

Communication: Lessons Learned at Manzanar

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Abstract

Manzanar encountered many forms of protest but none was as volatile and menacing as the riot which occurred on December 6th of 1942. Though blame for the tensions were for the most part, fingered at the Manzanar Relocation Center administration for their closed-door policy on the non-English speaking residents, much of the friction can also be attributed to leaders of the factions whose reactionary behavior strongly influenced both administration officials and internees. This paper looks closely at factors which sparked the divisiveness and concludes that the lack of appropriate communication channels was the cause for the miscommunication which precipitated the riot.

Introduction

In his research article entitled, “Collective Protest in Relocation Centers”, Jackman argues that the main factor contributing to degrees of unrest by evacuees of Japanese ancestry at internment centers during World War II was due to the “communicative process” conveyed by different organizational groups. The study of 115 incidents of collective protest in War Relocation Authority (WRA) internment centers found that the magnitude of collective protest was directly related to the effec-

tiveness which “channels of communication by contending groups” were utilized. In other words, internment camps experiencing severe unrest were subjected to constricting communication opportunities while in centers experiencing minimal crises communication appeared more accessible (Jackman 264). In the study of events leading up to the Poston (Arizona) Relocation Center strike, Leighton argues that understanding between center administration officials and internees lacked consensus on policies and other issues partly because “there was great difficulty in the transmission of information” (Leighton 240).

The “difficulty in the transmission of information” was a legitimate factor which contributed to the heightened tension in internment centers. Not only was its transmission problematic but, at times of crisis, information itself took on different interpretations. One such instance was the presence of a persistent rumor that high ranking members of the administration were in collusion with some internees who had ties with the pro-America Japanese American Citizen League (JACL) (Hansen and Hacker 137). Fred Tayama, during the pre-internment years, was reputed to be the beneficiary of businesses which offered low wages to non-union laborers who worked “under sweat shop conditions”. He was also known to have charged high fees for Issei needing travel permits when they could be gotten for free (Hansen and Hacker 138). Though these issues could never be substantiated, it apparently was clear that lack of trust for both the administration and the JACL-supporting internees prevailed. In one sense, the transmission of rumor was quite fluid, and it continued to persist, in tandem with their suspicion.

There were, however, significant measures taken by the administration to disseminate trustworthy information within the populace. Upon arrival at assembly centers—prior to their move to relocation centers—

signs translated into Japanese were posted for the Japanese-speaking Issei and Kibei (American-born Nisei educated in Japan). Volunteer guides directed newcomers in both English and Japanese how to go about the registration process (Leighton 64). The signs served to guide the newly arrived evacuees around the center as they gradually became acclimated to their surroundings, also reassuring them that channels of communication were provided.

Center newspapers, published first in English and later in Japanese, were also vital sources for information. Though they were censored, camp news served to inform readers of camp announcements, events, and administrative procedures and also included editorials, sporting news and other special-interest topics (Mizuno 99). Bulletin boards at mess halls were utilized as well to post announcements (Spicer et al. 209). According to Leighton, the Japanese-speaking Issei depended on Japanese translations of reports from radio transmissions (157). Another way to gain essential news from the outside world was through English and Japanese-language newspapers or correspondence from friends and those who had leave clearance such as soldiers, university students and those who left camp for essential work in fields such as agriculture.

The most efficient and, surely the most effective conduit for accessing information on administrative matters was through internee representatives from each residential block. These representatives were usually individuals who spoke both English and Japanese and maintained comfortable rapport with their peers. A block consisted of twelve residential barracks housing in total about 250 internees. Their duties were mainly to serve as liaison between the center administrators and the internees (tenBroek 131). Specifically they dealt with the provision of everyday maintenance of the residence and making announcements about

camp regulations and developments (Myer 40). Manzanar, at its peak, housed over 10,046 residents so representatives were important “voices” for the internee population (Burton et al. 40).

Such measures appeared to be the administrative blueprint followed in all ten relocation centers yet the WRA, who oversaw all center operations, failed to take notice and therefore implement mechanisms for creating a more representative exchange of information between the Manzanar administration and center residents. This paper will serve two purposes: to examine the context which contributed to faulty systems of communication at Manzanar Relocation Center, and to analyze the critical flashpoints which caused communication between the administration and evacuees to break down and therefore led to the outbreak of the so-called, “Manzanar Riot”.

The Manzanar Riot

The event that triggered the Manzanar Riot was the violent assault the night of Dec. 5, on a Nisei internee, Fred Tayama, who was suspected of collaborating with the government (Girdner and Loftis 264). Although the attackers were never identified, Manzanar police were led to believe that one of them was a Kibei named Harry Ueno, an active resistor of JACL-supported activities and a Kitchen Worker’s Union spokesman.

