

# Amache Remembered by Ernie Yoshinko

## Slide 1

In the early 1900's a Japanese community was formed in the Cortez Livingston area and was called the Yamado Colony. My grandparents came to the US about that same time, but settled in Alameda, where my dad was born. They moved to Denair California around 1910. They farmed 160 acres of land with his parents, brother and brother in law.

In the early 1930's my dad went back to Japan to find a wife. He found my mother there and they were married in Japan before he came back. He also found his brother a wife (His brother didn't have a say on who it was. I think my dad made the better choice. My mother happened to be an American citizen because she was born here, and her parents took her and her sisters back to Japan when she was 5 or 6 and she was educated in Japan.

## Slide 2

Japan bombed Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941 and the lives of the Japanese changed dramatically. The resentment toward the Japanese grew even though our family as well as other Japanese were well respected and ran successful farms and business in the area. One of the main reasons for the hostility growing was because our neighbors and friends had to send their sons to fight in the war and they were being killed. Since it was the Japanese that started the war, they felt like we were to blame. The Japanese community here had to destroy many of their Japanese belongings such as letters, written in Japanese, artifacts and other things that would have linked them to closer ties with Japan.

## Slide 3

There was so much resentment that President Roosevelt put out an Executive Order #9066 on February 19<sup>th</sup> 1942 giving the military the power to ban any Japanese Alien and Citizen from moving about freely in the Western states and ordered the interment of thousands of Japanese into assembly centers throughout the state. Some received permission to leave the west coast and move east or go back to Japan, but most stayed and were incarcerated in the assembly centers.

These posters were posted everywhere in all the towns throughout the state. This one posted on May 7<sup>th</sup> of 1942 in the Merced, Stanislaus, Mariposa counties, *states that all persons of Japanese ancestry, both alien and non-alien will be evacuated from their homes by 12 o'clock noon Wednesday May 13, 1942* Only one week after the posting of instructions.

Here are a few of the instructions that must be observed:

Evacuees must carry with them the following property:

- Bedding and linens (no mattresses) for each member of the family

- Toilet articles for each member of the family

- Extra clothing for each member of the family

- Sufficient forks, spoons, knives, plates, bowls and cups for each member of the family

- Essential personal effects for each member of the family.

All items carried will be securely packaged, tied and marked with our name and number that were assigned to each family **and** limited to one suitcase per person.

We couldn't take pets, excess personal items or household goods.

## Slide 4

The Assembly Center we were sent to was here at the Merced Fairgrounds. There were a total of 17 assembly centers throughout California, including the Turlock Fairgrounds, Santa Anita and Tanforan horse race tracks. You can see the list on the slide.

Since the orders came so fast the government didn't have time to build us places to stay so many of us had to use the horse and cow stables at the fairgrounds. The weather was warm and hot during the summer months we were here. They could have put us in the large exhibit buildings, but instead made us stay in the barns. They eventually built barracks for us. Our family number was 1911. My parents were 1911 A&B and my older brother in C and I was 1911 D, and we had to wear these tags all the time. There were over 4600 here in Merced.

There were over 200,000 Japanese who lived in the western states and about 120,000 were interned in the camps. The others went back to Japan or moved east before the Notices. Between December of 1941 and February many saw what was going to happen and left. My Uncle was one of them and moved to Colorado, but my dad elected to stay here. He didn't want to give up the ranch.

## Slide 5

We stayed at the Merced fairgrounds until they built the Internment camps located in other states which were not along the west coast.

There was a total of 10 camps, usually in desert type areas that were not populated. We were in Merced from May until August of 1942; the hottest part of the year and my mother was pregnant with my brother at that time and had to travel all the way to Colorado on a bumpy old train and my brother was born in early November at the camp.

All of the Merced Assembly Center evacuees went to Granada, Colorado. It is a little town in the southeastern part of the state about 15 miles from the Kansas border. A couple years ago I went back to the campsite for the first time since I was there nearly 70 years ago. While I was there I found out for the first time which block and barrack number we lived in. My parents never talked much about the camp and for some reason we never asked.

They named the camp Amache after some Indian tribe in the area, because the town of Granada didn't want to be associated with the camp. It is located 2 miles outside of the town.

