

Site recalls WWII fears, injustice

By Alexis Marie Adams

GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

CODY, Wyo. — The drive from the Montana ski town that I call home to Heart Mountain Interpretive Center near Cody crosses the high plains of northwestern Wyoming, a vast area dotted with sagebrush and fleet-footed pronghorns. To the north, east and south, there is nothing for miles but prairie and sky. To the west, the land buckles and then rises to become the Absaroka Mountain Range — literally the wall that divides this region from the bubbling, steaming wonders of Yellowstone National Park.

To me, this wild, windswept country is thrilling, a source of inspiration. I moved here by choice. For the 14,000 people of Japanese descent who were moved here against their will — to the camp hastily erected on the land where the Interpretive Center now sits — there were no thrills, no choice.

Imagine this: It is the spring of 1942, a few months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, and you are told you must abandon your home, your livelihood, and most of your possessions. Along with 120,000 others of Japanese descent, including those only 1/16th Japanese, you are herded to overcrowded assembly centers up and down the West Coast. Within a few weeks, you arrive by train at this bleak Wyoming outpost, 740 windblown acres enclosed by barbed wire. Armed guards stroll the grounds and stand sentinel in no fewer than nine watchtowers. They are there to watch you. Your crime is your ancestry. You will live here until the war your country is waging against the land of your ancestors is over.

On Feb. 19, 1942, with Executive Order 9066, President Franklin D. Roosevelt authorized the removal of all people of Japanese descent from the coast to 10 internment camps located in the country's interior. Heart Mountain Relocation Center was one of them. Built to house 10,000 people, at its height it was home to nearly 11,000. During the camp's three-year existence, from August 1942 until November 1945, a total of 14,025 intern-

ees came through. About two-thirds were US citizens; the rest were Japanese-born. A 20-block grid of barracks, mess halls, and latrines separated by unpaved roads, the relocation center was, however briefly, Wyoming's third-most populous "town."

Today, several camp structures remain standing: two hospital buildings, the hospital's boiler house with its towering red chimney, an administrative building, a concrete vault, an enormous root cellar and a large excavation that once served as a swimming hole. The railroad line that brought the internees here — the one long thread to the places and lives they left behind — is still in use today.

After 15 years of fund-raising and organizing, much of it by camp survivors, Heart Mountain Interpretive Center opened in August 2011. Featuring a war memorial, a walking tour, and a victory garden, at the heart of the National Historic Landmark site is an 11,000-square-foot visitors center. From the outside, the building is low and stark, reminiscent of the tarpaper-lined barracks the internees were crammed into. Inside, the museum is light and airy, as if to allow its visitors the contemplative space to digest the stories it tells. Through photos, artifacts, oral histories and film, visitors get a sense of the day-to-day experiences of the interned: first, being uprooted from their lives on the coast, and then, slowly, adapting to life in this new and unforgiving place.

Upon arrival, visitors receive a replica of the identification tags given to the internees. Today these serve as admission tickets to the visitors center, but the Japanese-Americans and resident Japanese who were rounded up were forced to display the tags on their clothing and possessions until they arrived at Heart Mountain. Just inside the building's foyer stands a large print of Dorothea Lange's iconic photograph of the Wanto Co. Grocery in San Francisco, where a banner proclaimed, "I am an American," beneath a "sold" sign. In the center's theater, visitors watch the introductory film "All We Could Carry" by Academy Award-winning documentarian Steven Okazaki. The title refers to the belongings the



PHOTOS BY VINCENTO SPIONE FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE



The war memorial (top) in Powell, Wyo., lists the names of Heart Mountain internees who served with the US military during World War II. Two of the three hospital buildings still stand (above).

internees could bring to Heart Mountain: one suitcase per person. Privacy, a key element of Japanese culture, was unheard of at Heart Mountain. Up to six families shared each barrack, and the washrooms and restroom facilities were open and unpartitioned. Today, in the center's public restrooms, mirrors positioned at odd angles in the

stalls quite successfully demonstrate the lack of privacy the people endured. A re-created barrack scene delivers a similar message.

Despite their extraordinary circumstances, Heart Mountain's prisoners eventually formed a makeshift community and established a certain rhythm to their daily lives. They worked as nurses, editors, and teachers. They managed fire, police, and judicial systems. They formed sports teams. There were even Boy Scout and Girl Scout troops. Farmers among the interned cleared the hardscrabble land to plant vegetable gardens and fruit trees. They built two enormous root cellars and one smaller cellar. Just as the center's exhibits tell of the injustic-

IF YOU GO . . .

HEART MOUNTAIN INTERPRETIVE CENTER

1539 Road 19, Powell, Wyo.
307-754-8000

heartmountain.org

Run by the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, a nonprofit governed by former internees and their descendants, the center is open 10 a.m.-5 p.m., daily May 15-Oct. 1 and Wed-Sat Oct. 2-May 14. Adults \$7, seniors and students \$5, under 12 free.

es of the internment experience, they also tell this story of resilience. Photos depict prisoners bundled against the January cold and snow, but they also show a certain triumph of spirit: a sumo wrestling match; a woman in her flower garden, laughing; members of the camp's Camera Club on an outing; a long queue outside one of the camp's two movie theaters. There are family portraits and a photograph of kimono-clad women dancing at a Buddhist festival. Copies of *The Heart Mountain Sentinel*, a weekly camp newspaper edited by Bill Hosokawa, an interned journalist, are on display.

The last of the internees left Heart Mountain on Nov. 10, 1945, three months after Japan's surrender. They were given \$25 and a one-way ticket to anywhere in the United States. For most, there was no place and nothing to return to, for when they were "evacuated" in 1942, they were forced to sell off their homes, farms, shops, furnishings, and clothing — all of the possessions that would not fit into that single suitcase.

Heart Mountain Interpretive Center offers a powerful lesson in a chapter of US history often neglected in the classroom and textbooks. It also leaves visitors grappling with the irony and complexity of the Japanese internment experience and its interpretation today. For example, does one call the people who lived at Heart Mountain residents, internees, evacuees, or prisoners? Was Heart Mountain a relocation center or is it more accurate to call it a concentration camp? Perhaps none of this matters today; perhaps it matters more as more is forgotten. In either case, this museum located between the Wyoming towns of Cody and Powell, just 50 miles east of Yellowstone National Park, makes for a poignant — and surprising — stop on any tour of the Greater Yellowstone region.

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