

Rohwer Reconstructed: Interpreting Place Through Experience

URL <http://risingabove.cast.uark.edu/>

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Rohwer Reconstructed offers an on-line archive of visually rich exhibits. This is far superior to the old style of Source Documents collections, with their limited illustrations and searchability. Through gathering, scanning, digitizing and applying clear presentation techniques, this website has liberated a scattered manuscript archives from its regional specificity.

The story that this archive reveals is riveting. Over eight thousand Americans were interned on the muddy Mississippi flatlands of southeast Arkansas during World War II. This was because they were also Japanese. The website's goal is celebratory; as it declares, like the lotus, the internees were "to rise with grace and beauty above the circumstances that forced them there."

The site is well organised and navigable. The home page works. With clear design, a rotating banner features intriguing images. It offers a minimalist choice of buttons or tabs: Archive, Visualizations, Timeline, About. The Archive tab is where you find most of the action: it contains 8 different sub-tabs ranging from autobiographies, correspondence, objects, paintings, photos, publications and yearbooks. You can either click on these or scroll down to preview an array of content relating to the three years in which the Japanese Americans were interned at Rohwer. The site explains, albeit very briefly, how the project came about and, equally briefly, it summarizes the historical story of Rohwer Relocation Camp (declared a National Historic Landmark in 1992). This two-year digital project involved a range of partners – Universities, libraries, a computing enterprise and a US park organisation.

As a historian, I am an easy target for any experience that requires archival delving, however this site makes it easy for everyone. The accounts are poignant and rich. Skipping the usual extraneous matter found in archives, you can go straight to an extraordinary selection of texts, photos, writings and artwork in which the inmates' voices and visions take center stage. Teachers could use it brilliantly in their classrooms. Quality digital transcripts accompany the original materials, about which useful catalogue and location details are provided. Visitors to the heritage site could learn much to prepare them for their visit, or to complement their knowledge afterwards.

Nonetheless, the website's title creates false expectations. The site does not "reconstruct" Rohwer as such, and nor does it present the 3D or animated digital effects that the term "experience" evokes when applied to digital contexts. Irritations? There are some typos on the homepage and the promised Timeline is not yet available. More significantly, the site needs some historical and explanatory maps. Its "Visualizations" section appears to be at an early

development stage, and what exists is painfully slow to upload. Yearning to learn more about the wider historical context of this site, I found the interpretative and historical contextualization of the National Park Service's *Rohwer Park* website. Although *Rising Above* links to the Park site, this does not appear to be the case in reverse. The two sites complement each other so well that each is the poorer without the other. The *Rohwer Park* site features a map that shows the numerous relocation camps all over the United States. The vast distance between Rohwer and its internees' homes in Los Angeles and the San Joaquin Valley is confronting. But even this map is too local. In World War 11 (a *world* war, after all), there were internment camps for Japanese and other 'enemy aliens' in many parts of the world. Local stories should be global histories too.

Digital history is expensive to produce, but it is rapidly becoming one of the most highly visible forms of public history. It often aims to be a freely available resource, and like public libraries, its advocates often find it difficult to obtain sufficient sustained funding. Yet, although digital projects lack the backing of a publishing company to ensure production is funded to completion stage, it is easier to expand, update, integrate user feedback, and to connect users with each other.

The *Rising Above* site, with its appropriate consortium of partners, has achieved much. Visitors from anywhere in the United States or anywhere in the world can now glean meaningful insights into the experiences of Rohwer's inmates. For former residents and families, its content will be jarring and personal. But anyone who spends some time with the *Rising Above* archive will be rewarded. With resident's voices prominent, the visitor gains an insider perspective that allows them to reflect upon the lives of the internees and to connect with their experiences. How did they cope? After all, they were uprooted from house and home, losing their freedoms, suspected and forced into detention by the nation that they called their own.

For this visitor, the on-line archive made me admire Rohwer's other heroes, of which I will mention just two categories. Firstly, those inspiring art and craft teachers, and the schoolteachers who invited the interned school children to write about their lives. Secondly, and despite many of the photographs being intended for government propaganda, the skilful photographers who interacted with their subjects to ensure a lasting record of a proud, dignified and diverse people.

At Rohwer, many industrious, talented Japanese Americans were effectively locked up. They had not committed any crime beyond their ancestry, appearance and ethnicity. Some of the children later became poets - one a poet laureate - and others became accomplished actors. One of the children schooled at Rowher grew up to become a contemporary cultural icon - George Takei of Star Trek fame. Also an activist, Takei explains in a TedX talk how the camp shaped his personal views of patriotism and democracy.¹

¹ George Takei, 'Why I love a country that once betrayed me', Ted x Kyoto, filmed June 2014.

Rising Above resonates with some of the crucial human rights challenges that have been faced and today are being faced by many nations. Think of the native American removals of the nineteenth century. Or the current detention regimes for citizens who are suspected of posing a security threat. This on-line archive serves as a reminder of how, when the state considers residents of certain ancestries or other potential loyalties to be a security threat, their personal rights can become very insecure indeed.