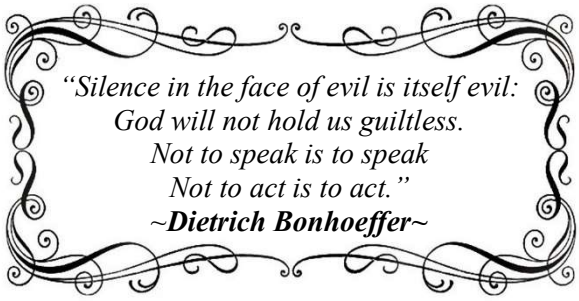
Amache - A Japanese Internment Camp in Colorado

Disclaimer: The facts are the facts, the opinions, only mine and mine alone, although there is not much in the way of opinion!

By Michelle Schulten with most Amache facts checked by Robert Harvey

What are the questions or the answers? Who has those answers? Is it the subjective interpretation of the 14th Amendment to the Constitution based on those in power at the time?



The 14th Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, is an Amendment guaranteeing citizenship to anyone born in the U.S. This Amendment was signed and passed in 1866, it was ratified and became law two years later. What does this mean? It clearly is very subjective to many, and to those in power in 1942, when war arrived on the doorstep of the United States. How relevant is that subjective interpretation from 1866 throughout history since then until now in the U.S.? How might it be interpreted in the future?

A book titled *Amache: The Story of Japanese Internment in Colorado During World War II* by Robert Harvey, is a wonderful place to start if this topic is confusing or unfamiliar to you. This book makes one see more clearly the atrocities that the Japanese Americans suffered during World War II and their incarceration from the summer of 1942 until the spring of 1946.

How do we put a value on the fear and indignation that the Japanese American people felt and suffered, and for the survivors, still suffering today? To go into homes and schools of any people of this country and terrorize those we are afraid of because we "think" their citizenship should be questioned or they are different from us? And why? Is it because of fear? I challenge you to ask yourself, based on "your feelings", not those of others, but possibly your religious beliefs, or your ability to empathize. Do you REALLY, IN YOUR HEART BELIEVE THIS IS THE RIGHT THING TO DO? If so, how do you propose we go about solving this dilemma, without creating all the conditions that I talk about in this article? Keep in mind, "habeas corpus" is real!

How much was truly lost when Executive Order 9066 was signed by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, ordering the incarceration of all Japanese Americans in the western half of Washington, Oregon, and California as well as from Los Angeles south, and the southern and western parts of Arizona? I am sure FDR thought he was doing the right thing, based on the "rumors" of fear. Where might we be if we had not illegally incarcerated them, where might our country be today? We lost so much, in knowledge, money, and more importantly, dignity!

Amache, Colorado's internment camp, may have been a bit better than some, but those of Japanese ancestry interned there, and their current children and/or grandchildren, might disagree. The atmosphere prior to and in 1942 was the fear of "others", this time the fear was directed at people of Asian descent and had started with the "Yellow Peril". The "Yellow Peril" being embodied in Federal laws like the "Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882" which was later expanded to include people from other parts of Asia, and "California's Alien Land Law of 1913", prohibiting "Asiatic aliens" from owning land or holding jobs in many industries. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor, that fear was magnified. One young, citizen of the U.S., living in California, being of Japanese ancestry, a Nisei, (those born in the United States to Japanese parents who were born in Japan) her parents being Issei (those born in Japan and immigrated to the U.S.), describes her feelings and memories of 1942. She remembers the fear of going to school and wondering if the officials would come for her and her family. Her worst fear came to fruition when she returned from school to government vehicles parked in front of her home and strange men in their house. The house turned upside down; drawers dumped, closets and cabinets ransacked, and her father in handcuffs because he had a radio antenna, the officials fearing he was amassing the 5th Column against the U.S. (The 5th Column, definition - a group of people who undermine a group or nation from within, in favor of an enemy. There was never any evidence of 5th Column activities by Japanese Americans during World War 2 in the United States[1].) She and her family were told they had two days to pack what they could carry and dispose of the rest. They were being "relocated". The family sold what they could, stored in a perceived safe location what they were able to and wanted to keep for later, only to find later that it was destroyed, stolen, or burned, and they disposed of the rest. They were told to close or sell their business, their bank account frozen - never to be recovered. In the days that followed, this family, like many others, were moved to "assembly centers". This first move to an "assembly center" was often animal stalls in fairgrounds or horse racing tracks, converted into "living quarters" with straw for a bed and the emanation of animal excrement assaulting their senses from everywhere around them. This lasted 3-5 months, then they were moved to the internment camps by rail. This part of their journey took at least three long, hot days. The conditions on the old railcars were dirty, full of fumes and dust from the coal powered engine, musty, and dark - they were not allowed to open the window blinds for a perceived fear that they would know where they were going.

