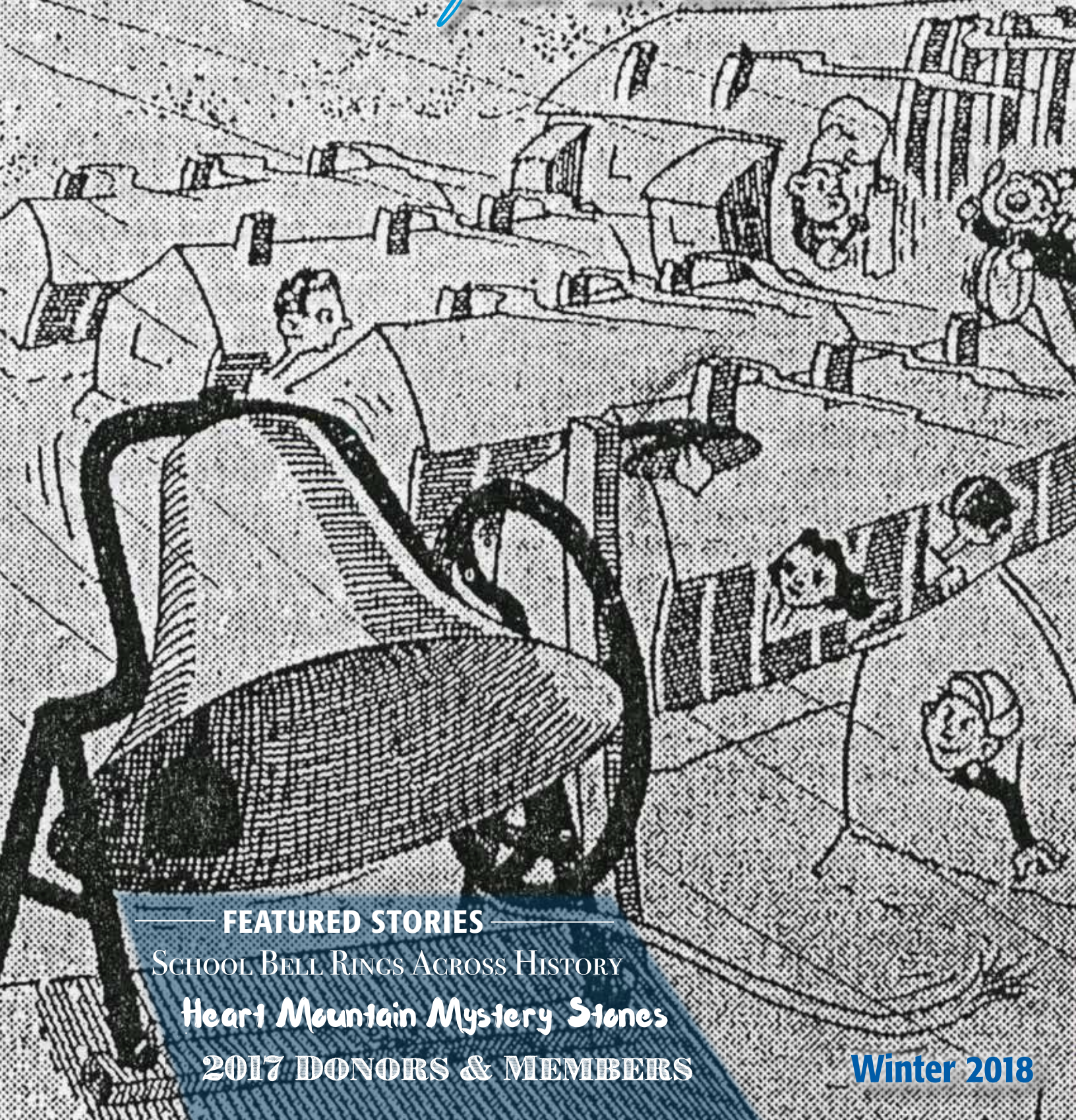




HEART MOUNTAIN WYOMING FOUNDATION

"from our heart"



FEATURED STORIES

SCHOOL BELL RINGS ACROSS HISTORY

Heart Mountain Mystery Stones

2017 DONORS & MEMBERS

Winter 2018



About the cover:

John Watanabe drew this cartoon to ring in the new year on January 1, 1943. It was featured in the first issue of the *Heart Mountain Sentinel* from that year.

HEART MOUNTAIN WYOMING FOUNDATION

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BRIDGING GAPS TO CREATE A STRONGER COMMUNITY

CHAIR SHIRLEY ANN HIGUCHI



Nearly three years after the auction of the Eaton artwork was cancelled, an exhibit focused on the priceless collection has finally opened at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM). The exhibit, *Contested Histories: Art and Artifacts from the Allen Hendershott Eaton Collection*, is on display through April 8, and has special meaning to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation (HMWF). It has been a long journey to this point, and we are so excited for the public to see the collection and the art created at Heart Mountain. We appreciate the hard work that JANM CEO Ann Burroughs and her team have put into making this exhibit a reality, and we congratulate JANM for putting together such a moving collection.

