

# MAYBE YOU CAN GO HOME AGAIN

When Ruth Okimoto was 6, she and her family were confined to an internment camp in Poston, Arizona. So were nearly 18,000 other Japanese-Americans. Eventually, the families were released, and Ruth went on to earn a Ph.D. For many years, she resented the camp experience, but then she found the courage to go back. And in doing so, she realized that regardless of the circumstances that put her there, Poston was home.

BY KATHY MONTGOMERY



T

HE DESERT SURROUNDING

Parker looks desolate, its sandy soil sprinkled with creosote and straw-colored grasses.

So it's easy to imagine what the land along Mohave Road looked like during World War II, when Ruth Okimoto first arrived. In those days, buses carrying Japanese-Americans to the internment camps at Poston sunk to their hubcaps in sand during the frequent dust storms.

But on this hot September day, Mohave Road is lined with vibrant green fields dotted with bales of alfalfa and single-story structures of similar shape and size.

When Ruth surveys this transformed landscape, she sees the legacy of the Japanese-Americans who were interned at Poston during the war and who brought Colorado River water to this land 70 years ago.

“That’s an old barracks,” Ruth says, pointing to

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Ruth Okimoto spent three years of her childhood in a Japanese-American internment camp in Poston, living in a barracks similar to this one. MARK LIPCZYNSKI

a single-story home. "There's another one, what's left of it," she says, pointing to a wooden structure with a collapsed roof. "Most homes you see around here, the barracks, they all look alike, and they all came from Poston."

Memories of Poston compel Ruth to visit Parker Valley from time to time. It was the location of one of the country's largest Japanese-American internment camps. But it was also her childhood home.

Ruth lived at Poston just three years, from ages 6 to 9. But memories of the place haunted her and shaped her. She needed to return to understand why so many Japanese-Americans were imprisoned there and why the Colorado River Indian Tribes (CRIT) allowed the camp to be built on their land.

Returning to Poston and finding the answers to those questions helped Ruth make peace with her past and ultimately led her to try to preserve what remains.

**R**UTH'S FAMILY WAS LIVING IN SAN DIEGO when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor. A few months later, President Franklin D. Roosevelt ordered the relocation of all people of Japanese descent living along the West Coast, two-thirds of them American citizens.

Ruth's neighbors traveled by train to a temporary assembly center at the Santa Anita Racetrack, but the Okimoto children came down with measles and delayed the family's departure. After they recovered, soldiers carrying rifles with bayonets came for the family.

"My brothers and I were petrified," Ruth recalls. "My mother was six months pregnant. They put us in line and marched us, three little kids, ages 4, 6 and 7, to the truck."

The Army truck had a canvas top and two hard benches. As the truck sped away, the canvas flapped, revealing flashes of the road.

"I'd never been on a truck before," Ruth says. "I remember looking down and seeing the road slash by, terrified out of my wits thinking I was going to fall out, and hanging on for dear life."

Having arrived late to Santa Anita, the family had to take what space was left, just enough room for five single beds. Ruth's bed was next to a window, and a constantly sweeping searchlight kept her up at night.

The family remained at Santa Anita for three months, long enough for the birth of Ruth's youngest brother.

"We kid him a lot about having been born in a stable," she says.

The family was taken to Parker in August. The dust and heat, which could rise to 115 degrees or higher, made life nearly unbearable.

An internee from San Diego vividly described the ride from the train station to Poston in the *Journal of San Diego History*. He said the trip was long and so dusty that the sky was blotted out. At first, he said, the passengers tried to keep the windows of the school bus closed, but it was so hot that people got sick. So they opened the windows and emerged from the bus so completely covered by dust that friends couldn't recognize each other.

