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Copy of a letter received from ~~Mrs. H. Ihara, Ward D, St. 3, Unit 3,~~
Merced Assembly Center, Merced, Calif. (~~Please do not use name~~).

May 13, 1942

Dear Barbara,

Right now we are in our "apartment" in Merced Assembly Center, having arrived here yesterday (Tues.) after a very heavy shower. Merced is famous for black thick clay soil so you can imagine what it was like. Lunch was a horrid affair--1 frankfurter, a mess of overboiled cabbage, white bread, pasty rice, and canned cherries. One consolation is that we don't have to wash dishes yet. All the workers are volunteer people--inside camp--and the cooks are quite inexperienced or else rusty with disuse since many of the farmers from our vicinity were houseboys and cooks some 30 years ago. Dinner was better--canned carrots and peas, 1 slab of canned pork, lettuce salad, apricots and plenty of milk. We eat in 3 shifts. The earliest breakfast call is at 6:30 and if any who is scheduled to eat at that time fails to appear, he is out of luck because doors are closed for fifteen minutes right away and the next time they open, it is for the next shift. There is a great shortage of waiters and common laborers. Even my brother was asked to help but upon hearing that they are paid 70% a day and that board and room is subtracted from that, he said, "H---no!" and a few other characteristic things.

There is a lot of noise in here now. Sam is putting up shades, Ben and Hidy are making a table and the radio is going. The "apartments"---there are 4, 6, and 8 bedrooms. Usually they assign one "apartment" to a family--apartment means one room with screened windows, concrete or airy wooden floors, 4 or 6 beds (single), depending on the size of the room and a door that may or may not fit. Some doors are at least 2 inches too small for the doorway and in some places the rain water and mud seep in through the concrete. When we first saw our living quarters we were so sick we couldn't, eat, walk, or talk. We couldn't even cry till later. We have put up canvas partitions (room is about 25' by 20' for four beds) so that the place looks more livable but it's still not pretty. Since they will not allow less than 4 in one room, my brothers Ben and Sam are going to live with Hidy and me. Mother, father, and Paul are living just across the muddy way. The things I have mentioned so far are tolerable and remediable--we can steal brand new lumber from horse stalls and things that are just going up near here if we can run fast enough, but gee--you should see the--er--latrines. There is absolutely no privacy or sanitation--10 seats lined up (hard, fresh-sawed, un-sandpapered wood) and it flushes automatically about every 15 minutes.

Whee! A fellow just came to offer me a job as Dietician. Hope there's a really good dietician to work under.

My parents feel humiliated but are quite resigned. I really can't help but admire their stoicism or whatever it is that enables them to hold up under so much. Paul is in the hospital--one of the many that immediately filled up the temporary one as soon as they entered yesterday. He is the only one not quarantined. There is one man here who is very near his end with cancer.

Thursday, May 14

Sorry I had to leave so abruptly yesterday; I had to report for work and was busy till 10:00 p.m. Much to my disappointment, there is no dietician so far that we can work under. Another girl and I have our hands full haggling with the mess halls, planning menus,

getting orders and even cooking. There is a very great need for trained nurses, dieticians, lab technicians and decent hospital equipment. We were terribly discouraged because the only fresh fruit we can get is bananas and the only fresh vegetable is--cabbage. Ugh. Oh well, I guess we're lucky it's not turnips. Many people need special diets--allergies, diabetes, stomach ulcer, high blood pressure, nephritis--everything seems to be prevalent. Violet and I feel overloaded, especially because we don't know a thing about planning menus from equations, balancing calories, weighing out grass, etc.

Hidy was peeved because he doesn't like me to work, but right now there is certainly no choice at all. Three-fourths of the population loaf all day while the mess hall boys and girls and the hospital staff work like horses. Right now the nurses are on 12 or 14 hours a day; we greenhorn dieticians on 10 hours can't complain.

We are slowly getting adapted to the diet, lack of privacy and food around here, but every time we think of the white plastered walls, sunny rooms and green gardens we left behind we begin to drop into depression again; we are learning not to remember. Hidy, however, has developed or rather learned a new slogan; instead of "Remember Pearl Harbor", he says, "Remember the Concentration Camp!" Until our dying day we'll never forget.

One great consolation is that we will never suffer from excessive eating. I have already lost 3 lbs.

Friday

Last night it rained--for many people it rained even on their beds. Our head nurse is a hyperthyroid sort of person with a remarkable personality and she says she cries every night when she thinks of the old folks (many of whom will most likely die here very soon) and of the very young children who just cannot understand why they can't leave this horrid place. The soldiers on guard here seem quite friendly and even flirtatious. No one can enter here except special officers and certain truck drivers who bring in the baggage. It's probably a good thing, because we can't stand any more disease than we have here already.

Excuse my disconnected thoughts. Hidy is banging away again, trying to make a shelf or something, I guess.

A band is playing out in the ball park nearby making us remember again the days of freedom we once had. We can't go out to watch; the kids feel greatly peeved.

Thanks millions and millions for these very fascinating books, they really are lifesavers, especially for Hidy, who feels that there is hardly anything left to live for except for books.

You must be through with finals now. Are you still busy in other ways besides socially? Please do try to come in as folkdance teacher; we need someone like that very badly, but be sure you can get out again before you ever come in.

Maybe you think life is one huge gloom cloud, but I've been giving you the worst side of life here--the side that to you is the most obvious. There is another side to this picture too. Some of the boys play all day; they quit only to eat and sleep, while some of the formerly busy mothers have time to look after their babies and chat with the neighbors. For many this is an extended vacation in somewhat drab surroundings.

The band is playing again; it's very annoying to be unable to see it strutting around.

My brother Paul is still ill; he is one of the many who get very inadequate, unsanitary and inexpert care here. We are all desperately trying to stay healthy.

Ten minutes to eight now. No curfew here, thank heavens, but I'll have to start figuring out one of the diabetes diets. I hope I don't kill anyone.....

Sincerely,

Ruth.