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Global Urban History of Housing Justice

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Home is Where the Heart Is: How Interned Japanese Americans Created Community and “Home”

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Open with soundscape: Wind in the Wyoming desert, train on the tracks, footsteps through the rocky dirt, creaking wood of the hastily-crafted barracks...

Intro/Language:

IB: “Drive out a bit from town, where the view up the valley is unobstructed, and you can see the lights of what appears to be a great city in a magnificence that reaches skyward.”¹

AC: That comes from the front page of the August 20th, 1942 issue of the *Powell Tribune*, the daily newspaper from a town in northern Wyoming. If one were to continue driving toward that distant light, they’d find that that light wasn’t being emitted from some Los Angeles or New York-type metropolis emerging from the midst of the Wyoming landscape. That “magnificent

¹ "Bringing in Hundreds of West Coast Japanese," *Powell Tribune* (20 August 1942), 1.

city” was the Heart Mountain Relocation Center—one of the ten internment camps where the US government detained Japanese Americans from 1942-1945, the final years of World War II.²

SK: Thank you for tuning in to *Home Is Where the Heart Is*.

IB: I’m Bella

AC: I’m Amber

SK: I’m Sophie

IB: And with the help of Sophie’s grandfather, Ken Kato, who, as a nine-year old, was interned at Heart Mountain with his family, we’re going to take you through the history of Heart Mountain and an account of life inside the camp. We’ll hear about how Japanese families interned there met unthinkable loss with resilience and ingenuity. They crafted new definitions of “home” by building familiar structures within the camp’s confines. The camps didn’t just have residences, they also had sports teams, schools, social clubs, and more. Can we actually think of them as cities? What is at stake in even asking that question?

KK: Okay. Yes, my name is Ken Kato. I live in San Pedro, California. My birthdate, I was born on November 7, 1932.

SK: Thank you for joining us, Grandpa.

AC: Before we get into the history of Heart Mountain, let’s talk a little bit about the language people use when they describe Japanese internment. “Relocation centers” were built by the U.S. government to detain Japanese Americans of the issei generation and the nisei generation. The issei generation are those born in Japan who first immigrated to the United States. The nisei generation were their children, second-generation Japanese Americans who were born in the States.

² Bradford Pearson, “For Japanese-Americans, Housing Injustices Outlived Internment - The New York Times,” accessed December 18, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/20/magazine/japanese-internment-end-wwii-trailer-parks.html>.

IB: All Japanese Americans were subject to relocation and internment from 1942-1945. When we go back through newspaper articles, policies, and other documents from that period, we see the Japanese American population depicted in two ways -- ways that the media and US government used to justify their imprisonment.

SK: The first justification reflects the nation's wartime hysteria and widespread Anti-Japanese sentiment resulting from Japan's position as an enemy Axis nation during World War II. Terms appear like "Japs", "Orientals", and other derogatory language, as the U.S. government and media worked jointly to reinforce their largely fabricated reports that Japanese Americans were guilty of treason and espionage. In mainstream American thought, many people believed that Japanese Americans were actively supporting a wartime enemy from within. A local newspaper called *The Enterprise* from Cody, Wyoming, one of the towns closest to Heart Mountain, announced in its May 27th, 1942 headline (quote): "10,000 Japs to be Interned Here". The article explained that the relocation centers were being built (quote) "on the grounds of military necessity" and that (quote) "evacuees would be under the strictest of military guards."³

IB: Beyond these claims to be saving America from the enemy within, there was another justification for the internment of Japanese Americans. Some argued that Japanese Americans benefited from their forced relocation. They're referred to as "refugees" living in safety and comfort, and as vacationers enjoying their stay at a long-term hotel. Simultaneously, Wyoming newspapers reassured the American public that the Japanese population would be strictly and securely contained. They also portrayed the relocation camps as happy vacation towns, obscuring blatant violations of civil rights. A front-page headline of the *Tribune* called Heart Mountain a "haven" that would (quote) "be their habitation and refuge for the duration of the war".⁴

AC: Of course, there's a tension between these two renderings of the Japanese American population. Why would you build a vacation destination for people allegedly conspiring against the U.S. war effort? But, when we put side by side these two ideas about who Japanese Americans were, the primary intention of internment comes to light.

