History of Merced Assembly Center Schools

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The Merced Assembly Center School was opened on June 10, 1945 and was closed on August 21, 1945—session of 11 weeks. It was an informal educational program conducted for a limited time. There were many handicaps and difficulties to cope with throughout the session, but due to the splendid co-operation of the administration officials, teachers, and the residents of the Center, we feel we can call the school—though brief—was a success. It was an experience very peculiar and unique in the history of American education. We shall attempt to give a brief picture of the work done by the Education Department.

BACKGROUND

Merced Assembly Center and its people:

Merced Assembly Center was a community made up of 4500 Japanese of which about 1000 were school-age children. All the people were evacuees, forced by the war to leave their normal way of living for the duration and to reside temporarily in this Center. Under their smiles and seemingly good humor, there could be detected a feeling of uneasiness and uncertainty.

The Isseis were concerned over their immediate families in Japan; all were worried about their relatives and friends in other Centers. However, the greatest concern was that of the Niseis, or the Second Generations. They asked: "Why weren't we, American citizens to the core, not asked to help for the cause of our country?" and "What does the future hold for us after we are released from the Relocation Center?"

With all these problems—coupled with the effect of moving away from business, homes, and people they loved—it was easy to see that the education of the children was of least concern. Under normal conditions, the Japanese parents have strived and sacrificed for the education of their children. Under these conditions education had to take a back seat.

EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

Aims

The school was started to keep the leisure time of the children, men, and women,
occupied in a worthwhile manner. In a place like this, home-training is practically impossible. It was the aim of this School to keep the children occupied under a capable leadership even for a short time of a day; to give to the children some useful knowledge so that it would make up for their lack of natural environments; and it has endeavored to keep alive in the students the desire to learn.

The school has strived to teach discipline in a pleasant way, form in the students good habits, and to instill in their minds the spirit of tolerance and co-operation.

HANDICAPS

No Definite School House:

The Center School was a school without a school house. Two Recreation Halls and nine apartments in three Wards were used as classrooms. Some classes were forced to change their rooms several times as apartments were taken away with the influx of late evacuees.

No Equipment:

Classrooms were too small. There were no desks, no blackboards, no textbooks for several weeks. In many classes children studied sitting or lying on the cement floor. Teachers had to type or mimeograph the lessons for their students or become hoarse due to shouting and taking incessantly to get the undivided attention of the students.

Non-Compulsory:

The school was not compulsory. Children did not have to attend school. Many students, especially the older ones, took full advantage of this and switched to recreational activities which were more interesting.

Vacation Time:

Children thought they were entitled to make full use of their summer vacation—which to them was a period of relaxation from everything. Parents were more or less lenient and did not urge their children to attend.

Presence of Many Children Who were Not in Attendance at School:

School-going children envied them. They thought they were being robbed of good times.
Intense Heat Made It Difficult To Study:

Concerning the heat, need we say more?

Japanese School Teachers:

Because the teachers were Japanese, the children took this advantage to become very attached to them. Since, in normal life, they had been taught by the Caucasian teachers, the younger pupils "just felt" that a Japanese teacher couldn't be a "real teacher" as the following remark from a young student attest: "Teacher, may I call you Miss Stanley 'cause that was the name of my teacher back home? I feel funny to call you by your Japanese Name."

The Students

Shoving, pushing, and fighting among the little students were common. We wondered if the diet of corned-beef, cabbage, and beans put extra vitamins into the bodies of the young ones. Seriously speaking, every boy and girl wanted to be the first to go into the classroom or the first to go out. To them taking the back seats was a sign of cowardice. Mass groupings of classes were always something to think about. These were the times when the students "behaved" their unruly best and put their teachers in a frenzy.

However, the above behaviors of the students are forgotten whenever we think of the following: we were thrilled when the students lined up by classes every morning to stand in the burning Merced sun to pay their respect to the Flag; and to sing in childish but proud voices. "America, my country 'tis of thee."; we were amazed and moved when without a murmur the children sat on the cold hard cement floor to follow their teacher's words; we were impressed when we saw the gray-haired, wrinkled students eagerly learning their A B C's. Here are some comments by the teachers concerning their students:

"It was a pleasure to teach such responsive intelligent children."

"The degree of retention and mastery of the subject matter by my students have been amazing."

"I was very much pleased with their frankness and enthusiasm to learn."

