Rohwer Audio Tour

By George Takei

As you tour the Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center site, enjoy this audio tour narrated by George Takei, *Star Trek's* Mr. Sulu, who was interned at Rohwer along with his family. The chapters below correspond to the interpretative signage at the site. This tour can also be accessed by following the QR codes on the signage.

- Taken Away
- Why Us?
- I'm an American
- A Look Back in Time
- Making a Living
- Trying to Make a Home

Taken Away

Narrator: George Takei

Welcome to the former Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center.

I’m George Takei. You may know me as Mr. Sulu from Star Trek. You may not know that I spent a part of my childhood here at Rohwer behind barbed wire.

I remember that terrible day when American soldiers came to our California home to order us out. I was five years old at the time. I remember that they carried bayoneted rifles. I remember the tension. I remember my mother crying. I didn’t really understand what was going on, but I will never forget.

We were rounded up and put into concentration camps surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards in towers.

There were no charges, there were no trials, and there was no due process.

My father told me that we were going on a long vacation to a place called Arkansas. That sounded exotic to me. We were put on a train with other Japanese Americans and it was a grueling, long, long trip.

We arrived in Rohwer after three days and two nights on the train—sitting day and night on hard, wooden seats. It was late summer and the sunlight glinted off each barb on the wire—flashing like sharp, deadly gems strung out along the new fence. We passed tall guard towers with armed soldiers staring down at us. Beyond the fence we could see internees who had arrived earlier, lined up and waving forlornly. Beyond them were rows upon rows of black tar-paper-covered barracks all lined up with military precision.

What you see here today is not what we saw when we arrived. The barracks have been demolished or moved, the internees moved away after the war, the guard towers have been taken down, and the barbed wire fences have been removed. But a few remnants from that time are here to remind you of our internment experience at Rohwer. The memorial cemetery is the final resting place of many internees and marks the southern boundary of the camp. The smokestack in the distance was once part of the hospital complex and marks the northern end of the camp.

This is the first stop on the walking tour of the Rohwer Japanese American Relocation Center site. This tour will provide a glimpse into this dark time in our nation’s history.

Why Us?

Narrator: George Takei

The internment experience was the most defining moment of my life. I remember my father telling me that both the strength and the weakness of American democracy is that it’s a people’s democracy – it can be as great as a people can be and it can also be as fallible as people are. That’s why it’s so important for all of us to be actively engaged in the democratic process.

We were imprisoned because of fear, misunderstanding, and racial discrimination. Here in Rohwer, these issues were part of life for people living outside the fence too. They were fearful of us and misunderstood the way we lived here. The folks outside the fence also had to deal with economic, social, and racial discrimination.

Your next stop should be the memorial cemetery. From there, continue along the gravel road to learn more about the Rohwer experience—it’s a short, easy walk, less than a quarter mile.

I'm an American

Narrator: George Takei

Immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, young Japanese American men and women, like all young Americans, rushed to their recruitment office to volunteer to serve. They were answered with a slap in the face. They were denied service and labeled Non-Aliens. Even the word, “citizen,” was taken away from them.

A year into internment, the government discovered that there was a war time manpower shortage and they looked to the young men and women as potential sources. But they had accused them as being disloyal and potential traitors or saboteurs. How to determine their loyalty? The government, a year into internment, came down with the infamous loyalty questionnaire which turned all ten camps into turmoil. Despite some of the outrageous and offensive questions that were asked in the loyalty questionnaire, many young men still volunteered to serve. Shortly thereafter, the draft began and thousands of young Japanese American men and women served in the U.S. military. They were all put into a segregated all Japanese American unit, the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which was sent to Europe to fight on the bloody battlefields of Italy, France, and, ultimately, Germany. They served with incredible courage and they returned to the United States as the most decorated unit of the entire Second World War. They were greeted back to America on the White House lawn by President Harry Truman who said to them, “You fought not only the enemy, but prejudice, and you won.”

A Look Back in Time

Narrator: George Takei

This is your last stop on the walking tour. Just in front of you, on the other side of the gravel road, I was interned with my family. Block 6, Barrack 2, Unit F—a black tar-paper barrack behind barbed wire and armed guards.

Memories are our most precious possessions. They link us to our past. My Rohwer remembrances may be only a child's fragments of history—incomplete, disjointed, and simplistically intense. But I treasure every piece and broken shard, every brief and incomplete wisp of memory I have.

After eight months at Rohwer, our family was sent to the Tule Lake camp in Northern California. The rows of barracks that seemed so stark in their uniformity when we first arrived now had identities. They had become homes of friends. The guard towers were no longer so ominous but simply a part of the landscape. Even the barbed wire fence had become just my familiar playground enclosure.

