

WHEN BEING JAPANESE MEANT LOSING FREEDOM

By **SUSAN DUNNE**
COURANT STAFF WRITER

Mary Higashi arrived at the Poston relocation camp in the Arizona desert in 1942. The



California teen and her family had been forced out of their home,

transported in a closed train, and in the back of a truck and then walked past a gauntlet of soldiers armed with rifles and bayonets.

Mary and her mother looked at their new home — a prison-like barracks with dusty floors and a dilapidated stove in the corner — and began to cry.

That's to hear Mary tell it. A government newsreel of the time, aimed at a non-Japanese audience, tells it differently: "The newcomers looked about with some curiosities . . . here they would build schools, educate their children, reclaim the desert."

"Passing Poston: An American Story" looks at the World War II internment of 120,000 Japanese-Americans from two perspectives: From those who lived it, still tormented by memories, and from government



FLY ON THE WALL PRODUCTIONS

CHILDREN playing at the Poston relocation camp in Arizona during World War II in a scene from "Passing Poston." More than 120,000 Japanese Americans were forced to stay here and in similar camps during World War II.

propaganda films, which told the American people that the internment was not just justifiable, but necessary.

Joe Fox and James Nubile's effective approach is galling and heart-wrenching. Old footage of men, women and children — infants, neatly dressed girls clutching dolls, schoolboys playing leapfrog — alternates with newsreels offering

stomach-turning bromides about how Americans were "protecting ourselves without violating the principles of Christian decency."

Recollections about internment are becoming common, and are essential for a full picture of 20th-century American history. But Fox and Nubile go farther, telling a fascinating story about the complicity of the Office of Indian

Affairs in the internment.

The office wanted to bring Colorado River water to the Colorado River Indian Reservation. But for the federal government to justify the expense, more people would have to live there. To attract residents, the reservation would need a stronger infrastructure: roads, schools, irrigation, etc. John Collier, commissioner of Indian affairs, suggested that one of the internment camps be put on the Colorado River reservation, to provide unpaid, forced labor.

His request was granted, 20,000 people were moved into Poston and the men were put to work. The strength of that region's postwar Indian community is attributable to hundreds of thousands of man-hours by incarcerated innocents. "From their suffering, we gained a lot," an Indian spokesman says. As the newsreel said, the detainees built schools and reclaimed the desert, but not for their own benefit.

Average Indians did not bring about the exploitation; they knew about it but were powerless to do anything. Nonetheless, to see one racial group, which historically had suffered from forcible relocation, benefit from another

racial group being misused in exactly the same way is ironic and disturbing.

This Indian Affairs involvement was brought to light by one of the Poston detainees herself. In 1988, Ruth Okimoto got her \$20,000 share of the reparations decreed by the federal government. She used it as seed money for her research.

"She took her \$20,000 and started digging, digging, digging. She spent innumerable hours at the National Archives," co-director Nubile says in an interview. "Nobody suspected Indian Affairs of being involved in the camps, so anyone doing research on camps wouldn't have looked there."

Okimoto, now 71 and living in Berkeley, Calif., said in an interview that she couldn't find what she was looking for in the camp files. So she looked in files about Colorado River water rights, and found the Indian Affairs link. "I knew there had to be a connection. There had been a controversy among three states, Arizona, Nevada and California, who would control the flow of the Colorado River," Okimoto says.

Further digging led Okimoto to congressional papers of spring

1942, in which Collier officially asked the federal government to put Poston on the reservation. "I was so excited when I found out why it was done," Okimoto says. "I was just a child when I went to Poston, and the memories of it just haunted me."

Okimoto has a degree in organizational psychology, but she could teach a college course in investigative reporting. In bringing this story to public awareness, Okimoto, Fox and Nubile have done a great service to history.

PASSING POSTON is a *Fly on the Wall Productions* film directed by Joe Fox and James Nubile. Not rated, with nothing to offend. 60 minutes. It will be shown with Tadashi Nakamura's 22-minute short, "Pilgrimage," about a journey to where the Manzanar detainee camp once stood.

