

A letter from Minoru Tonai, President of the Amache Historical Society  
November 11, 2013

Visitors to the History Colorado Amache website who see the depiction of the barrack might think, "That's not so bad!" As a survivor of the Amache Relocation Center, who was incarcerated when I was 13 years old in 1942 and left when I was 16 years old in 1945, I would like to share my memories of the Amache barracks and my reaction to the website.

The room depicted here has to be the largest room (24' X 20") where a family of 6 - 7 people lived. However, the room looks even larger. On the website, it looks like there were only three or four beds. There would have been 6 - 7 canvas cots in our largest room. Families were placed in their room at its planned capacity when they first arrived in Amache. Particularly, those from Merced Assembly Center - the first to be incarcerated in Amache. Albeit, under some special circumstances, a few families were allowed to not have as many people as its planned capacity. But three or four people in the large room? That was not done. The only time it happened would have been after the family was settled in Amache if a member of the family left for the Army, or to go to college and/or to relocate permanently, leaving less people in their room. Authorities did not force inmates to go to a smaller room, since there were very few people arriving in Amache after the arrival of those who came from Tule Lake Relocation Center in 1943 and Jerome Relocation Center in 1944.

George "Yas" Hirano, our Amache Historical Society Vice President's family of 5 boys, in their 20's and teens, plus their parents, a total of seven, were placed in the largest (24') room. Seven canvas cots in that room made it very crowded, as they, as everyone else, tried to build a table and chairs to have a place to sit, other than your cot. The tables were essential, for those who were in school, to do their homework and school projects. Schools did not stay open at night and weekends, except for special occasions. The Mess Halls were not open after supper, except for special events.

Even though bunk beds could give you more floor space, it was very difficult to build bunk beds, as we would have to find long boards and posts from the scrap wood pile compound and get them surreptitiously at night, as it was not open to the inmates. It was easy to carry small boards, but the larger ones were difficult to carry without detection. Don't forget, the searchlight on a guard tower was rotating across that area at night, so you needed to go when the light was not shining. The authorities knew what was happening, but did very little about it. They "pretended to look the other way", as they knew it was to make our lives less miserable. We did not know about their attitudes at that time, so it felt like pilfering, but rationalized that we were putting scrap wood to good use.

The room depicted here shows the fine work done by the inmates to show how clever we were. Some people did some amazing things with what little was available to them. However, for most internees, this was not the case. For one, not everyone had the tools or talent to do some of those things. This room looks more like it is for a propaganda photograph by the authorities.

To someone visiting this website, it looks like we all had plenty of room and we all were able to build those fine things that are shown in the exhibit. It does not show what our lives were really like. It looks like a spacious bedroom, with handicrafts, with steel cots. In reality, there were: tight quarters; lack of privacy; communal bathrooms, laundry room and eating facility; inadequate heating; no cooling (fans); one ceiling light bulb; dusty environment - no lawns were allowed in the inmates residence areas; poorly designed and constructed barracks allowed dust and snow to blow into the room between the foundation and the walls and door; breakdown of family bonds (most older children ate with their friends and father was no longer the breadwinner); and above all, we were enclosed by barbed-wire fences, with guard towers and searchlights and Military Police making sure that we did not escape.

We were prisoners of our own country, though we were not guilty of any crime, just our ancestry. We only needed 1/16th Japanese Blood to be considered the enemy and living only in the U.S. Army's Western Defense Command (West Coast of U.S.) This was did not apply to those "Enemies" living in Hawaii, nor the rest of the United States. Those of German, Italian or Finnish Ancestry were not treated the same way on the East Coast of the United States. There was not one person of Japanese descent found guilty of Espionage or Sabotage. Greed, prejudice, and lack of righteous politicians caused this injustice by the United States government. Only Colorado Governor Ralph L. Carr spoke up against this travesty of justice.

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