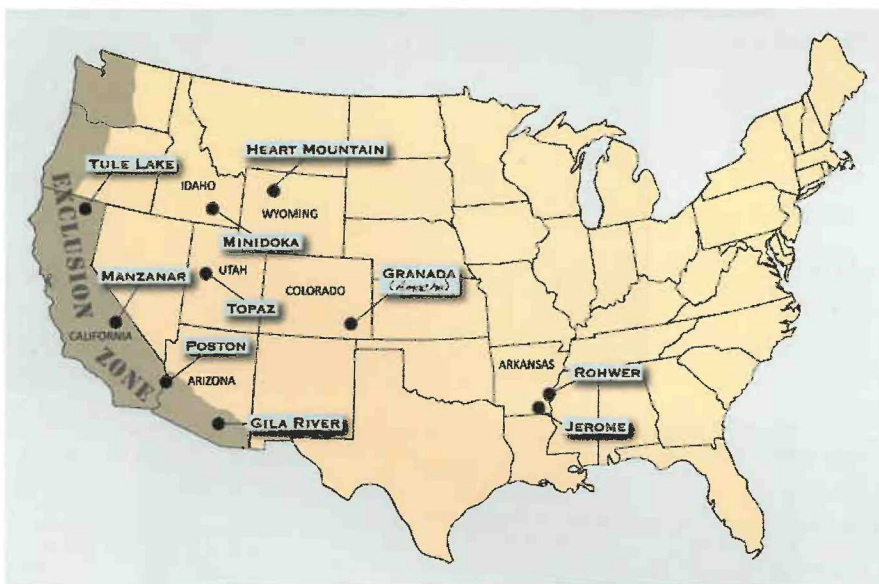


The Archaeology of Entryway Gardens at Amache

BY BONNIE CLARK, Ph.D.

Beauty, Hope, Community. These are hardly the words one associates with a prison. Yet these are all ideals evoked by the gardens built by Japanese and Japanese Americans during their World War II incarceration. The majority spent the war in internment camps built by the War Relocation Authority (WRA) in uninhabited locales, made barren of vegetation through their hasty construction. Each of the ten camps contained a variety of gardens, from small vegetable patches to grand strolling gardens like Merritt Park at Manzanar.¹

One of the best preserved of the WRA camps is the Granada Relocation Center, better known as Amache, located in far eastern Colorado. All of the incarcerated came from California, about half from farms in the central valley or northern coast. The other half came from the Seinan, a neighborhood of Los Angeles with many truck farms and produce businesses. In 2006, the central square mile of the camp was recognized as a National Historic Landmark, a status reserved for historic sites of the highest significance and physical integrity. The intact evidence of gardens and landscaping created by internees was a key factor in Amache's landmark nomination.²



Map of ten WRA camps and exclusion zone. Courtesy of Anne Amati

Historical archaeology, which combines memory, documents, and the physical evidence of the past, is a powerful way to better understand how people create places. Since 2008, I have led intensive archaeological study of the Amache landscape which has taken place primarily during biannual archaeology field schools. One of my guiding research topics has been how internees were taking their expertise in growing things and applying it to an entirely new environment, the High Plains. I am also interested in what these landscapes reveal about the translation of Japanese and Japanese-American values and aesthetics in a situation of upheaval and shortage.

1. Kenneth I. Helphand, *Defiant Gardens: Making Gardens in Wartime* (San Antonio: Trinity University Press, 2006) and Anna Tamura, "Gardens Below the Watchtower: Gardens and Meaning in World War II Japanese American Incarceration Camps," *Landscape Journal* 23 (2004): 1-21.

2. Thomas H. Simmons and R. Laurie Simmons, *National Landmark Nomination, Granada Relocation Center*. Front Range Research Associates, Inc, Denver, 2004.

Methods of Analysis

Our investigations of gardens at Amache began in conversations with Amache survivors. Their stories and photographs have been key to keeping the gardeners at the forefront as we investigate the gardens. In the field our work each year starts with a systematic pedestrian survey which includes identifying gardens and landscaping features. Some of these features employ concrete, the material also used to create the foundations for all of the camp's buildings. Other gardens are a bit subtler, and crews are trained to be on the lookout for river cobble, gravel, and crumbling limestone. Amache is located in an area where the parent soil is wind-deposited sand and so any stone we find has been brought in from elsewhere. Oral history confirms that the river cobble and gravel at Amache derive from the banks of the Arkansas River, which was located three miles north of the fenced and guarded central area of camp, but adjacent to fields associated with Amache's many productive farms.

