

Oranges

By Marilyn Noah

I was a mess hall cook at the Japanese American internment camp in Gila River, Arizona, in 1942 and 1943.

All of us in internment camp hungered for many things.

Most had been evacuated from homes in California. We gazed out through barbed wire at the bare rocks of Arizona, hungry for the sight of trees and grassy hills. In the hot, stuffy barracks at night we hungered for the breezy fog near the coast.

We hungered for our family life. There was no privacy in the barracks, no family talk over meals in the mess halls.

We were on the edge of starvation. There was barely enough food, and no comfort in what food there was. We hungered for rice, fresh vegetables and fruit, chicken, fish. We got wieners, macaroni, maybe canned beans. Every day.

Teenage boys roamed the mess halls in gangs, eating more than their assigned rations. Everyone saw this happening, no one said anything about it.

"It is best to eat this stuff when you steal it," my teenage son joked. His gang was his family. He ate with them.

We hungered for our work. I was a farm manager, accustomed to planning for the next crop, the next harvest. Making decisions. In the camp my work was boiling large pots of the same empty food, day after day.

We were forgotten people, hungry in the desert.

One day in January, after about six months of internment, change started.

It started with a dust cloud. Fearing a dust storm, we watched anxiously as it approached. Dozens of pickup trucks began to appear inside the dust. They came to our internment camp gate and stopped.

All the trucks had California license plates. All were loaded with crates of oranges.

We thought we were hallucinating.

After some discussion, the guards swung the gates open and the pickup trucks drove in. The truck doors opened and weary looking drivers stepped out.

A big crowd of us gathered around. Wondering.

"Hey you, you, you," the guards called out, pointing to the young men. "Unload."

The pickup truck drivers talked with us. They were volunteers from a church in Los Angeles. Many of the oranges had been picked by the church members from trees in their own yards. Some had been donated by the commercial orchard growers.

“There might not be enough for everyone,” one driver said, scanning the rows of barracks and the crowd.

My father stepped forward. He was smiling for the first time since leaving California.

“There is enough,” he said. “Just seeing this is enough.”

We each got a single orange. I rolled the orange in my hands. Sniffed it. Feasted on the sight of its bright, familiar color standing out in the dull brown desert.

Many had tears in their eyes.

My wife saved her orange for the next day.

“We are all going to sit together at breakfast,” she insisted.

At the mess hall table, she brought the orange out from her pocket.

“Ooh, another orange!” my youngest daughter exclaimed.

With a smile, my wife divided the orange up and handed everyone a piece. I realized she missed preparing meals for us. Sharing in this way fed her hunger for that.

The gift of oranges from California gave us strength. We were not forgotten. Someday we would be released. Until then, we needed to feed as many hungers as we could.

We asked the camp boss for vegetable seeds and a gardening area. We got it!

We asked for rice deliveries. After some nasty comments, rice deliveries started.

We asked for fresh meat. For chickens to keep for eggs and eventually food. We got both!

Once I had rice, fresh vegetables and meat to work with, I learned how to cook. My hunger for farm management was fed by planning meals using newly harvested vegetables, fresh meat arrivals, and egg production.

The mess hall meals became extended family meals when we could talk together about the work of growing vegetables and tending chickens. We could compliment Ruth for the green beans she grew, or Bill for his radishes. We came to relish our meal times.

This happened to us a long time ago, and it ended. But it is still happening to other people. When I see news of refugee camps, I know their hungers. I remember well.

But I also remember that gift of oranges. What it gave us, and how it helped us.