

Tule Lake, Part 1: Japanese American Incarceration

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Tule Lake National Monument commemorates Tule Lake War Relocation Center / Segregation Center, where almost 27,000 Japanese Americans were incarcerated from 27 May 1942 until 20 March 1946. The site, far from large cities and the coast, is one of two such concentration camps in California. Due to the prominence of Jeanne Watsuki Houston's memoir, *Farewell to Manzanar* in the middle school canon, students learn something about Manzanar, located in southern California. However, the Tule Lake camp, which has unique significance as a maximum-security Segregation Center, remains unfamiliar to many outside the Japanese American community.

The camp at Tule Lake – hot in the summer, cold in the winter, windy, dry, flat, largely treeless, and desolate – lies in the northeast corner of the Episcopal Diocese of Northern California. Like the other War Relocation Authority (WRA) concentration camps that imprisoned Japanese Americans, a high barbed wire fence surrounded the compound, with strategically placed guard towers staffed by armed sentries. Barracks, mess halls, latrines, washrooms, and other community buildings lay within the fence.



Two rows of barracks at Tule Lake. The smaller buildings between the rows are latrines, laundries, and mess halls. Photo: US National Park Service.

Official photos of “evacuees” in camp showed happy children in school and at play, smiling young women, residents diligently at work or enjoying a parade and harvest festival, and so on. These images were in keeping with the euphemistic rhetoric that the federal government used to describe the forced removal and detention of Japanese Americans. Non-citizens and citizens alike were “evacuated” to “assembly centers” and subsequently moved to “relocation centers,” such as Tule Lake.



Original caption: Tule Lake Relocation Center, Newell, California. Nursery school children singing "Twinkle, Twinkle, Little Star." Photo: Francis Leroy Stewart, 2 November 1942. Central Photographic File of the War Relocation Authority.

“Here we say Dining Hall and not Mess Hall; Safety Council and not Internal Police; and last but not least, Mental Climate, and not Morale.” – from *The Topaz Times*, 17 September 1942, newspaper of the WRA concentration camp at Topaz, Utah.

However, the reality was much grimmer and harsher. Barracks, 20 feet by 100 feet, typically were subdivided into four one-room apartments where families were often over-crowded into one or if necessary, two apartments. Wind whistled through cracks in the walls of uninsulated buildings hastily constructed from green wood and tar paper. Coal burning stoves supplied heat. Light in each room came from small windows and a single bare light bulb. The only furniture provided was a metal



Interior of an apartment within the barracks. The residents repurposed packing crates for a table and seating. Photo: US National Park Service.

Army cot; residents later constructed chairs, tables, dressers, and other furniture from scrap lumber.

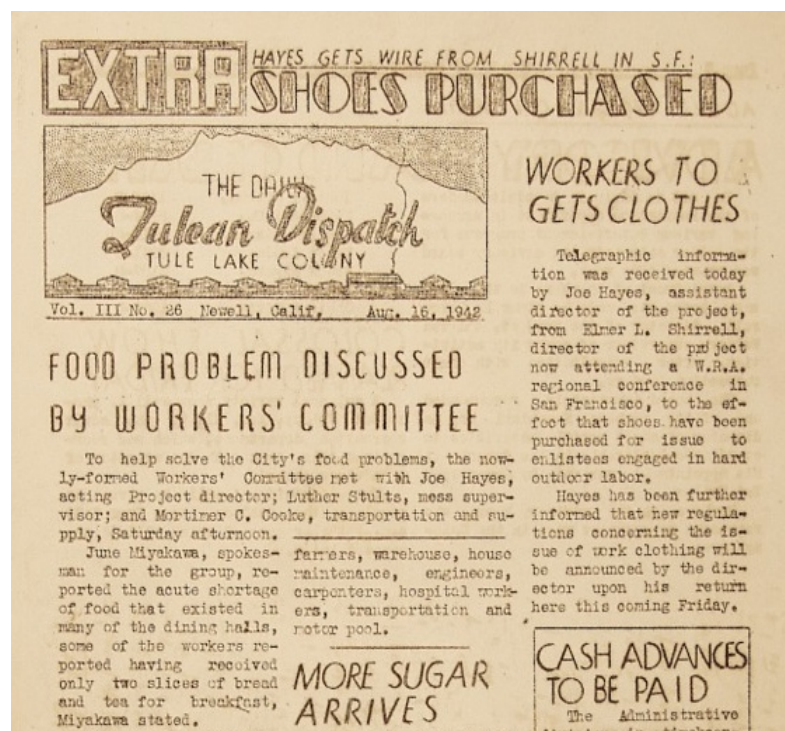
Inmates waited in lines to eat meals within mess halls, where they sat at long rows of tables. Afterwards, they waited in lines to wash, to use latrines, to shower, to do laundry. Privacy – within apartments, in latrines without partitions or doors between commodes – did not exist.

Initially, Japanese Americans assigned to the Tule Lake camp came primarily from the rural parts of western Washington and Oregon; the eastern part of the Sacramento Valley, foothills, and Sierras in northern California; and much of the greater Sacramento region. By the fall of 1942, the population reached over 15,000 – about the same as present-day Ukiah – confined to an area of 1.5 square miles. Inmates provided much of the labor need to run the camp, albeit with low salaries:

physicians, dentists, and other professionals earned up to \$19 per month; mechanics, shopkeepers, laborers, or farm workers earned between \$12 and \$16 per month. Workers also received a few dollars monthly for a clothing allowance.

However, promising goods did not always make them appear. By August 1942, food shortages, lack of appropriate clothing for outdoor workers, a two-month delay in payment of salary for others, and poor working conditions led to poor morale and multiple strikes.

Children attended nursery, elementary, and high schools in camp at schools that lacked state accreditation.



Excerpt from the camp newspaper, the Tulean Dispatch, 16 August 1942, describing shortages and meetings between camp administrators and representatives of the incarcerated to address shortages. Courtesy of Joe Matsuzawa and the Densho digital repository, www.densho.org.

“All they had were chairs...they were made out of plywood. So we sat in those but when we wrote, we would kneel on the floor and write on the seat of the chair.” – Betty Morita Shibayama, recollections of 4th grade, courtesy of Densho.

The onset of cold, wet, and snowy weather created new challenges for residents, who had to slog through mud multiple times daily to get between buildings.

With this backdrop, the situation at Tule Lake became even more difficult in the subsequent year.

Look for next month’s article about the deeply flawed loyalty questionnaire and its consequences for Tule Lake. For a brief introduction to the incarceration of Japanese Americans, please see the first two articles in this series.



Barracks and winter snowmelt, 2 February 1943. Photo: National Archives and Records Administration.

We plan a deeper look at the Japanese American incarceration and its implications for today in a half-day webinar planned for May 2025. Please watch for information.

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