CHAPTER II

PROBLEMS OF COMMUNITY GOVERNMENT

A. The Social Setting

The problem of community government was the problem of the divergent geographic, economic, social, political, educational, and age groups that have plagued all attempts of the people of Japanese ancestry in America to achieve a true community of interest. It was the problem of a racial cultural minority suddenly catapulted from its former adjustment by reason of a world situation. It was a problem of the need for creation of new values and social structure to meet the conditions of a new social and physical environment.

Another difficulty equally insurmountable to the creation of any sort of truly representative self-government was the explicit responsibility of the War Relocation Authority for the administrative direction and policy making function. As long as policy, and as long as administrative direction originated largely outside the community, without consultation with it, or without regard to its wishes, then self-government (no matter how enlightened or liberal) must remain a truly limited and misnamed activity. Actually, complete autonomy in center management was neither feasible nor contemplated.

The new environment into which the evacuees moved was one of uniformity in housing, food, employment and available services. Not so the people. Their only common meeting ground was that they were all of Japanese ancestry, they had all experienced evacuation, and they were all subject to the same rules and regulations in their present situation. The social and cultural differences within the population were of more significance than were the similarities. The most easily observable difference was that between the older alien generation of parents, most of whom continued to speak their native language with fluency and observed the customs of Japanese culture, and the younger generation of American citizens, almost all of whom used English as their native tongue, and most of whom were American in thought, manners, and action.

There were, however, many differences within each of these two groups, and these were so fundamental that they sometimes led to conflict, and often to misunderstanding. Among the Issei were rich and poor, farmers and city folk, shopkeepers, professional men, and laborers. Some had been highly educated in this country or in Japan, some had little schooling. There were some who spoke good English, many who spoke only Japanese. There were even a few who spoke a non-Japanese native dialect. There were those who openly condemned the military machine of Japan, those who lamented that these two countries should be at war, and those who were sympathetic to Japan.

The American born were divided into two major groups. Those who had been educated in this country, with the exception of a few who came from isolated rural areas, were predominantly American in outlook and behavior. These were the Nisei. The Kibei were those who although born in this country had received a considerable portion of their education in Japan, and had subsequently returned to this country to rejoin their families or to secure additional education, for employment, to evade military service in Japan, or for a combination of these reasons.

The Kibei were of especial interest because by and large they were predominantly Japanese in culture and outlook. Careful examination revealed, however, that this group also exhibited significant divergencies. There was no hard and fast correlation between political loyalty, cultural identification, or economic attainment. Politically, they ranged from the few who had assimilated the jingoism of Japanese militarism, to those who were equally vehement in their opposition. The great majority fell somewhere between.

The Kibei created a particularly difficult problem in the centers. Many of them had no parents in this country. Because they frequently spoke fluent Japanese and little English, and observed Japanese customs they had little in common with their age-mates, the Nisei. Conflict and mutual avoidance between these two groups were widespread before evacuation. The Kibei were neither wholly Japanese nor wholly American in culture. This cultural ambivalence was an advantage among some of the older and wiser Kibei who were able to bridge the gap between Issei and Nisei, and to resolve and reconcile some of the conflicts.

The Nisei were also divided, and their immaturity militated against their possessing the confidence of their elders or of others. Although there were 71,900 American-born evacuated, only 22,400 were over 21 years of age, and these constituted only one-third of the adult Japanese population. The Japanese American Citizens League claimed as members many of the Nisei, although there was a group of young intellectuals which was not sympathetic with its program.

In addition to the problems which stemmed directly from evacuation, there were also those problems for which the Japanese in America had themselves been unable to find answers. It would have been difficult to administer a relocation center even without the questions of constitutionality of evacuation, citizenship rights, public antagonism and many other complicated factors. Many of these questions could not be answered. Nevertheless, they constantly influenced the behavior of the evacuees and the administration.

A report was made in late 1942 on the situation existing at one of the centers portrayed some of the crucial problems of this early period.[1]

[1] Memorandum to E. R. Fryer from S. T. Kimball

"An immediate problem is that of the conflict between alien Japanese and those who have American citizenship. Relocation (evacuation) has emphasized the conflicting values held by these two groups and the policy which gives control of community government to the citizens is a cause for dissatisfaction and non-participation on the part of some aliens.

