



(Staff photo by Dean Spuler)

Kara Kondo's carving renders the bleakness of life at Heart Mountain 38 years ago

# 'I never forget' Memories remain of the cold, the dust and the barbed wire

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Of the Herald-Republic  
(Second in a series)

The Stars and Stripes no longer wave over the remains of the Heart Mountain, Wyo., concentration camp.

The flag pole was disassembled long ago. The barbed-wire fences have been removed. The buildings have been sold, taken away or scrapped.

And as the winter now begins to set in again on that lonely Wyoming bluff, sheep graze sluggishly next to a low-lying monument which still marks the fate of the Japanese race in America — from Sunnyside to Yakima, from British Columbia to San Diego.

Only the memories linger.

"I'll never forget what we went through," said Ken Inaba, a farmer who lives near Harrah. He was 17 when he was taken with his family to the Heart Mountain concentration camp.

"The memory is something I'll

carry with me to the grave," he said. "It is one wrong that will never be made right as far as I'm concerned. I don't have animosity, but I just don't ever forget. I tolerate it, but I never forget."

Like most other West Coast Japanese-Americans, including

For the most part, all the camps looked the same. Whether it was Heart Mountain (where most of the Yakima-area Japanese were taken), Topaz, Utah; Gila River, Ariz; Minidoka, Idaho, or any of the six others, all the camps were clustered in similar desolation.

ment buildings, placed in isolation where the dust swept across the compound, bordered by guard towers, fences, gates and secured with an almost impenetrable executive order.

"Executive Order 9066 affected all Japanese residing on the West Coast, including those living west of the Columbia River," Kara Kondo wrote in a 1973 profile of the Yakima Valley Japanese Community. "By June 6, 1942, with the possible exception of one or two persons, no Japanese remained in the Yakima Valley."

And like the others from the Yakima community, Kondo was one of those taken to the Heart Mountain facility.

"The whole experience was very emotional," Kondo said. "I used to cry every night. Not because it was happening to me. But because it was happening."

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## CAPTIVES IN THEIR OWN LAND



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about 1,200 from the Yakima area, Inaba and his family were placed in one of 10 concentration camps in 1942 to wait out the war being fought thousands of miles away in the Pacific Ocean and throughout Europe.

"A concentration camp is a concentration camp is a concentration camp," one Japanese-American spokesman explained bluntly.

Each camp setting was regimented in identical govern-

## Heart Mountain camp: 'this strange place'

Time in the Heart Mountain, Wyo., concentration camp passed slowly. Like an endless broken record, the days there in 1942 skipped by in similar repetition.

In the mornings, potbelly stoves blazed in each little one-room family apartment and the freezing air outside was cut with the smoke and smell of paltry breakfasts being prepared in the dozens of mess halls strategically situated throughout the barrack-like buildings.

As the opening bells clanged and the fire sirens blared the camp awake, people scurried back and forth to the latrines found in each block of the center.

Most of the latrines were like run-down locker rooms. Men and women took showers in an open area where privacy was almost non-existent, and the bitter cold

forced many to wait through the day before carrying on with most bodily functions.

During the daylight hours, some of the Japanese-Americans left the camp under government supervision to work in nearby farm fields, and others participated in many other activities, including performing the many vital functions necessary to survival.

Some cleaned and cooked and washed dishes. Others helped run the camp school, repaired equipment, cleaned the latrines or worked shoveling coal to keep hot water flowing.

As time went on, doctors, nurses, office workers and recreation organizers were needed and provided from the diverse camp population.

Many people passed their days away tending to children, patching

old and worn clothing, washing laundry, writing letters to relatives on "the outside," hand-crafting small trinkets or carving with some of the scrap wood that was periodically heaped in piles around the camp.

Still others would just circle the camp, walking around the barbed-wire fences and staring outside to the barren flatlands that stretched out to the foot of Heart Mountain.

At night, the workers straggled in under guard and the stoves would heat up again.

Food, which consisted of horse meat, potatoes, rice, beans, salted fish and some vegetables, was served with precision at dinner time.

And then families huddled off to their rooms to fight the cold in sleep, only to rise once more the next morning to the constant routine of another day in captivity.

"When the population reached 12,658, many rooms were partitioned in half and the families crowded closer," Estelle Ishigo wrote in her book "Lone Heart Mountain."

"Children were born here — some third and fourth generation Americans beginning life in this strange place. Sometimes an old one dropped dead from fear, worry and hardship or the altitude and severe climate.

"In the confusion of adjustment, tempers were lost, personalities changed. Some who before had lived quietly by themselves now became leaders and some, in this undreamed of predicament, found humor.

"The interrelation of experiences quickened a bond; a pattern of life took form and made it compelling to do anything to keep alive — to keep sane."



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For a young girl just out of high school, Kondo said the evacuation was like an adventure at first. But soon the adventure turned sour.

"We knew we were being incarcerated and really wondered why," Kondo said. "I would say the experience of just going some place new tended to color the attitudes of the children at the time. But the fact they were being taken without due process and put behind barbed wire was very traumatic."

Time in the camp crawled by. Families began to settle into their one-room "apartments." The mess halls opened with regularity. The seasons changed from bitter, cold winters to dry, dust-laden summers. And most of the Japanese people, reluctant but resilient, began to adjust to the "relocation" as best they could.

"A lot of people were bitter at the time," 68-year-old Herb Iseri said of how people reacted in the camps. "But we had to get going. Everybody chipped in."

Ray Yamamoto, who was 28 when he was forced into the Minidoka camp, said that the Japanese-Americans constantly had their rights violated even before the bombing of Pearl Harbor.