³ "10,000 Japs to be Interned Here," *Cody Enterprise* (27 May 1942), 1.

⁴ Ronald Bishop (2009) "Little More than Minutes": How Two Wyoming Community Newspapers Covered the Construction of the Heart Mountain Internment Camp, *American Journalism*, 26:3, 7-32, DOI: 10.1080/08821127.2009.10677725.

SK: As the *Powell Tribune* wrote, Japanese Americans were (quote) “industrious, substantial citizens who are not in any way harmful to the American war effort.” But these (quote) “peaceful, hard-working people of oriental origin had been infiltrated by that element of Japanese who are sympathetic with the Mikado’s realm in this very serious war with America. One could not expect military and government officials to differentiate among all the Japanese.”⁵

IB: So, in other words, by detaining *all* Japanese Americans, the U.S. could be sure to protect its other citizens from the handful of Japanese who were supposedly conspiring to sabotage the U.S. war effort. Of course, the claims that *any* Japanese Americans were committing these forms of treason were unfounded. Xenophobic, racially charged beliefs and fear overpowered the conditional access to the rights of American citizenship for 20,000 Japanese people. People of Japanese descent, including non-naturalized immigrants, naturalized immigrants, and American-born citizens, were also interned for their alleged espionage. The federal government claimed that people of Japanese descent living in the United States needed to be contained and surveilled through imprisonment and relocation for greater American safety and sanctity.⁶

SK: We mention all this because it’s important to understand these Japanese Americans were subjected to relocation programs not as refugees or traitors, vacationers or spies, but as US citizens entitled to the same rights as the rest of the population. The U.S. imprisoned citizens within their own country and deemed them traitors. We draw our own language from the accounts of Heart Mountain’s residents, who often refer to themselves as internees, detainees, and inmates.

History

AC: With that said, let’s lay out a historical timeline and talk about the creation of Heart Mountain. Without addressing past events and the particular language we use to describe them, our history remains separate from us. Cleansed. (pause) Palatable. Often, individuals seek to distance themselves historically from the mistreatment of migrants, genocide, and disruption of communities. So how did Japanese internment come to be?

⁵ "Japanese to be Interned Here," *Powell Tribune* (28 May 1942), 2

⁶ “The Injustice of Japanese-American Internment Camps Resonates Strongly to This Day | History | Smithsonian Magazine,” accessed December 7, 2020, <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/history/injustice-japanese-americans-internment-camps-resonates-strongly-180961422/>.

IB: On February 19, 1942, two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, emboldening the Secretary of War to (quote) “exclude any and all persons, citizens, and aliens, from designated areas in order to provide security against sabotage, espionage, and fifth column activity.”⁷

SK: After designating much of the West Coast as a military zone, the FBI emphasized that people of Japanese descent posed a threat to American safety post-Pearl Harbor. After, the FBI was authorized to arrest enemy aliens (although German and Italian residents were not relocated nearly to the same extent as Japanese residents).

AC: 2,000 Issei were then arrested. The Navy ordered all Japanese-owned fishing boats to be beached to prevent them from aiding Japanese ships.⁸ All assets of Japanese nationals were frozen. Issei and Nisei Japanese Americans were sent to assembly centers, then to relocation centers staffed by the War Relocation Authority (the WRA). These centers were often unused fairgrounds, racetracks, or warehouses where families had to camp out in the interim period before being transported to a relocation camp.

SK: Grandpa, what was your experience with this initial forced relocation?