"The uncertainties concerning the future expressed by frequent rumors ranging all the way from removal to other relocation centers to repatriation to Japan hinders the creation of a feeling of security and stability and frustrates the incentives for creating a productive and satisfactory community. Many of the more intelligent citizens react to this condition by a desire to leave relocation centers. There are some, especially among the Issei who are willing to wait quietly until the outcome of the war has been decided. If Japan wins they are certain that the future is bright; if Japan loses they will passively accept what fate holds in store for them.

"An additional uncertainty is found in the relationship between the project administrative staff and the evacuees. There has been misinterpretation on the part of some that self-government would eventually mean the complete control of administration by the evacuees. Others believe self-government to be meaningless.

"The failure or inability of formerly responsible persons to assume an active leadership further complicates administration. The attempts of the J. A. C. L. to claim leadership of the evacuees has been almost universally repudiated. This repudiation is based on the belief that the J. A. C. L. leaders were in large measure responsible for the decision to evacuate and that they sacrificed members of their national group for their own selfish interest. This distrust of the J. A. C. L. is held not only by the alien group but also by a large contingent of citizens although for a different reason. The citizens' group feels that it has received ineffective leadership with the failure of this body to take a strong position previous to the war against the Fascist countries.

"The alien leaders have failed to take an active part because of the policy of the F. B. I. in detaining the many Issei leaders. They feel that to assume a position of leadership within the project would result in scrutiny and probable arrest and removal by Federal agencies. In some instances they have failed to take a position of

leadership because of the reliance of administrative personnel on the younger and more aggressive evacuees. By and large the informal Issei leadership that has developed at Tule Lake has come from persons who are not respected by other members of the community either previous to their evacuation or since. Issei and Nisei who have expressed themselves are in agreement that the so-called agitators and those responsible for administrative difficulties have come from this group.

"An additional problem facing the administration is that of the difficulty of creating a normal community when many external aspects resemble a concentration camp. The presence of troops, guard towers, restrictions on free movement and the imposition of rules and regulations without consultation are all evidences of the fact that evacuees are not free persons.

"A further problem is the need for the occupation of time and interest of all evacuees. Primarily, there is the need for the development of an employment policy which will absorb large groups of persons and give purposeful and productive work relationships. This is necessary if satisfactory community life is to be achieved. If achieved, the result may conflict with the desire to relocate.

"The problem of communication is a serious one. It is complicated by the fact that many evacuees do not speak or understand English. It is hampered by the inability of the channels of communication which have been established to either fully inform the residents of policy and the reasons or for the evacuees to communicate to the administration their wishes and desires.

"Specifically, there is as yet no real understanding of the complicated process by which the administration is able to secure foodstuffs, clothing, building materials and so forth which are needed for the health and comfort of the residents. Lacking such understanding, it is also impossible to appreciate the difficulties which the administration faces in securing these things or to understand why it is impossible to secure many things which are essential. Whether we like it or not the procedures which we follow to secure food, clothing and other essentials are institutional procedures and verge toward paternalism. The inability of people to have any say in what they do or do not receive and thus in the final analysis to be helpless to control whether they do or do not get what they need must inevitably create insecurity."

B. Disorganization and the Beginning of Organization

Broadly defined, community government was inclusive of more than the community council and its associated bodies. It also included block councils and block managers. The block managers as an organized group and with systematic communication with the administration and the residents was a significant administrative and political factor in community life. It was much later in center history that a more definite separation of managerial and representative functions was achieved.

The first organized evacuee group, the block managers, was administratively sponsored and supervised. The block manager system included an appointed evacuee for each residential block, a coordinator and his staff, all under the supervision of a non-evacuee civil-service appointee. It was the block manager's responsibility to distribute supplies and materials, to maintain records, to conduct censuses, and to perform a myriad of other tasks which had direct relation to the welfare and comfort of the residents of his block. He filled an administrative need for an immediate channel of communication with the residents and for the control of distribution of supplies to the residents of the block. An equally important function was his ability to report to the administration the needs, problems, and attitudes of the residents of his block and to interpret and make suggestions for meeting problems of a block or community nature. Thus it was that the block manager, as an individual and as a member of a group, was in a strategic position in administration-evacuee relations, and filled an immediate and important function in the total plan of project management.

Too much credit cannot be given to the conscientious efforts of the block manager to work for the welfare of the residents. Especially in the early period of confusion, his was a twenty-four hour job. If a resident became ill in the middle of the night, it was the block manager who was most frequently called to get help. He was often called in as arbitrator for disputes. Organized cooperative efforts to improve block or community conditions often came from his initiative.

