

My Time at Camp Amache

Written by Rachel Kubiak

My mother always told me that a unified community would make the best out of any situation. Now that I look back, all those years ago, she was right. The year was 1941, it was a cold December afternoon. The clouds covered up any hope of sunlight that could defrost our windows. I came back from a normal day of school, walking into the house with cold air nipping at my nose. I went into the kitchen to do my homework, and saw my family avidly listening to the radio. I didn't think anything of it at first, until I heard eight distinct words. "Pearl Harbor was just bombed six hours ago." That is when my life turned upside down. My name is Setsuko Endo, and this is my story.

I was born on February 2nd, 1929 into a family of five. There is my younger sister Miyoko, my older brother Hiroshi, my mother, my father, and myself. We lived a respectable life in a small city in Pennsylvania. My life was normal until the bombing of Pearl Harbor. I would go to school for a seven hour day, walk the scenic route home, do my homework, have dinner with my family, read, and go to sleep. On the weekends I would play with friends like everyone else. There was always that small tension between the Japanese-Americans and the Americans, but it was very unnoticeable to me. At least until Pearl Harbor was bombed.

I was twelve when the incident happened. The bombing was a Japanese air assault that destroyed many artillery ships and airplanes. This caused the deaths of 2,403 men and women. When the federal government found out it was the Japanese who bombed Pearl Harbor, not even two months later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066. This ordered all Americans of enemy country descent to be relocated. After that, the small racial tension I had nothing to worry about became a huge issue. I was treated as if I were a rat running around the streets scavenging for food. I was given side eyes, I was even spit at. It was as if the Akuma (A Japanese fire spirit) was staring right into my soul. After seven months of this terrible new life, I only had two friends Chiyo and Kiyoko that were still in town. The rest were relocated to places I am unaware of to this date. The day had finally come where my friends' families and mine were told to sell our items and pack our things. We were to be sent to the Granada War Relocation Center, also known as Camp Amache, in Colorado. We were expected to be at the train station within a week for relocation. My friends and I promised we'd find each other once we arrived at the camp. A new journey had begun for my family and many others.

My family and I had made it to the train station, before we knew it we were being pushed onto the train. The train ride was long and tormenting. The smells that surfaced on the train were unbearable, and we didn't even have a seat to ourselves. We shared seats with other clueless passengers, as we were frightened and had no idea where we were going. The worst part was that the train was only filled with Japanese-Americans. We were being targeted, sent away for something we didn't even do. There was no one left to take care of the house so we lost everything. After what seemed like days, everyone on the train was relieved to finally be outside and standing again. What we didn't know was that this wasn't the end. We were forcefully sent into rows to be counted and documented. Everyone was sent back to find their families, to then just be sent back onto another smaller train to get to the camp. This time the ride was much shorter. At that point I remember very little because I had fallen asleep. I woke up to the ear piercing sound of train whistles bellowing . Everyone now knew it was time to depart.

We were waiting in one long line so we could be checked in and then given a barrack assignment. When it was finally our turn there was another family of three standing next to us. We were to be assigned a room with this family. At the time it felt very peculiar to be living with total strangers. But I soon realized we were one of the lucky barracks. Other rooms had three to four families per barrack. We got to settle in for a small period of time before we were told it was time for dinner. As we were eating dinner, we learned that the bathrooms were a block away past the mess hall. The dinner was barely edible. My brother soon became nauseous. He had been stricken with food poisoning from the food we had eaten no more than two hours earlier. Things were not looking good at this time. The bathrooms were disgusting, the pungent smell of urine and feces filled the latrines. To make matters worse the rooms had no privacy. It was either very cold or scorching hot, there was no in between. I was running out of hope fast. I wanted to go home and be with my friends. That was the night my mother had given me the advice about the importance of building a strong community. I was up most of that night, but then I convinced myself to get to sleep as I was being enrolled in school the next morning.