KK: Okay. Yes. I lived with my parents and my grandfather and my brother in Los Angeles. UH...an my father had a business. He had a billiard parlor. He had a home that we lived in. And he also had recently bought a apartment house. And then the war started, December 7 1941. A few days after the war started, the FBI, Federal Bureau of Investigation, they came to pick up my father for some reason, he may have been *His wife, Yuki Kato interjects* December, 1941 years ago when the war started. Okay. But anyway, for some reason, my dad my dad and my brother was associated with the martial arts of Kendo and maybe my father's association with that was the reason why the FBI came and took him to camp but he was not. He didn't talk too much. We didn't know exactly the reason why he was taken. The responsibility of the business and home and stuff was left up to my mother. And she really wasn't that aware of what was going on but still she had to take care of everything. We were in Los Angeles for, I don't know

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Saara Kekki, “Life at Heart Mountain: A Dynamic Network Model of a Japanese American Community during World War II,” *University of Helsinki*, 2019, <https://doi.org/https://helda.helsinki.fi/handle/10138/294727>.

about three months before they took us to the relocation center.

KK: But anyway, my mother had to take care of all the business but she didn't know what to do because the government never helped us. But she found a real estate or real estate man came over and he said he's willing to help us so my mother had no other choice. So she kind of left it up to him. All of her home furnishing and furniture and whatever she had she took and put it into the attic in the business, and then, about three months later, approximately, I think, we were taken to the relocation center in Pomona. They had uh fixed up horse barn--that's where we stayed and (laughs) we could smell the horse, horse smell when you went there. We were there for maybe...I dont know...maybe for about six months while they were building up the permanent relocation center in Wyoming. And then maybe six months after we went to Pomona they put us on a train. The train [and] we went to Wyoming, and the train that we went on, they pulled all of the shades so we couldn't see the outside. And it took maybe about three days for us to finally get to Heart Mountain...

KK: The only thing that we were able to take on our own was whatever my mother was able to get into a suitcase, so mostly clothes and stuff like that. She really wasn't able to take too many things. Like I said she stored everything into the attic of our parlor.

AC: What followed was a monumental loss of property, personal objects, and assets. The FBI mandated that Japanese Americans dispose of all "contraband items"-- namely radios, cameras, and other technology that could somehow be used for their alleged fifth column activity.⁹ Many families destroyed other belongings that might be used to further villainize them -- items that represented their Japanese heritage, like books, heirlooms, and clothing. They lost not only their material possessions but their connections to culture, community, customs, geography, and much more that was rooted in their home cities.

(Re)creation of City

⁹ Saara Kekki.

IB: Along with this incredible loss, I can't imagine the shocking transition from city life in California -- where most of the incarcerated came from -- to rural Wyoming,¹⁰ where the WRA had built the skeleton of their new prison city.

AC: There were state-certified schools and small businesses under WRA control. Internees had wages and jobs -- although those too were heavily restricted and under-compensated. White nurses hired by Heart Mountain made about \$150/month, whereas employed internees made about \$19/month.

SK: And the camp itself was laid out like an army camp, with repetitions of the same barrack structure. The War Relocation Authority had military members assemble the barracks hastily, some in as little as 58 minutes, out of cheap, untreated beams that shrank in the dry and extreme climate of the region, creating gaps in the walls.¹¹ Bill Hosokawa, an internee who went on to become a prominent journalist, wrote that, "the Wyoming wind had an uncanny knack for finding the smallest cracks in walls and creating uncomfortable drafts in barracks."

KK: The barracks were 20 feet wide by 120 feet long. And each barrack had six rooms for six different families. And all it was our room was the end rooms were the small ones, you know for couples, for two people. So, and then the next one next to that was the largest one. by large it was maybe about 24 by 20. And the middle ones were for families of four and those are just a square room 20 by 20, I think.

K K: There was there was maybe about 30 blocks or so I think. I know there was a block 28 so that was I think...I remember block 28. I was on block six. So, each block had I think 24 barracks. There was an upper block in a lower block. Upper block had 12 barracks, I think, in the lower block had 12 barracks. And in between was a pretty good-sized space. Nothing was there. So if you could imagine the barracks lined up six next to each other on one side, and then a mess hall and a toilet in between and on the other side, another six barracks. And then that was the

¹⁰ Eric J. Sandeen, "The Japanese American Relocation Center at Heart Mountain and the Construction of the Post-World War II Landscape," in *Politics and Cultures of Liberation*, ed. Hans Bak, Frank Mehring, and Mathilde Roza, vol. 7, Media, Memory, and Projections of Democracy (Brill, 2018), 285–306, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvbqs8h0.17>.

