

CATALINA PRISON CAMP HISTORY

For many years, the only way to get to the top of the Catalina Mountains was the hard way. A trail led from lower Sabino Canyon to Soldier Camp and to Summerhaven. You either hiked the trail or rode a horse or burro. Everything that was needed was packed up on the back of burros. In 1920, the first road was completed that allowed automobiles to get to the top of the mountains. Its main drawback was that it started in Oracle and was a narrow winding dirt road that was only a single lane wide for the last seven miles. This route to Summerhaven was also a long 75 miles from the heart of Tucson. This road is still in existence today and came in handy when the current Catalina Highway was temporarily washed out a few years ago.

In 1926, the push for a new road up the South side of the mountains was started. Arizona Legislator F. E. A. Kimball started the push and the editor of the Tucson Citizen, Frank Hitchcock, quickly took up the cause. In the next two years, two bond elections were held and both went down to defeat. Hitchcock then took his case to both forestry and highway officials. On 13 March 1933, Secretary of Agriculture Henry A. Wallace approved a 25 mile two lane surfaced road from the foot of the mountains to Summerhaven. Next came the question of who would build the road. This was answered when Hitchcock convinced federal prison authorities that a prison camp in the mountains could serve both as a cheap labor source and a means to rehabilitate the inmates. The prison camp was opened in June 1933 and was initially located at an elevation of 8,000 feet in a pine tree grove on the side of Mount Bigelow and consisted solely of tents. Access to the site was via the Control Road that originated in the town of Oracle. When winter arrived, this location became completely untenable and it was relocated to the base of the Catalina Mountains. Frame buildings were constructed and this location was used until February 1939.

Road construction progressed steadily and by 1938 about nine miles had been completed. So much time was being lost transporting crews from the camp to the work site that it was decided to relocate the prison farther up the mountain. Vail Corral, at an elevation of 4,860 feet, was chosen as a permanent site for the prison and construction began in the late summer of 1938. The new site was completed in January and the prison was moved to the permanent site during a February 1939 snowstorm. The prison



Prison Camp Photo Courtesy of the U.S. Forest Service

facilities consisted of twelve buildings. There was an administration building, four barracks, a mess hall with kitchen, a laundry, a powerhouse, a storeroom, a garage, a vocational shop and a small building for academic classwork. The camp had no walls or fences. Prisoners were simply told not to venture unguarded beyond a white line painted on the ground. There were also ten

masonry and five frame cottages for use by prison officers. With the exception of one civilian carpenter foreman, the entire camp was constructed by the inmates (supervised by the camp officers). In addition to the buildings, the camp included a sewage disposal system, a water supply system with high-pressure diesel-operated pumps, two miles of water mains, an electrical distribution system, and six miles of telephone lines.

Car thieves, bootleggers, tax evaders, draft dodgers, Mexicans entering the country illegally, conscientious objectors and even 44 Japanese-Americans who had refused Executive Order 9066 were sent to the Mount Lemon Federal Honor Camp. Between the summer of 1933 and the spring of 1951 when the camp was closed, over 8,000 prisoners were sent to work on the road. On March 10th 1951, the road was declared finished. In 1958, the camp was converted to a Youth Camp for seventeen to twenty-two year olds who had been convicted for such things as car thefts. These youths worked in the Catalina District for several years on fire suppression and recreation clean up and construction. In 1967 the United States Bureau of Prisons turned control of the facility over to the State of Arizona and the camp was used as an Indian Youth Rehabilitation Center until 1973. Not long after, bulldozers demolished the buildings on the site.

Earlier we indicated that 44 Japanese-Americans were interned at the camp. Gordon Hirabayshi was one of those interned. He was a senior at the University of Washington when President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 on 19 February 1942. This order authorized the Secretary of War and the Military Commanders to take actions considered necessary to control access to areas defined as “military areas”. Initially a curfew was imposed and then in May 1942, the forced evacuation of anyone with 1/6th or more Japanese blood from the Western states. They were to be interned in what were in effect concentration camps.

Hirabayshi chose not to submit to either the curfew or the internment and challenged authorities to respect his rights as an American Citizen not to be imprisoned. He remained in jail from May to October 1942 awaiting trial by a federal jury. As a result of the hysteria of the day, he lost his case and was sentenced to two concurrent three-month terms for the two offenses. He spent an additional four months in jail pending his appeal to the Supreme Court. When his conviction was upheld in 1943, he requested that he serve his time at the Mt. Lemon Prison so that he would be able to work out of doors while incarcerated. That was fine with Federal Authorities but they refused to pay his fare to transfer him from the prison in Washington where he was being held. He ended up hitch hiking his way to Tucson and after reporting in, went to a movie while waiting for officials to find and sort out his paperwork. He served his three-month sentence at the Mt. Lemmon Prison Camp. Hirabayshi never gave up on his belief that the order was unconstitutional and in 1987, the 9th US Circuit Court of Appeals vindicated him. In honor of Hirabayshi’s principles, the former prison camp was renamed the Gordon Hirabayshi Recreation Site. Gordon Hirabayshi died 3 January 2012 at the age of 93.



Gordon Hirabayshi –1985

Of special interest to the members of the Green Valley Recreation Hiking Club is that one of its

former members, Larry Lim, had a special relationship with the Mt. Lemon Prison Camp in the late 1940s. No, he was not incarcerated but he did spend some time there. When Larry Lim was a teenager he was a member of the Sino-American Club Softball Team. The prisoners at the camp had formed a softball team as a recreational activity and needed some competition to really enjoy the game. One of the teams in the Tucson area that provided that competition was the Sino- American Club Softball Team. This allowed Larry the rare opportunity to visit the camp when it was still operating. The Prison Camp's softball diamond was located in the large open area at the end of the current road into the Gordon Hirabayashi Recreation Site.

Summarized by T N Johnson from a report by C. B. Mead (Prison Camp Superintendent), an Arizona Daily Star article by Bonnie Henry, a 30 August 1998 Daily Star Article, a 14 July 2000 Green Valley News article, and a 3 January 2012 New York Times article. Updated in 2023 to add information pertaining to the camp's softball program.