

THE LOST WATER GARDENS OF MANZANAR

During a time of national turmoil, a group of Japanese-Americans created a thing of great beauty in a forgotten, barren valley.

Fortunately it has survived for us to appreciate, even today.

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photos by the author



MANZANAR
★ WAR ★
RELOCATION
CENTER

Entrance sign at Manzanar War Relocation Center with visitor center and snow covered Sierra Nevada in background. Manzanar is located off Highway 395 north of the town of Lone Pine.

The attack on Pearl Harbor in December, 1941 changed the world forever. For the 120,000 Japanese living on the West Coast of the United States, it meant the relocation to camps established by the War Relocation Authority. These internees, many born and raised in the States, were forced to leave homes, business, and possessions. They were charged with building and maintaining the very camps in which they were interred throughout the war.

Manzanar

One of these camps, known as Manzanar, held over 10,000 Japanese-Americans by September, 1942. Manzanar is located 220 miles north of Los Angeles and situated at the base of Sierra Nevada Mountains in the Owens Valley, sitting between the towns of Lone Pine and Independence. It is now a national historic site, the best preserved of all the relocation camps.

The Internees

Internees at the camp included many landscape designers, nursery owners, masons, farmers and other skilled workers. They turned their efforts toward gardening, to pass the time and make their conditions more tolerable. Gardens were established around the living areas and at community parks. The gardens were more than plants. They often included a traditional Japanese water garden. Manzanar was transformed from a wind-swept, desolate valley into a place of incredible beauty in just a few short years.

Water Garden Designs at Manzanar

Water garden design was based on traditional Japanese styles, influenced by American culture and the availability of materials. Most ponds were built in one of two styles, either Tsukiyama (hill gardens) or Hiraniwa (flat gardens).



The water garden at Block 22 is well preserved with two ponds, an island and a bridge between the two. An inscription with the date, "Aug 9, 42" is located near the bridge.