## Slide 6

There were 10,000 acres at Camp Amache with internees arriving in trains starting August 27<sup>th</sup>. 200-500 internees per day arrived. By October the population was 7,566. 4,500 were from Merced Assembly Center and 3,090 from Santa Anita Assembly Center.

The entire compound was surrounded by barbed wire, guarded by armed military police and we were watched 24 hours a day, 7 days a week by soldiers located in eight guard towers overlooking the barrack housing units. Outside of the fenced compound was an administrative area where the Military Police had their housing and mess hall. There were a total of 134 enlisted men and officers watching over us. Later the number was reduced to 15 with the use of internees to help with some of the policing. Later 3,230 internees were employed to help with administrative, clerical and teaching. The wages for the internees ranged from \$12 to \$15 month. The professionals like doctors and teachers made \$19 per month.

## Slide 7

The internee areas were divided into 30 blocks. Each block had 13 barracks with one used as a recreation hall for the block members and used for meetings, church services and adult education classes. Each block also had a communal mess hall to feed 250 to 300 in their block. It also had a communal clothes washing and toilet facility. Clothes were washed using a scrub board in concrete tubs and hung to dry outside on clothes lines or in their barracks during the winter. The toilet facilities for the men and women consisted of group latrines, long rows of toilet bowls with no

partitions. Separate group showers for men and women were also built in the multipurpose building which had rows of wash basins.

## Slide 8

Each barrack measured 20 feet by 120 feet and was divided into 6 rooms or apartments. Each room housed 4 to 6 people. 4-6 single men or single women were assigned to a room and in some cases 2 couples shared a room if they had no children. Many times these couples were not related to each other and were total strangers to each other. The barracks were poorly built with 1 by 8 boards with spaces between them and no insulation. Just building paper on the outside. If the building paper had holes in them the air just blew in. I know that my parents used to get mad at us because being kids we would use a stick or pencil and poke hole through the boards. The winters were cold, and it often snowed. The elevation is about 4,000 feet and during the summer it was hot and often over 100 degrees. There was no running water, no toilet facilities in the units and only one bare light bulb and no furniture except the canvas cots that were provided with a thin cotton mattress. Each unit had a pot bellied coal stove.

There was a hospital with 150 beds, the internees produced a weekly newspaper; they had school for the elementary and high school students. There were 60 War Relocation Authority teachers and 50 internee teachers. There was a fire department with 2 fire trucks, a police department with 3 military police officers and 60 internee policemen, and on this site was a farm where the internee farmers produced about 4 million pounds of vegetables and 33,000 bushels of field crops. In 1943 surplus food was sent to other relocation centers. There were a few cows, pigs and chickens raised in the camp. They also had a post office and sold war bonds and war stamps to the internees. Many had money; because we brought all the money they had with them in fear of losing it all if they left it in the banks back home. Different people set up shops to repair shoes, make jewelry, furniture and mend clothes for those who needed it done. Barber shops were set up along with other services needed by the internees.

Life in Camp for the children was an easy life. We had more people to play with, the older children had to go to school like normal and older adults played card games, wrote poetry, carved wood, painted, or just sat around. The women were busy washing clothes or knitting. The men farmed the land around the blocks and many were sent out of the neighboring farms to pick sugar beets and other crops because most of the eligible men of working age went off to war.

There were organized ball teams that played baseball and football. The high school even got a chance to play the local teams outside of the camp and when they won, were not allowed to play them again. Their reason was that the parents were afraid for their kids, they thought they might be stabbed by the Japanese.

We held traditional dances, organized a summer carnival and even had an agricultural fair. There was an outdoor movie night once a week. Many just sat around listening to a radio.

Over two thirds of the internees were American citizens. Many were drafted and joined the armed service and served in the War, with the most famous being the 44nd Army Combat Regiment. A total of 1,500 enlisted from all the camps and the motto for the 4-4-2 was "Go for Broke". 614 applied from Camp Amache with 445 being accepted, by the end a total of 953 names were on the Amache honor roll for serving during the war including women. 31 Amache soldiers lost their lives and one was awarded the Congressional Medal of Honor. In total there were more than 10,000 Japanese who served in the war.