The arrest of Ueno that evening and his subsequent removal to an off-camp jailhouse touched off a series of emotionally charged protests by his fellow reactionaries. The agitated crowd, estimated to number about 1,000, were represented by five appointed spokespersons which included their fiery leader, Joe Kurihara, who demanded not only the return of Harry Ueno but also gave warning that JACL members drawn up on their blacklist, which included Tayama, would face “physical vio-

lence". After a series of unsuccessful attempts to disperse the stirred-up crowd, and fearing the worse, Project Director Ralph Merritt, who had only taken over as director a couple of weeks prior, and his staff made concessions with the Committee of Five to return Ueno to the Manzanar jail, however, the crowd would have to:

"disperse immediately, there would be no more mass meetings without Merritt's consent until the Ueno case was settled, there would be no attempts to free Ueno from the Manzanar jail, all future grievances would be discussed and negotiated with Merritt through recognized committees and the Committee of Five would help to find the assailants of Tayama and aid in maintaining law and order in the center" (Unrau 11)

upon which they mutually agreed. In addition, Merritt would make a statement about Ueno's return at 6:00 pm.

Shortly thereafter, the administration responded with the return of Ueno to Manzanar—though still under confinement—but under the agreed terms. Still dissatisfied, the masses, now estimated to be between 2,000 and 4,000, regrouped at 6:00 pm, which was a clear violation of the conditions set earlier. Merritt felt he had been clearly deceived and, with the crowd growing intensely hostile, he deployed the military police. When the mob confronted a wall of military police and armed soldiers, they failed to disperse; accordingly, tear gas was ordered to be used. A series of escalating confrontations led to shots being fired into the surging crowd, and when finally peace was restored, the casualties included two deaths and ten internees treated for major and minor gunshot wounds (Thomas and Nishimoto 51).

Effort to Improve Communication

Months prior to the riot, the WRA had sought to create a commu-

nity body which would facilitate the exchange and management of information. High on their agenda was the establishment of a form of self-government involving the management of the resident community. The role of the resident representatives for community government was: 1) to serve as a two-way channel of communication between the administration and the community at large; and 2) to adopt and enforce ordinances and regulations in the interest of community and welfare and security (WRA 85).

Manzanar had established a somewhat different form of government structure consisting of predominantly Issei and some Nisei representatives when it was still functioning as an assembly center under the Wartime Civilian Control Administration (WCCA). This body of block managers was called the Block Leaders Council. After undergoing reorganization to follow more in line with WRA regulations (the WRA eventually replaced the WCCA when Manzanar reorganized from an assembly center to a relocation center) which stipulated that representatives were to be elected by their respective blocks, the council was renamed the Block Managers Assembly and continued to be in communication with the resident population (Spicer et al. 135).

Formation of factions

The administration's reliance and dealings with the "more Americanized" Nisei over the former but now disenfranchised Japanese leaders led to obstacles in the efforts to re-form community government. The antagonism only underscored the residents' opposition and thus they "never fully accepted the official framework of community organization as set forth in the WRA self-government regulations". As a consequence, a "spontaneous organization of groups not sponsored by the WRA regulations" emerged (Spicer et al. 135).

In July 1942, the Nisei, led by Fred Tayama, formed the Manzanar Citizens Federation (MCF), which attempted to thrust Nisei into a more prominent role for improving camp conditions, contributing to the war effort, educating leaders and assisting with post-internment needs of evacuees. (Unrau11e) Also, the establishment of the Federation was a political move to strengthen the Nisei's position in community government matters.

To counter the Nisei ideals of patriotism and military service, World War I veteran Joseph Kurihara, who despised the Nisei-dominated JACL, formed the Manzanar Relocation Center Federation (MRCF). While striving to promote democratic ideals, the Federation would "act in the capacity of intermediary in carrying out instructions of the authorities to avoid misunderstanding and complexity among the Issei, Nisei, and Kibei groups" (Unrau 11e). Growing up in a rural area of Hawaii, where multi-racial diversity was widely-accepted, Kurihara envisioned launching an organization which would assist internees on issues regardless of social and educational background and more importantly, regardless of nationality (Thomas and Nishimoto 365).

In November, under the leadership of Harry Ueno, the Kitchen Worker's Union (KWU) was set up to put political pressure on its opposition (Unrau 11e). The Union, made up of mostly Kibei, forcefully spoke out against the cozy relationship of the MCF with the administrative hierarchy. With the KWU's backing, Ueno publicly voiced his displeasure in the administration's handling of food distribution and the limited availability for internees. Ueno suspected that sugar and meat meant for the camp residents was being used for the benefit of some in the administration and sought to resolve the matter by finding the culprits (Spicer et al. 136). Though his search proved unsuccessful, his efforts to boldly confront the powerful administrative body garnered the respect of

many residents including, his Kibei peers.

