INVESTIGATION OF
A PROPOSED JAPANESE MEMORIAL AREA
AT
ROHWER, DESHA COUNTY
ARKANSAS

June - 1961
Report of a field inspection of an area near Rohwer, Arkansas
June 2, 1961

Prepared by
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JAPANESE MEMORIAL AREA, NEAR ROHWER, DESHA COUNTY, ARKANSAS

Background

Following the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, there was grave concern for possible treachery on the part of Japanese nationals and persons of Japanese descent on the West Coast of the United States. A large-scale roundup of such persons was followed by screening and assignment of tens of thousands to internment centers within the interior of the United States. The number of persons so interned, and the exact number and location of Japanese internment camps during World War II are not immediately known. There were approximately ten such camps. One of these was near Rohwer, Desha County Arkansas. (See tabs A, B, and C for general and vicinity location) It is reported to have accommodated approximately 10,000 internees. If other camps were of comparable size, probably some 90,000 to 100,000 Japanese were interned during the War years.

Time has not provided perspective to judge with finality the historic significance or to estimate fully the moral and social phenomena and lessons implicit in the wholesale detention of people of Japanese origin or nationality. However, it is an episode which unquestionably had a direct and dramatic impact upon the lives of a substantial number of people, and represents at once a tremendous logistic achievement and a burden of national conscience counter-weighted against national necessity.
This war-born, emotionally toned defensive action, engulfing a substantial and largely guiltless minority group of American citizens and resident nationals may have counterpart in future time of stress in our Nation. Wide dissemination of the lessons of this experience might produce the blueprint and motivation for meeting another such situation with optimum efficiency and minimum injustice. A memorial interpreting the historic facts, the moral, social, and emotional currents, the factors of necessity, and the patience, fortitude, constructive deeds and heroism involved, distilled in this crucible of crisis is a worthy undertaking. A place such as that at Rohwer, Arkansas where deceased internees lie at rest, and where proud Japanese-Americans after long detention devotedly erected memorials to their sorrows and the bravery of their sons, would be an appropriate site for such a memorial and an area of far greater significance than a mere cemetery.

**Physical Description of the Area**

No information is at hand concerning the total number of persons who died in these internment camps, nor in particular at the camp at Rohwer, Arkansas. It is reported that many of those who died at Rohwer were cremated and their ashes interred elsewhere. The bodies of perhaps fifty deceased were buried in a plot enclosed by a concrete post and cable fence at the south edge of the Rohwer internment camp. The plot contains two memorials. One is an
obelisk, capped with a globe, surmounted by an eagle. The obelisk rests upon a square concrete platform perhaps twelve feet square, elevated some two feet above the level of a concrete terrace which surrounds both monuments. Various inscriptions and Oriental ornamentation adorn the base and pedestal of the obelisk. Inscriptions upon the obelisk faces, some in Japanese, some in English, memorialize those interred within the plot. Particularly poignant is an inscription appealing for perpetual care of the burial ground:

May the people of Arkansas keep in beauty and reverence forever this ground where our bodies sleep.

The second memorial is a formed concrete replica of an American combat tank. In the position of the coming tower is mounted a rectangular shaft of height comparable to the adjoining obelisk. This shaft bears inscriptions memorializing Japanese-Americans from the Rohwer camp who gave their lives in the Armed Services of the United States in Europe. Some twenty-five to thirty names of these individuals are incised upon one face of the shaft. On either end of the tank chassis, is inscribed the figure 100,442. The significance of this figure is unknown. Possibly it represents the number of Japanese interned during the War, although this seems an incongruous element in a memorial to Japanese-American war dead. However, it seems excessive for the number of persons of Japanese descent serving in the Armed Forces of the United
States, although it would be assumed logically from its inclusion in the memorial to war dead that the latter may be the case.

The legally described memorial area consists of 1.28 acres (See Tab E). The region for miles around the memorial is low-lying, being largely Mississippi River bottom cleared and drained for agricultural use. Today, the fenced area enclosing the two memorial structures is completely surrounded by neatly cultivated level fields planted to row crops. Evidence of the once-bustling camp is almost entirely absent. Lines of tree or shrub growth along fences and ditches, and backdrop groves of swamp forest and residential tree clumps add to the pastoral charm of the setting.

There has been an impression on the part of some of those interested in establishing a park or memorial at the Rohwer site that the land is in Federal ownership. This is not the case. After the war, the camp became surplus to Government need, and was sold in 1950 to a Charles H. Kendall, whose further identity is not immediately available. The transfer deed protects the rights of unknown persons with interest in the described burial plot. (See Tab E). This encumbrance in the title is the only basis for possible vested public interest in the plot, there being no reversionary clause in the deed from the Government.
The present owner is Robert H. Adcock, a banker of McGehee, Arkansas. His attitude is unknown, but others state he probably would give a quit-claim deed to an agency proposing to perpetuate the area as a memorial.