At the train by the main gate, my father shook hands somberly with everybody lined up to see us off. The train lurched as it started moving. As the train picked up speed, I saw the crowds of people who had gathered to see us off get smaller and smaller. Soon, our friends who were lined up at the railroad siding became nothing but a dark line on the horizon. The tall guard towers were the only structures I could see in the distance. As they got smaller, our crying faded into soft sniffles. I kept watching until a fly buzzing on the window glass looked bigger than the towers. Then the train turned a bend and the guard towers disappeared. It was gone. Rohwer became a collection of memories.

Making a Living

Part 1

Part 2

Part 1

Internees came from the West Coast and Hawaii. In our block alone, we had people from communities up and down California. Farmers from Fresno, fishermen from San Pedro, professionals from Los Angeles, and shopkeepers from Stockton. We were old and young, immigrant and American-born. We were diverse. We were different from each other. But we were all interned together. My father became the manager for Block 6 to represent our group with the camp administration and to settle disputes among internees. He was well suited to this role because he was fluent in both Japanese and English. And, at thirty-nine years old, he bridged the age gap. The older immigrant, Issei, and the younger, American-born, Nisei all trusted him.

Many internees didn't know what to do with their time now that they were taken away from their homes and jobs. There were few jobs in the camp and working outside the camp required special permission. Some internees worked at jobs similar to those they had before the internment—Allan Hagio was an artist in California who worked in the sign shop. Mrs. Sadako Yasui was a Home Economics teacher who taught sewing for adult education classes. George Baba was a mechanic who worked in the motor pool. Sam Takada and George Yoshihara were butchers before being sent to Rohwer. Many internees had been farmers in California so they grew the food that we all ate.

Part 2

My father was a block manager. He related to the Administration representing the interests of the block, as well as settled disputes and sometimes even served as a marriage counselor. As a kid, we resented the fact that he had to be away so often. And sometimes suddenly there would be a crisis that would happen and daddy had to leave. What I remember most about my father being block manager was he was always making announcements at meal times, whether it was breakfast, lunch, or dinner. And I was kind of proud of that because my daddy was the boss of our block.

One of my best friends was Eddy Takahashi who lived in the barrack behind us. And he didn't have a daddy there. It was only his mother and his two sisters. And he said his father is a Buddhist Minister and he was taken away immediately after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. They didn't know where their daddy was. After the war Eddy's father was reunited with the family.

Trying to Make a Home

Part 1

Part 2

Part 1

We arrived at Rohwer in the summer. The black tar-paper on the barracks radiated shimmering waves of heat. Our room was a bare sixteen-by-twenty-foot space with raw-wood plank floor and walls, and three windows. Just one room for my parents and us, three kids. The only pieces of furniture provided were a black pot-bellied stove and five Army cots—one for each of us.

My parents' full-time job became setting up our new life in Rohwer.

Mama began the daunting task of making a home for us. She sewed curtains from government surplus fabric and braided rugs with strips of cloth. She couldn't prepare our food because meals were served in a communal dining hall. This was hard for her—a precious personal responsibility that was taken away.

Daddy scoured the camp for scrap lumber and loose nails to make shelves and stools for us. On our journey to Rohwer, he seemed really worried about our family's uncertainty. Now, in the camp, he was coming to grips with a shared existence with many other people confronting the same hardships.

The recreation halls had activities for everyone. Many children learned to play a musical instrument for the first time. Some kids had judo lessons or took art classes. Adults took classes or practiced the ancient art of wood carving or flower arranging.

I remember going to school behind barbed wire fences. We began every morning with the Pledge of Allegiance. I could see the barbed wire fence and armed guards in towers from the schoolhouse window as I recited the words, "with liberty and justice for all.

Part 2

Trying to make a home for us was the big challenge our parents had. My mother was constantly busy. She hated the lack of privacy in our tiny barrack room and so she found some olive drab cloth of military discards and she made curtains with her sewing machine which she had smuggled into camp. Anything sharp or pointed was contraband, but she marched right past all those armed guards with her portable sewing machine wrapped in blankets and sweaters – disguised. And she made not only curtains for us, but clothes for us and then she braided rags – made them into little rugs so that when we got out of bed we didn't have that hard splintery wood floor to walk on bare

footed. And at meal times I remember people were always complaining about the food. I thought it was lunch time and I ate what they had. The big treat was Spam. That was delicious. I loved it! It was after we came out of the internment camp that my parents tried to make up for what they thought we had lost. And so we were introduced for the first time to something like sushi.

Our block became a wonderful place to explore and find things. There was a ditch that went around our block and we caught pollywogs and put them in great big, huge pickle jars. We watched them sprout legs and lose their tails and turn into frogs which was magical. We also caught ants in the big pickle jars filled with dirt and we saw them make their nest right alongside the glass. And we saw their fascinating network of tunnels and little chambers and it became a whole ant city that we saw.