"Poston" co-director James Nubile will be present at the 5:30 screening today. Opening today at Real Art Ways, Hartford.

Contact Susan Dunne at sdunne@courant.com

★★★★★ Classic; ★★★★★ Excellent; ★★★ Good; ★★ Fair; ★ Poor; ☆ Don't bother

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Photographs by BRYAN CHAN Los Angeles Times

MEMORIES: Ruth Okimoto, a former internee at the World War II internment camp in Poston, Ariz., views the remains of the camp's auditorium. In 2000, the Berkeley artist began researching Poston to understand the experience that had torn her life apart.

Celebrating a shared history

Indians laud WWII Japanese American internees who developed their land

By TERESA WATANABE
Times Staff Writer

POSTON, ARIZ. — On an uninviting swatch of arid desert, marked by sagebrush and mesquite trees just east of the California border, the winds of war blew together the fates of two beleaguered peoples.

In a now familiar tale, 120,000 Japanese Americans were removed from the West Coast and relocated to internment camps after Japan's 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor and the subsequent U.S. entry into World War II. But in a little known piece of that history, the U.S. government sent nearly 20,000 of them to three camps on a Colorado River Indian Tribe reservation at Poston with an explicit plan to use Japanese Americans — most of them Californians skilled in farming — to help develop tribal lands for later Indian use.

Under the plan, the Japanese Americans helped clear lands and build irrigation systems, started farms and built schools from handmade adobe bricks. Their work in develop-



TOGETHER: Talyia Carter, front, welcomes ex-internees, from left, Leon Uyeda, Mary Higashi and Ruth Okimoto.

ing a reservation that previously had no electricity, running water or modern homes — many families lived in mud huts — laid the foundation for the tribe to jump-start its standard of living and thrive financially, said Michael Tsosie, director of the tribal museum.

Now, 66 years ago today after then-President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Or-

der 9066 authorizing the relocation, the two peoples are deepening their shared bonds.

Last week, Native Americans and two dozen former Japanese American internees gathered in Poston to memorialize their experiences and view a new documentary about it, "Passing Poston," by New York filmmakers Joe Fox and James Nubile. They also dis-

cussed plans to restore some of the wartime barracks, seek national historical landmark status for the site and build a museum about their shared history.

"The basis of our present-day wealth is the result of the activities during the war years by the Japanese," Tsosie said. "Maybe if they knew that all of their suffering and hard work did make a remarkable difference in the lives of so many tribal people, it might bring them some peace."

The lasting effect of their fateful desert encounter remained largely hidden for decades by elders in both communities who declined to talk much about it, both sides say. In 2000, however, Berkeley artist and researcher Ruth Okimoto, 71, began researching Poston in a personal quest to understand the experience that had torn her life apart.

Okimoto, a Tokyo native brought to San Diego as an infant by her Christian missionary parents in 1937, was only 6 when she arrived at Poston in 1942. Her memories of the time

[See Poston, Page B6]

Japanese Americans revisit past

[Poston, from Page B1]

are sketchy: a German neighbor making her family split pea soup before soldiers with rifles and bayonets took them away. Shame at having to share latrines and showers with so many strangers. Hunting for petrified wood and scorpions in the vast, forbidding landscape.

Other, older former internees who journeyed to Poston last week shared their memories. Kiyo Sato, a Sacramento retired school nurse who was 19 at the time, remembered fainting from the blistering desert heat, which climbed as high as 125 degrees.

San Pedro resident Mary Hayashi, also 19 at the time, remembered arriving at the dust-filled barracks bereft of any furniture but an oil stove. She collapsed to the floor in tears.

Okimoto was chased and spit on, rocks heaved at her by schoolmates when she returned to her San Diego elementary school in 1945. As she became an artist in the 1970s, dark and troubling images began to surface in her work — a two-faced portrait of herself, the American flag covering her child's eyes and adult mouth. That began her journey of self-discovery that, in 2000, led back to Poston.