When the first internees arrived at Granada, the town closest to the new internment camp at Amache, it was August 27th, 1942. The first small group was chosen as workers to help finish building the camp. Soon, more internees would follow. Amache had over 10,000 Japanese Americans pass through their gates. The largest population at one time was Oct/Nov 1942, at nearly 7,500 detainees. This camp was the smallest in the ten relocation camps in the U.S. This camp made Amache the 10th largest city in the state of Colorado. Granada prior to the establishment of Amache had a population of four hundred, a population trying to recover from the Dust Bowl.

The people and their new life - One of the people incarcerated and sent to Amache described getting off the train and going to Amache as being transported from California's beautiful, central

valley to an "unforsaken desert full of sand and rattlesnakes". The detainees were given one room of 20' x 24' for families of seven or smaller, and smaller rooms for singles or couples. The rooms had sagging cots, a potbellied stove that burned coal for heat, and a single light bulb hanging from the ceiling, nothing more. The buildings, much like a military barrack, held six "apartments". They were hastily and badly built. The dust, rain, and snow would enter the building with every puff of the wind, and the wind blew almost all the time. (With an average wind of 10 miles per hour, every day…. not to mention the storms and gusts of wind, rain, and snow.) The barrack buildings were laid out in blocks like a military base. Each block held twelve residential barrack buildings and at the end of each block, there were – a mess hall for meals, an outhouse because the barracks had no indoor plumbing, a laundry/shower building, and a faucet for their only water source. The internees came with warm weather clothing and few possessions, not at all prepared for the life they would face. With winter temperatures in the low teens at night and high daytime temperatures in the 40s. The camp, surrounded by barbed wire and guard towers staffed with personnel holding rifles pointed at the internees. They were told the barbed wire, and the guards were there to "protect them," not what you would assume as a detainee. Shouldn't the guns be pointed at a perceived threat, not at the people that were to be "protected"?

Despite the horrendous living conditions, they tried their best to make do with what they could of life. They had gardens, newspapers, markets, schools, a hospital, crops, farm animals, as well as police and fire departments, and contributed to the surrounding community, providing labor and services that were sorely lacking during the war. They worked harvesting crops on temporary leave status, helping to amass the much-needed supplies for the war effort. Those detainees made, up to a whopping $19 a month for their efforts (those making $19 a month were professionals, all others made far less), a far cry from what they could have made if they were free to work and pay taxes. They had a saying, "Shikata Ga Nai", "it can't be helped", in reference to their current condition. Most did what they did in a positive manner to get through this traumatic time with resilience. One of the most positive things they did for themselves, their families, and their neighbors, were the gardens. These gardens amassed a large variety of native plants to the area, trash (such as lumber pieces and broken bits of concrete and metal piping) providing boarders and decoration, and local rocks, were transformed into some of the most beautiful gardens you can imagine. A wonderful archaeological project is going on at Amache that reveals the beauty that the detainees created as well as trying to reconstruct what life was like at Amache. This project is led by the University of Denver Amache Project, and Dr. Bonnie J. Clark. Dr. Clark has authored a wonderful book on this subject, titled *Finding Solace in the Soil: An Archaeology of Gardens and Gardeners at Amache*.

