

The Search for Japanese Relocation Camp Covers

by
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The Japanese began emigrating to the United States during the 1890s. They were greeted by anti-Asian prejudice dating to the Chinese immigration of the 1850s. By the turn of the century, about 25,000 Japanese lived in California. As they entered California's labor market during the early 1900s, the negative sentiment originally aimed at the Chinese was leveled at them. As early as 1905, efforts were underway to extend the Chinese Exclusion Act to include the Japanese. The Gentlemen's Agreement of 1908 was a compromise in which President Roosevelt negotiated with Japan to cease issuing passports to laborers. The Alien Land Law of 1913 prevented Japanese farmers in California from purchasing land or leasing it for more than three years, and in 1924 the Japanese Exclusion Act was passed by Congress.

The attack on Pearl Harbor mobilized U.S. opinion against the Japanese. Years of anti-Japanese sentiment suddenly erupted into hate and suspicion. All Japanese were looked upon as capable of sabotage, and the success of the attack was assumed to be the result of espionage by Japanese-Americans living in Hawaii and on the West Coast. All residents of Japanese descent in Hawaii were rounded up and interrogated. On the West Coast, a sort of hysteria began with inflammatory journalism, pressure groups, politicians, and the U.S. Army all fearing the treachery of the Fifth Column: the enemy within. This profound suspicion of Japanese-Americans quickly led to cries for their expulsion. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which called for the eviction and internment of all Japanese Americans.

The evacuation and incarceration of 120,000 Japanese Americans began in April 1942. Different types of facilities were created for this purpose: assembly centers, relocation centers, and internment camps. The War Relocation Authority, or WRA, was established to administer the camps. During the first phase, evacuees were transported on trains and buses under military guard to the hastily prepared assembly centers. Twelve of

these were in California and one was in Oregon. The assembly centers were set up on race tracks, fairgrounds, or livestock pavilions. Detainees were housed in livestock stalls or windowless shacks that were crowded and lacked sufficient ventilation, electricity, and sanitation facilities. There was a shortage of food and medicine. From these assembly centers, some 500 deportees moved daily to permanent camps called relocation centers. These camps were located in remote, uninhabitable areas. The relocation centers in California were at Manzanar and Tule Lake.

The third type of incarceration took place at internment camps. These camps came under wartime censorship and a complete listing of the number of camps and their locations is still not available from the Justice Department. In California, Angel Island, Sharp Park, and Tuna Canyon served as internment camps.

On December 17, 1944, President Roosevelt announced the revocation of Executive Order 9066, thus assuring the return of the evacuees to the West Coast. On December 18, 1944, the WRA made public its policy to terminate all centers under its control and to empty them within six months. Relocation, especially to the West Coast, was difficult. The Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act of 1948 and its modification in 1951 resulted in less than 10% paid on the property losses of 26,568 claims. A bill signed by the President on August 10, 1988, provides restitution and apology for the Nisei still living.

More than 50 years after the close of World War II, America's wartime policy of relocation and internment is still very controversial, one side arguing that it was totally uncalled for and merely the result of rampant racial prejudices, while the other side argues that such precautions were more than reasonable given the attack on Pearl Harbor and the heavy concentration of Japanese-Americans on the West Coast. Just last month, for example, an Internment exhibition at New York's Ellis Island sparked an emotional debate over the title, "America's Concentration Camps..." Fortunately for me, it's not within the scope of this article to examine which side, if either, is correct.

The phillicentric interest in this topic centers on the covers issued from these camps. There *are* covers from various internment camps around the country during World War II. As with P.O.W. camp covers, these internment covers are clearly marked "Internment Camp." But, there are *no* relocation camp covers—or, there don't appear to be. I've checked with a number of major Military collectors, as well as going through my own 6,952 Military covers, and none of us have been able to find any relocation camp covers. Do they exist? Probably not. Why would that be the case? There were certainly smokers at all the camps. One can only guess. Perhaps the the staffs of these camps weren't large enough to justify such individually designated matchbooks; perhaps the camps were looked upon as such temporary facilities that orders for such matchbooks didn't seem warranted; perhaps it was simply thought as inappropriate to 'advertise' such facilities.

The ten relocation camps: Tule Lake (CA), Manzanar (CA), Poston (AZ), Gila River (AZ), Minidoka (ID), Heart Mountain (WY), Topaz (UT), Rohwer (AR), Jerome (AR), and Amache (CO).

Have *YOU* ever seen any such relocation camp covers? The search continues!

As a concluding footnote, it was announced last October that a new Washington memorial will be built near the U. S. Capitol to recognize the nearly 12,000 Japanese-Americans forced from their homes during World War II. Groundbreaking is scheduled for next year on the \$8.6 million project, to be funded with private funds.