Seeds of Discontent

Many opposing forces, both externally and internally activated, prevented the Manzanar administration and the internment community from maintaining a peaceful co-existence, thereby closing the circles of communication. Though some of these circumstances were not directly attributed to the Manzanar uprising, they were certainly the seeds which, at any given time, sprouted into emotions of hatred and animosity.

That 70,000 of the 110,000 displaced were American citizens and were interned against their constitutional rights was, without doubt, one of the determining factors for their deep-seated resentment. Aware that the majority of internees were loyal, the WRA sought to clear and relocate them into the interior as soon as possible so that they could join the nation's workforce, which was badly in need of additional manpower (Jackman 265). This directive however, appeared to backfire in two notable cases.

The first case occurred during the summer of 1942 when the WRA allowed the temporary release of Nisei to help with the harvest in farms, whereas the Kibei, also U.S. citizens, were not permitted to do so. The failure to include Kibei unleashed their ire and stoked the flames of hostility which led to the gathering of the famous Kibei meeting (Fisher 128).

On Aug. 8 a meeting was held in Manzanar's Kitchen No.15 to address grievances, particularly the WRA regulation which prevented Kibei from working in farms during harvest season. The large representation of Issei and Kibei, and a smaller number of about 70 Nisei, came to hear five speakers scheduled to speak that day. Most voiced their in-

tense resentment toward the government for ignoring their citizenship rights, the poor conditions of the camp administration, the incompetence of the camp director Nash (Ralph Merritt's predecessor), and their distrust in the Nisei-organized MCF due to misrepresentation and the marginalization of the Issei. One speaker with close JACL ties was shouted down while others with similar, more hopeful, views were besieged by angry dissenters. With order difficult to maintain, the administrator present had to order the chairman to put a stop to the meeting (Spicer et al. 115). Project Director Nash reacted to the "disgraceful" behavior exhibited at the Kibei meeting by ordering all further public gatherings to be conducted in English (Unrau 11e). The use of Japanese would no longer be permitted (Spicer et al. 115).

The second controversy and the WRA strategy, which proved worst of all and spelled disaster from the outset, was their efforts to address the issue of the new self-government. The establishment of the community-run government was well-intentioned but the WRA failed to note the cultural and social differences among the internee population and ignored the significance of their roles at Manzanar.

This all changed when, in late June, the WRA ordered "that only [American] citizens could elect and serve as block representatives" (Hansen and Hacker 129), which essentially barred any Issei from being community representatives. While it was felt during early policy discussions that Issei representation should be more equitable, the overall sentiment was that "special recognition" should be given to American-born Nisei who were more "Americanized" than the Issei (WRA 85). This automatically alienated over one-third of the non-citizens (Jackman 265) and also the Kibei, many of whom felt closer emotional ties with Japan than the United States.

Without trustworthy representatives to interpret and to speak for

the “excluded” groups, it was virtually impossible for the WRA to foster any semblance of camp-wide cooperation or communication, which was quite ironic because opposing groups found other ways to express their views through self-established organizations not sponsored by the administration. According to Jackman’s study of protests characterized by overt rebellion, Manzanar tallied the largest number of protests, as represented by small group protests, labor disputes, mass meetings, mass resignations, gang beatings, and dangerous crowd behavior (270). The latter form of protest proved to be the fatal blow to camp unity for the reason that it fomented uncontrolled antagonism and rebellion. The crowd on the night of Dec. 6 served to intimidate its opposition while empowering its key representatives but it also had negative repercussions: their boisterous behavior deliberately impeded exchanges of substance which could have yielded a lesser degree of force.

A classic case of this abnormality was when Kurihara, the leader of the Committee of Five, successfully negotiated Ueno’s return from a town jail but only when Merritt made a compromise. The project director, fearing the crowd’s agitation would induce violence of much greater magnitude, made concessions with the understanding that the masses would disperse immediately and there would be no more mass meetings without the director’s approval.

Kurihara was supposed to relay this information to the crowd in Japanese, however, he proceeded to deviate from it. Merritt then asked his Japanese chief of internal security, who supposedly understood Japanese, for confirmation regarding the agreement, to which the chief responded “[Kurihara’s] speech was all right” when, in fact, the chief was not able to catch all of Kurihara’s talk due to his lack of command of Japanese (Unrau 11). Merritt was later taken by surprise when he learned that a crowd had turned up at 6:00 pm. (Fisher 129).

What happened?

According to the WRA report, Kurihara failed to explain the agreement he had reached with Merritt; instead he told the hot-tempered audience “that a victory had been won in obtaining an agreement to return Ueno to Manzanar and that the crowd should disperse temporarily and reassemble at 6:00 P.M. at the police station to secure Ueno’s release” (Unrau 11).