When finally allowed, those incarcerated, enlisted in the military. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team, whose motto was "Go For Broke", was a segregated all Japanese American unit. Many of those of the 442nd also went to the European Theatre as replacements to the 100th Infantry Battalion, which was also a segregated Japanese American unit. Many of Amache's internees that were eligible for military service were assigned to this unit. For its size it was the "most decorated" unit in the history of the U.S. military, further attesting to the loyalty of these brave individuals.

Amache detainees, had pride in what they did, pride in -- their country, their contributions to their country, and the war effort.

The monetary cost to our country, due to this heinous event, were the reparations that were paid to these Japanese Americans and the monetary costs associated with their incarceration. These reparations the U.S. paid to those who were illegally detained during World War II (yes, during a war, and still illegal according to our Constitution!) are as follows: These totals show the significance of the amount that came out of the U.S. pocket for an event caused by a president gone haywire do to rumored fears. The stats: Approximately, 135,000 people of Japanese ancestry on the mainland of the U.S. Approximately, two-thirds of them were "full citizens" of the U.S. Of that total population, 120,000 incarcerated due to EO 9066. Our military followed those orders, not those of the Constitution that they were sworn to uphold and protect. Approximately, 120,000 people of Japanese heritage, U.S. Citizen or not, incarcerated! Initial cost to this was astronomical; building of the camps which became small cities, creating assembly facilities prior to the mass movement of those incarcerated into the “internment camps”, transporting them to camps, hiring staff to manage it all, and costs for the continued running of those facilities. The original cost to build camp Amache, alone, was estimated at 4.2 million dollars, 85.5 million today[2]. Then there were the reparations. What reparations, you ask? The Japanese Americans of the U.S. lost approximately $400 million in owned assets - homes, businesses, farms, ranches, orchards, bank accounts, and personal belongings that did not fit into suitcases they could carry. That total today, over 5.24 TRILLION U.S. dollars[2]. Our government, to allay our feelings of guilt, paid the internees approximately $38 million in 1948, over $498 million today[2], and an additional $20,000 to each surviving internee in 1988, upon the signing of the Civil Liberties Act, by President Ronald Reagan. That additional $20,000 was paid to 60,000 survivors of the camps, another $3.3 billion[2], today. In 1982, the State of California passed Assembly Bill 2710, stating it would pay $5,000 to each survivor that had been fired from a state job. Similarly, many cities in California signed into law reparations in varying amounts to those fired from various government positions. The dollar amount is just mind blowing! This did little, if anything, to repair the damage. The bigger cost is the cost to the humanity and dignity of another human being!

How many of those who suffered had died by the time the Act was signed? How many minds were assuaged from guilt? So many lost, so much suffering, and for what? Fear of something or someone different than you? Fear that you will lose a job to “them”? They worked hard, they had to - to provide for themselves and their family in a country that feared and discriminated against them.

Amache officially closed October 15, 1945. Their harrowing experience was awarded by, $25 and a train ticket to wherever they wanted to go as they walked out the gate. Many who went home found nothing left by them, or for them. The last of the ten internment camps in the U.S., Tule Lake, was closed on March 20, 1946.

The experiences of those incarcerated, their stories, their trauma, and their indelible spirit and pride deserve our attention and admiration. They and their experiences should never be forgotten. The

heinous acts of fear imposed on so many over the course of history….hopefully! to never be repeated!

Further reading and sources of information for this article:

https://www.historycolorado.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/2017/amache_primary_resource_set.pdf

https://museumsfordigitallearning.org/resourcekit/51/timeline/282

---

[1] https://pac.cdlib.org
[2] www.amortization.org/inflation