A land sketch supplied by the County clerk of Desha County (Tab D) indicates the plot is an elongated rectangle immediately within the boundary of the camp site, with a narrow access corridor extending eastward to the Missouri Pacific right-of-way, which lies parallel and immediately west of State Highway No. 1 in the vicinity of Rohwer. The plot as presently fenced apparently represents only a portion of the land designated in the Tab D sketch, since it is almost square in outline, and approximately 175 feet along each side. The access corridor indicated on the sketch is non-existent. Farm equipment now travels between fields, coming from the west and the north, skirting the memorial plot on the north, along what appears to have been a narrow road separating the burial area from the camp area to the northward during the period of occupancy. This narrow "road" ends at the northeast corner of the memorial area. A shallow drainage-way extends eastward from that point to the railroad right-of-way. South of this drainageline, continuous row crop fields extend over the area shown on the Tab D sketch as an access corridor.
Present Condition of the Area

At the time the area was inspected on June 2, 1961, damaging effects of neglect and vandalism were considerable. Many decorative embellishments of the memorials have been willfully broken. Expansion cracks have opened in the concrete, particularly on the walks and horizontal planes of the memorial structures. Seedling trees and shrubs and woody vines have become established in the cracks, threatening rapid deterioration. Exposure to the weather has caused some shelling in the concrete, and lean spots in the cement are crumbling. Some of the walks and parts of the concrete plaza surfacing have been broken or tilted by root growth of trees which had become well established on the area by 1958. Among the tree thicket at that time was a dense ground cover of woody vines and shrubs that had developed during the years since abandonment of the camp.

About two years ago, an American Legion Post in McGehee organized a work party, cleared the site, and put it in reasonably presentable condition. With subsequent neglect, the area now is all but overgrown with tree and shrub sprouts and woody vines, including dense stands of poison ivy and dewberry briars which practically cover the walks, grave plots and markers and all but conceal much of the enclosing fence. Without regular attention, the area will quickly return to forest tangle. Several sections of fencing are down, and a number of concrete posts have been broken, tilted, or
uprooted. The individual tablet-style cast concrete markers at the grave sites are in a good state of preservation. Each is identified by incised name of the deceased. The burial plots are separated by neatly geometric concrete sidewalks constructed to provide circulation through the burial area. At each grave, three small cylindrical holes in the marker base have been cast to receive floral offerings. A dramatic touch is provided by a weed-shrouded marker set apart near the north edge of the area. It bears a full canine profile, and the one world "PAPI,
suggesting tender tribute to the spark of warmth brought to dreary lives by a friendly camp dog.

Suitability of Area for Recognition and Public Use

Other than for the presence of the Missouri Pacific Railroad tracks which create an elevated horizontal barrier within approximately a quartermile of the site, the memorial area setting is a serene one, pleasant in aspect among well-tended fields and green fence-rows, with hummocklike tree canopies of the village of Rohwer and nearby farmsteads and clumps of forested swamp enhancing the middle and distant landscape. A few scattered farm buildings, and the mass of a school plant with its tall chimney a mile or so to the northward are inoffensive as seen from the site. However, if this area is to be preserved and presented in an appropriate manner, and serve the probable substantial visitation it would attract, additional land should be acquired to permit development of an adequate approach, to provide both interior landscaping and buffer screen planting, and to accommodate a parking area and interpretive
facility. The immediate area should be kept free of administrative utility, and residential developments as inconsistent with the area's memorial character. Such physical developments for utility and other purposes could easily be accommodated in the village of Rohwer, or in association with an approach development.

Present plans route the proposed Great River Road in Arkansas along State Highway No. 1 from the vicinity of Arkansas Post, north of the Arkansas River, via a future Pendleton Bridge to Back Gate, and thence southwesterly via State 54 to Dumas, Arkansas, and from there southerly via U. S. 65 through McGehee and Lake Village to the Louisiana line (See Tab A). State Highways 54 and 1 are entirely hardsurfaced, providing an easy alternate loop route from Dumas or Back Gate to McGehee via Rohwer for travelers on either U. S. 65 or State Highway 1 and the future Great River Road. U. S. 65 is a major artery for traffic from the north and northwest to New Orleans and other Southern and Southeastern cities. The establishment of Arkansas Post National Memorial and ultimately, replacement of the Pendleton Ferry with a Great River Road bridge will bring increasing numbers of persons to this part of the state. Should the Great River Road finally be located on the levee from Pendleton to Arkansas City (See Tab A), as has been proposed by some advocates of the project, it would bring an even greater volume of travel within approximately two miles of the memorial (See Tab B).
Another road development influencing access is hard-surfacing of connecting county roads from Arkansas City and a point on State Highway 1 about two miles south of Rohwer (See Tab B).