"I needed to go deep into my subconscious to see who I am," Okimoto said.

For their part, the tribal people had no say over the mass encroachment on their land, museum director Tsosie said. Only when government trucks began rolling in to build the barracks did leaders begin to ask questions.

"The other Indians didn't like them coming in," recalled Gertrude B. Van Fleet, 83, who used to visit the camps with her father, the Mohave tribe's first Presbyterian preacher who ministered to the internees. "They were worried because people were always coming in to take land from the Indians. Some spoke out real hard. Some wanted to chase them out."

But the Indians were told: "It's part of the war effort. Don't ask questions. Do your patriotic duty and accept it," Tsosie said.

The Japanese American population, peaking at 19,000



BRYAN CHAN Los Angeles Times

REMAINS OF HISTORY: Visitors to the Poston, Ariz., internment camp walk past the burned-out remains of the camp's auditorium. Internees came from California Central Valley towns and were chosen for their agricultural capabilities.

scattered over three camps, dwarfed the 1,200 Mohave and Chemehuevi Indians living on the reservation at the time. But the encounters were limited, both sides say. An armed guard was posted at a canal that divided the populated upper reservation with the lower reservation where the internment camps were placed. And the Indians were told not to mingle with the internees.

Still, Tsosie said his own family remembered renting horses to the internees and trading fish caught from the nearby canals and Colorado River for camp provisions of sugar and flour. There were basketball games between Japanese Americans in Poston and American Indians from a nearby high school in Parker.

Dennis Patch, who heads the tribal education department, said many Indians felt empathy for the Japanese Americans. The tribes themselves had been herded up and

forced onto the Colorado River Indian Tribe reservation when it was established in 1865 to open land for white settlers, he said.

"They saw people captured and put someplace they didn't want to be, and they understood that," Patch said.

At least some tribal students were aware that the Japanese Americans had begun to transform the barren reservation. In one school essay, a student wrote that the bountiful fruits and vegetables they grew — cantaloupe, lettuce, spinach and the like — "were as good as can be grown anyplace. They have shown that this valley has great possibilities as a vegetable growing center," according to documents unearthed by Okimoto.

What the Berkeley researcher would discover was that the U.S. government had deliberately selected Japanese Americans with farming experience from California Central

Valley towns like Sacramento, Bakersfield and elsewhere, to help develop the reservation's agricultural potential, Okimoto said. Researching documents in the National Archives, along with Colorado River Indian tribal archives and other sources, Okimoto discovered that the then-named Office of Indian Affairs partnered with the War Relocation Authority to develop a plan for internee labor.

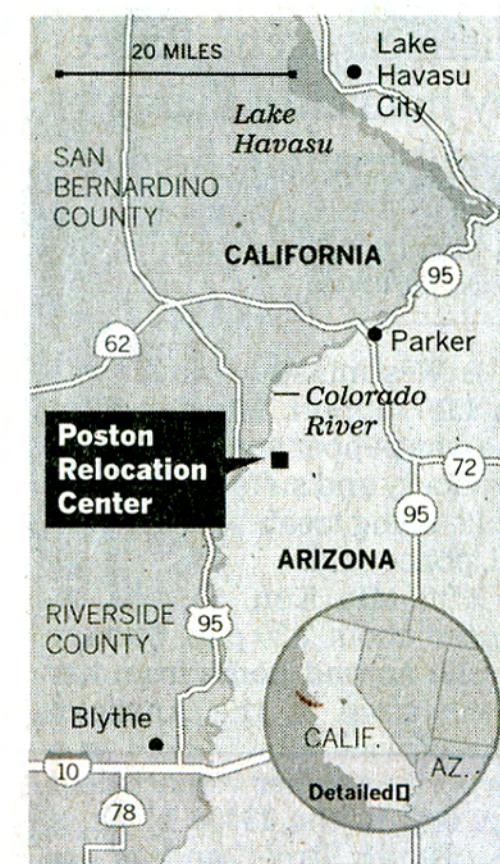
Commissioner John Collier of the Indian Affairs office had long sought federal funds to bring irrigation and other projects to the reservation to make it self-sufficient so the government could bring in other tribes. World War II finally gave him an opening to offer up the land as an internment camp in exchange for permanent infrastructure improvements.