As you recall, HMWF first heard about the auction in March 2015. The items, donated to Eaton by incarcerated for the purpose of public display, had passed on to his daughter after his death. She in turn left them to her neighbor who made repairs to her home after a fire. The neighbor left them to his son, and the son arranged for the items to be publicly auctioned at Rago Arts in New Jersey. We reached out to the auction house, offering to pay more than twice as much as the items were valued. When our offer was rejected, and after exhausting every possible remedy, we moved forward to file an injunction on the basis that the incarcerated entrusted their work to Eaton for public interest purposes and not private gain. With the help of a grassroots campaign led by *Japanese American History: Not For Sale*, our efforts prompted Rago Arts to cancel the auction when our legal counsel gave notice of the injunction.

In the following months, JANM worked with Rago Arts and the consignor to acquire the items. The

crown jewels of the collection are a series of paintings by Estelle Ishigo, a Caucasian woman who was sent to Heart Mountain with her Nisei husband. Some of our Board and Advisory Council members remember Estelle from her time at the camp, and her artwork holds a special place in their hearts. In November 2015, after JANM had control of the Eaton collection, more than 80 Heart Mountain Nisei signed a moving letter to JANM, stressing the importance of Estelle's work and stating their wish to see her paintings at Heart Mountain before they died.

Now they will finally get the chance to see Estelle's pieces where they were created over 75 years ago. When the exhibit closes at JANM, it will go on tour to various museums and confinement sites. Additionally, ten of Estelle's paintings will go on loan to the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center, where they will be on display for the second half of 2018. From 2019, JANM will loan HMWF three Ishigo paintings each year to be part of our collection.

On January 7, 2018, our Board and Advisory Council members had a chance to see Estelle's work at JANM. For the opening of the exhibit, Board and Advisory Council members attended, including Darrell Kunitomi, Sam Mihara, Shig Yabu, Takashi Hoshizaki, Toshi Ito, Alan Kumamoto, and Joanne Kumamoto. Their visit made the front page of the *Rafu Shimpo*, and we are so proud that HMWF is represented by such inspirational figures in the Japanese American community.

Looking forward to our Pilgrimage on July 26–28, 2018, it's with great pleasure and excitement that I announce Japanese American Citizens League (JACL) Executive Director David

Inoue is keynoting. I first met David last October in Washington, D.C. to update him about the history of the All Camps Consortium. He told me about his background in advocacy, and I was struck by his compassion, unique understanding of the Japanese American community, and his vision for the future. We met later that month with JANM, again in D.C., to discuss the Consortium in more detail, and it was so inspiring to have the three of us—JACL, JANM, and HMWF—all on the same page about the direction of the Consortium. In the time since, we have added Friends of Minidoka to the Consortium's list of lead administrative stakeholders who have stepped forward to donate significant resources. We feel very optimistic about the Consortium's ability to bridge gaps in the Japanese American community and strengthen these important relationships.

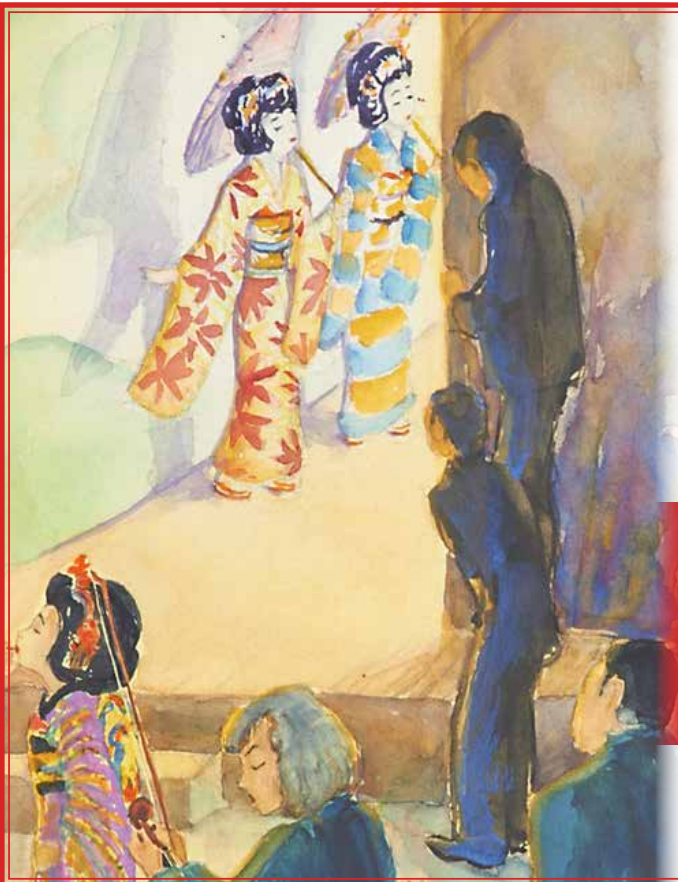
On the subject of bridging gaps, PBS premiered its new documentary series in January, *We'll Meet Again*. Host Ann Curry tells the stories of people reunited after long separations. In the first episode, Heart Mountain was the setting. Reiko Nagumo was incarcerated as a child and was reunited with her old

childhood friend, a Caucasian woman, 75 years later. Reiko reached out to me in a letter recently; seeing her story on TV put faces to the names mentioned in her letter and on our subsequent phone call. One of the many joys of my role as Chair is meeting those who spent time at Heart Mountain and hearing their inspiring and moving experiences.