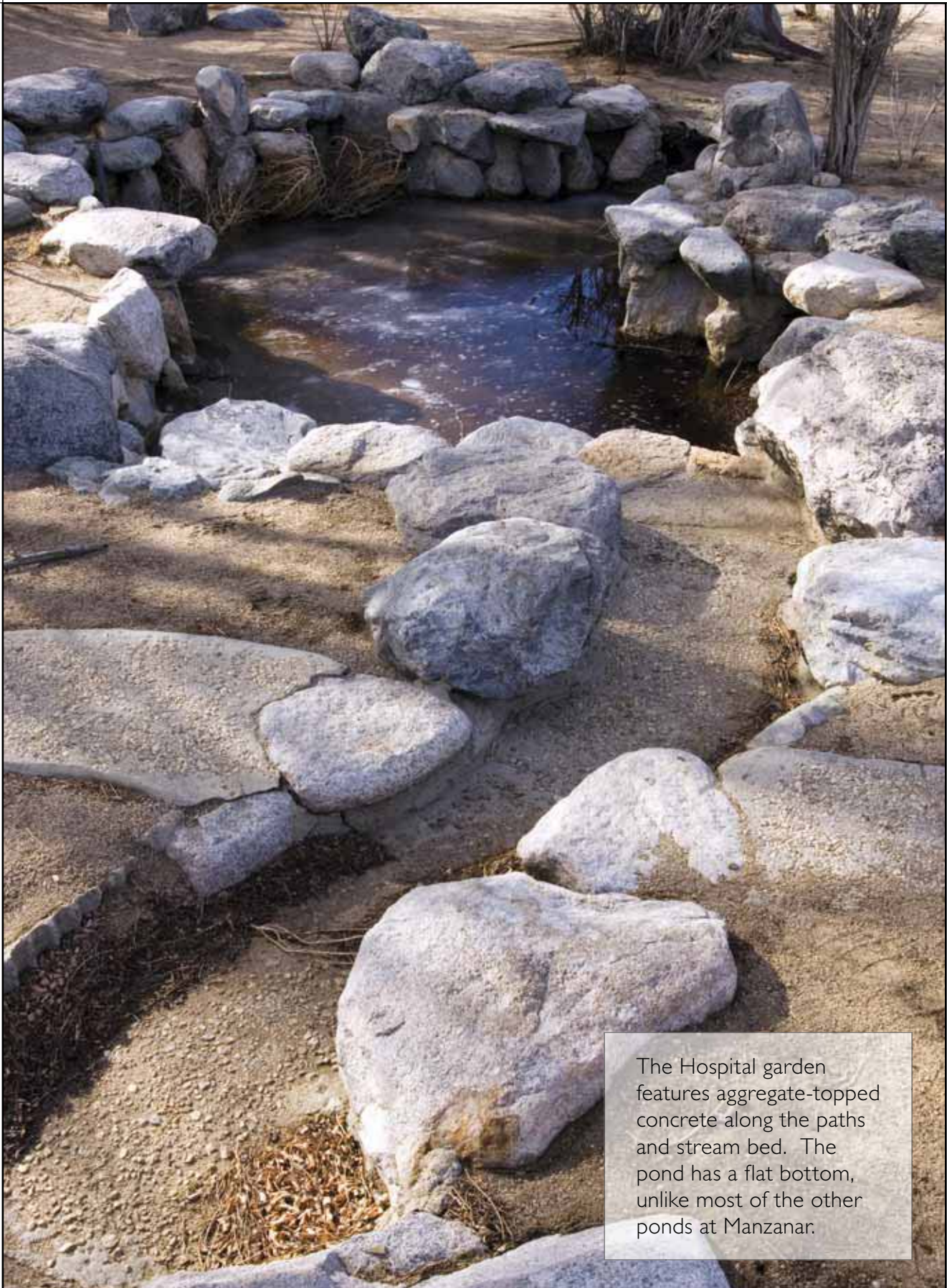


The lower waterfall for the Merritt Park pond was selected for its tortoise like shape, a symbol of longevity. A small pool in the top of the rock leads to two separate falls, evident by the streaking on the rock.

Tsukiyama ponds were a common design in the Momoyama to Edo period in Japan during the 1600s through the 1800s. These ponds are made with three basic features: a waterfall, a stream and a pond. The excavated dirt from the pond is used to make a hill for the waterfall. Water flows from the north starting with the waterfall, then travels south through the stream and ends in the pond. Many of the ponds also feature stones representing tortoises or cranes, symbols of longevity and happiness in Japanese culture.

The flat or Hiraniwa ponds offer a different atmosphere from the Tsukiyama ponds. Tsukiyama ponds are relaxing with the sounds of running water. Hiraniwa ponds are more quiet and contemplative because they don't have moving water. Some may include waterfalls, but it is uncommon. Instead, bridges, islands and rock features are used to create visual interest. Hiraniwa ponds often take the shape of clouds, a reflection of the sky above.

It is believed some of the ponds contained fish, even possibly local trout. Many of the ponds are clearly designed to provide hiding places from predators by including deep center areas and overhanging rocks along the edges.



The Hospital garden features aggregate-topped concrete along the paths and stream bed. The pond has a flat bottom, unlike most of the other ponds at Manzanar.



Water Garden Ruins at Manzanar

Nearly all of Manzanar's buildings were dismantled after the war. A few sentry posts at the entrance remain, as well as the auditorium that is now a permanent visitor center. Without the protection of the buildings, wind swept dirt back into the ponds eventually filling them. These water gardens have remained intact, well-preserved under the surface. Some of these water gardens have been excavated and provide remarkable examples of enduring design as well as remarkable and high-quality craftsmanship.

Merritt Park

In addition to all the buildings of the relocation camp, there were also community gardens in various sections. One of these gardens was called Pleasure Park, which was eventually renamed Merritt Park, after the camp's project director, Ralph P. Merritt. These parks were places where internees, workers and soldiers could go to relax.