Among other documents, Okimoto discovered an April 1942 letter from William Zim-

merman, the Indian office's assistant commissioner, to the House of Representatives that outlined the plan. Zimmerman proposed using the Japanese to transform 10,000 acres of land — clearing it and constructing canals, drainage ditches and flood levees — and then cultivate it "as rapidly as possible."

The projects were never completed, but the reservation ended up with new roads, electricity, irrigation systems, housing and the like.

Many tribal members were able to receive parts of the old barracks as their first modern homes, including Van Fleet. Before the Japanese came, she recalled, she lived in a mud hut and used kerosene lamps for lighting. Other wartime buildings were maintained and used for such purposes as tribal schools, youth centers and alcohol-rehabilitation programs. The buildings, now shuttered, were visited last week by sev-



Los Angeles Times

eral of the former internees and form the heart of the application for national historical landmark status.

Overall, the improvements gave the Colorado River Indians a "step ahead" on postwar progress compared with other tribes, Patch said.

They began leasing land for commercial agriculture and started their own farming enterprises as well. The tribal budget has grown from an annual \$7,000 in 1952 to \$28 million today.

"Much of this would not have happened without the Japanese laying the groundwork," Tsosie said.

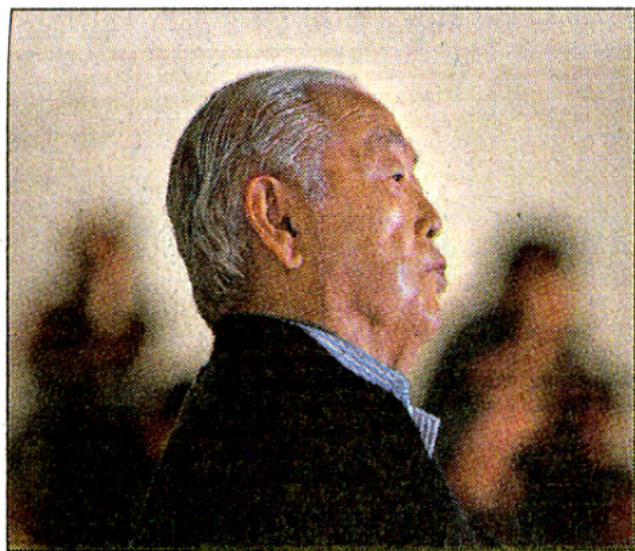
Last week, on a wind-swept patch of desert, where Japanese Americans erected a stone memorial monument in 1992, Tsosie delivered his thanks to several former internees.

Tribal youth performed traditional Indian songs and dances. A Japanese Buddhist priest burned incense and said prayers.