We document the more complicated gardens and landscaping features with scaled, measured drawings. The location of landscaping is also recorded with digital mapping equipment so that we can create extremely accurate maps of the areas surveyed. These maps help us see the larger spatial relationships at camp by overlaying the building foundations, locations of landscaping, and the locations of important artifacts or concentrations of them. A selection of gardens is then chosen for further test excavations employing intensive garden archaeology techniques—focusing on revealing activity in the gardens, as well as how they were planned and what was planted in them. In addition to sifting the soil to look for artifacts, we also consistently take soil samples throughout the gardens. These samples are geared to the recovery of botanical remains, pollen, and soil chemistry.

Results of Research: A Sampling of Amache's Gardens

Over the course of five archaeological field seasons, what has become clear is that internees at Amache didn't just change the camp landscape, they radically transformed it.³ One sees it through the city forest, in raised sidewalks along the busiest street, sports facilities like a sumo ring, and the consistency of entryway gardens found near the doorway of barracks. These gardens have their roots in the *tsuboniwa* (courtyard) gardens of Japan but they also reflect the American landscape, especially front yards, some of which Japanese gardeners were creating for their clients and themselves in the West Coast of the United States. The



TOP: Mr. Mataji Umeda in his garden. Photograph shared with author by Mr. Umeda's granddaughter Helen Yagi Sekikawa

BOTTOM: Lobed pond next to Umeda garden. Photograph by DU Amache Project staff

3. A series of technical reports documenting each field season of research at Amache is available through the University of Denver, Department of Anthropology.



Garden excavation in progress, Summer 2008.
Photograph by DU Amache Project staff

entryway gardens are not only the most common at Amache, they are also idiosyncratic and complex. Taking a closer look at them provides evidence of the expertise, strategies, and networks internees employed as they remade an environment none of them chose to inhabit. They also reveal the translation of Japanese gardening traditions in a setting where traditional plants and materials were often not available.

In 2010, we excavated a portion of a garden which is directly in front of the barrack occupied during the war by Saichiro and Bun Hirota. The Hirotas were not gardeners or farmers; before the war they owned and managed a grocery store in Los Angeles. Yet, as we dug, it became clear the soil in the Hirota's garden was amended throughout with the judicious use of crumbled eggshell. A former internee who visited us that summer recalled that eggshell, tea leaves, and coffee grounds were all highly prized soil amendments. She also told me that not everyone had access to them: you had to know people who worked in the mess halls. Another source for the eggshell could have been the

chicken-raising facilities at the ranch that was part of the camp's agricultural properties.

The Hirota entryway garden also employed broken water pipes. These were ingeniously placed upright and sunk into the ground for use as planters. In his mid 50s, it is unlikely that Mr. Hirota worked in the sanitation

department, rather the pipe planters reflect connections to someone who had access to the camp's trash.

Finally, like almost all of the gardens we have excavated at the camp, the Hirota garden yielded a wide variety of wire of varying gauges. It exhibits a wide variety of uses in gardens, from home-made fencing, to hangers, to training trees. Made of metals required for the war effort, wire was rationed during the war and therefore not available through popular mail-order. It seems likely that the wire in this garden was one of the many items pilfered by internees from the camp's store of construction materials.

So, in this one little garden, we see the networks across the camp these gardeners employed to access the materials they needed. We also see care for the sandy soil to make a garden thrive. Saichiro Hirota may not have made his living in agriculture, but his father did.⁴ Children in Meiji-era Japan were key to the success of family farms. Saichiro likely had many years of farming experience by the time he emigrated to the U.S. at sixteen, and he employed his skills much later in America.

One of the many surprises revealed by the gardens of Amache is the relationship of internees to the larger physical and social environment. Internees made great use of materials available at hand, as well as those nearby, but beyond the barbed wire perimeter of the camp. These include river cobble and gravel, but also transplanted wild

4. This information comes from the WRA case file 806345 82084 available at <http://www.japaneserelocation.org/index.php?page=directory&rec=76046>. In the WRA records, Mr. Hirota's first name is spelled "Saichiro," but my research suggests it is more properly spelled "Saichiro."

species like cholla, a type of cactus not found locally but employed in at least one entryway garden. Others evidence even greater movement of internees.

In 2010, we recovered two large stones used as decorative elements in an entryway garden likely associated with Mataji Umeda. Mr. Umeda was a tomato farmer with a talent and passion for growing chrysanthemums.⁵ The two stones we found in his garden both derive from a type of geological formation the nearest outcrop of which is about 40 miles from Amache. Historic accounts indicate that internees could get permits to travel, both for work and in the case of organized youth groups, for pleasure. If collected on one of these forays such specimens are not only decorative, they are mementos of the nearby landscapes of freedom outside camp. But their significance is likely even greater.