Lastly, I regretfully announce the passing of two Heart Mountain Nisei, Ike Hatchimonji and Jack Kunitomi at the ages of 90 and 102, respectively. Both of these Heart Mountain incarcerated lived extraordinary lives, seeing and experiencing things many of us can only dream of. I can only imagine how proud they must have been to know how much they accomplished in their long lives. We feel so grateful for the work these men did in educating the public about the incarceration, and we're honored to have known them (see opposite page for more about Ike & Jack).

I look forward to seeing you at our 2018 Pilgrimage and celebrating all that we've accomplished. If you should have any questions, please feel free to reach out to me at shiguchi@heartmountain.org.

Shirley Ann Shiguchi



2018 Heart Mountain PILGRIMAGE

Powell & Cody • July 26–28, 2018

Join us this July for what promises to be
another memorable and meaningful
Heart Mountain Pilgrimage.

Visit

www.heartmountain.org/pilgrimage
for more details!

Registration Opens April 1, 2018

In Memoriam

Ike Hatchimonji (1928–2018)

Veteran Ike Hatchimonji passed away on January 17 at the age of 90. As a teenager, Hatchimonji and his family were incarcerated first at the assembly center in Pomona, and later at Heart Mountain. After the war, the family went to Arizona to re-start the Valley Seed Company, which they had been forced to abandon during their imprisonment. The company later moved to the Imperial Valley in California.



Photo courtesy of Robert Fujioka

In 1953, Hatchimonji was drafted into the US Army, and was deployed to Korea shortly after the ceasefire. He was honorably discharged in 1955. In the early 1960s, Hatchimonji started working for the Los Angeles County Public Health Department. He was working in the Watts community when the 1965 riots occurred. Hatchimonji later began a career in the U.S. Agency for International Development and worked in Nicaragua, Vietnam, and Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of Congo), as well as Washington, D.C. He retired from the agency in 1988.

Hatchimonji volunteered at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM) for over 28 years as a tour docent and volunteer fundraiser. He also served on the JANM President's Volunteer Council. His commitment to the museum earned him three volunteer awards. In addition to his wife of 60 years, Hatchimonji is survived by daughter Susan Gates (Jim), son Jim (Rachel), and son Alan (Souzan), plus six grandchildren and one great-grandchild. He is also survived by his twin brother Mike (Grace); his sister Gloria predeceased him.

Yoshisuke Jack Kunitomi (1915–2018)

Veteran and teacher Yoshisuke Jack Kunitomi passed away on January 20 at the age of 102. Kunitomi was a native Angeleno who ran the streets of Little Tokyo, cycled with the Oliver teams, and climbed the historic Aoyama tree when it was just a sapling. In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor, Jack and his new wife, Masa Fujio-ka, were incarcerated first at Manzanar, and then at Heart Mountain. From behind barbed wire, Kunitomi answered the call to serve in the Military Intelligence Service in the Philippines, and later in MacArthur's headquarters during the Occupation of Japan.

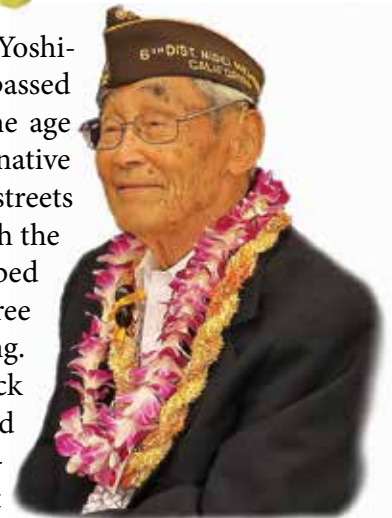


Photo courtesy of Darrell Kunitomi

After the war, Kunitomi worked in produce at Grand Central while earning his Bachelor's and Master's in Education at night school at USC. After battling a nearly-fatal jaw infection, he underwent cranial surgery and, with Masa's help, learned to speak again. Kunitomi became a teacher at Cortez St. Elementary School and was employed by the LAUSD for 30 years. He retired in 1983 when his wife became ill, battling ovarian cancer. The family rallied around Kunitomi after Masa's death. With their help and eventually the help of his new partner, Thelma Jackson (who later passed away, as well), life continued for Jack.

Kunitomi visited the Greatest Generation's WWII memorial in Washington and received the Congressional Gold Medal. In 2016, the L.A. Dodgers honored Kunitomi—a lifelong fan—as the Dodgers' Military Hero of the Game. A quiet, hard-working American citizen, Kunitomi is remembered by Dale (Grace) Kunitomi, Kerry (Ed) Cababa, Colleen (Sei) Miyano, Darrell, Don, Dean, Damon Kunitomi, Krissy and Claudine Cababa, Corey (Jen) and Brandon Miyano, Phoebe Kunitomi, and many nieces and nephews.



