

The Holyoke connection: WWII Japanese American evacuees embraced in CO

Written by Darci Tomky

□ Looking back at history, American patriotism was at its finest during WWII. Rationing efforts and scrap drives became a part of daily life. If citizens weren't fighting in the war, they were supporting their "boys" back at home.

□ Coloradoans took the war effort one step further in their willingness to bring unity and safety to a country filled with uncertainty and hysteria.

□ "We of Colorado are big enough and patriotic enough to do our duty," said Colorado Governor Ralph L. Carr. So when the government was looking for a place to relocate evacuated Japanese Americans, Colorado cooperated. Colorado would do its duty.

□ Although few Americans of Japanese ancestry were spies or traitors, much fear arose among Americans, especially on the Western coast.

□ "People today cannot quite understand the hysteria that prevailed at that time," said Holyoke resident Jim Gribben. "Yes, they were American citizens, but they looked just like the pictures of other Japanese killing our brothers and friends in the South Pacific and Aleutian Islands."

□ This fear and hysteria led up to FDR's Executive Order No. 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, an order that mandated the evacuation of all Japanese U.S. citizens and aliens from areas near certain strategic military sites in the West.

□ Over 120,000 people needed to be moved inland. This included both the Issei, the first-generation Japanese Americans who immigrated to the U.S., and the Nisei, the second-generation children of the Issei who were born in America.

□ So, where were all these evacuees supposed to go?

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□ Colorado.

□ Whether Colorado residents thought the evacuation was ethical or not, the state as a whole was willing to cooperate with the relocation efforts. Governor Carr was openly opposed to depriving these American citizens of their liberty and freedom, but he still acknowledged that Coloradoans would not avoid any obligations to their country.

□ “We announce to the world that 1,118,000 red-blooded citizens of this state are able to take care of 3,500 or any number of enemies if that be the task which is allotted to us,” he said.

□ The War Relocation Authority (WRA) decided to build camps in several interior states where Japanese Americans would be concentrated and under constant guard.

□ Robert Harvey’s book “Amache—The Story of Japanese Internment in Colorado during WWII” outlines the four stipulations the WRA set for possible evacuation sites.

□ The first demand was that the site needed to have an abundance of land that could provide work opportunities in public works, agriculture, production or manufacturing.

□ Even though the evacuees were placed inland for security reasons, it was also clear the Japanese Americans could help the nation’s wartime labor demand, explained Harvey. With many men off fighting in the war, farming communities in Colorado were eager for more manpower in the fields, and the relocation program seemed like a perfect solution.

□ A letter from Mayor of Julesburg George Thompson to Governor Carr expressed his eagerness to have Japanese workers for fields with crops that were just waiting to be harvested.

□ Secondly, the camp needed to have “adequate public facilities” like roads, water, power and railways. To avoid the dependence on any established towns, the camp needed to be

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self-sufficient.

□ Evacuees would be able to grow their own food, have access to their own water supply and receive goods shipped to them.

□ In an effort to ease tension with other Americans, the WRA's third stipulation was that the camp was not near a large concentration of caucasians.

□ Finally, the last requirement was that the evacuees be placed away from easily sabotaged sites like forests, reservoirs and dams. The WRA did not want to put national safety at risk, an idea resulting from the fear of fifth-column activities by the Japanese.

□ Out of 14 sites in Colorado, the location for the Japanese internment camp was narrowed down to two places—both fit all four stipulations.

□ What most readers probably don't know is Holyoke was one of those two sites. Think about it. It makes sense. 1942 Holyoke certainly had enough space to house a large number of evacuees away from large cities as well as plenty of agriculture work for them to contribute to.

□ Correspondence between Governor Carr and Rex Evans, the chairman of the Republican County Central Committee in Holyoke, was documented, regarding Carr's stand on the subject. He wanted to make clear that Colorado did not ask for the Japanese evacuees, but that it was a decision of the U.S. government. Nevertheless, Carr noted his willingness to do what he was required to in the midst of this national crisis.