¹¹ "NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION ." USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86). United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service , n.d. http://files.cfc.umt.edu/cesu/NPS/CU/2004/Noel_Heart%20Mountain%20NHL%20Nomination.pdf.

upper block, and then the lower block at the same type of arrangement. So later on, they dug a trench in the middle and filled it with water and made an ice rink out of it. So, in the wintertime, you know, everyone went ice skating there. I don't know where they got the ice skates from, but maybe the government furnished that.

SK: Similar to what happens in refugee camps, there was a “division of labor and livelihoods” in the internment camps.¹² Interned residents took on different roles that reflected their past experience and professions to satisfy personal and “city” needs. There were farmers, cooks, and firefighters,¹³ and eventually, teachers, event organizers, group leaders, elected representatives, and much more.

AC: They had much of what other American cities had, but they were still very much detainees, and their reality as prisoners loomed over them. Decisions ultimately lay at the hands of guards and camp officials. There was an enforced hierarchy between authorities and detainees -- communication with the outside world was heavily restricted. People were crammed and privacy was non-existent. There was an elected government that oversaw camp functions. Punishment for crimes that occurred in the camps could result in imprisonment in a “normal” federal or state prison.

IB: Guards holding inward-pointing machine guns surrounded the detainees and a barbed wire fence enclosed them, exemplifying the extremely hostile prison environment of this unique “city.”

SK: Yet, at 10,000, the population of Heart Mountain would make it the third largest city in Wyoming at that time.¹⁴ Even with the looming and deterring prison environment, the camps had systems, facilities, amenities, governance, and layouts that resembled that of a municipality.¹⁵ Little by little, the imprisoned internees impressively nurtured this military-constructed camp

¹² Bram J Jansen, “The Accidental City: Urbanisation in an East-African 11 Refugee Camp,” n.d., 2.

¹³ Park County Travel Council. “The Heart Mountain Relocation Center.” Cody Yellowstone Wyoming. Buffalo Bill's Cody / Yellowstone Country., February 25, 2011. <https://www.codyyellowstone.org/blog/the-heart-mountain-relocation-center-the-community-in-the-camp/>.

¹⁴ Eric J. Sandeen, “The Japanese American Relocation Center at Heart Mountain and the Construction of the Post-World War II Landscape.”

¹⁵ Ibid.

into a living “city,” a place that felt normal and comfortable, yet was complex enough to meet basic needs.

KK: They had a movie theater that was a barrack. And I don't remember but there was some place where they used to grow vegetables and things, you know -- a plot of land over there that they converted and made into a big vegetable garden.

AC: Get this: the land that Heart Mountain was built on was qualified as “abandoned government property” perceived as arid desert wasteland. But the Japanese internees managed to plant gardens and turn sections into fertile farmland, making the camp pretty much self-sustainable. Eventually some internees got work permits that allowed them to leave the camp, because sugar beet growers in the surrounding region were requesting their agricultural expertise.¹⁶ The U.S. House Committee on Un-American Activities, which was founded to investigate disloyalty, actually attacked the WRA and the relocation camps, on the grounds that they were “coddling” Japanese American internees! As they claimed throughout the 1943 hearings, the camps weren’t experiencing the same wartime shortages as the rest of the American public, which raised suspicion about where their food supply was coming from. In actuality, they were just growing it themselves.¹⁷

IB: I am curious about if there was a sense of “home” in the relocation camps, because I’d say the sense of “home” in a place is so crucial to making a city a city. How did the imprisoned residents make their prison more home-like? And moreover, would Heart Mountain therefore be considered a city?

