

BACKGROUND

From: Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation
164 W. North St. # 5 Powell, WY 82435
www.heartmountain.org

Contact: George-Ann Rosenberg, PR Contact
Redpoint Communications
202-887-1744
gar@redpointcommunications.com
or
Christy Fleming, Area Manager
Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation
Interpretive Learning Center
307-764-2320

Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center to Open at Former WWII Internment Site in Wyoming

Japanese-American Internees and Their Families Plan Pilgrimage and Celebration in August

WASHINGTON, D.C. – The grand opening of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation Interpretive Learning Center will be the focal point of a three-day celebration, August 19-21, at the former World War II concentration camp in Park County, Wyo. From 1942 to 1945, nearly 14,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry were imprisoned at the Heart Mountain Relocation Center – one of 10 War Relocation Authority (WRA) camps in the American West – surrounded by guard towers and barbed wire fences. More than six decades later, an estimated 1,000 internees, descendants and supporters across the nation are planning a pilgrimage to the site to honor Heart Mountain survivors and commemorate the opening of this lasting tribute to their experiences.

According to Shirley Ann Higuchi, chair of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, the opening of the Interpretive Learning Center is the culmination of a 15-year effort to preserve the historic site – and interpret what occurred there – for the current and future generations of Americans. Founded in 1996, the foundation has raised nearly \$5 million through private donations, largely contributed by former Heart Mountain internees, and acquired 50 acres of land at the original site. In addition to exploring the 11,000-sq. ft. Interpretive Learning Center, visitors can take a 30-minute walking tour on a paved, 1,000-ft. loop that offers insight into camp life through a series of informational kiosks.

“The Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center will stand as a world-class educational facility and an enduring recognition of the struggles of Japanese Americans before, during and after the war,” said Higuchi, a third-generation *Sansei* whose parents were incarcerated at Heart Mountain.

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Higuchi said the site also has historic significance and deep meaning to local residents, noting that members of the Wyoming community have been active in the planning and development of the Interpretive Learning Center, serving as foundation board members, advisory council members and volunteers. The site was designated a U.S. National Historic Landmark in 2006.

“The new Interpretive Learning Center has essential lessons for us all – young and old alike – and is of immeasurable importance to the neighboring communities of Powell and Cody, the state of Wyoming and the nation,” stated Pete Simpson, board member of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

The Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center will house a number of permanent exhibits and artifacts in a barracks-like structure that helps capture a sense of everyday life at Heart Mountain. First, visitors will learn about the pre-war life of Japanese immigrants on the West Coast, and view an introductory film produced by Academy Award®-winning filmmaker Steven Okazaki. Next, visitors will learn about the upheaval of forced evacuation and the devastation of leaving behind homes, farms and businesses. Then, they will explore a model of the camp and gain an understanding of daily life through interactive displays and exhibits. And two recreated barracks rooms will reveal what it was like to arrive at Heart Mountain and how families tried to make the best of their spare living quarters. Lastly, visitors will gain insight into post-war challenges for the internees and the tragic legacy of civil rights abuses.

Higuchi, a Washington, D.C.-based attorney and past president of the District of Columbia Bar, said the lessons of Heart Mountain remain relevant today. “The Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center and surrounding site will stand as a powerful reminder to current and future generations of Americans of the need to balance concern for national security with respect for basic civil rights,” she stated.

“Our long-term vision for the Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center is to become a catalyst for further education and research on the internment experience and a voice in the ongoing national dialogue on civil rights policy,” said Higuchi. “We intend to eventually support advanced studies in the psychological and legal aspects of the Japanese American internment experience in collaboration with other organizations, museums and universities.”

The dedication ceremony is planned for Sat., Aug. 20 at the Interpretive Learning Center at 10:00 a.m. MDT, with a grand opening banquet in the evening at the Park County Fairgrounds in Powell, Wyo. Details about other events and activities scheduled for the three-day celebration can be found at www.heartmountain.org.

Named for nearby Heart Mountain, the Heart Mountain Relocation Center site is located on Highway 14A, Road 19, between the towns of Cody and Powell, and 60 miles east of Yellowstone National Park.

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