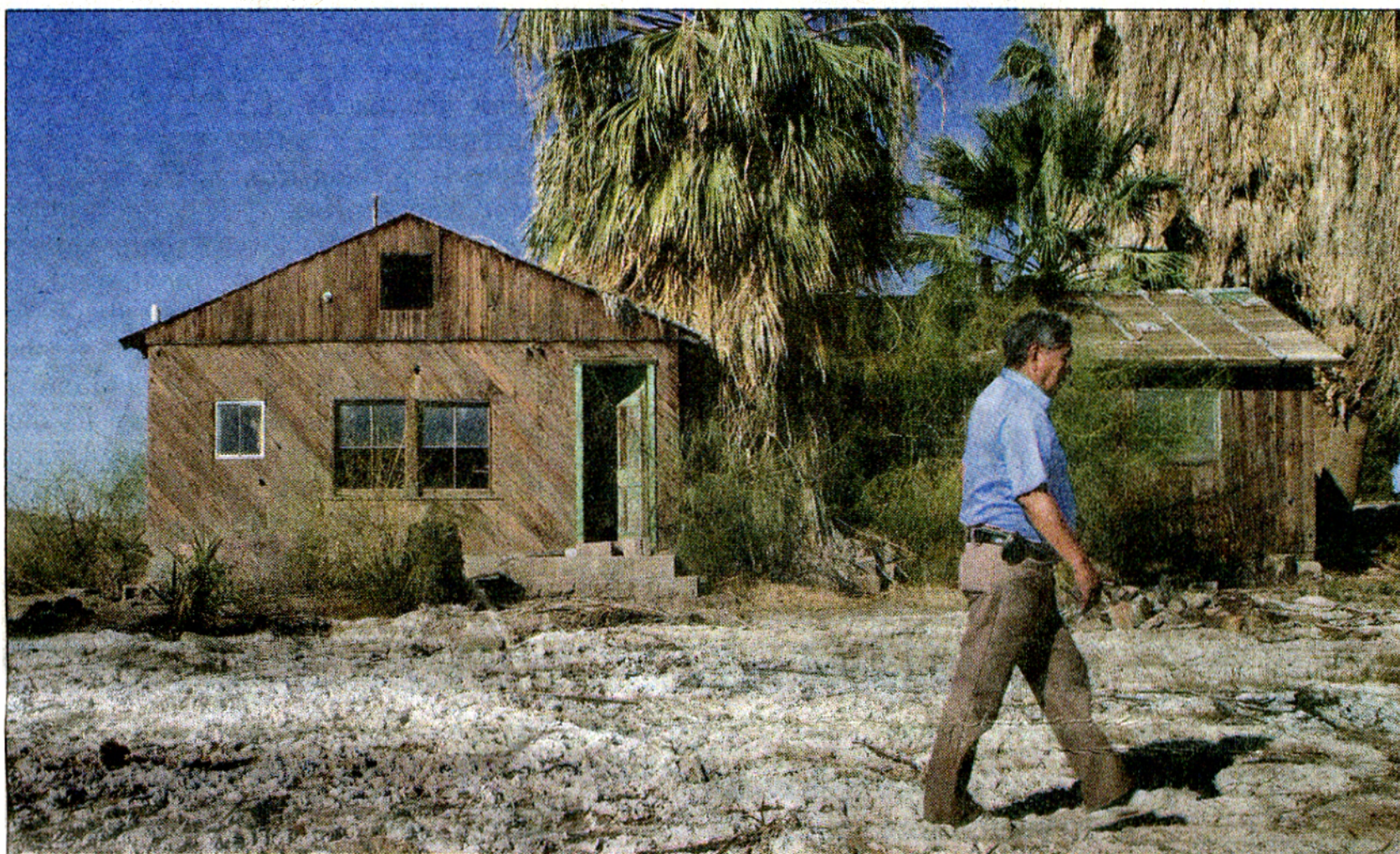
For Okimoto, the tribal progress has allowed her to find meaning in her personal saga of suffering.

"Here were two minority groups struggling," she said. "If what we did helped them, then I guess it was worth the suffering the Japanese endured during the war."

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Parker Valley: A legacy of life, growth



MARK HENLE/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

"You don't want to be forgotten," says Poston Relocation Center internee Leon Uyeda (inset above). "Here, we will not be forgotten." Ron Moore, (above) a Hopi, walks past his childhood home, built from Poston camp barracks. In 1951, Moore's father paid \$50 for two 50-foot sections of barracks and moved them here.

Japanese internees' hard work created lush valley

By John Faherty | THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

POSTON

In western Arizona, the land is dry and brown.

Through Bouse and past the Plomosa mountains, the blur of desert is broken only by mobile homes with satellite dishes.

Near the very edge of the state, however, on the Colorado River Indian Reservation, things begin to change.

Suddenly, irrigation ditches flow with water, stacks of hay bales rise tall, fields are lush and farmers are busy.

This burst of life is the complicated legacy of the time Japanese-Americans were forced to live here during World War II.