The 442 was one of the most decorated units in the war and had the men received over 18,000 medals. 21 medals of Honor, 52 distinguished Service Crosses and in the year 2000, 19 were upgraded to medals of honor. 1 Distinguished Service Medal, 560 Silver Stars, 22 Legion of Merit Medals, 15 Soldier's medals, 4,000 Bronze Stars and 9,486 Purple Hearts were awarded to the Japanese soldiers fighting for the United States of America

Camp Amache today. While I was in Granada there was a museum in town that the local high school teacher started. They have created directories of people who were in camp and where they lived. They also retained newspapers that the camp put out plus a lot of other things that people left when leaving the camp. That's how I found out where we lived. I found the block number where I lived. We lived in Block 11E, building 11 unit C. I also found out that my first

wife lived in block 11E building 8D. Her family lived in Turlock and owned a market there but lost it during the war. They moved to San Francisco and when I was going to college we visited them, and I found out that the little girl I used to play with was now older and beautiful. We started writing and dating and finally married.

All that's there now is a few story boards, a plaque, the old streets, the water tower and some foundations of the barracks and slabs where the restrooms and laundry areas were.

The cemetery was located outside of the fenced area and was cleaned up by the local high school kids. The counselor said this happened in our backyard and that it wasn't right that it be forgotten so every year they go and clean up the place and plant trees around it and keep the lawns mowed. There were a total of 415 births and 114 deaths at the camp.

August 15, 1945 was the end of the war and the start of people being released from the camp. Trains were made available to those wanting to go back to California. The last train left on October and the camp was closed on October 15, 1945.

We weren't sure that we would get our farm back and didn't know where to go. My dad's brother in law lived in Crowley Colorado during the war. It is about 100 miles from Granada, so we went there to live while my dad worked with him on his farm. My older brother went to the local school in the town of Crowley. Crowley is a little town smaller than Denair where we lived. The elementary school has now been turned into an apartment house and the high school is a museum. You can see we lived right across the street from the school and I remember waiting for my brother to come home from school.

The one thing I remember was that it snowed and hailed there in Colorado. Interestingly, while we were in Colorado visiting Amache and Crowley they had a hail storm. Luckily, we missed it, but I read in the Pueblo paper that many storefronts windows were broken from the storm and in Granada the lady at the restaurant said that her pickup truck on their ranch had the windshields broken the night before we came.

In 1946 we found out that we could get our ranch back so we moved back to Turlock. I remember that the weeds around the house were as tall as I was. The people who kept the ranch harvested the grapes and made whatever they could from the crops, but we were just happy to get our ranch back.

While the place was being fixed up we stayed in Turlock at what we called the Social Hall. My dad started a club back in 1920 and called it the Turlock Social Club. He became the president of the club. Local Japanese families belonged and bought the building. I remember they had this older gentleman that ran the building his name was Ibria and he lived to be 101. It was a building with a big hall in the center, which was used for church services, they also had funerals there and sleeping rooms on the sides of the hall. Many who came back from the camps stayed there till they could find a place to stay. We stayed there for almost 6 months; my younger brother was born there but died a few months after being born. We had Japanese classes there and I remember there was a Koi fish pond. He kept pigeons in the back. Anyway this club still exists today. My older brother became president when my dad passed away and when my brother died, I became president. We still have a total of 24 members and they sit at the Turlock Japanese American club table.

My former in laws came directly back to the Cortez area and worked as farmers for local farm owners and they remember that first year they lived in tents at the ranch with conditions like what we had in the camps. In fact, my sister in law said they complained that it was better in the camp. There was a lot of discrimination toward the Japanese who came back that first year. She even remembers a lot of gun shots being fired toward the ranch I was asked to join the Merced Assembly Committee to help with the monument at the fair grounds and our first design was to stack some suit cases and put a plaque on top of it, because our budget was around \$80,000. A statue would cost too much. Once we began and the word got out, we started getting more and more donations, so we expanded it to include a statue of a little girl sitting on the suitcases, and more money came in so designed in a wall with plaques with all the names of the internees, the we had story boards telling our story and finally a documentary for the whole process.