Two large entry stones, called steles, greeted visitors like a doorway. These stones are still intact today, even though they are overgrown and slightly hidden. The central focus of the garden was a large pond in the center. Built in the Tsukiyama style, this pond started with a waterfall, fed by a natural spring for part of the year, pouring

into a small pool. This pool fed another waterfall. The second waterfall contained a rock shaped like a tortoise that divided the water into two parts before spilling into the main pond. Very little concrete was used in pond construction due to its limited supply caused by the war. The stones from the waterfall are still in place today. The shape of the original pond is evident, as well, even though the pond is mostly covered by vegetation.

A wooden bridge and teahouse also complemented the pond. Both were made from native trees. Today, only the stone foundation of the teahouse remains.

Hospital garden

The hospital garden is one of the better-preserved water gardens. It has features somewhat unique compared with other gardens at Manzanar. Other water gardens have bowl-shaped ponds and rounded streams. The hospital water garden has a flat-bottomed stream and pond. Plus, the pathways around the garden and the streambed use aggregate on top of the concrete. The hospital garden follows the traditional Tsukiyama style, starting with a small waterfall to the north and a stream flowing into the pond. A distinctive concrete bench with an elaborate faux wood finish is located near the pond, too.

San-Shi-En

The water garden for the Block 34 mess hall was discovered only a few years ago as Manzanar Park Ranger Richard Potashin walked the grounds. Potashin shared that he and a partner noticed a rock outcropping emerging from the dirt. They could feel a large solid area as they probed below the surface with poles. Once uncovered, a beautiful Tsukiyama water garden was found.

The garden is named simply San-Shi-En or 34 garden, for its location adjacent to Block 34's mess hall. A traditional crane shaped rock waits where the stream would glide into the pond, as if looking for its next meal to appear in the cascade. This garden, like many at Manzanar, has an unobstructed view of towering Mt. Williamson along the crest of the High Sierra, the second highest peak in the entire mountain range.

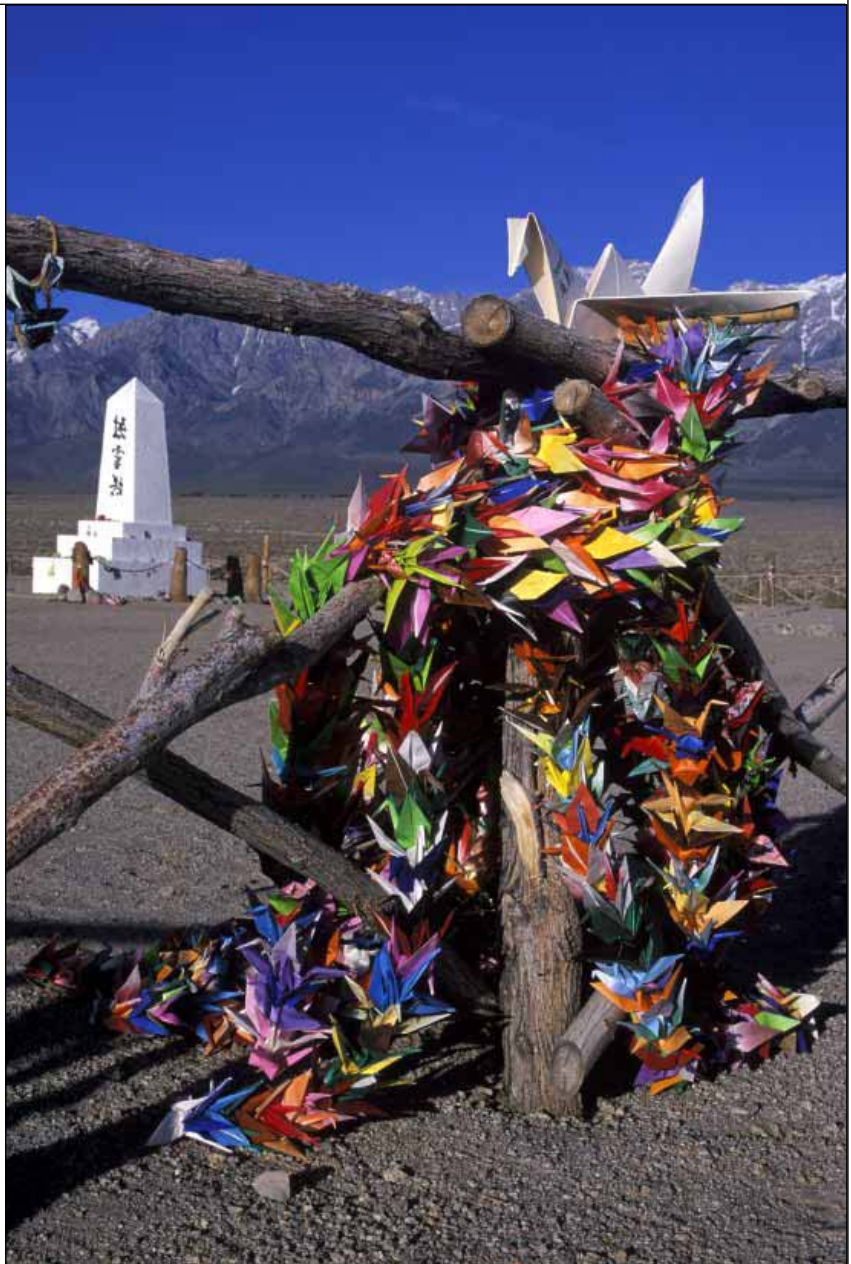
The rock in this garden is not local granite but dark metamorphic volcanic stone from the White Mountains located on the east side of the valley. One of the benefits for those working on water gardens at Manzanar was an occasional trip away from the camp to collect materials.

