

Neil H. King and Frederick F. York

# Close to Eden in Idaho

## The Minidoka Internment National Monument

**G**eographically distant from the biblical Garden of Eden, federal land in the Magic Valley near Eden, in south-central Idaho, was selected in early 1942 by the U.S. War Relocation Authority (WRA) as one of several sites for the wartime relocation of Japanese residents of the United States and their American-born offspring. The creation of the WRA followed the bombing of Pearl Harbor by the Japanese military in December 1941, and the U.S. Declaration of War against Japan. The Idaho site was far from military exclusion areas of the West Coast and next to a major man-made irrigation canal that gave the Magic Valley its name and reputation. Home communities for Japanese and Japanese-American residents of Washington included the city of Seattle and nearby rural areas on Bainbridge Island in Puget Sound. Ultimately, the WRA administered Minidoka and nine other “relocation centers,” some 15 “assembly centers,” and three former Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camps that were primarily in the western U.S. In total, some 120,000 Japanese residents of the U.S. and their American-born family members were confined in centers and other facilities run by the WRA, Department of Justice, U.S. Army, or Federal Bureau of Prisons.

The site of the Minidoka Internment National Monument is in Jerome County. It is known as Hunt (based on the name of the local post office and community) and Minidoka (based on the Shoshone language derived name used for both a small community 50 miles east of Hunt and a county of the same name). The monument was designated by presidential proclamation on January 17, 2001, under the auspices of the Antiquities Act of 1906. This was about 60 years after selection of the area; the construction of over 600 buildings in the summer of 1942 by a private enterprise; and the three-year-long forced occupation of the “camp” by resident

Japanese nationals and their Japanese-American offspring between 1942 and 1945. The National Park Service (NPS) has recently initiated the public involvement, research, and planning to preserve and interpret the site. Anthropologically informed social science and broadly based planning skills are being utilized by the NPS to engage Japanese-American and Asian-American institutions, communities, and individuals to identify and address issues during the next three years.

### **Community Involvement**

The NPS has managed the Manzanar National Historic Site at the location of the Manzanar War Relocation Center in the Owens Valley of south-central California since 1992.

*Japanese ceramics at the Minidoka Relocation Center landfill. Photo by Jeff Burton.*



And, the newly designated Minidoka Internment National Monument will both complement and contrast with Manzanar. The management and operation of both sites will enhance the interpretation of a unique period of U.S. history during World War II. In this article the focus is on our initial efforts to collaborate with geographically widespread Japanese-American institutions, Asian- American and Japanese- American communities, scholars, people who were interned at Minidoka, and members of the nearby Idaho communities who interacted with internees. Such collaboration will facilitate planning, resource management and interpretation.

### ***The People***

The exclusion of Japanese-born immigrants (*Issei*) and their descendants (including second generation, American-born *Nisei* and subsequent generations) from “designated military areas” was authorized by President Roosevelt’s Executive Order 9066 of February 19, 1942. The WRA then prepared “assembly centers” near cities such as Seattle and San Francisco as way stations for temporary use while contracts were made to construct the more distant “relocation centers.” By early August 1942, the first group of “evacuees” arrived at Hunt or Minidoka. From mid-August through mid-September, some 500 additional persons arrived per day. At its height, the maximum population grew to approximately 9,500.

The people interned at Minidoka primarily came from Washington, Oregon, and Alaska. Initially sent to Manzanar in California, some former Bainbridge Island residents requested relocation to Minidoka and were moved in early 1943. Minidoka was on the north bank of the North Side Canal, but the site had not previously been irrigated and could not draw on water from the canal without the installation and operation of what would have been a very costly pumping facility. Instead, the WRA and the internees turned to the Milner-Gooding Canal, some five miles to the northeast, to get water for irrigation. An initial task undertaken by internees was the construction of an irrigation canal that ran from the Milner-Gooding Canal to new fields they had cleared. Initially 350 acres were cleared and farmed, but by 1944 the irrigated acreage grew to 740.

Information on the life of internees exists in various texts and documents, but much more will undoubtedly be acquired as collaboration with Japanese Americans develops and deepens

through the conduct of oral history research during the planning process. It is well documented that large numbers of camp residents of various ages provided agricultural labor throughout the region between 1942 and 1945. The beginning of school for children was delayed until November in 1942, for example, because so many students were on “agricultural leave.” At the same time, a total of some 2,000 evacuees from Minidoka were working in Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. Regional labor camps were set up for Minidoka residents at both Rupert and Twin Falls, Idaho.

