



ROHWER—The camp was less than ten miles from Mississippi River, and Jerome, the other concentration camp, was about 25 miles from Rohwer. Rohwer, the farming area didn't really have a town, and the nearby town of McGehee was the closest post office. The area was a swampy delta region.

rigid wooden seats. Air conditioning was unheard of in those days, and the windows had to be kept closed so that the soot from the smoke-belching engines pulling the cars would not enter the cars. With the train crammed with people, it was stifling hot and uncomfortable.

The military police were in the last car of the train, and they would walk through each car from time to time to check things out. Whenever the train stopped, whether at a railroad siding or at a station in a small town, the soldiers would jump out and stand guard on both sides of the train just in case someone would try to escape, which never happened, but they also stood guard to keep the curious townspeople away from the train.

Most of the townspeople did not know that the trains carried Japanese internees since the government tried to keep a lid on information about the train movements in order to avoid trouble from the local populace as the trains rolled by the towns and cities. In fact, shades in every car had to be pulled down anytime the trains stopped in a station. In a way, it was a spooky train ride.

RESTLESS CHILDREN

There were a lot of kids on the train, and it seemed like most of them were constantly racing from one end of the train to the other end. There was a lot of admonishing, "Now you sit here and be quiet!" type of stern parental orders, but most of the restless children were off and running within five minutes. And in a way, it was a crowded madhouse.

Many of the young people were excited about the train ride because here was a chance to see the country which you only read about in geography books in schools and originally, they sat glued to the windows taking in the scenery as the train chugged eastward. Going through Arizona, New Mexico and Texas, however, the scenery never changed. It was a continuous band of endless

expanse of plains during the first two days of the ride, and it didn't take long for most people to become quickly bored. No mountains, no trees, and no rivers.

The only thing that the people looked forward to was eating. It was the only time the young children sat quietly with their parents as they waited to be fed. The food wasn't much, as sandwiches were served during lunch most of the time, and it appeared that the cheapest and easiest to cook food was for dinner. Rice and shoyu was a no-show.

One of the strangest things about the dining cars were the black waiters in their white coats. The internees sat down at the tables, the waiters brought a plate of food and eating utensils. You ate and then left as the waiters cleared the tables for the next group. It was never made clear as to whether the waiters were Army personnel or employed by the railroad company running the train. Anyway, it was a weird situation since at the assembly centers, everyone had to line up, grab a plate, have food slapped on, find a seat, eat, then take the plates and utensils to the dishwashers. It was surmised that the cars were too narrow for that type of service, and the method utilized was probably efficient and faster even if they had to have waiters.

GRIDLOCK AT WASHROOMS

Probably the biggest problem riding for three long days on the train was trying to keep and feel

clean. There was one small washroom in the back of each car with a toilet and a wash basin. About all anyone could do was to brush their teeth and wash their face. There was a gridlock every morning in front of the washroom. With the September heat of the Southwest and unable to wash up, the first thing everyone swore they were going to do when they got to Rohwer was to take a shower.

Changing clothes was almost impossible, and most wore the same clothes during the three-day trip. When it came to sleeping, you just slouched on the hard wooden seats and slept in your clothes. Some took off their shoes and others slept with them on, but it really didn't matter since everyone was in the same uncomfortable situation. The more fastidious internees changed socks every day, and some even managed to change shirts or blouses in the washrooms, but it was a losing proposition since the muggy and stuffy heat in the cars induced perspiration faster than you could change shirts. It was a no-win situation.

Sleeping was also difficult since the people had to sleep where they sat. It was impossible to stretch out, although many slept on the floor and in the narrow aisles hoping that no one would walk through in the dark and step on them. The rigid and upright wooden seats didn't help any, but some have said that the steady clickety-clack of the train wheels soothed them to sleep.

As the train rolled into Louisiana during the third day, the people began to perk up a little since the scenery became more interesting with clusters of trees and some bayous appearing. More invigorating was the rumor that the train would reach the Rohwer concentration camp late that afternoon. The long three-day train ride had sapped the energy and spirit of the people, and in an incongruous way, the passengers seemed happy that the long ordeal was over and that they were finally reaching the end of the line, a concentration camp.