"The Japanese people withstood a lot of abuse," he said. "They were used to it. It started ever since they immigrated to the U.S."

The needs of the 10,000 people at Heart Mountain were many. Children had to be taken care of, laundry had to be washed, people had to be fed, schools needed instructors, medical facilities needed qualified staff, showers needed to be kept clean, and wood had to be cut and stacked for heat.

And with few major problems, the Japanese people quickly organized the camp to meet those needs and more.

Iseri, for example, helped organize recreation activities for the children and worked in the sports center checking out athletic equipment.

Kondo devoted her time to the Heart Mountain newspaper, which reported on the news of the camp as well as providing information on the outside world.

Inaba went to work in nearby farm fields and then came back to the camp where he finished his last year of high school.

Yamamoto reviewed work permits. Yoshio Hata of Wapato went to the farm labor camps in Eastern Oregon. And others took similar jobs or stayed in the camps where activities such as painting and woodworking helped pass the time.

One of the most unusual events that some Japanese still remember came after the "relocation authority" decided it would be good to stage a program along the lines of a talent show.

In her book, "Lone Heart Mountain," Estelle Ishigo gives the following detailed account of the show:

"An American flag waved from the improvised stage in the sharp, cold wind. Two soldiers sat next to it — very straight and still. There was an introduction by the project director, with speeches and then the entertainment."

"Shivering performers waited behind the platform trying to keep out of mud and snow. A group of girls finished their dance and lifting the skirts of their bright kimonos, slipped their feet into high wooden geta and ran through the mud and snow back to their barrack rooms."

"Then two others dressed in overcoats and sweaters climbed on the stage. One gripped a violin in icy cold hands and the other went to the piano. As they played, the wind blew the music to the floor. They played on to the end, trembling with cold, and then climbed down from the stage blushing with embarrassment. The two soldiers sat still like statues of stone waiting for the program to continue."

Certainly, life in the camps was not ideal for fun and games.

"There was no privacy; that was the worst thing," Kondo said. "And everybody had to always wait in line for everything. There were community mess halls, community laundries. It was all on a communal system."

"Then you heard the gates clank behind you, and it was a terrible feeling."

The gates, however, would not stay closed forever.

By the end of 1943, with the war effort firmly entrenched and looking more optimistic each day, it soon seemed apparent that Japanese-Americans really posed no major threat to the security of the country.

"The attitude of the people overall was that we were in a survival situation," Kondo said. "There were always rumors of what your future would be,



(Staff photo by Sherry Bockwinkel)

## Herb Iseri was among those at Heart Mountain

but, eventually, we knew we would get out."

This was made all the more evident when a great number of people were released from the camps in 1944 and 1945 to attend college or work in areas not considered vulnerable to attack.

Iseri took a job in Spokane at Whitworth College. Inaba went East to work in an attempt to put himself through school. Kondo left to be married. Hata enrolled in college. And Yamamoto took a job as an assistant leave officer.

Then the war ended in a bang. On Aug. 6, 1945, the United States dropped an atomic bomb on the Japanese city of Hiroshima, followed by a similar bombing at Nagasaki on Aug. 9. Finally on Sept. 12, the Japanese troops in Southeast Asia surrendered and the Japanese-American concentration camps were soon closed for good.

After the war ended and the Japanese had been allowed to leave the 10 concentration camps, most found it hard to go back home to start their lives over again. They found few friends and little hope of picking up where they had left off.

"In 1946, when the camps were officially closed and residents allowed to return to the West Coast, only a small percentage (about one-third) of the original 1,200 residents returned to the Yakima Valley," records a 1976 report of the Yakima Valley Asian American Task Force. "Many relocated in other parts of the country; a large number moved to Seattle."

"A few former residents slowly returned only to find hostility. 'No Japs Allowed' signs appeared in almost every store and business establishment in Wapato. Forced resistance met the Japanese at every point."

"Some of those who had returned remained only long enough to learn that the Valley had no future for them."

Of those who did return, Kondo explained that coming back to the Lower Valley was just as much of a struggle as surviving the concentration camp.

"It was just as traumatic as leaving, especially in the Lower Valley," she said. "People were just told to move on. You look back in light of what has happened, and it is just another chapter of the whole thing."

"I guess there is a little bit of larceny in all of us."

Iseri added that he never thought American citizens could be placed in such a hostile position.

"The law says we were created equal," he said. "I was 30 years old then; so I should have known better. It was rough. Those who hated you, hated you regardless of anything you could do."

The Inaba family was one of the first groups of people who returned to the Yakima area after the camps had closed.

Ken Inaba, who was almost 21 at the time, remembers today how hard it was to come back to the farm his family was forced to abandon in Wapato.

He said his father had the family work the farm he leased from the Yakima Indian Nation until the last day before the trains rushed the Japanese community into their temporary incarceration.

Because of this, the family lost its property, its machinery and a lot of time and money invested in cultivating crops.

"If you keep on farming, you just put every cent back into the land," Inaba said. "My parents really suffered. We didn't have welfare back then. We gave our equipment away when we left, and when we came back, we had to pay through the nose for the same things."

Soon after he returned, Inaba became legally able to acquire the land his father had farmed before the war.

"The first year back was rough," Inaba said. "I remember getting only six hours sleep a day and eating my meals on a tractor."

"We had no choice, the whole family worked like that. We came up the hard way."

"You see, the Japanese people at the time had an ethical code. We were a very proud people and we literally worked ourselves all the time, around the clock . . . the hardship made us a better people."