

AMERICANS

wapato independent

# Japanese-Americans recall internment camp experience

BY ANN LEIGHTY

May (Yasuda) Umemoto became a prisoner of her own country on June 4, 1942 when along with thousands of Americans of Japanese descent, she and her family were taken from their homes and placed in internment camps.

The journey of the Wapato native was relived recently when Umemoto and seven other women who had lived in the Heart Mountain, Wyoming internment camp, held a 44 year reunion.

Present besides Umemoto were Rosie (Wada) Ishimoto from Torrence, Calif.; Margie (Konishi) Hattori of Moses Lake; Alyce (Wada) Yoshikai of salem, Ore.; Tamaki (Inaba) Mitsui of Renton; Joan (Hirano) Suyemaisu, Ontario, Ore.; Toshi (Matsumura) Terayama of Kent and Sono (Iko) Nishi of Zillah.

The only one missing of the original group of friends was Sue (Tainaka) Ideta.

All had been residents of the Wapato-Toppenish area when World War II began and the American government for so-called defense purposes decided to incarcerate Japanese-Americans.

Barbed wire fence and guards with guns greeted the people who were taken to the internment camps across the United States. Camp became their home for the next two to four years.

"We were so young when we were taken to Heart Mountain that it seemed like it was more fun than anything else," said Umemoto, whose parents and 11 brothers and sisters, were released within two years after being placed in the

camp.

Only a few weeks warning were given to the Japanese-Americans about the move and Rosie Ishimoto said that was one of the saddest parts of the whole thing. "It was such short notice that my parents did not have time to put things into order," she said.

"Now as a parent I have come to realize just how devastating it really was," said Ishimoto, whose father had raised hops in Parker Heights before the war.

"My parents had to give up everything because we could only take with us what we could carry," she added.

One thing Umemoto said she missed due to the experience was that she had no heirlooms from her parents because only essentials were taken with them.

To get to Heart Mountain the women said they had to take a train from Portland which took between three to four days. "What I remember about the trip was that it was really dark inside because all the blinds had been pulled down," said Umemoto.

Approximately 12,000 Japanese-Americans were kept at Heart Mountain. Families were assigned to barracks which had six rooms in each. Umemoto recalled that her family had been placed in two of the six rooms.

There was also a mess hall and community wash facilities. Schooling was provided as well as several extra-curricular activities.

The nine girlfriends, who at the time were in their early teens, participated in Girl Scouts, a school



## Reunion

**Rosie (Wada) Ishimoto, left, traveled all the way from California to attend the 44 year reunion of friends who were all held in the Heart Mountain Internment Camp during World War II because of their Japanese descent. On the right is May (Yasuda) Umemoto of Wapato who hosted the affair.**

drill team and formed a successful softball team they called the Alligator Pros because of the way they caught the ball with two hands.

"I can't get over how long ago it all seems," said Umemoto, who believes such a thing could never happen again in the United States. "But if you are ordered to go you go," she said. "If the U.S. Government tells you something you do it."

Umemoto's parents, Heisaku and Ichi Yasuda, had been residents of the country for over 30 years when Pearl Harbor was attacked.

One thing that remains the same today as it did back then was the

discrimination many people felt towards Japanese-Americans. "Before this all happened people used to call us Japs and tell us to go back to Japan.

"Even after our release, sentiments against the Japanese people were high. I still think there is discrimination now," she said.

But throughout the ordeal then and the after effects that still remain, to this day Umemoto and her friends hold on to their dignity and culture.

"I learned I had to lift my head up and say to heck with it," she added.

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