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Changing clothes was impossible and most wore same clothes during trip



BIRD'S EYE VIEW—Rohwer concentration camp under construction during 1942. The camp began construction in July, 1942 and was completed in January the following year, which was three months after the

internees arrived. Nails and scrap lumber left by contractors were prized items of the people.

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As the train rolled by the small town of McGehee, Arkansas, everyone on the train knew that the long journey through half the length of the United States was almost over. The train had travelled along the bayou area of upper Louisiana and lower Arkansas, and the sights the people saw were as different as any they had seen or expected, although many had read about the South. It was a shock to see through the windows of the train a lot of things they had read or heard about.

The train, moving slowly, had passed by fields of cotton, which was nothing like what the passengers expected. Coming from California with the verdant green fields of vegetables and fruits, the stark cotton fields with its spine-like bare leafless stems with small tufts of cotton on its ends did not appear to be productive fields. The whole scene was a mystery, especially to the Issei, who were more familiar with lush green fields of vegetables.

Another scene, which affected most of the young Nisei, was the wooden shacks in which the black people lived. The weather-beaten homes of the poor blacks, built about a foot above the existing ground on wooden stilts to escape the flooding from the frequent torrential rains of the areas, gave proof to many of the viewers that the South was really what they had read and heard about as far as the lives of the blacks were concerned. It was obvious that the black people in the South were not on equal footing with the rest of the people of the South. To many of the Nisei, it was a cultural awakening of the world around them even if they were headed to a concentration camp. On the other hand, very few of the black people who watched the train full of Japanese people go by knew that the passengers were headed to another version of the white man's prejudice and wrath.

As the train slowly moved past the small town of McGehee in Arkansas, most of the passengers

were at the windows looking for their next home. They knew that the destination was near because the train was slowing down.

It was a clear warm day in September, late in the afternoon. No one really knew what to expect and, coupled with the strange sights of the South they were witness to during the last day of the train ride, there was apprehension and concern that the camp they were headed to may be the worst of their expectations. Things were bad enough as they were.

Except for the fields of cotton on one side of the railroad with large patches of woods with tall trees, the left side of the train was all woods. The trees didn't compare with the redwood trees of California, but it was wooded fairly thick with large bushes interspersed. A gravel highway ran parallel with the railroad track, but with little traffic. There were very few people sighted along the way as the train neared Rohwer. The only positive note among the passengers was that at least the camp was not located in the middle of a desert if what they were seeing from the train was any indication of the type of environment in which the concentration camp would be located. Hope springs eternal and any positive sign, whether to soften the approaching internment in an unknown concentration camp or an improvement over either the Santa Anita or the Stockton assembly centers, was

wished upon as an omen for better treatment and a more comfortable confinement.

"ROHWER!"

Voices rose as the train neared the camp and everyone moved to one side of the train to get their first look at Rohwer. As the train slowed down in front of the Rohwer concentration camp, there were a lot of disappointed groans as the rows and rows of tar-papered barracks came into view. A closer inspection of the sight also brought into focus the ubiquitous barbed wire fences and the guard towers. It was not unexpected, but still disappointing and depressing.

"Rohwer!" yelled the soldier as he walked through the cars. "Get ready to leave!"

People began scrambling back to their seats as others went looking for their children. Taking down the battered cheap suitcases from the shelves above their seats, the Issei solemnly sat down on the car seats to wait for the next step in their life. A few calmly picked up some loose papers on the floor and dutifully took it back to the trash box in the rear of the car. They wanted to make sure that the car was in the same condition when they left as when they first boarded it. Although they did not consider themselves as guests, it was a trained habit and part of their culture to make sure that you did not show disrespect to your friends or strangers by leaving behind a dirty room or place.

As the steel wheels of the train whined to a stop on the rails, the soldiers jumped off the train from each car and stood by the entrance to the cars. They helped the elderly off the high steps as other internees lowered their baggage for them. Everyone slowly walked down the slope of the tracks with their suitcases and packages to the level ground covered with weeds. Most just looked at the sprawling camp in front of them.

*Restless children would
race the length of the
train over and over again.*