They were sent to the Poston Relocation Center because they had the misfortune of being of Japanese descent at a time of war hysteria and prejudice.

The 3½ years they spent at the camp are a shameful period in American history, but their work while imprisoned there continues to shape the land and the lives of the people there today.

While living at the camp, the internees dug irri-

See **POSTON** Page A12



Poston Camp II barracks were built by Del Webb to house Japanese Americans during World War II. Those interned at the camp were paid \$16 a month by the U.S. government to work the land.

COURTESY OF
COLORADO RIVER
INDIAN TRIBES

Imprisoned Japanese remember, 65 years later

POSTON

Continued from A1

gation canals and built adobe schools. They began farming land that had been barren.

"Their suffering and their misery, if it's any consolation to them, changed our path," said Michael Tsosie, Colorado River Indian Tribe museum director.

"There is some meaning to what was a real senseless moment in American history."

For the Japanese imprisoned in Poston, the green fields of today do not lessen the injustice of what happened in 1942. But seeing the fertile land does provide comfort.

"It's all green with alfalfa; it's productive. That matters. That's important," said Leon Uyeda, 83, who was brought to the camp when he was 17.

"You don't want to be forgotten. We are old now. I am old. But here, we will not be forgotten. It is the land now. It is all around us."

The internment

In 1942, more than 120,000 Japanese-Americans and Japanese immigrants were sent to 10 remote camps across the country when President Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066.

The order was called a military necessity after the attack on Pearl Harbor because the Japanese were considered a threat to spy on, or sabotage, the country.

Ruth Okimoto was a 6-year-old girl living in San Diego. Her family was sent to Poston to bunker No. 327.

"My bed was right under a window, and every night the search light would sweep over my face," Okimoto said. "I carry it with me to this day."

In 1988, President Reagan signed legislation that apologized for the internment on behalf of the U.S. government.

The legislation stated that government actions were based on "race prejudice, war hysteria and a failure of political leadership."

In the decades after the war, the internment camps were left to whither.

But Poston left more than crumbling buildings behind.

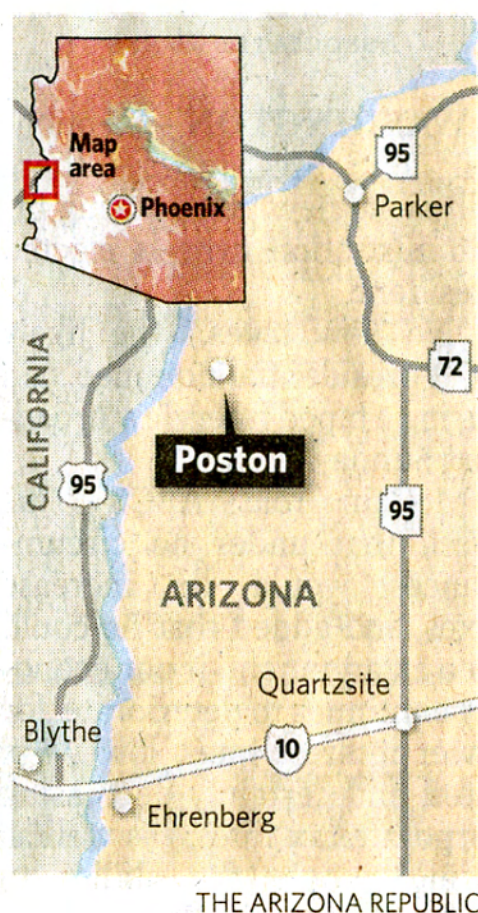
Across the Parker Valley, the work the Japanese accomplished remains visible.

Taming the land

Poston was not randomly chosen by the federal government.

It was placed there because of an agreement between the War Relocation Authority and the Office of Indian Affairs.

The WRA needed a remote site for a camp and the OIA needed infrastructure to develop the Colorado River Indian Reservation.



THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Francis Feeley, author of *America's Concentration Camps During World War II: Social Science and the Japanese American Internment*, writes about a 1942 letter in which Thomas Campbell of the Department of Agriculture wrote to the assistant secretary of War.