AC: I wonder about that too. I think there are two definitions of cities at hand here--the definition crafted by the government and media, who created the settlements and controlled public perceptions of them. And another definition created by the actual residents of the settlements. So, the WRA created internment camps to bring supposed order during the war and to control

¹⁶ Eric J. Sandeen, “The Japanese American Relocation Center at Heart Mountain and the Construction of the Post-World War II Landscape,” in *Politics and Cultures of Liberation*, ed. Hans Bak, Frank Mehring, and Mathilde Roza, vol. 7, Media, Memory, and Projections of Democracy (Brill, 2018), 285–306, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/10.1163/j.ctvbqs8h0.17>.

¹⁷ Brian Nijiya. Dies Committee. (2020, October 16). Densho Encyclopedia. Retrieved 13:12, December 18, 2020 from <https://encyclopedia.densho.org/Dies%20Committee>.

Japanese American communities. But Japanese Americans, in an attempt to cope with their sudden imprisonment in a foreign place, reappropriated the community that had been forced together and made it their own. They emulated their home cities within camp walls, defying the confines of the prisons created for them. That's such a testament to their incredible resilience, and their ability to reject socio-spatial restrictions, isolation, and segregation.

SK: It also must have been difficult to try to create a "home" when what would be the most private layer of the city -- the house, the room -- was shared in close proximity to others. Guards could freely enter the homes and rooms of the interned families suspected of crimes or those who resisted enlistment in armed services.¹⁸

KK: And the only thing that was in the room was a potbelly stove. That was the only thing you had to heat up your room and put coal in there. Keep it burning. The walls weren't very insulated... But you know, it wasn't much privacy because there was just a room -- for me being a kid it was okay -- but I'm sure for some of the other people you know, that were couples and stuff, you know, it was just a bare room, and not much privacy at all. And so, the only thing they furnished was a army kind of bed, kind of cot and a mattress and some blankets.

SK: Do you remember anyone like decorated the rooms in any way or like added, like, ways to...[ensure privacy]?

KK: You'd have to go into a shower. That's not private. It's just showers in one room, maybe about eight or 10 showers that comes up but it's all in one room. So, everyone took a shower in the same place. And even the toilets, it's not private, just a toilet bowl, just lined up.

Soundscape: people talking, a busy environment and sound of showers (?)

SK: Without physical objects and manifestations of "home," including privacy and personal space, I'm sure many internees relied instead on the creation of a socio-psychological, cultural home-- the more intangible, human elements of a "home" that are created through communities'

¹⁸ Stacey Lynn Camp, "Landscapes of Japanese American Internment," *Historical Archaeology* 50, no. 1 (2016): 169-86.

traditions, practices, and customs, which all allow for expression, play and solidarity, and human connection. For my grandpa, as a nine- to eleven-year-old boy, the Boy Scouts and general play time really cemented this sense of socio-psychological home.

KK: All I did was think about playing. So, everyone, you know, we had a lot of friends. We finally made a...they had things like Boy Scouts. So, in our block, we made a Cub Scout(s) that I was in.

IB: To spruce up and improve their homes, imprisoned residents also used raw material scraps from the camps, received materials from people outside of the camps by mail to create functional objects, gifts, costumes, decorations, and art pieces. Many of the art creations depicted the camp environment, and others gracefully portrayed elements of Japanese and American culture, like dolls made out of kimono fabric and Minnie Mouse pendants.¹⁹

AC: In this way, they actualized an environment for themselves that -- albeit with restrictions -- served as a second home, and therefore, a second home city.

The Aftermath

SK: The internees continued to attempt to recreate a city and a sense of home up until the war ended in 1944. After the prisoners were released, this “home” -- in all of its ways -- was destroyed and abandoned with an abruptness that resembled their initial relocation and transition. Parts of the barracks were auctioned off for as low as a dollar to be used for garages or barns.²⁰

AC: And properties, assets, and possessions that internees had prior to their internment were devastatingly lost, misplaced, or stolen. A postwar survey would later show that 80% of privately stored goods were destroyed, stolen, or sold illegally during the absence of owners.²¹

KK: They lost everything. I tell you about the real estate person that was supposed to take care of everything, and he said that someone came in and robbed the place and took everything.