Potlach Forests, which has substantial holdings in Southeastern Arkansas, has acquired a site adjacent to the Mississippi River levee near Desoto Landing on which it shortly will construct a large pulp mill. The mill itself to some degree may become a sightseeing feature, bringing additional motorists near Rohwer. Undoubtedly, the pulp mill operation will stimulate development in nearby hamlets such as Rohwer, adding to the urgency of its early acquisition by an appropriate agency if the Japanese Memorial Area is to be protected against encroachments or engulfment in subdivision activity.

First consideration is, of course, whether such a memorial would serve an inherently worthy purpose. However, a practical consideration influencing the likelihood of obtaining support for preserving, developing, and operating such a memorial, is the matter of public use and its concomitant economic value. With the excellent nearby existing and proposed trunk routes and constantly improving secondary connecting roads, an attractively developed and well-publicized Japanese Memorial Area at Rohwer would attract considerable unplanned tourist travel, supplementing the very substantial visitation such an area would draw as one of Arkansas' principal promoted tourist attractions. Potential public use and economic factors thus appear most favorable.
Degree of Significance

Evaluation of possible national significance of this site is impossible without careful review of the entire World War II Japanese internment program. A cemetery in itself probably would not possess national significance, or be of more than casual interest to others than descendants of those buried there. There appears to be no basis for inclusion of this area in the National Cemetery system.

Evaluation should be in terms of historical, patriotic, and social values. The area's story is one of generally patient endurance of unusual hardships and forfeiture of human rights by a largely blameless racial minority group of substantial numbers, whose freedom was sacrificed under stress of war necessity and hysteria; and one of loyalty, heroism and supreme sacrifice in the Armed Forces of the United States by Japanese-American boys from the interned families, despite grounds for disillusionment, resentment, and bitterness on their part for the adversities imposed upon them.

A survey of the relative importance and suitability of other internment areas and any memorials associated with them would be necessary to determine whether the Rohwer site and its existing memorials offers the best opportunity for a national memorial, should one appear to be appropriate.
If memorialization of the involuntary vicissitudes of a people, and perpetuation of a stirring story pregnant with lessons in tolerance, human rights, and national vigilance are determined to be a proper responsibility of the Federal Government, the site at Rohwer, Arkansas, provides an excellent opportunity for these purposes, both in the physical elements present, and in its relatively central location in the United States and with reference to major travel routes, including the projected Great River Road. If the area is not of such exceptional value as to warrant consideration as a Federal project, it has excellent potential as a historical or memorial feature that may warrant its preservation, development, and presentation as a property of the State of Arkansas. Should the appropriate state agencies be unable or disinclined to assume responsibility for the area, it could well become the charge of a patriotic order, a private foundation, or subscribed endowment.

It is possible organizations such as the American Legion or Veterans of Foreign Wars, particularly Nisei Posts or Posts with substantial Japanese-American membership, might serve as the vehicle for a Nation-wide fund-raising drive for this purpose. An effective promotion, supported with an attractively designed prospectus for development and perpetuation, could well attract substantial gifts from Japanese-Americans and from persons touched by the propriety of such a memorial, and the poignancy of the obelisk's silent, graven plea in behalf of those who rest there for a place of beauty in which to repose from the burdens that beset them in the sunset of their lives.
The possibility is suggested that the area become a state memorial, historic monument, or state park, with the state carrying out development and administering the area with funds endowed for this purpose through a campaign such as that described above.

**Suggested Guidelines for Development**

The theme of the area makes Japanese garden landscaping most appropriate as the surroundings for the small formal memorial plot. The flat terrain allows complete flexibility in ground plan. The water table is shallow, providing unlimited, easily accessible ground water for lotus gardens and reflecting pools. Japanese cherry and weeping willow should thrive in the soil and site conditions at the area. Thus, from a peripheral parking area, it would be possible to develop a stately and beautifully ornamented approach avenue, composed of plant-bordered promenades flanking an elongated reflecting pool leading to the memorial plot, all surrounded by irregular lotus ponds interspersed in groves of weeping willow and Japanese cherry trees.