Citing the Japanese-Americans' "farming wizardry," Campbell suggested using the internees to develop places like Poston.

John Collier, the commissioner of Indian Affairs, thought the Japanese could be used to convert the arid land south of Parker into farmland to feed the nation and its overseas troops.

Collier had longer-term plans, as well.

He realized that the government would need to build an infrastructure to establish an internment camp capable of holding 18,000 people on the Colorado River Indian Reservation.

He also knew that after the government paved roads and strung electrical wires for the camps, the Japanese would arrive and provide cheap labor to work the land.

When Poston was selected as a location, Del Webb built the camp, and the internees began to arrive by train in May of 1942.

Once there, some chose to work. They were paid an average of \$16 a month.

One of their biggest — and most difficult — tasks was the digging of irrigation ditches to bring water from the Colorado River to the fields.

"They subjugated the land," Tsosie said. "Clearing and leveling the fields was a massive task. It was wilderness."

On the farmland today, the line is blurry between the work of the Japanese laborers and the work of the Native Americans who followed.

But there is no doubt that the work 60 years ago helped to create a foothold in the Parker Valley.

"Things happened for us a



MARK HENLE/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

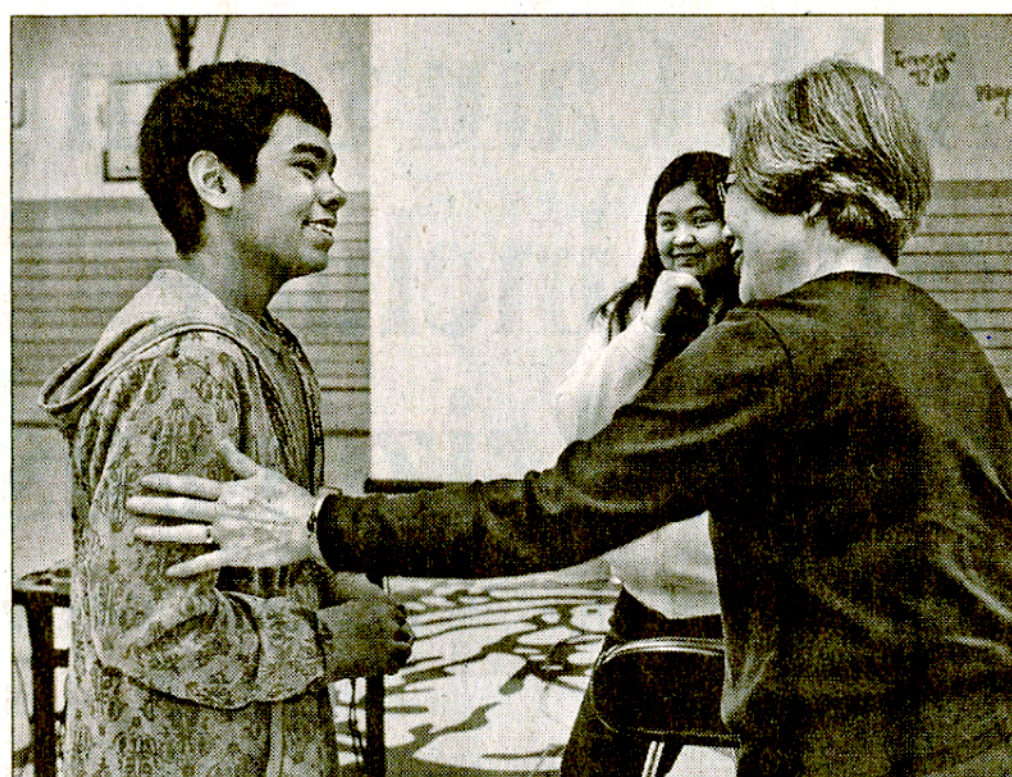
Poston Relocation Center internees Maria Uyeda (left) and her sister, Frances Kuraoka, watch *Passing Poston: An American Story*.

lot quicker," said Dennis Patch, a Colorado River Indian Tribes councilman and the education director for the tribe. "Our infrastructure was built by the government and Japanese la-

bor."