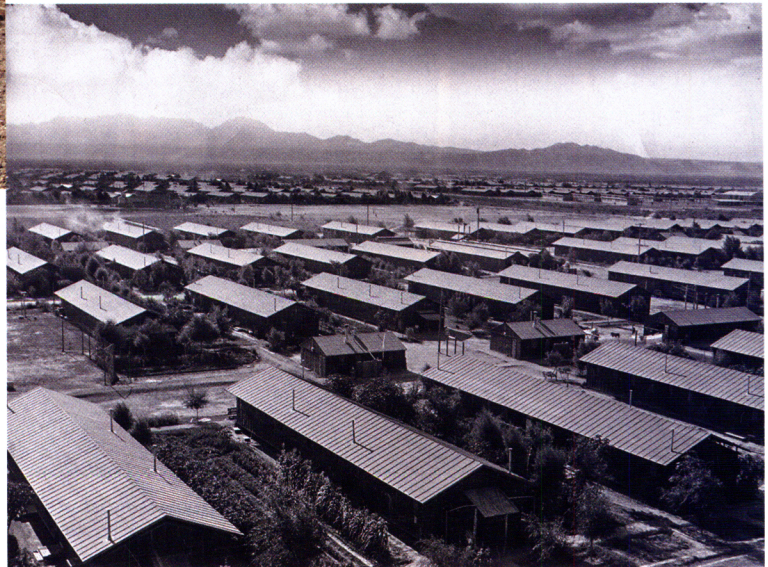
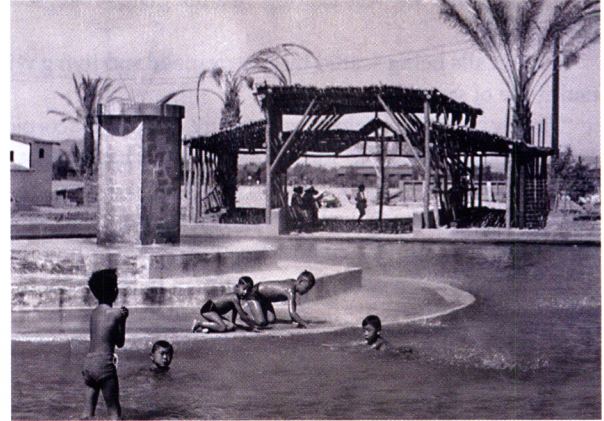
"I know you won't believe this, but it's really true," he said.

The barracks were built of freshly milled pine, which shrank as it dried. Dust swept through the cracks and blew in through knot-holes, covering everything, including the food.

As hot as it was in summer, the drafty, uninsulated barracks were cold in winter.

Each barracks was 20 feet by 120 feet and divided into apart-





At its peak, Poston was home to nearly 18,000 internees, making it the third-largest city in Arizona at the time. By the end of the war, internees had built an irrigation system, leveled land for agriculture and built 54 adobe school buildings.



**CLOCKWISE FROM TOP LEFT:** Today, deteriorating buildings are the most noticeable remnants of the Poston War Relocation Center. MARK LIPCZYNSKI

Japanese-American children cool off in the camp's swimming pool in 1942. COURTESY OF ARIZONA STATE ARCHIVES

Each barracks was 20 feet by 120 feet and divided into apartments with walls that did not reach the ceiling. COURTESY OF ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, YUMA DIVISION

Internees line up upon arriving at the camp in 1942. COURTESY OF ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, YUMA DIVISION

A young internee passes the time at one of the barracks. COURTESY OF ARIZONA HISTORICAL SOCIETY, YUMA DIVISION

ments with walls that did not reach the ceiling. The six people in Ruth's family shared a space roughly 20 feet by 24 feet. Public bathrooms at the center of each block had no toilet partitions or bathtubs, and little hot water.

Ruth's youngest brother, just a few weeks old, contracted pneumonia and nearly died. Her mother was hospitalized after a glass container she was heating on a hot plate broke, scalding her leg.

Ruth recalls being scared by a rattlesnake and living with a multitude of scorpions.

"Finally, my father helped me capture one of the scorpions and we put it in alcohol," Ruth remembers. "I had it right next to my cot. That was my pet: a dead scorpion in alcohol."

After the war, the Okimotos returned to San Diego, where they encountered lingering hostility. Ruth and her brothers were the only Japanese-American children in their school. Half

to Japan, where she was born. Then she visited Japan, only to find she didn't fit in there, either.

She took art classes, which gave her a way to work through her feelings.

"I have this one painting. It's a portrait of me, but my mouth is covered with an American flag," Ruth says. "After that, it just kept pouring out.

"One day the professor came to my house. I couldn't put this gigantic canvas into my car, so she came to my house to look at it and to critique it. She looked at it for a long time and said, 'Why are you doing this, Ruth?' I said, 'Well, because I just have to do it.'"