Soon I was able to adjust to this new normal. In fact, it was like our own little town. Our camp had a police station, a firehouse, shops, grocery stores, we even had a church where we could practice our religions. Adults that had jobs started to get paid small wages. Every kid, including highschool students, went to school Monday through Friday. Each person was given three meals a day. People even started to plant small gardens. It was nowhere near similar to my old life, but it was starting to be quite enjoyable. I even found Chiyo and Kiyoko once I started school. This new normal had oddly brought us even closer together.

Everyday after school, Chiyo, Kiyō and I would do our assigned school work in the community gardens. After we finished our work we would go over to the basketball and volleyball courts to watch the older kids and adults indulge in sports. It was really nice to see everyone have smiles on their faces. The beams of laughter from the younger children filled my heart. There were so many activities created by the community to pass the time. After dinner there were martial arts lessons in the schools, and fencing and wrestling in the baseball fields. Although most Japanese customs weren't in play, the majority of people were happy. In wartime that's really all that matters. Here we were safe from bomb threats. We were building our own community through social interactions. By the time we were set free I knew almost everyone in the camp.

The best part about living in the camp was the tight-knit community that the people had created. Not only through school and sporting activities but also the adults going to work with the same people each day. Everyone who was a part of this community was there to help each other. That is how the volleyball courts and baseball fields were made. Not only were the recreational activities constructed by the devoted people, the gardens were also created. Now my friends and I had a peaceful and quiet place to do our homework. I remembered really missing everyone once it was time for us to go back home. I had to spend two years with these strangers, by the end they were all like family to me. We all helped each other get through this rough patch in history. I was forever grateful for the efforts made by the people of Camp Amache.

Although the camp was enjoying itself we still had to do work for the Americans. The Japanese-Americans were key to the economy at the time so families would have to grow crops. But oddly, that was the best part. While my mother worked as a cashier, my father worked in the fields. So sometimes after school he would bring my siblings and I to the corn fields to help. It was like one huge maze in there. The corn stalks were so tall, they seemed to go on for miles. It was the perfect place to play hide and go seek. At times my brother and I would be out there until sunset looking for our younger sister. She would always win the game, as she is so small. It's like trying to find a needle in a haystack. By the end of the day we would be so exhausted, we would eat dinner then go straight to bed. Plus, growing our own crops meant we could make our own meals, and not always have to eat the unappetizing food the Americans would give us. Now of course, the majority of the crops went back to the hungry citizens on the homefront and on the battlefield. But we always got a small share, which was good enough for me.

Contrary to popular belief, it would seem that all the Japanese-Americans would hate the rest of the U.S. for leaving us in the camps for two plus years. Although I can't speak for everyone, for the majority I can say that the U.S. was also our home too. I chose to respect them, as America gave us a better life than I could have ever had in Japan. Besides, the camp I lived in for two years became very enjoyable. Everyone in the camp helped me keep going, to have hope and be happy with what I have.

As the war was coming to a close, so was Japanese internment. The federal government ruled Japanese internment unconstitutional and they were setting the Japanese free. It was December of 1944, and we all gathered the belongings we still had, said our goodbyes to our new friends, and returned home. My family was lucky as others had terrible experiences of typhus and dysentery, which caused paranoia for many. All families had to go home and start a new chapter in their lives. Japanese-Americans would have to use the little money they made to rebuild their families. My family was able to rent a cheap apartment and within the next few years we were right back on track. Unfortunately for others, it was much harder, and many were homeless at the start. I think what really helped my family was the many things we learned at Camp Amache. We learned how to ration our food, and go to family for emotional support. While these camps weren't so great for many, they taught me that it is key to make some form of bond with your community. Without that knowledge I'm not sure how long we would have lasted in that camp. Even after the fact for that matter.

Everytime I hear a train whistle all those memories come flooding back. The good, the bad, all of it. Sometimes I wish it never happened as my race was targeted. But, if it never happened I would have never learned one of the most important lessons in my life. I would have never met all those amazing people. Some consider this a time in history to be covered up and forgotten. I considered it a blessing, to have survived, to learn important lessons, meet great people, and form a new community. I want to shed some light on the good and the bad experienced during this time, while also passing on the lesson I have learned. Even during tough times if you work hard, care for others, and form strong bonds, you can create happiness anywhere, at any time.