Where We Put Our Fears

There's very little to see now but row after row after row of foundations, a procession of rectangles angling down a long slope toward where there once stood a front gate. If you get there in June, the whole expanse will be awash in wildflowers, a bright yellow smiley face on a place you can't help but grimace to remember.

Amache Relocation Camp is much bigger than you can imagine, but it had to be to hold 10,000 Japanese-Americans, neighbors we believed--the rest of us--too vulnerable to their ethnic and racial past to side with the U.S. of A., after the horror at Pearl Harbor. After all, some of them still spoke Japanese.

So we built camps, ten of them. We transformed race tracks and other wide-open spaces, surrounded them with fences, and filled them with Japanese-Americans.

If some morning you stand on the broad grounds of what’s still there at Camp Amache, just outside of Granada, Colorado, if you look up and down the rows of foundations, you can still feel some animosity, hate-generated fear, that must have arisen.

"I am for the immediate removal of every Japanese on the West Coast to a point deep in the interior. I don't mean a nice part of the interior either. Herd 'em up, pack 'em off and give 'em the inside room in the badlands... Personally, I hate the Japanese. And that goes for all of them."

So wrote newspaper columnist Henry McLemore.

There were other reasons as well, selfish reasons:

"We're charged with wanting to get rid of the Japs for selfish reasons. We do. It's a question of whether the white man lives on the Pacific Coast or the brown men. They came into this valley to work, and they stayed to take over... If all the Japs were removed tomorrow, we'd never miss them in two weeks, because the white farmers can take over and produce everything the Jap grows. And we do not want them back when the war ends, either."

Those are the words of the head of a California agricultural association told the Saturday Evening Post in 1942.

Hundreds of rudely constructed barracks once stood here, enough for ten thousand men and women and kids who had been living all up and down the west coast, all of them herded to places like this by howling fear fanned into racial hatred.

Most of what was here is gone now, 75 years later; but the absence of people has not emptied the place of voices, especially if you're alone. Once upon a time the place was a city. Once, thousands crowded into its mess halls, worked its gardens, created its newspaper, maintained a Great Plains village that became, for better or for worse, a home. Babies were born here, men and women died on the ground beneath your feet and are buried in its sanctuary cemetery, a
place you can still visit. Camp Amache once was flourishing, if a people can be said to flourish in a prison.

To call Amache Relocation Camp a concentration camp may well go too far. It wasn't an American Auschwitz; what's still there in the landscape was never created simply to kill human beings.

Still, the images all around you are stunningly reminiscent of black and white photos we've all seen from Germany and Poland. And if you stand there at Camp Amache, even for a few minutes, the prairie winds all around will whisper in voices that tell you with a vividness that's extraordinary how very easy it is for all of us to be fearful enough to sentence those we don't trust to life beyond a wall, any wall, even walls that will never be seen.

For the record, you'll find Camp Amache just a hop, skip, and a jump from the Santa Fe Trail, the domain of Kit Carson and a host of Western heroes. What could be more American than "the way west" on the Sante Fe Trail?

Strangely enough, that's where you'll find it.