If the managerial and liaison functions of the block managers were invaluable to the residents as an administrative device they were basic to administration. The advice and assistance of this group was frequently sought and in the early period constituted the only major contact between the administration and the residents. The fact that the block managers frequently found themselves considering problems which were political in nature was not disturbing to the administration unless those problems were controversial and of a kind the administration wished to avoid at the moment. On the other hand, the administration frequently introduced problems of a community or administrative nature at block manager meetings for the purpose of securing advice.

The block manager system was significant not only as an administrative device, but also in relation to the development of community government. It was of great importance in quickly developing block cohesion. It also contributed to the early development of block loyalties as opposed to community loyalties and to a response to problems based on block needs as distinct from community needs. As an example, the block managers at Poston were concerned, as they were at several other centers, with the inadequate health facilities which the earliest evacuees found. This concern was transmitted to the administration, but it was not until the temporary community council was organized that there was a concerted effort to investigate conditions and to make specific recommendations to the administration.

At most projects, by the time that efforts were directed toward establishing either a temporary or permanent community government, the block managers were well organized with clearly defined responsibilities and functions, and stood in high favor with both evacuees and administration. It is not surprising that when discussion on establishing a political body to be known as the community council was initiated, many people favored the status quo. It is also not surprising that the block managers, in some instances, expressed opposition to the formation of a group which conceivably threatened the prestige and status which the block managers enjoyed. Many of the administrative personnel expressed similar opinions and were quite willing to continue with an organization which was responsive to their needs and at the same time not unduly critical of existing conditions.

C. Block Organization

A second development of considerable importance affecting the future of community government were block organizations frequently called block councils. These existed at all centers in one form or another. The basis of organization, the function, and the history has varied widely from block to block and from center to center. Gila River was the only project where the formation of the block council was encouraged by the administration as the first and most important step in community organization. There, the project director or his representative appeared at a mass meeting of each newly occupied block, and, in addition to discussing general policies and problems, outlined a plan for block organization. The plan as conceived at Gila River included a block council to be composed of one representative elected by the residents of each barrack, the block manager and the head chef. This group, to be known as the block council, was to elect its own officers and work for the welfare and happiness of the residents. This included, "improvement of the grounds of the block, recreation for the residents of the block, health, and sanitation for the block, the need of preventing fire hazards, the adjustment of problems that arise among the residents of the block."

The minutes of a meeting held in Canal Camp at Gila River in August 1942 indicate that 15 blocks had organized their block councils and that the unanimous response of the block managers to a question concerning the usefulness of block councils was that they were helpful. The block councils at Gila River continued to function in Canal community throughout the life of the project. Their relative importance lessened at all centers as problems of an individual or community-wide character entered the picture. Nevertheless, there always remained in most blocks a nuclear organization which met to discuss and decide upon a course of action whenever a crisis threatened the equilibrium or stability of the block. This organization was much utilized by the councils to determine or influence community opinion.

The block council was another of the significant and important groups which contributed to the stability of project life and brought individuals into meaningful relations with each other, thus helping to achieve a group approach to the solution of community problems. Block councils were never fully utilized by the project administrations. In fact, one center officially discouraged any type of organization within the blocks. This failure to understand and to utilize the block council as a significant group to which problems and policies might be presented was to some extent compensated for by the administrative plan of block managers and by a system of political representation based on the block group. Policies and procedures adequately communicated either to the block managers or to the community council would in a properly organized system be readily transmitted to all block residents. This terminal transmission was not a particular concern of the administration and was well or badly organized depending upon the leadership qualifications of either the block manager or block representative.

In community-wide crises, such as developed in connection with registration, segregation, selective service and labor difficulties, the block unit was frequently the source of original decision. During the registration crisis many of the decisions reached in block meetings represented agreement for a common course of action. There appeared the obvious contradiction between a registration form designed to record each individual's declaration of intentions and loyalty and answers which actually reflected group decisions. There is the case of the old man who appealed a negative answer to the "law-abiding alien" question on the grounds that his block manager had inaccurately recorded his affirmative answer. His argument, in brief, was that he had been a member of the group in the block which decided that all should answer "yes," and obviously he would not have gone against the group decision in the registration. The attempt of the Issei Planning Board at Tule Lake to overcome widespread resistance to registering failed because it was counter to the more powerful force of block group pressure. This organization prepared a statement (which was rejected by the project director) advising against group decision and emphasizing that

registration was a matter of individual judgment.

This general outline of the organization and function of the block managers and of block councils and the function of the block as a group of original decision, will help us to understand the organization and function of community councils through their period of establishment and growth.