Worthwhile development will require acquisition of a probable minimum ten-acre block including the existing memorial enclosure, and a landscaped approach corridor adequate for modern two-way vehicle traffic. Because of difficult grade problems adverse to a crossing of the elevated railway tracks to the eastward, the approach probably should be from an existing east-west road from Rohwer, starting at a point several hundred yards to the south of
the memorial plot. Parking area should be at the east edge of an
enlarged area to provide a long perspective toward the memorial
when approaching it on foot from the east.

Land values are high in this region, but the limited acreage
required and the relative simplicity of treatment proposed would
not make a project of such scope excessive in total cost when
measured by the worthiness of the memorial, its value as an
educational and travel feature, and its potential as an economic
asset through travel expenditures by visitors.

Addenda

Appended to this report are: an Arkansas State Highway map
showing the location of the Japanese Memorial Area with reference
to Arkansas Post and the Great River Road (Tab A); a Desha County
map showing geographic relationship of the camp site to travel
routes and other features of public interest (Tab B); a vicinity
sketch plan (Tab C); a plot plan provided by the County Clerk of
Desha County, Arkansas, showing the recorded location and measured
boundaries of the subject area and access corridor (Tab D); a copy
of a letter from the County Clerk of Desha County to the Arkansas
Publicity and Parks Commission quoting the section of the deed of
conveyance placing an encumbrance upon the land occupied by the
Japanese Memorial Area (Tab E); a sketch showing the approximate
ground plan of the memorials and associated burial plot (Tab F);
and four photographs showing the character of the area and the
memorial and features therein (Tab G).
SCALE: 1 INCH = 7½ CHAINS
FILED 8-4-47 - 3 P.M.
RECORDED PLAT BK. 2D 135 B

NOTE: ALL DIMENSIONS EXPRESSED IN CHAINS
May 3, 1961

Mr. Clovis Copeland
Arkansas Parks & Publicity Department
State Capitol
Little Rock, Arkansas

Dear Mr. Copeland:

Re: Japanese Re-Location Center Cemetery
Desha County, Arkansas.

In accordance with our telephone conversation of this A.M., I enclose excerpt from a Deed from the United States as follows:

The United States of America, To Charles H. Kendall, Quitclaim Deed, Dated Feb., 28, 1950, Filed for record March 9, 1950, at 9:00 o'clock, A.M., Recorded Book 104 Page 615 Records of Desha county, Arkansas, Conveying (Among other lands) the following:

"The SE 1/4 of Sec. 3, Lying West of the West right-of-way of the Missouri Pacific Railroad Company, subject to the rights and interests of unknown parties interested in a cemetery and burial lot, containing 1.28 acres, more or less, located along the south line thereof, in T. 11 S. R. 2W. of 5th. P.M."

I do not find any Record where the tract was ever conveyed to any organization prior to the above sale or subsequent thereto.

This property is now owned by Robert H. Adcock, of McGehee, Arkansas.

It appears that the 1.28 acres should have been excepted in the U. S. Deed, instead of being subject thereto. If this is to be made a shrine, as the newspapers indicated, it should be quitclaimed possibly by Adcock to the Parks Commission.

There is no other Description of record, but there is a Recorded Plat a tracing of which is enclosed, that definitely locates the 1.28 acres.

Trusting this is the information desired, I am

Respectfully,

D. A. YOUREE (signed)

P. S. Aerial Photo shows all this as cultivated land. There is no visible markings on the Photo.
JAPANESE MEMORIAL
NEAR ROHWER, DESHA COUNTY, ARKANSAS

NORTH APPROXIMATE ACREAGE 1.28

OPEN UDEVELOPED AREA

MEMORIAL TO
DECEASED INTERNEES BURIED
HERE

CONCRETE PLAZA

MEMORIAL TO INTERNEES LATER
KILLED IN ACTION
IN U.S. ARMED FORCES
IN EUROPE

WALK

GRAVE PLOTS

GRAVE PLOTS

GRAVE PLOTS

GRAVE PLOTS

GRAVE PLOTS

GRAVE PLOTS
Looking southeast at Memorials (1) to deceased Japanese internees buried at Rohwer, Arkansas (left); and (2) to Nisei killed in action in Europe. Hamlet of Rohwer, right background. Farm buildings, extreme left, face directly on Missouri-Pacific Railway right-of-way.

Looking northeast across grave plots, with deceased internees Memorial, left, and Memorial to Nisei war dead, right.

Japanese Memorial Area, Rohwer, Arkansas.
Inscriptions on Memorial to deceased Japanese internees buried at Rohwer, Arkansas.

Japanese Memorial Area, Rohwer, Ark.


Japanese Memorial Area, Rohwer, Arkansas. HRG 6-61