SCHOOL BELL *Rings* ACROSS HISTORY

By Dakota Russell

Inside the Interpretive Center, atop the exhibit about children in the Heart Mountain camp, sits a heavy, somewhat rusty, steel bell. In the 1940s, this bell sounded each morning and afternoon, alerting Heart Mountain students to the beginning and end of the school day. The bell's path to Heart Mountain—and then to the museum—makes for an interesting tale, and is part of the reason that the school bell was recently selected as one of the Wyoming Historical Society's "Ten Most Significant Artifacts" for 2017.

Heart Mountain High School principal Jack Corbett discovered the bell at an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) camp in 1942, while searching for equipment and structures that the government could reuse at Heart Mountain. Corbett was told by locals that the bell—cast sometime between 1899 and 1924—had first been brought to Wyoming to hang in the tower of a new church in Powell. The church burned to the ground some years later, and only the bell survived.

A rural elementary in the Bighorn Basin salvaged

the church bell, and hung it outside the schoolhouse. It served as a school bell over the next few years, until 1938, when it was transferred to the CCC camp outside of Powell. The CCC, President Franklin Roosevelt's answer to unemployment during the depression, set young men to work on conservation and infrastructure projects around the nation. The Powell camp was responsible for building irrigation canals across the high desert country of Wyoming. The bell became the CCC "chow bell," perched atop the mess hall, signaling the workers to come in for their meals.

The CCC program came to an end as the United States entered into World War II. The camp in Powell was emptied out around the same time as the government began forcibly removing Japanese Americans on the West Coast from their homes. As agents of the War Relocation Authority scrambled to set up a concentration camp at Heart Mountain in a matter of months, they scoured the old CCC camps for anything they could reuse. Corbett, discovering the bell among the



A nursery school group at Heart Mountain (photograph by Tom Parker).
Opposite: Image from *A Challenge to Democracy*

remains of the Powell camp, quickly acted to secure it for Heart Mountain.

Corbett installed the bell in a makeshift tower constructed on top of one of the barracks that served as classrooms for Heart Mountain students. These hastily constructed buildings made poor schools. They were cramped, stuffy, and noisy. Heart Mountain incarcerated would later build a much more suitable high school building. They planned to build a new elementary school, as well, but Wyoming politicians interfered. They accused the Federal government of “pampering” the prisoners with new school buildings, and the elementary school project was scrapped. The bell stayed in the school barrack until the Heart Mountain camp closed in 1945.

The final incarcerated boarded westbound trains that November, leaving behind them a ghost town. The government quickly enacted its new plan for the Heart Mountain project: turning it into homesteads for returning war veterans. Over the next few years, hundreds of hopeful homesteaders poured into the area, from all over the nation. Homesteads were given out by lottery, and many families moved into the old barracks while they waited for their names to

be drawn. The government sold buildings from the camp to those who had already received their land. One by one, the barracks began to disappear.

Allen Talbott arrived in Wyoming in the later years of the homestead period. Talbott and his wife Vivian had both served during the war. They originally hailed from South Dakota. He had seen action in Europe and North Africa, and she had joined the Women’s Auxiliary Corps, serving on the West Coast.

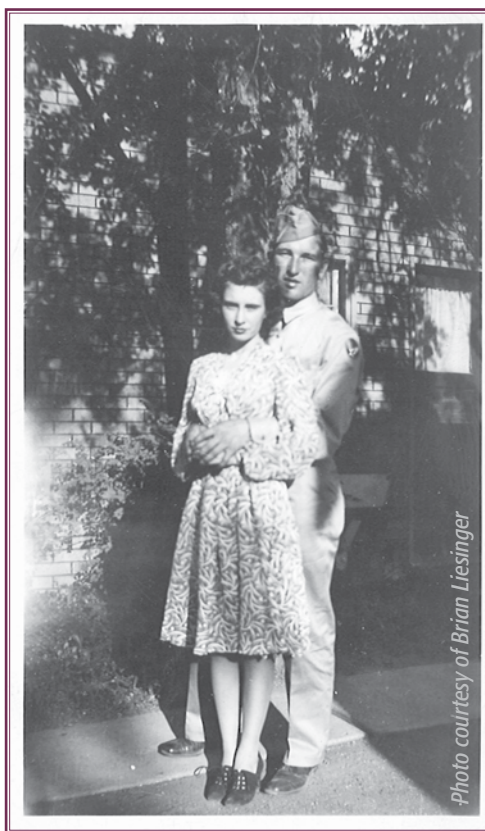
One day, walking through the rubble, Talbott came across a real **treasure**: the Heart Mountain school bell.

Afterward, they married and settled in San Francisco. However, the promise of a farm of their own and an adventure in the Wild West soon led them to seek a homestead in Wyoming.