"I do not hesitate to say, at the end of the trail, that my students are well
advanced in grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary. Their eagerness and perseverance are something to be admired."

"Despite the inadequacy of the classrooms, I have had enthusiastic response from my classes."

As a whole children were obedient, anxious to learn and worked reasonably hard. They all make progress to a satisfactory degree.

ADULT EDUCATION

Over 100 Issei and Kibei men and women attended English classes, and almost as many women took lessons in knitting and sewing. This was very encouraging. They made good use of the time they were given by this strange situation which rarely happens in one's life.

THE TEACHING STAFF

There were more than 20 full-time teachers: more than half of whom were university graduates. Not a single teacher was with less than 2 year's attendance in college. There were 3 teachers who majored in education and many who took courses in education and psychology. Very pleasant in personality, diligent in their work, they all did their best despite all sorts of difficulties, for they were sincerely interested in the education and the welfare of the children here. All have expressed their enjoyment in teaching and are grateful for the priceless experiences obtained through their work.

APPRECIATIONS

The education department wish to express its sincere gratitude to the following people and departments:

For guidance and splendid co-operation: Mr. Harry L. Black, Center Manager, and Mr. Richard E. Mitchell, Supervisor of Education and Recreation.

For generous donations of more than 5000 textbooks: Merced County Library.

Cleaning of the classrooms: Sanitation Department.

For all kinds of assistance: Recreation Department.

For physical and moral support: To the parents of the students.

For financial assistance: To the families who donated to the school fund.
Education in the Relocation Center will be formal and compulsory with buildings exclusive for school. All necessary equipments, material, and textbooks will be supplied. The teaching staff will be composed of Caucasian and Japanese teachers.

We hope that not only the children of school-age but men and women above the school-age will make good use of the time they are likely to have by attending school or by taking courses which will be useful when they leave the Relocation Center.

Particular attention is directed to the young children and young boys and girls—the group from which the leaders of tomorrow will emerge. We feel and fear that a long stay in the Center—away from the normal outside world—will more or less kill the ambitions of many of these young people. We feel that the reasonable task of keeping the light of faith, ambition, and pride in these young people will rest in the main with the educational group. We ask of the parents and the Public also to bear this in mind, and to co-operate to the fullest extent with the group.

We ask, in behalf of the youngsters of this Center, to make us strong to face all and every problem we meet after the war is over: fill in us with ambitions so burning that we will fight unto the end; and lastly preserve in us the true sense of democracy so that we will unwavering faith in it no matter what the future holds for us.

STATISTICS

1. Informal Summer School

2. School Opened: June 10, 1942
   School Closed: August 21, 1942
   Duration of School: Eleven Weeks

3. Names of Teachers:

   EDUCATION DEPARTMENT

   Takashi Terano, Head
   Kiyoshi Kasai, Assistant Dir.
   Kazuo Kasai, Assistant Dir.
   Beanie Matsunaka, Secretary
   Julia Andow
   Minnie Andow
   Fred Arimoto
   Kameji Domoto
   Mrs. K. Domoto

   Kiyoe Masuda
   May Matsumoto
   Marie Minutani
   Natsue Sato
   Munro Sugimoto
   George Toriumi
   Juna Yamoto
   Kazue Yokohari
   Mitsuko Hattori
   Setsuo Uwata
2. Enrollment:
   - Elementary Grades (1st to 6th): 330
   - Jr. & Sr. High: 450
   - Adults: 200

5. Subjects Taught:
   - Grades (1st to 6th): Arithmetic, Reading, Spelling, Group Singing, Dancing, Story-Telling, Drawing, Crafts.
   - Adult: English for Men and Women, Knitting, Sewing.

6. Organization of Class Periods:
   - General Assembly: 9:00 to 9:10 a.m.
   - School Hours: 9 to 11:30 a.m. for grade students; others held on different hours of the day.
   - Length of each period: 35 to 45 minutes.


8. Meetings:
   - Teachers Meeting: Every Saturday at 8 a.m.
   - Directors Meeting: Every day at 11:30 p.m.

9. Activities:
   - June 10, 1942—Opening Ceremonies
   - July 2, 1942—Commencement Exercises
   - July 4, 1942—Fourth of July Parade
   - Aug. 1, 1942—Play Day for Children
   - Aug. 15, 1942—Hobby Show
   - Aug. 21, 1942—Closing Ceremonies