When she was 55, Ruth took early retirement and, with the help of a grant, returned to Poston to get some answers to the questions that had plagued her.

CONGRESS CREATED the Colorado River Indian Reservation in 1865 for the Mohaves who had settled there. Members of the more nomadic Chemehuevi Indian Tribe settled there later.

The Poston internment camp was the brainchild of Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, who saw an opportunity to use war funds to advance two of his goals for the Colorado River Indian Reservation: to develop an irrigation system using Colorado River water, and to colonize the land with Indians from other tribal lands who were struggling to support themselves on arid lands.

Japanese-American internees, he reasoned, could complete a canal from the recently constructed Headgate Rock Dam. They could also make adobe bricks for school buildings that could later be used by the Indian Service. And once the Japanese-Americans had departed, the barracks could provide housing for colonists from other tribes.

While the Colorado River Indian Tribes opposed both ideas, the tribes did not try to stop them, afraid they might lose the land set aside for the camp.

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In 1945, the War Relocation Authority returned control of 2,000 acres to the Office of Indian Affairs for the colonization program. Lured by the promise of water and farmland, the first group of 17 Hopi families arrived while several hundred Japanese-Americans were still living there. Navajo colonists began to arrive in 1947. Many of them eventually became members of the CRIT. Today, the CRIT consists of four tribes: Mohave, Chemehuevi, Hopi and Navajo.

After the internment camp closed, the government sold the barracks to anyone who wanted them for \$25. Many remain on tribal land, used for storage or remodeled into single-family homes.

Today, what's left of Poston lies along Mohave Road, about 15 miles south of State Route 95 in Parker, past the Harvest Mission Church, the American Legion hall, the Chino Hay Market and the senior center. A small sign marks the census-



A 30-foot concrete pillar serves as a historical marker for the site of the Poston War Relocation Center. Its inscription dedicates it to "all those men, women and children who suffered countless hardships and indignities at the hands of a nation misguided by wartime hysteria, racial prejudice and fear." MARK LIPCZYNSKI

the students were black; the other half were white. Kids spat at Ruth, chased her and threw things. A girl named Carolyn befriended Ruth. Once, while Ruth was trapped and cowering, Carolyn came between Ruth and her attackers.

"I often think about Carolyn and what she did to restore my hope that I could get through school," Ruth says. "Because it was frightening."

It was a confusing time, but Ruth's family never talked about it. They eventually moved, and things got better. Ruth grew up, got married and had children. Despite a cultural bias among Japanese-American families against women going to college, she eventually earned a Ph.D. But, for all her outward success, the memories of Poston never left her.

As she grew up and learned more about how Japanese-Americans were treated, she grew angry and dreamed of returning



designated place, which is home to about 400 people.

During the war years, Poston was composed of three separate camps located a few miles from each other. A boarded-up Texaco station stands on the corner of Poston Road, which leads to a collection of deteriorating adobe school buildings that make up the remains of Camp I.

Ruth's research ultimately led to the formation of the Poston Alliance, a nonprofit organization, made up of former internees and their descendants, with the mission of preserving Poston and creating a living museum and interpretive center. The CRIT supported those plans by passing a resolution dedicating 40 acres for the historic preservation of the camp. A couple of years ago, the alliance relocated a barracks that had not been modified from Parker to the site.

Much needs to be accomplished before the vision of the alliance becomes a reality. Plywood covers the windows and parts of the roof of the barracks. Much of the exterior plaster on the school buildings has peeled away, exposing the adobe bricks. Graffiti mars the walls, and weeds cover the ground.

The tribe fenced off the area after a fire burned the old school gym. Arson was suspected.

"It was just devastating after all the work that was put into it," Ruth says.

Now 78, Ruth is less involved in the project, leaving much of the work to the younger members. The reconstruction of her own history is largely finished.

"The process helped me come home," she says. "For the first 20 years of my life, I was very resentful. But later, I realized that the experience really did define me."

It was like finding the missing pieces to a puzzle, Ruth says: "The process of looking back and realizing your roots gives you something to stand on firmly. For me, it was very important."

Now, Ruth loves coming back to Poston. Regardless of the circumstances that brought her here, during an important time in her life, it was home. **AH**

There were no physical fences surrounding the camp when Ruth Okimoto, now 78, was interned there. There were only, as she puts it, "fences of the mind."

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