By the time the Talbotts arrived, much of the former Heart Mountain camp was gone. Talbott was not able to purchase a barrack for his homestead, but the

government did grant him the right to salvage material from a section of the hospital complex. Talbott pried apart a building and hauled away lumber and fixtures, recycling the remnants into a home for himself and Vivian, and later their three daughters.

After the Bureau of Reclamation had taken back possession of the land, much of the remains of the camp were bulldozed into a kind of dump at the edge of the hospital complex. One day, walking through the rubble, Talbott came across a real treasure: the Heart Mountain school bell. As an amateur historian and veteran who served in Italy in the



Allen & Vivian Talbott



B-556

Photo courtesy of UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library

A group of students gathers around the entrance to the principal's office with Ralph Forsythe, assistant principal (photograph by Bill Hosokawa).



Photo courtesy of Brian Liesinger

House built by the Talbotts on their homestead near Riverton, Wyoming.

UNITED STATES
DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
BUREAU OF RECLAMATION
Shoshone Project, Wyo.

Heart Mountain, Wyoming. March 21, 1951

Heart Mountain, Wyoming.

You were assigned building (s) No. 15 Hospital Area (fifteen)

Block _____ on March 21, 1951
(date)

I have inspected the area from which these buildings were removed and find that you have performed the clean up work according to the transfer agreement.

Allen D. Talbott portion of building

Robert M. Fagerberg
(Title)
Act. Proj. Superintendent
Per HJ

Document from the Bureau of Reclamation confirming Allen Talbott's authorization to "clean up" Hospital Building #15. He dismantled the structure (pictured on opposite page) and used the lumber to build a small house (pictured above).

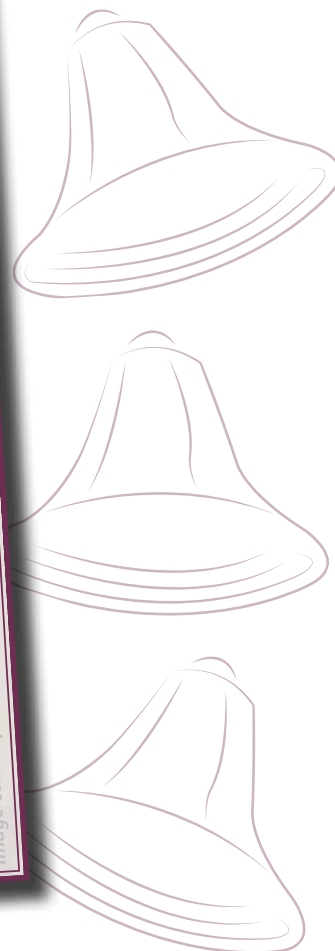


Image courtesy of Brian Liesinger



Hospital Building #15: Allen Talbott's ladder can be seen on the left, along with the boards he piled up in the front during his one-man demolition.



The Talbotts dry-farmed their homestead for 15 years, as the promised irrigation network never made it far enough to reach them. Talbott and his neighbors filed a lawsuit against the government and won, but in a sense lost everything. They gave up their land and received a settlement.

wake of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, the significance of the site and its remnants was not lost on him. He heaved the weighty bell onto the bed of his pickup. As he would tell his children and grandchildren later, he didn't know quite what to do with it; he just knew he didn't want to see it turned into scrap metal.

Talbott would hold on to his find for the rest of his life, even after he moved his family from Wyoming to South Dakota 15 years later. He let his children and grandchildren ring the bell, while talking about the homestead years, his service during the war, and the terrible injustice that the Japanese Americans had endured during those years. In 2005, after both Allen and Vivian had passed away, his daughter and son-in-law—Doris and Rodney Liesinger—packed the bell into their truck, drove it all the way back to Wyoming, and donated it to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation. They discovered a museum was in the works for the Heart Mountain site and believed it to be the best home for the bell. They were received by LaDonna Zall, longtime Heart Mountain board member and steward of the Heart Mountain collection in the years prior to the

construction of the Interpretive Center. Eight years later, Rodney and Doris's son, Brian Liesinger, would enjoy a reunion with the bell when he served as executive director at Heart Mountain from 2013–17.

As he would tell his children and grandchildren later, he didn't know quite what to do with it; he just knew he didn't want to see it turned into scrap metal.

It's not often that a single artifact has such a long and varied history in Wyoming, especially one that touches on so many important moments. The Heart Mountain school bell faced strong competition in last year's "Top Ten" contest, but it almost immediately stood out from the pack. After online voting narrowed the field, a panel of judges appointed by the Wyoming Historical Society chose the winners. As one of those winners, the Heart Mountain school bell joined such illustrious company as Jim Bridger's rifle and the first T-rex found in Wyoming. Staff accepted the award at the historical society's annual conference in Cody in September. The bell, after an eventful life, can now enjoy a proud and silent retirement. 🦋🔧

NEW EXHIBIT

CONNECTING THE PIECES

Dialogues on the Amache Archaeology Collection

On display in our Temporary Exhibits area from February through May 2018, visitors will have the opportunity to explore the Japanese American incarceration experience through archaeological findings from Colorado.