His interpretation of Merritt’s agreement emboldened the frenzied crowd, but also may have made it impossible for Kurihara to say anything to the contrary, given the reactionary atmosphere. Perhaps under duress, he noticed the mob’s “long-pent-up thirst for revenge against fellow informers could no longer be contained” (Weglyn 123) so Kurihara presumably gave them information, however slanted it was, which they wanted or expected to hear. Interestingly, his committee peers never once interceded to correct or counsel him for providing “inaccurate” or conflicting information.

Kurihara, his fellow committee colleagues and Merritt fell victim to a common pitfall in communication— that is, failure to confirm information. A witness to the evening of the Manzanar riot had this to say about the exchange between Merritt and Kurihara: “They had a little misunderstanding that brought things to a head later on too. The spokesmen, those five men, thought that it was understood that Uyeno [sic] was to be freed within the Center, but the Administration only meant that he was to be brought back to the Manzanar jail from the Independence jail” (Unrau 11d). It could be said that Kurihara heard what he wanted to hear and said what he wanted to say.

Conclusion

The Manzanar administrative body used a system which relied on block representatives to release and obtain information. In other internment camps, a body or council of spokespersons was organized to represent the concerns of the community. Manzanar, however, was the only internment community without such a governmental body for the simple reason that they opposed its establishment (Hansen and Hacker 137). It made little sense for the Issei and Kibei to support a majority body of Nisei representatives who had political leanings toward the WRA. Another source for vital information for Manzanar officials was their secret collaborations with JACL members—composed mainly of American-born Nisei—in identifying and segregating camp troublemakers. As their inauspicious relationship was widely-suspected, the collaborators were put on “death lists” for providing information.

In both instances, the Nisei’s involvement in the formation of a new community government and the administration staff’s reliance on the JACL for guidance and leadership intensified public resentment and hostility for the main reason that they did not allow the inclusion of Issei and their distrust of the Kibei in influential circles. The WRA authorities in their report concluded that one of the main causes for the unrest at Manzanar was the “discrimination against the Issei and their exclusion from positions of importance in project administration” (Unrau 11b). Conversely, they were led to believe that the JACL were the spokespersons for the Manzanar residents; as a consequence, non-citizens were not consulted on key issues such as the leadership for the newly reorganized government. The rift between citizens and non-citizens was evident, as Jackman asserted: “many aliens feared that the American citizens among them would not represent them properly. They

therefore sought representation through informal organizations which had no standing with the administration” (265).

The political influence of language also weighed heavily in their protest. A common complaint among Japanese-dominant residents was the inadequacy of literal translations of English into Japanese. Leighton points out that “one of the central difficulties in communication between the Administration and the evacuees was the lack of selected and trained interpreters” to transmit accurate information, which added to their frustrations (240). In addition, exclusionary directives fueled discontent when the use of Japanese “as the principal language” would no longer be permitted in public gatherings as ordered by Nash. This drew strong criticism and demands for restoration of their freedom of speech (Unrau 11e).

The classic example of failure to understand and transmit information properly was in the extraordinary exchange between Kurihara and Merritt on the day of the Manzanar riot. Each misstep in the transmission compounded the already grave situation. First there was failure, on both sides, to interpret and confirm Merritt’s conditions. Secondly, there was a lack of regard to accurately translate the terms of the agreement; and thirdly, Kurihara ignored the details of the agreement. In essence, Kurihara abandoned his responsibility as Merritt’s interpreter by remaining intolerant to Merritt’s demands. Immediately after the negotiators came to supposed terms with the agreement, Kurihara went into a “fanatical tirade, [which he] disclaimed loyalty to the United States, expressed the hope that Japan would win the war and threatened death to all informers” (Unrau 11). This was the role he chose to play— by ignoring details to Merritt’s demands and taking full advantage of his influence to foment the crowd, his decision led to dangerous consequences. In a private conversation with Kurihara on November 12, 1945, Merritt re-

ported that “Kurihara took full responsibility in his talk with me for this entire matter. He said that he had spent three years in praying for forgiveness and in studying Japanese so that he in future might speak understandably” (Weglyn 133).

It would be unfair to cast blame solely on Kurihara’s lack of language technique as the reason for miscommunication and ultimately, the cause of the riots. There were the fractious masses pressing on his emotions and self-control, the stress of making sure all of Merritt’s demands were interpreted, the pressure to perform as a leader instead of as an interpreter, all of which may have influenced the tone of his interpretation. It would be fair, though, to assert that camp authorities set forth a policy to underrepresent particular residents and their constituents by relieving them of their social and community responsibilities, thus ultimately denying the camp of a valuable human resource; and in their place were put those who were thought to be better communicators. This led to an absence of sufficient channels to convey reliable information. This lack of information, Leighton argues, “not only produce [s] uncooperative attitudes in evacuees, but also clogged the workings of the Administration itself, and promoted bad relations between the Center... and public...” (363).

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