Employing unshaped stone in gardens is one of the earliest of Japanese garden traditions. Many writers suggest that the importance of stone in Japanese gardens reflects even older, Shinto traditions.⁶ Some of the earliest Shinto shrines centered on stones within a cleared spot in a forest. Such stones, like the trees around them, represented local *kami* or nature spirits.

The presence of non-local stone in Amache's gardens is a pattern confirmed through the next three field seasons. One of the most intriguing examples we discovered in a wonderful *karesansui* (dry garden). The main elements of the garden were large concrete pieces surrounded by river gravel. Carefully placed among them was a fist-sized heavy black stone. We discovered that it is magnetite, a stone that is magnetic. While concrete could (and often did) do in a pinch, it would never have the *kami* of a stone found in nature. Imagine how much *kami* might reside in a stone that is actually magnetic.

One of our most exciting finds in two different gardens was microscopic remains from *Canna*, a flowering plant related to ginger. It grows wild throughout the Hawaiian islands. Many of the families at Amache had ties to Hawai'i, which had a larger population of people of Japanese ancestry than the continental US. But because most Japanese in Hawai'i were not incarcerated during the war, they could have gathered *canna* rhizomes to send to their friends and family. Its presence at Amache may indicate an amazing effort put into procuring plants that would make this place both more beautiful and a little less foreign.

Most of the entryway gardens at camp were created by adults, but the younger generation of internees was also involved in efforts to landscape the camp. An article published by the school administrators indicated that the

Karesansui garden with reconstructed guard tower in background, Summer 2014. Photograph by DU Amache Project staff



5. Interview with Helen Yagi Sekikawa, 2013.
Notes in possession of author.

6. Masao Hayakawa, *The Garden Art of Japan* (New York: Weatherhill/Heibonsha, 1973) and David Slawson, *Secret Teaching in the Art of Japanese Gardens: Design Principles, Aesthetic Values* (Tokyo: Kodansha International Ltd., 1987) are two examples.

students themselves initiated a program of widespread landscaping at the elementary school. This effort was framed by the WRA as a reflection of American ideals.⁷ Certainly, the overall landscaping scheme that resulted would have been reassuringly Western to administrator eyes; our intensive survey of the school block suggests a similarity in the size, placement, and boundary hardscaping of the individual beds.

But excavations in a pair of beds that flanked one of the classroom doorways tell another story. The beds were approximately the same size and both were bounded by limestone, however, one of the beds was landscaped with consistently sized gravel from the banks of the Arkansas River. The adjacent bed had no gravel at all. From one bed we recovered *ipomoea* (ornamental morning glory) seeds, but none from the other. The very different school gardens suggest these young children were already developing their own landscape aesthetics. They were also carrying on, in an incredibly unlikely setting, the tradition of the *tsuboniwa*.

Like the elementary school students, most of Amache's gardeners were not experts. However, a few were, including the gentlemen who designed the entryway garden we excavated in 2012. Before the war, Zenkichi Sairyō had worked as a gardener for the LA railway, while Kahichi Yokoi ran a cactus nursery. These "bachelor gardeners" lived together at Amache and may have known each other before the war.⁸ The garden in front of their barrack is a very good example of how Japanese garden design was both maintained and transformed in camp.

A distinctive shape was impressed into one of the concrete pieces in a garden wall, that of a prickly pear cactus. It seems the designers of this garden took advantage of the physical properties of material that although not traditional itself, could be employed to perpetuate tradition.

Although *shakkei* is commonly thought of as a technique for framing distant views (like mountains or forests),

shakkei can also bring in nearby elements.⁹ When employed in that manner, it may reflect an even older concept of *ikedori* (capturing alive).¹⁰ The impression of the prickly pear cactus in this garden wall ingeniously employs a normally utilitarian material to an aesthetic end. By capturing the cactus in the concrete, the gardeners could bring that element to their garden, without actually placing a potentially hazardous plant in a space traversed many times a day. Mr. Yokoi's pre-war experience propagating cactus makes this choice that much more resonant.

Conclusion: Finding Solace in the Soil

There are many answers to the question of why there are so many gardens at Amache. Some of them are quotidian. Gardens keep the grit down in a region only just coming out of the dustbowl; they create more equitable microclimates; they hide shabby, institutional architecture. But the energy poured into these gardens suggests something deeper at play. Attending the 2016 NAJGA conference on the healing power of Japanese gardens only confirmed my conviction that gardening was ideally suited to help the people of Japanese ancestry imprisoned at Amache cope with upheaval.