The objects in this exhibit, recovered during archaeological field work at Amache, encourage dialogue about this history. This exhibit was created by the Denver University (DU) Amache Project, engaging students, scholars, and community members in collaboration to research, interpret and preserve the tangible history of Amache.

Colorado's tenth largest city during World War Two was Amache, a one-mile square incarceration facility surrounded by barbed wire, guard towers, and the scrub of the High Plains. Over the course of three years, over 10,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry lived there, yet their experience is muted in our national discourse.

For more information about this ongoing project, visit www.portfolio.du.edu/amache.



Above: Exhibit pictured in Heart Mountain Interpretive Center temporary gallery.
Left: Individual objects featured on display in exhibit (All object images courtesy of DU Amache Project).

Exhibit organized by the DU Amache Project in collaboration with the University of Denver Museum of Anthropology.
Funded in part by a State Historical Fund grant from History Colorado.



Danielle McAdams tends to collection pieces in the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center Archives.

Welcoming our new Registrar

We are excited to welcome Danielle McAdams as our new Registrar at Heart Mountain Interpretive Center! McAdams recently graduated from Johns Hopkins University with a Master's Degree in Museum Studies. McAdams is passionate about working to preserve artifacts and make them accessible to the public. She has volunteered, interned, and worked at a variety of institutions from local historical societies and art

galleries to children's museums and art museums. Most recently, she has been working with the collections and archives at Carl Sandburg Home National Historic Site in North Carolina. "I am excited to begin work with the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation," says McAdams, "getting to know the history of the site and working to create a better collection for researchers and visitors!" 🏡



DECODING THE HEART MOUNTAIN

MYSTERY STONES

BY DAKOTA RUSSELL

This is a story that begins and ends far beyond the barbed wire fences of the Heart Mountain concentration camp. It's a story that stretches all the way from thirteenth century Japan right up to the present; a mystery that remained unsolved for over fifty years. Mostly, though, it is the story of one man's act of unshakable faith during one of the darkest periods of his life.

After the Heart Mountain camp closed in 1945, the Bureau of Reclamation opened the area up to homesteaders, giving away parcels of land through a lottery. While waiting for their number to come up, many homesteaders moved into the old barracks in the residential area of the camp. When they moved out, they often took one or two barracks with them.

The Bureau of Reclamation began to raze the ruins of the camp, preparing the land to be given away. While clearing the old cemetery area with a grader, heavy equipment operator Bill Higgins hit something underground. All of the bodies were supposed to have been removed, either to the West Coast or to Crown Hill Cemetery in Powell. Even so, you can imagine Higgins' panic. He cut his engine and climbed down to inspect. He discovered not a casket, but a 55 gallon metal drum buried just under the surface. Its top had been sheared off by his blade. Peering inside, he saw that the barrel was full of pebbles, more than 1,000 of them. Stranger still, each pebble had a single Japanese character painted on it.

Higgins didn't investigate his unusual find further, but he did notify Les and Nora Bovee, who had been awarded the land on which the barrel was buried. Les had spent the war as an airplane mechanic in Italy. He had recently returned to his native Powell, where he met and married schoolteacher Nora. The Bovees set out with shovels to excavate the barrel, which was still about two thirds intact. They had no idea at the time of the mystery they had uncovered.


Les placed the barrel of stones in his barn. He frequently showed it to friends and historians, in the hope that someone might be able to tell him what the stones were, or who had made them. Often, he'd let visitors take a handful of stones home with them. As years went by, Japanese Americans who had been incarcerated at Heart Mountain began making pil-

grimages back to the site of the former camp. Word spread among the pilgrims of the Bovees' mystery stones. Several stopped by to see the rocks for themselves. Nora asked the wife of one former incarcerated to translate some of the characters for her. She mounted the stones and translations to a board, which hung on the wall of her ceramics shop—itsself a former Heart Mountain barracks—for nearly 35 years.

Despite all the attention, no one could give the Bovees any history of their stones. Someone told Les a vague story about a group of secretive priests in the camp, who kept to themselves and rarely associated with other incarcerated. They were said to have a written a prayer for a deceased member of their group, and buried it in the cemetery. Les could never learn any more details, though, and no one ever provided any evidence to back the story up. The stones still remained a mystery in 1994, when the Bovees donated what remained of them—656 pebbles—to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles.

It was at the museum, some years later, that the mystery stones caught the eye of Japanese scholar Dr. Sodo Mori. Mori, an expert in Buddhist history, had a hunch as to what they might be. He knew there was a long tradition in Japan, dating back to medieval times, of copying and burying Buddhist scriptures, or sutras. Originally, the texts were copied onto paper, sealed in a container, and then symbolically buried. The idea was to preserve the sutras until the *Maitreya Buddha*, the future Buddha, came to Earth to show mankind the way to enlightenment. In the 1600s, burying paper scriptures fell out of fashion, and devout Buddhists instead began copying the sutras, one character at a time, onto pebbles. Then they would bury the whole collection.