Bittersweet memories

The Japanese-Americans who were forced to live in Poston have mixed emotions about



PHOTOS BY MARK HENLE/THE ARIZONA REPUBLIC

Poston Relocation Center internee Ruth Okimoto (right) talks with Chaz Martinez (left) in the Parker High gym last week.

Years of labor built enduring legacy

POSTON

Continued from A12

did really changed things."

After internment

When the war ended, the Japanese returned to their homes. Most were from California, but some were from Arizona.

With the Poston camps — there were a total of three — now empty but an infrastructure in place, the government started recruiting Indians from other tribes, particularly the Navajo and the Hopi, to move to the area and work the fields.

Learn more about Poston

At its peak population, the Poston Relocation Center housed 17,814 Japanese Americans and Japanese immigrants.

A new documentary film, *Passing Poston: An American Story* provides insight into their experience.

To learn about the film, which will be shown in New York this week, go to passingposton.com.

To learn more about efforts currently under way to restore artifacts from the Poston Relocation Center, as

"Their suffering and their misery, if it's any consolation to them, changed our path."

Michael Tsosie

Colorado River Indian Tribe museum director

their time there.

They are acutely aware of the injustice of their treatment, but they are pleased to know that the 3½ years their families spent at the camp have had long-term benefits for the Native Americans.

Mary Higashi, 85, came to the camp at 19. She was the oldest of seven children and helped her mother take care of the family.

"I'm sorry it happened, but we did help this area. It was for the benefit of the Indians, which is nice. They were living in very poor conditions."

The Colorado River Indian Tribes are an amalgamation of four tribes: the Mohave, Chem-

ehuevi, Hopi and Navajo.

There are about 3,500 active tribal members.

The tribe members, even some of the young ones, are aware of the role the Japanese-Americans played on their land.

Jermaine Fisher, 26, was born and raised on the reservation.

"My grandmother told me. She remembers going to the campsite. She had never seen Japanese people," Fisher said.

"It's really good. The Japanese were able to grow things in the desert. It's amazing they were able to do that. It's sad they were here, but what they

See POSTON Page A13

Ron Moore, a Hopi, was 11 when his family moved to Poston from Shiprock, N.M., in 1949.

His family moved into an abandoned barrack that had housed the Japanese prisoners.

After two years, his father bought 100 feet of barracks for \$50. They cut it into two pieces, loaded it onto a trailer and brought it to their new home-site a few miles up the road.

"It's all redwood. We did the labor ourselves, so it didn't cost us anything really," Moore said outside the now-abandoned home in Poston.

The family was given 40 acres of land and a \$4,000 loan to buy farm equipment as part of the government's efforts to settle the reservation.

While acknowledging the labor of the Japanese, Moore is reluctant to give them all the credit for the growth of the reservation.

"That's kind of a sore point with me. That story has been overblown. This land was recognized as a good agricultural spot well before they came here."

Moore believes it is more accurate to say the federal government's decision to place the camp here is what made the difference.

He says it was the government that built the roads and brought in the electricity and tribe members who work the

well as the stories of those forced to live there, go to postonalliance.org.



For a video on the history of Poston, go to news.azcentral.com.

fields today.

Defining a legacy

Ruth Okimoto was 6 when she came to Poston, and 9 when she left. She has spent much of her life trying to make sense of what happened to her family.

Even now, she says, she cannot define the legacy of the Japanese-Americans who came to the reservation.

"I'm not sure a Japanese-American can answer that question; I think it would have to be answered by a member of the tribe. It's very complicated for us."

Tsosie, who lives and works on the reservation, also struggled with the idea that his tribe would benefit from an injustice.

But then he learned about what happened to the other nine internment camps.

"At the other camps, it's just abandoned. There is nothing there," Tsosie said.

"At Poston there is life. There is a fertile valley. That has to mean something."