¹⁹ “The Art of Gaman: Arts and Crafts from the Japanese American Internment Camps 1942–1946, D. Hirasuna, Ten Speed Press, Berkeley, CA (2005), *The Arts in Psychotherapy* 33, no. 5 (January 1, 2006): 456–57, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.aip.2006.09.003>.

²⁰ Eric J. Sandeen, “The Japanese American Relocation Center at Heart Mountain,” 285–306.

²¹ Michi Nishiura Weglyn, *Years of Infamy: The Untold Story of America's Concentration Camps* (New York: Morrow, 1976), 34.

Mother came back to Los Angeles and she went to visit him at his house, and he thought she was somebody else, and invited her in. And then the first thing she saw was the Persian rug on his floor and her sewing machine. We had to go to Chicago after the war, because my father heard that there was too much prejudice going on... in the West Coast. So, my father went there. They were able to get a very -- it was really in a slum area that he rented a hotel, a room. And they shared it with one of our friends from camp.

IB: Although “free,” the imprisoned Japanese-American residents were ultimately abandoned, with most of their possessions and assets permanently gone. Rampant racial discrimination still followed them at every turn--(PAUSE) connecting urban segregation, poverty, and stigmatization in postwar America with the relocation camps.

Conclusion

AC: Journalists told the public that they’d all be safer once Japanese Americans were rounded up and contained in these camps. Yet at the same time, these same news reports worked to convince the public that those very sites of containment served as luxurious and desirable homes for Japanese Americans. News reports really sold this contradictory image. In 1942 the *Powell Tribune* advertised that, the weekend before internees were set to arrive at Heart Mountain, the public could visit (quote) “to bring their families and friends to the camp to see the city in a nearly completed condition.”²²

IB: Unpacking that prison-paradise dualism is important to understanding the impact of calling Heart Mountain a “city”. When these newspaper reports announced that internees would be arriving at a newly constructed city, it made their forced relocation seem *normal*, almost like Japanese American families were just moving from one U.S. city to another. Yet, readers were also invited to visit the grounds, to ogle at the place where this supposedly threatened population would soon be detained for the safety of the American public. Through this strategic description, journalists depicted internment as something that could do the seemingly impossible: ensure the safety and comfort of Japanese Americans *and* all other U.S. citizens.

AC: Of course, we know that this reporting was fed by and in turn helped to form a set of ideas about justice, race, and spatial segregation and containment of the *supposed* enemy within. The alleged “safety” of the general American Public came at the expense of Japanese Americans’ civil rights, which were overtly and severely violated in the relocation process.

²² "Japanese Arrive at New heart Mountain Town," *Powell Tribune* (13 August 1942), 1.

SK: Yet, Heart Mountain *did* have all the makings of a “city.” It had institutions like schools, its own newspaper, a boy scout troop, civil rights and political groups, and even a successful agricultural system (that was notoriously more prosperous than those outside of the prison). There were craftsmen and artisans who opened up their own shops, there was a championship-winning football team, and cultural and community events like the Obon celebrations. Imprisoned residents even personalized their built environment and personal spaces.

AC: But when you pinpoint these as the components that made Heart Mountain a “city,” you find that these are all things built and maintained by the Japanese internees. In other words, the WRA and U.S. government didn’t altruistically build this city—full of all kinds of comforts and amenities—for Japanese Americans to live in throughout the War. They uprooted these families and forced them onto arid, abandoned government lands.

IB: On these lands, the internees then designed an entire city for *themselves*—for survival, for sustenance, for education, and for cultural preservation. So, when we look at Heart Mountain and other internment camps, we have to understand that it was not the U.S. government’s benevolence, or a part of its military strategy, that transformed it into a real *place* -- a “home,” a tangible, unique, and interconnected city. No...this city was built by Japanese American resilience.

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