Mori suspected he had found an American version of this "stone scripture" tradition. He obtained permission from the museum to copy the characters off of each stone before he returned to Japan to study them. Mori reasoned that the text on the rocks had to be a sutra that was widely available and regularly used, since it had been brought into a concentration camp. He narrowed it down to six scriptures: the three *Pure Land Scriptures*, the *Heart Sutra*, the *Lotus Sutra*, and the *Hannya Rishukyo*.



Each sect of Buddhism tends to emphasize one of these sutras above the others in their worship. Zen Buddhists, for example, favor the *Heart Sutra*. By figuring out which text was used, Mori believed he could narrow down the identity of the stones' creator. He and his colleagues entered all the legible characters from the stones into a database. Using a computer program written especially for the task, they began to compare the characters to the scriptures. They were looking not just for the presence of each character, but for the frequency with which it appeared. In the end, they found a match: the first five books of the *Lotus Sutra*, the sutra favored by the Nichiren sect of Buddhists.

Nichiren Buddhists believe that the *Lotus Sutra* is the most important scripture in the Buddhist canon. The sect's founder, also named Nichiren, was a 13th century Japanese monk who came to believe that all other sects were interpreting the scriptures wrong. He believed it was possible to attain enlightenment in just one lifetime, rather than over the course of several lives, and that the *Lotus Sutra* held the key to learning how. A large part of Nichiren worship involves chanting a mantra declaring devotion to the *Lotus Sutra*. They also express their faith

by repeatedly copying the scripture itself.

Mori felt certain that the mystery stones' creator must have been a devout Nichiren, possibly a priest. The delicate brushwork on the stones suggested that the creator had also been trained in Japanese calligraphy. Mori pored through the Japanese editions of the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*, the camp's newspaper, until he found a person who met all these criteria: Reverend Nichikan Murakita.

Murakita was born in the coastal town of Sakaide, Japan. He became a Nichiren monk as a teenager, and attended the sect's school until he was 22. Murakita went on to study literature and philosophy at a college in Tokyo. After he graduated, the elder priests sent him on a mission to a remote outpost: San Francisco, California.

Murakita, raised as a humble monk, likely experienced severe culture shock upon arriving in the United States. He was fortunate that San Francisco had an established Japanese American community to support him. He soon met his wife, Masako, a Japanese immigrant who had come to the United States as a young girl. Nichikan and Masako moved to Los Angeles in the mid-1930s, where Nichikan enrolled at the University of California and completed a Masters' degree.

In 1940, Murakita, now thirty-three years old, established a Nichiren Temple in Los Angeles's Little Tokyo district. He also began teaching children at the Hollywood Japanese Language School. Many Issei enrolled their children in these schools in addition to American public school. It was their attempt to instill traditional Japanese culture and values in their children, even in a foreign land. A distrustful FBI, however, strongly believed—despite having no evidence—that these schools were staffed by agents of the Japanese government.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor drastically changed the lives of all Japanese Americans and, in Murakita's

The "bon odori" was a ritual dance with over 1,000 volunteer dancers clad in colorful *yukata*. These kinds of events helped to **lift the spirits** of the incarcerated and to remind them there was a spiritual world beyond the hardship and suffering of their physical lives in camp.

case, those changes occurred almost immediately. The FBI began watching Issei priests and schoolteachers more closely and, on March 13, 1942, authorized a mass arrest of some 250 Japanese language instructors in California. The local authorities picked up Nichikan Murakita that day. His congregation became one of the many that lost their priest overnight. His students, likewise, lost their teacher.

Murakita spent the night in the Los Angeles County Jail before being transferred to the Tuna Canyon Detention Center, a facility the FBI and INS had set up in an abandoned Civilian Conservation Corps Camp on the outskirts of the city. Many Buddhist priests would spend the entire war in detention centers like Tuna Canyon, separated from their friends and families. Murakita was one of the lucky ones. He was eventually released to join his wife at the Santa Anita racetrack. When the government began rounding up the rest of the Japanese American population on the West Coast, it converted the racetrack into a temporary “assembly center” for holding incarcerated.

After a few months at Santa Anita, the Murakitas were removed to the Heart Mountain camp. Nichikan and the other twelve Buddhist priests at Heart Mountain realized that faith communities would now be more vital than ever. They quickly organized a Heart Mountain Buddhist Federation. Murakita, being the only Nichiren priest in camp, represented his sect. The priests established a main Buddhist church in a recreation hall in block 17, and several satellite churches around the camp. They worked out a Sunday worship schedule that allowed time for all sects to use the church building.

Perhaps the biggest contribution the Buddhist Federation made, though, was bringing traditional festivals to the camp. The biggest of these was the Bon celebration in July, which honored the dead. The two-day festival featured special services at the cemetery and offerings of incense at the church. It culminated with the “bon odori,” a ritual dance with over 1,000 volunteer dancers clad in colorful *yukata*. These kinds of events helped to lift the spirits of the incarcerated and to remind them there was a spiritual world beyond the



Women dressed in traditional Japanese clothes dancing at the Obon Odori festival, organized by the Heart Mountain Buddhist Federation.