OPPOSITE PAGE

One of the two steles (entrance markers) for Merritt Park is hidden from the road, obscured by vegetation. The park, originally named Rose Park and then called Pleasure Park, was eventually named Merritt Park in honor of Manzanar's Project Director, Ralph P. Merritt.

RIGHT

Origami decorates the fence surrounding the cemetery. The famous marker can be seen in the background with the Sierra Nevada range raising up in the distance.



Barrack gardens

The garden at Block 22 is one of the more remote ponds at Manzanar. It is an elaborate feature with two ponds joining under a bridge. The date, "Aug. 9, 42" is inscribed in the concrete near a bridge. Only a few months passed between occupation of the camp and completion of this feature.

Another garden at Block 12 is located next to the road along the 3.2-mile, self-guided auto tour route. This tree-lined garden features a concrete pond with a cascading waterfall.

Mess Hall gardens

One of the most common types of water gardens at Manzanar are the mess hall gardens. Unique to Japanese water gardens in the United States, water gardens near the mess halls allowed those waiting in line to pass the time enjoying the tranquility of a running stream.

It was one of these gardens that inspired Jeanne Watatsuki Houston, author of *Farewell to Manzanar*, to write, "You could face away from the barracks, look past a tiny rapids towards the darkening mountains, and for a while not be a prisoner at all. You could stand suspended in some odd, almost

Water Garden, Block 22



lovely land you could not escape from yet almost didn't want to leave."

Future of the water gardens

Although many water garden ruins have been located and documented at Manzanar, one must believe the discoveries are still in their infancy. Some have discussed the possibility of renovating a historic pond or building a replica water feature, but there are significant issues hindering the efforts. Creating a new and constant water source could attract potentially dangerous mountain lions or damaging herds of elk from surrounding areas. Also, maintaining a water feature within a limited Park Service budget is another issue that would

need to be overcome. And there are always safety issues anytime a pond is around.

There are still many water features that are buried under 60 years of seldom-disturbed dirt. Both Blocks 9 and 6 have clear evidence of ponds below the surface. It is possible that these and other water gardens will be excavated in the future.

It was a treat for me to sit near one of Manzanar's dried water gardens, staring up at the snow-capped Sierra Nevada, watching billowing clouds dance along the peaks almost two miles above the valley floor. You can almost hear the sound of the water as it flows down a meandering path dropping into the pond at your feet.