D. The Early History of Community Government

Community government began its center history in mid-May 1942 at the Colorado River Relocation Center. Representatives of the first four blocks occupied by incoming evacuees met in a messhall to discuss organization plans for preparing a permanent form of community government. The original meeting was conducted in an atmosphere of pioneers who were looking forward to creating a governing body for a peaceful and productive community. The nuclear group under the chairmanship of the Reverend Mitani, a Christian minister, established a civic planning commission. Subsequently, a legal bureau staffed by evacuee lawyers provided technical assistance. As new blocks were occupied, members of the planning commission met with residents explaining the objectives and purposes of the group and securing the election of additional representatives.

This initial attempt at community government was abortive, although the plan that was developed was to be utilized during the November strike. The receipt of the June 5 memorandum in the middle of that month brought to a halt the efforts of this group. Subsequently, a temporary community council, elected and inducted into office in July became the first representative body for Poston.

In the confusion of continuing construction and the reception of additional hundreds of evacuees, project directors encouraged the beginnings of the political institution of community government as best they could. The project director at Tule Lake met with each new incoming group to explain the policies of the project including the election of representatives to a community council. By July an organized group was meeting regularly. The history at Gila River was similar. There, the project director met with the new residents, block by block. He encouraged the formation of block councils. When the first unit was completely occupied in July, plans were made for the election of representatives to a community council. One of the first petitions prepared by an evacuee group was presented to the project director at Gila River in August 1942. These resolutions requested among other things, street lighting, completion of the water system so that the grounds could be watered, tables and chairs for apartments and the screening of windows and laundry rooms. They requested the establishment of a canteen which would be owned and financed by the evacuees and operated on a non-profit

basis. They requested clothing and wearing apparel and laundry soap for those in dire need. They also requested that there be established a recreation program, that there be opportunity for the education of their children, and that provision be made for religious observances and gatherings. They requested completion of hospital facilities and that non-citizens be given the privilege to hold elective positions in the community government.

It is incorrect to assume that the residents were either entirely in favor of or vitally interested in the establishment of local government. The exclusion of Issei from office engendered some opposition. The vast majority of residents, however, remained disinterested spectators. The group most actively interested was composed of a number of the more mature and politically-minded Nisei including many JACL members and some of the better educated and more Americanized Issei. Opposition, as it developed, came largely from the Kibei, plus some others who because of resentment, bitterness or loyalties to Japan were opposed to any action which might be construed as cooperation with the Government of the United States.

There was a third group which took the position that, since the delegation of authority was so limited, self-government was an impossibility, and therefore it would be wiser to let the Government assume the full burden of center operation and management. These differences all found expression in the attempts to formulate a permanent plan of community government.

E. Temporary Community Councils

The early problems of center management were largely beyond the effective responsibility of a politically organized evacuee group. The responsibility for providing food, preserving law and order, establishing fire protection, purchasing equipment, construction, maintenance of public facilities, recruitment of staff, employment and manifold other major and minor details of providing goods and services to a newly established community were assumed by the project director and his staff. Decisions were made without consultation with the evacuees. The problems were many, and there was no organized evacuee group except the block managers which could be of any assistance. Even the block managers were able to do no more than to call attention to dire need and to explain inadequacies to the residents.

The problem was not one of assuming joint responsibility with the evacuees in project management, but one of communication of the difficulties facing the administrative staff on the one hand and of meeting the more pressing needs of the residents on the other. This function was generally assumed by the block managers. The frequently recurring inability of the administration to secure fuel, lumber, machinery,

sometimes even food, produced many complaints and contributed to the feeling of insecurity. Pressures placed on the block managers and subsequently on the administration all too often could not be relieved. There did develop among many evacuees an appreciation of the sincere efforts of the administration. There were, however, several areas of project life where incompetent personnel, inefficient management, and bad organization were obvious to the evacuees. If for example, babies died in the hospital, not only the families affected, but also the entire community became disturbed and demanded a remedy for the conditions which permitted the situation. When people were cold from lack of fuel or equipment for heating, there was a tendency to reject explanations of delayed shipment and to accuse the administration of inefficiency or in some instances of deliberate intent to contribute to the discomfort of the evacuees.

It was in this atmosphere of confusion and uncertainty that temporary councils were created. To their credit there was no difficulty so great that they were unwilling to tackle it. Council officers and committees conferred with project directors and staff members. They made investigations which included interrogation of administrative staff members. Resolutions were passed calling attention to the conditions, solutions were offered, but in most instances correction of the situation was beyond the immediate control of any one person and the efforts of the temporary councils were often regarded by the residents as unproductive and by the administrative staff as meddling.