Courtesy of Hirahara Collection, Washington State University

hardship and suffering of their physical lives in camp.

Murakita began conducting regular Nichiren services in camp shortly after his arrival. He especially concentrated on providing services for young people. He also began teaching Japanese calligraphy, a skill he had no doubt honed as a young monk, copying the *Lotus Sutra*. What we don't know is whether or not these calligraphy classes included the creation of the Heart Mountain mystery stones. Some theorize that the sheer number of stones suggests multiple creators. Others note that the consistency of the brushwork—and the secrecy in which the project was carried out—point to the stones being an act of devotion carried out alone.

By spring 1943, Murakita had stopped holding regular church services. He remained active in the Buddhist Association, and would occasionally give funeral rites, but the *Sentinel* no longer lists him among the Sunday priests. It's likely that this coincided with a

major decision that Nichikan and Masako had made: to apply for repatriation to Japan.

The year before, the United States had made an exchange of Japanese nationals trapped in America for some of its own citizens stuck in Japan. The exchanges were supposed to be equal, though, and the U.S. came up short. Struggling to find more people to exchange, the government extended an offer for repatriation to Issei in the concentration camps. Discriminatory laws barred the Issei from seeking U.S. citizenship, so they were technically still Japanese nationals.

Masako and Nichikan Murakita had both lived their entire adult lives in the United States, but there are many reasons they may have chosen to repatriate. Some Issei still felt a strong loyalty towards Japan, and had never really thought of themselves as Americans. Others felt that their adopted home had betrayed them, and applied in anger. Many had



1944 Memorial Day services, organized by the Heart Mountain Buddhist Federation; watercolor by Estelle Ishigo.



Reverend Knakai Izuwara at the altar in the main Buddhist Church, during Hanamatsuri.

the simplest motivation of all: they just wanted their freedom back. In the summer of 1943, the Murakitas received word that they were among those approved to return to Japan.

That August, their neighbors in block 7 held a going-away tea for Nichikan and Masako, complete with speeches from their friends. The couple was to depart on the 24th for Fort Missoula, Montana, where they would be inspected and processed before being sent to New Jersey, to board the *M.S. Gripsholm*. The *Gripsholm* was a Swedish cruise ship that the U.S. government had chartered to carry them to Japan. Sodo Mori believes that before Murakita left Heart Mountain, he took his stone scripture, placed it in a metal drum, and quietly buried it in the camp cemetery. Mori's research suggests that Murakita had completed at least five of the eight books of the *Lotus Sutra* before he had to leave his work behind.

The *Gripsholm* carried the Murakitas on a six-week voyage around the Cape of Good Hope to Mormugao, India, where they rendezvoused with the Japanese ship *Teia Maru*. Upon his arrival in Japan, Nichikan Murakita was drafted into the Imperial Army, but managed to secure his release. He was likely living in a temple in Kyoto when the Americans dropped the atomic bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945, ending World War II.

Later in life, Murakita returned to his birthplace in the Kagawa prefecture, becoming abbot of the very same temple in Utazu at which he had been ordained as a young man. Murakita never spoke of the stone scripture or of his time at Heart Mountain. He died in 1983, likely never knowing of the mystery that he had unintentionally created. His scripture, meant to stay buried until more enlightened times, was uncovered prematurely. We still haven't attained enlightenment. But if we can learn our lesson from the story of Nichikan Murakita—and the stories of the 14,000 other Japanese Americans unjustly held here at Heart Mountain—we might bring ourselves one step closer. 🙏

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There are many ways to support the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation:

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DONATIONS help us fulfill our long-term mission of: memorializing the place and events that have come to symbolize the fragility of democracy; educating the public about the history surrounding the tragic and illegal imprisonment of Japanese Americans; and supporting inquiry and research so that future generations understand the still relevant lessons of the Japanese American incarceration experience.

Make a **general donation** to help us keep our doors open or donate to a specific fund:

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Our National Historic Landmark Site contains several original structures, which require varying levels of restoration and preservation as we prepare to make them accessible to the public. Help us make these special projects a reality!

MEMORY & JUSTICE ENDOWMENT

Your tax deductible contribution will help ensure that the Foundation continues to teach the Heart Mountain story, including its relevance to circumstances in our day.

More info @ heartmountain.org/support

Collections Care Fund

Supporting the Collections Care Fund helps us with collections care and management, and the costs associated with processing, preserving, storing, protecting and growing the collections. Do you have artifacts to donate? We are actively seeking artifacts, objects, works, and materials related to Heart Mountain and to Japanese American incarceration.

More info @ heartmountain.org/archives.html#donations



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Powell, Wyoming 82435
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VOLUNTEERS WANTED!

- Are you interested in volunteering at the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center?
- Would you like to have the chance to interact with former incarcerateds and their families?
- Do you want to be part of a meaningful event that commemorates and explores different aspects of this chapter in American history?

Join us during the last week of July (July 23–29) to help us host our 2018 Heart Mountain Pilgrimage.

For more information and to learn about specific volunteering roles, contact Kim Barhaug at kimb@heartmountain.org or 307.754.8000.