly Center and one at the Fresno Fairgrounds.

My family and I were assigned to the Santa Anita Race Track Assembly Center. I believe we were

one of the families that occupied a horse stall — you can imagine what that was like!? In any case, we were there from May 1942 until Aug. 27, 1942. Only a small portion of those assigned to this Assembly Center went to Colorado. The government decided to mix us up in order to prevent any collusion, so other families/individuals were sent to one of the other internment camps.

At the time, the Granada Relocation Center/Amache was the 10th largest “city” in Colorado; the largest number of residents probably hovered around 7,000. THIS WAS THE BEGINNING OF MY HISTORY!

In May 2009, I attended an Amache reunion in Las Vegas. I had never attended one before, although there were several leading up to this one. I had seen the announcement in the *Pacific Citizen*, a newspaper read by many Japanese Americans. I shared this announcement with my maternal uncle and my cousin and their wives. Not really planning to attend myself, they said, “We’ll go if you go!”

Well, I did and that was the start of my personal “Journey into the Past.” At that reunion, I met Dr. Bonnie Clark and two of her graduate students, April Kamp-Whittaker (now, Dr. April Kamp-Whittaker) and Ms. Dana Shew. They were talking to curious folks about their research at the Granada Relocation Center/Amache (for brevity, I shall refer



Photo courtesy of Dr. Bonnie Clark

Carleen Tanigoshi Tinker helps unearth the history behind the Granada Relocation Center/Amache at a field school.

to the Granada Relocation Center as Amache) that they started in 2008.

They were conducting an archaeological research study at the internment camp where I spent my early years. Wow! That in itself was exciting! At one point, volunteers were being asked to join them. And I, being a front-row type, raised my hand eagerly. I had always wanted to go on a “dig,” so this was the chance to do one.

I contacted Dr.

Bonnie Clark after the reunion, and she agreed that I could come along in 2010. (I’ve gone five times now, and I plan to join them again this July.) I asked a friend, Judy Speer, to join me — I had met her earlier on an African safari, and she, like me, enjoys new adventures. So, outfitting ourselves with kidskin gloves, trowels and other like equipment that was recommended, Judy and I reported to Amache, with hopes of learning about Amache and, of course, about field archaeology.

In each Amache Field School (2010, 2012, 2014, 2016 and 2018), I have been involved in unearthing things — physically and culturally — about lives of the internees/incarcerates as whole, and about my personal history at the same time. There are three notable, personal experiences that have resulted that stand out in my mind.

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The first one happened in 2010, when Dr. Clark told me I was to be interviewed by the Colorado Public Radio station in my “actual” apartment. I had no idea where that was. She showed it to me on a map and led me to it (the crew was within earshot distance as I was being interviewed).

Standing in “my” apartment, she asked me if I remembered anything about it. If you can believe it, within a few minutes, yes, I said, “This is where the blanket, hung over a rope, was hooked to the wall to create a sleeping area separate from the living room (the room was probably 20’ x 16’ — not big), the single light bulb hung from center of the ceiling and the pot belly stove was over by the wall.”

I told one of the grad students that I had no recollection of all of this, but there it was in my subconscious — amazing! She said our minds are like layers of onions: You can peel the layers, one by one, to reveal your subconscious. You know, I think she’s right.

The second discovery was the outdoor bathtub that we found in 2016; it’s called an “ofuro” and it was made out of tin. It is big enough for several people (it looks just like a water trough for horses). It’s built on a wooden platform — there’s a space for disrobing before entering the tub that has water, heated below, by burning coal pieces. I do remember going with my mother and my maternal aunts to take our baths. You had to first wash yourself with soap, rinse off with clean water and then get into the tub. Dr. Clark said most of these tubs were enclosed, but mine, as I recall, was opened to the sky — my most singular memory says it was a clear, starry night, as I glanced upward.

Finally, the third amazing discovery was in 2018, when an original barrack, Barrack 11F, which had been housed in a park of the nearby town of Granada about 1.5 miles from Amache, was moved back to its original footprint. Because it had been cut into a smaller building to fit the Granada park site, it didn’t fit its original footprint (last year, 2020, a crew “rebuilt” it to its original size).

More information

Open this link to see a video of former Amache incarcerated reflecting on their participation in the Amache project, “Amache kids search for their past”: https://youtu.be/0uo_jJlELk4

Colorado Public Radio did a podcast on Amache, featuring Carlene: <https://www.cpr.org/show-segment/memories-of-life-in-camp-amache-amid-effort-to-make-former-internment-camp-a-national-historic-site/>

Now, you might be wondering why this barrack is significant for me? Well, as I was looking at pictures on my phone of documents I had photographed of my personal papers at the National Archives in Washington, D.C., I came across a photo that showed my report card from pre-school and kindergarten. Voila! There it was: I had attended school in Barrack 11F. Mind-boggling, to say the least.

Of course, there are other things I’ve gleaned and learned from my five Amache Field Schools. These were opportunities, not only from an academic perspective to learn about the internment/incarceration history of Japanese Americans and resident Japanese, but most importantly to learn about and appreciate how my family and I and thousands of others managed to “survive” this period of our lives! There are two principles that depict the character of those who managed a life within internment/incarceration camps: “shikata ga nai” (it can’t be helped) and “gaman” (to persevere). Truly, because the internees/incarcerated embodied these principles, they did survive!

Thanks to Dr. Clark, Dr. April Kamp-Whittaker and Ms. Dana Shew for allowing me this chance of a lifetime! “Digging for My Roots” has become a salient part of my search for my personal history, which began as a child in 1939 — I had just turned 3 years old when my family and I arrived in Amache. And, as long as I am able, I hope to continue my participation in the Amache Field Schools.