

Victory Garden

JAPANESE AMERICANS INTERNED DURING WORLD WAR II ALSO WANTED A U.S. VICTORY by Christian Toto

The barbed wire, watchtowers, and armed guards have vacated the 10,500 acres in southeast Colorado. So have the thousands of Japanese Americans relocated here in 1942 in a misguided government effort aimed at preventing them from aligning with Japan against their own nation.

The site looks unspectacular to the naked eye but is in fact one of the most well preserved relocation camps in the country. It still speaks to archeologists, historians, and America itself.

"When you're born in America and go to American schools, you're taught all the things that are supposed to be good about America. It's just shocking for us to find out that things we had been taught weren't being honored," says former camp resident Bob Fuchigami, 79, who often talks to various groups, in part to honor what his parents endured. "We were Americans just like everybody else. If we are not vigilant and responsive to what we learn in schools, it can happen again to any group of people. It happened to us. It could happen to Muslims or Jews or Mexican Americans or Iranians ... any group."

The official name is Granada Relocation Center. But it is often referred to as Camp Amache — a separate postal designation meant to further distinguish it from the adjacent town of Granada in Prowers County. This May, former camp internees as well as members of Colorado's Japanese American community will gather at the internment camp for the annual pilgrimage. And there are even some attempts at rebuilding. The water tower, sold off after Amache was shuttered in October 1945, landed at a ranch about 30 miles away. The rancher's heirs have agreed to donate it back, and a federal grant is being sought for restoration.

Amache barracks, made up of 120-foot-long buildings that lacked running water and typically housed four to six people, were also parceled out after the camp closed. One barrack is currently a classroom for Prowers County preschoolers, and others are scattered throughout Colorado and in disrepair.



Historic Amache: (top, left to right) a Boy Scout troop, internees playing baseball, working the harvest at Amache farm, and (above) an overview of the camp as seen from the watertower

A barrack in Stonington, more than a hundred miles away, has been donated back to Amache, but the problem is finding the \$100,000-plus to move it.

War Story

Most Amache residents hailed from Los Angeles and Merced, California. Internees included Disney cartoonists Chris Ishii and Tom Okamoto, Stanford University professor Yamato Ichihashi, and future Broadway star Chiyoko "Pat" Suzuki. But Fuchigami, who was 12 when his family first came to Amache, says many internees were farmers — his own father worked as a fruit and vegetable gardener — and learned to deal with the different climate and soil conditions.

"They didn't stop what they were doing," says Fuchigami, a California native who now lives in Evergreen. "They just changed location."

Internees grew crops such as celery and spinach in large quantities. They also tended to ornamental and cactus gardens as well as koi ponds. "It's one of the things that kept people sane," says Bonnie Clark, an assistant professor of anthropology at the University of Denver who oversees the school's Amache Research Project.



The one-square-mile core of the camp, which was enclosed by barbed wire, was designated a National Historic Landmark in 2006. It featured amenities one would see in most small towns, such as general stores, schools, and churches. But internees did more than survive the forced relocation, cramped conditions, and collective insult to their love of country. They retained their dignity. Internees began their own newspaper and formed a number of groups, from a Boy Scout troop to their own fire department.

“They became a stronger community because of this hardship. Long-lasting relationships came out of this,” Clark says. “It’s where young people met their future spouses.”

Some internees were eventually recruited for the war effort — 614 in all — with 31 giving their lives for their country. Most were chosen for their ability to speak Japanese and worked as translators. Camp Amache internee Kiyoshi Muranaga earned the Congressional Medal of Honor for his heroics.

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— Bonnie Clark


While Clark and other researchers have conducted interviews with Amache survivors, some information comes from remains on the site. A fragment of Japanese pottery might have been used for sake. Swizzle sticks show internees occasionally left the camp to visit the local bar. They even planted Victory Gardens, Fuchigami says. Amache is well preserved partly due to John Hopper, a teacher and athletics coach at Granada High School who has

Below: Mapping landscaping features. Bottom: Trees planted by internees along the barracks.



spent roughly 17 years organizing his students to volunteer at the camp.

But Clark believes it remains a hidden part of our history. "Almost every time I talk about Amache, I have someone from the audience tell me that Japanese American internment was something they did not learn about in school as part of American history," she writes in an e-mail. "That goes from kids to the

elderly. Recently, an employee of the National Park Service told me he thinks this is a shadowed history because the internment does not fit our conception of ourselves as Americans. The irony of the fact that during WWII we are fighting for freedom in Europe but at the same time we imprison our own citizens? Try explaining that in your fourth-grade history class ..." 

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