The internees lived in a world where the social ground was constantly shifting. One day they were farmers or pharmacists, the next they were prisoners with no idea of when, or if, they

7. Enoch Dumas and Margaret Walther, "Landscaping for Beauty and Health," *The School Executive* (May 1944):40-41.

8. The 1945 camp directory indicates that Barrack 11H-9E was occupied by Zenkichi Sairyō and Kashichi Yokoi. This document is available at the Amache Preservation Society museum, Granada, Colorado. Subsequent research suggests their names were both misspelled and are likely Zenkichi Sairyō and Kahichi Yokoi respectively.

9. Hayakawa, 140.

10. Teiji Itoh, *Space and Illusion in the Japanese Garden* (New York: Weatherhill/Tankosha, 1973):16.

might be released. The *issei* (first generation) Japanese immigrants were people without a country, while their *nisei* children were citizens of a country that had turned its back on them. But they had a set of skills honed over generations for bringing harmony to at least one little part of the world—their garden.

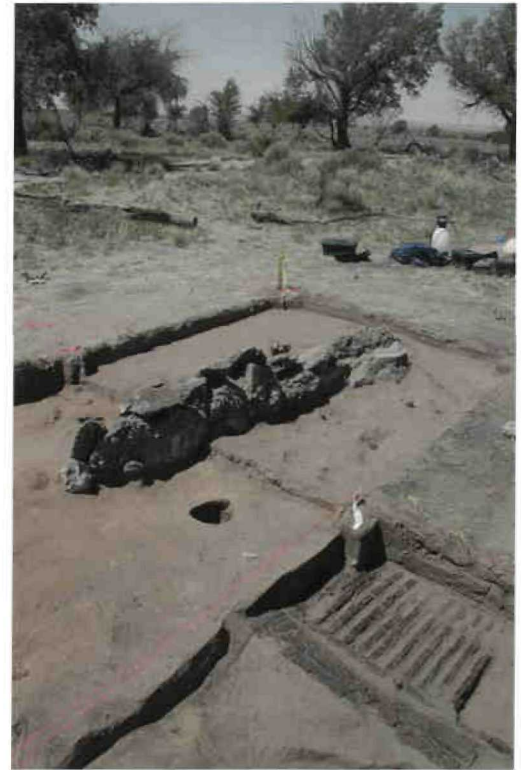
The entryway garden with the *ikedori* cactus turned out to be a stunning Japanese-style entryway garden. One of the reasons I chose to further investigate this garden was the feature previously discussed, the concrete slab wall. Not only is the wall a skillful evocation of a mountain range, it is also sited in an especially interesting manner. The designers created mindfulness by placing the wall right in front of the barrack door. Through excavation we discovered a beautiful cedar walkway that led directly from the doorway to the wall. From there stepping stones suggest pathways to either side. Each time the residents served by this doorway transitioned between the world outside and their barrack, they would have had to slow down, to be aware and present for at least that moment.

Another element of harmony created by the Amache gardeners is a kind of deep balance which we discovered through our study of soil chemistry. The soils at Amache are classified as “overly drained” sands, poor for growing just about anything. We have found all sorts of visible soil amendments, not just eggshell, but also marine shell, fish bones and scales, and pieces of iron slag. Nutrient analysis reveals that in almost every single garden feature we have so far analyzed, the soil retains a higher organic content than that of non-garden soils. Considering the rapidity with which nutrients are washed from this sandy matrix, and the short duration of the camp’s occupation, this

imprint is nothing short of amazing. There remains 70 years later, a legacy of care for the land by a people who were forced to inhabit it.

The physicality of creating and maintaining a garden is yet another of its virtues and a pathway to balance. One of the most important proponents of gardening in Japan, priest Musō Soseki, wrote, “He who distinguishes between the garden and practice cannot be said to have found the true Way.”¹¹ The daily chores of raking, or picking up fallen leaves, or even harvesting vegetables, are acts that keep a garden and a gardener in harmony.

The archaeology of Amache reveals gardeners who were resourceful, imaginative, and skilled. They turned an oppressive and monotonous environment to one that was useful and beautiful, sometimes through the use of objects that most of us would consider trash. Amache’s gardens remain an amazing testament to the human spirit in a world where forces seemed bent on destroying it.



11. This comes from the *Dream Dialogues* as cited in François Berthier, *Reading Zen in the Rocks: The Japanese Dry Landscape Garden* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2000):3.

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