This activity, including criticism of the administration on the part of temporary councils was in part an attempt to determine the responsibilities, the authority, and the limitations under which councils could operate. Their investigations inevitably led to questioning of either the administrative or technical ability of the members of the appointed staff with the result that some of the latter became irritated and resistant not only to investigations, but also to proposed solutions.

The administrative staff, including the project director, was equally uncertain of the separation of council and administrative responsibilities. The tendency was to look to administrative action rather than community participation to bring solutions. A few project directors did attempt to explain conditions and secure understanding of the handicaps under which the administration was operating. Most did not.

That there were numerous labor difficulties is not surprising. These sometimes came to the attention of the council, but more often were negotiated directly by the project director or one of his staff. The inability of the council to secure acceptance of its views frequently led to the conclusion that the councils were either ineffective or obstructionist or both. There were examples, such as the attempt of

an OWI unit to secure broadcast material at Tule Lake where the council although first giving its approval was later forced to retract its stand because of community pressure. Another instance in the same center involved the use of community funds to construct a building for showing motion pictures. The proposal favored by the council was rejected by a referendum of the residents. Council action was not always attended by failure. There were instances in which its recommendations were followed with benefit to both the residents and the administration. These successes, however, were usually not so well publicized as were the failures.

At some centers, there were groups of both evacuees and administrative staff who were disappointed at the failure of the councils to take an aggressive stand on some of the larger issues. Instead, councils concerned themselves with the immediate problems and pressures and in so doing were politically realistic. They were well aware that many issues were extremely controversial and that action on the part of the council would have led to internal strife and factionalism. When the council cooperated with the administration, it was suspected by the residents; when it opposed the administration, it was attacked as being obstructionist—and in some instances individual members were accused of being subversive and disloyal.

It was not surprising that the majority of the residents who were interested—and that number was not great—considered the council less effective than the block managers, lacked confidence in its judgment—or in its ability to negotiate with the administration—and resented control by the Nisei and exclusion of the Issei. Neither was it surprising that many administrators felt that the council was at best a useless and innocuous group, and at worst a trouble-making and critical group. It was surprising that councils were able to survive at all. Their survival was due to the confidence and efforts of a few members of the appointed staff and of those members of the evacuee community who saw in community government potentialities that could compensate for its early weakness of performance.

F. The Organization Commission

The procedures for establishing an organization commission were left to the discretion of the project director. Several methods were followed. At most centers the temporary community council appointed a commission. At Manzanar and Gila River the project director selected the members. Minidoka followed the plan of electing two delegates from each block to a nominating convention which in turn elected a seven-man group.

Tule Lake was the first center to establish a commission—it was appointed by the community council—and the first to complete and secure

ratification of a permanent plan of community organization by the residents. Central Utah, in December of the same year, completed its plan and secured ratification. During the first six months of 1943, charters were approved by Granada and Poston and rejected at Minidoka. During the last half of 1943, Gila River, Heart Mountain, Rohwer and Jerome joined the others, and the Minidoka charter was resubmitted and accepted. Manzanar remained the only center with no organized form of representative community government which was based on WRA administrative suggestion; instead, at this center, a town hall of block delegates served in an advisory capacity to the project director.

The essentials of both organization and function of community government were provided for in the policy statement. Each charter made provision for the election of a community council with the authority to enact regulations and to provide penalties. Provision was also made for the establishment of a judicial commission, the organization of the council, the election of officers and the appointment of committees and commissions. The arbitration commission was universally functionless.

There were some variations to meet local conditions. For example, at Poston, which was composed of three distinct communities, the charter provided for the election of local councils for each of the three units of that center. Each local council then elected representatives to an over-all community council. The over-all council was responsible for enactment of regulations for the entire center and for general policies and problems affecting all the residents. Variation in council organization appeared also at Minidoka and Gila River. At the latter project, each of the two separate camps approved almost identical plans of government, but no provision was made for the coordination of the two. This lack was overcome by the creation of an executive board composed of members drawn from each council. The Minidoka council was unique in that it provided for the election at large of seven members from a list of candidates nominated by delegates elected from the separate blocks. It also provided for the election of a block commissioner from each block. Council organization included an executive committee of 7 members and a consulting and advisory group of 35. Several of the projects attempted to overcome the unwieldiness of a large council composed of one representative from each block by the election of an executive committee from within the council group. This plan worked with indifferent success.