□ A telegram was sent from the WRA to the Missouri River division of the Army Corps of Engineers. They were to send an engineer, an appraiser and a man qualified to pass upon water supply for domestic purposes to Holyoke. Someone would be there to meet them at Principal Hotel in Holyoke for site board investigation of the proposed relocation area for 5,000-10,000 evacuees.

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□ The same board continued south from Holyoke to Granada to investigate Lamar and the XY Ranch, the second Colorado site under consideration.

□ Harvey noted secrecy surrounded the selection of these two sites. After much anticipation, a June 1, 1942 statement announced a camp would be established at Granada between Holly and Lamar in southeast Colorado.

□ Japanese Americans in California only had a few days to dispose of their possessions before boarding a train to the internment camp where they would live under guard, proving their loyalty to America.

□ “It probably isn’t fair to judge those actions too severely by using today’s standards. The fear was that those Japanese on the West coast might help an invading army,” said Gribben who lived on a farm near Holly with his aunt and uncle.

□ “The Holly kids figured it was just a consequence of war,” he added. “It dawned on most of us after the war that it wasn’t fair to uproot those citizens from their homes.”

□ Over 10,000 Japanese Americans spent time at Amache Internment Camp which was in use from August 1942 to October 1945.

□ The camp was named after Amache, the daughter of a Cheyenne Indian chief and the wife of John Wesley Prowers, the leading pioneer in the area and the namesake of Prowers County.

□ As the smallest of 10 camps in the Midwest, over 500 buildings on 640 acres housed 7,318 internees at Amache’s peak. They lived in army barracks and produced alfalfa, corn, onions, potatoes, sugar beets and wheat. The self-contained community had a newspaper, a hospital, mess halls and schools.

□ “We felt strange,” commented former Governor Roy Romer and Gribben’s brother Tommy,

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who were high school classmates in Holly at the time. “Why were folks herded here? It was just strange.”

□ The two teenagers had an unforgettable experience with the Japanese Americans at Amache in 1943, a seemingly innocent event that ended up making a big statement.

□ Gribben explained that his brother and Romer were on the Holly High School Wildcats football team. They had won the Southeast Colorado “B” Championship, and their coach wanted a warm-up game before they were to play Burlington in the State playoffs.

□ The Holly Wildcats suited up and headed to Amache to challenge the internees to a football game.

□ Workers cleared a pasture for the makeshift football field, and even with no bleachers, a reported 2,500 Japanese American fans surrounded the field.

□ Gribben said many people in the community were a little amazed and fearful of the Holly boys playing on their field.

□ The Amache kids played sandlot football, with no organized plays and many of the players without proper uniforms or equipment.

□ Even though apprehension was high, the football game that cold November day went forward without any problems. Amache ended up winning the game 7-0 over the Holly Wildcats.

□ Looking back, it wasn’t really about who won. It was about building bridges. At least for a time, it didn’t matter what their skin color was. For Tommy Gribben, the importance of that game has more meaning for him with each passing year.

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□ Now all that's left of the Amache internment camp is a cemetery, a water well and tank and the concrete foundations of the barracks. A memorial remembers those who served in the war—almost 1,000 men and women from the camp. Thirty-one lost their lives in the war, demonstrating their dedication and allegiance to America.

□ “They wanted to prove they were just as loyal to the country of their birth as any other soldier,” said Gribben.

□ In fact, WWII's 442nd Infantry was an Asian American unit that became the most highly decorated regiment in the history of the United States Armed Forces, including 21 Medal of Honor recipients.

□ “Americanism is not, and never was, a matter of race or ancestry,” said President Franklin D. Roosevelt after the formation of the 442nd Infantry.

□ Fighting in Italy, France and Germany, the soldiers were mostly Japanese American—some coming from a small internment camp located at a little known place in rural Colorado.

□ While WWII had a profound impact on the entire country, this Japanese internment camp was a significant part of history that impacted both Colorado residents and the Japanese Americans that experienced life at Amache. The effects of the war came much closer to home than one might have thought.