Although the internees were confined to the Minidoka Relocation Center, children and adults were authorized to leave the center for agricultural work and a variety of cultural and recreational activities. Internees supplied labor that helped to compensate for a domestic labor shortage caused by the large numbers of Americans who were in military service. By 1943, however, the U.S. War Department recruited internees from the various relocation centers for the 100th Battalion and the 442nd Regimental Combat Team for service in Europe and thereby contributed personnel for the war. The number of volunteers from Minidoka for the 442nd was the largest of all. Ultimately, some 1,000 internees from Minidoka served in the military, and 73 servicemen from Minidoka were killed in action.

In January 1945, the ban that excluded the internees from their homes along the Pacific Coast was lifted. They were allowed to leave, and the last family left Minidoka by October. About 150 other internees remained at a labor camp in nearby Twin Falls for a short time. Most internees from Minidoka returned to their previous communities of residence in Seattle, the Puget Sound area, and elsewhere.

### ***The Resources***

Prior to the establishment of the Minidoka Relocation Center, the North Side Canal was a prominent local feature that provided a source of water for elsewhere in the Magic Valley. Ironically, the 33,000 acres of land set aside for the center was a high desert environment dominated by sagebrush. Instead of a river running through it, the North Side Canal did so. As noted above, internees brought water in from the Milner-Gooding Canal. According to maps in the National Archives, roads, buildings, ditches, agricultural fields, and other facilities were cre-



Chimney in waiting room of entry building. Photo by Dick Lord.

ated in the 950-acre heart of the 33,000-acre reserve.

Following the end of the war, much of the acreage of the reserve was divided up into homesteads for veterans. Along with available acreage, the vets could get two buildings. The vets then needed to remove them from the heart of the former relocation center that remained in federal ownership. Dismantling of the community through removal and relocation of the majority of the 600 or so buildings took place, and only two buildings remained when the

NPS Western Archeological and Conservation Center did a survey of Minidoka in the 1990s. A remnant stone feature at the guard house and a standing chimney in its waiting room area remain, as do building foundations, other features, road alignments, and portions of the irrigation system that are still in use.

Oral history interviews and site visits with surviving internees will undoubtedly provide excellent information on the structural organization of the community that will increase the knowledge that is currently based on archival documentation, initial archeological survey, and the more detailed mapping and site documentation that is currently underway. To set the stage for retrieving ethnographic data about life at Minidoka between 1942 and 1945, we will continue to involve a variety of organizations, institutions, communities, and individuals throughout the West.

#### **Collaboration and Planning**

Collaboration with Japanese Americans and other citizens of Idaho took place when the designation of Minidoka was first considered for the remaining federal acreage at the site. In the period since that designation was made in January 2001, organizations, institutions, com-

munities, and individuals throughout the West have been contacted. Organizations include the Japanese American Historical Society in San Francisco and the national Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) and its local offices in Idaho and elsewhere. Institutions include the Wing Luke Asian Museum in Seattle, the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, the University of Washington, and Boise State University, as well as local individuals and the Jerome County Historical Society. In all cases, certain staff or faculty members have indicated an interest in the projected three-year planning process.

In the context of making the organizational and institutional contacts, many individuals, including many who were interned at Minidoka have been met or have contacted NPS personnel to find out more about what is going on and to offer assistance. The reception has been enthusiastic and there is a keen interest in becoming involved in and being supportive of ethnohistorical research efforts that will seek to document life at the relocation center and to present this chapter about ethnic relations in American history.

#### **References**

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*Neil H. King is Superintendent of Hagerman Fossil Beds National Monument in Hagerman, Idaho. He has an undergraduate degree in anthropology. He is taking the lead on community involvement and for the production of a planning document for the Minidoka Internment National Monument on behalf of the NPS.*

*Frederick F. York, Ph.D., Anthropology, is the Regional Anthropologist in the Seattle Office of the NPS Pacific West Region in San Francisco, California. He is assisting Neil King and others with the community involvement efforts for planning at Minidoka and will develop and supervise social science research.*