TABLE OF CONTENTS

Board Chair’s Column ........................................................................................................ 3
Executive Director’s Column .......................................................................................... 5
Current Events:
Farewells & Welcomes ................................................................................................. 5
Welcome to New Board & Advisory Council Members:
John Kim & David Fujioka ........................................................................................ 7
Thank You: Julie Abo ..................................................................................................... 8
2022 Day of Remembrance ........................................................................................... 9
Sam Mihara Awarded JACL Biennium .......................................................................... 22
In Memoriam .................................................................................................................. 11
Features:
Remembering Norman Mineta .................................................................................... 13
Disability & Displacement at Heart Mountain ............................................................... 17
Bob Kuwahara & the Nisei Animators Exhibit ............................................................... 23
2022 Heart Mountain Pilgrimage .................................................................................. 31
Reflections of a Sansei ................................................................................................... 37
Dusted Off: Highlights from the Collection ................................................................. 43

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www.heartmountain.org/kokoro-kara-magazine

KOKORO KARA
Volume 11, Issue 2
Editors: Kate Wilson & Krist Ishikawa Jessup
Design/Layout: Kate Wilson

Have an idea for an article? Would you like to be a contributing writer? We’re interested! Write to Krist Ishikawa Jessup with your story ideas—these could include a profile of a former incarceree, a specific aspect of the Japanese-American experience before/during/after the war, or an act of kindness from a non-incarceree, just to name a few.

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Cover image
Norman Mineta, photographed with the original Heart Mountain barrack on display at the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, CA. Courtesy of The Rafu Shimpo, Photographer Mario Gershon Reyes, April 2019
I can’t think of how many times since I joined the board of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation when I have said, “What does Norm Mineta think about this?” Every time I asked him for his advice or opinion, it was on target. Norm Mineta’s experiences and disposition made him an invaluable resource. I’m devastated thinking of life and our foundation without his guidance and leadership. Norm’s strength and wisdom, however, came in grooming future generations for success. He did that for me at Heart Mountain and in the Japanese American community, and he did it for thousands of others as well. That was obvious by the hundreds of people who turned out in early May for a video tribute and reminiscence session online. So many people at the height of their careers recounted how much he had helped them along never expecting to be paid back. That feeling was repeated in person in Washington, San Jose and Los Angeles in June for memorial services for Norm. I had the same feeling in 2018, when a documentary about his life premiered in Washington. Then I marveled at the presence of leaders of both parties who paid Norm tribute. I also realized that I was not alone in knowing that I could call on Norm for help and guidance. Others did, too, even those whose rank in public affairs far exceeded mine.

His example is something I try to follow, and it’s a big part of our foundation’s future. We have added younger board members to help keep our foundation strong for the future.

That’s evident in the role that Aura Sunada Newlin has taken on as our interim executive director. I know she shares Norm’s spirit and generosity, which makes me optimistic about our future. Our combined success depends on telling our story to new generations. We see that each year in our Pilgrimage, as younger family members join their parents and grandparents to learn about their history. That’s one of the main reasons for our creation of the Mineta-Simpson Institute. We are training educators to teach new generations of students about the Japanese American incarceration and the conditions that made it possible 80 years ago. The arc of his life showed that Norm learned from and honored his elders, brought others along as his career began to rise and continued to develop leaders long after he could have retired with his beloved wife Deni and family at his home on Maryland’s Eastern Shore. We want the extended Mineta family to view Heart Mountain as their second home, which is why we were so grateful for their attendance at our July pilgrimage. We thank the Aratani Foundation and our supporting partners, the Japanese American Citizens League and the Japanese American National Museum, for providing the resources to allow everyone to attend in person.

We were also graced by the presence of Deni Mineta, Norm’s widow, Erika Moritsugu from the White House and Margot Walk, recipient of our LaDonna Zall Compassionate Witness Award.

“We know that the work of remembering and teaching the past in order to build a better future is never done,” Margot said. Norm’s gift to me was showing me that I could make a difference. That is a gift I want to pass on, and I hope you will join me.

Stay inspired!

Chair Shirley Ann Higuchi
DOUGLAS W. NELSON

Douglas Nelson first arrived as a graduate student at the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation. I accepted a new position leading the board of The Carter Center. My family and I are excited about this fantastic opportunity, but I have to confess I will miss my work at Heart Mountain and the tremendous sense of purpose and community that comes with it. I am proud of everything we have accomplished during my time at Heart Mountain. The ongoing projects to rehabilitate the barrack and root cellar are just the first steps in growing our National Historic Landmark Site. The current special exhibit at the Interpretive Center, “Bob Kuwahara and the Nisei Animators,” is our best yet. And the Japanese American Confinement Sites Consortium that we helped create has become a powerful network and an advocate for spreading awareness about Japanese American history.

Most importantly, of course, is the creation of the Mineta-Simpson Institute, which will allow us to expand our work and carry the Heart Mountain mission further than ever before. Thanks to the generosity of so many of you, our capital campaign to build the Institute has gathered real momentum. And though we must now find a way to forge ahead without Norman Mineta’s leadership, honoring his life and his legacy means more than ever.

It makes it easier to leave knowing that Heart Mountain is in excellent hands. We’ve built an amazing staff here over the past couple of years, and I am pleased to hand the reigns over to Aura Sunada Newlin, longtime Secretary for our Board of Directors, who has stepped in as Interim Executive Director. With her vast experience, skills, and knowledge, I know she will make this transition seamless and keep on with our ambitious slate of projects.

I want to thank all of you for trusting me as your ally in telling the Japanese American story, a story that is so deeply personal for many of you. It has been my honor. I look forward to continuing to serve as part of the Foundation’s Advisory Council, and it was wonderful to get to see so many of you this past summer at the Heart Mountain Pilgrimage.

All proceeds from the sale of this edition will go to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, and I learned so much from his research into court documents print for a new generation to learn from and enjoy.”

FRANK ABE

Camp. If the passage of time has done anything, it is to make Americans who believe, perhaps naively, that democracy will NORMAN MINETA

ALAN SIMPSON

All proceeds from the sale of this edition will go to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, and I learned so much from his research into court documents print for a new generation to learn from and enjoy.”

INTERIM EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AURA SUNADA NEWLIN

GREETINGS

Interim Executive Director Aura Sunada Newlin

Greetings to my Heart Mountain family! I stepped into the role of Interim Executive Director in June, but in some ways I have been on the job for almost ten years, having joined Heart Mountain’s Board of Directors in 2013 and served as Board Secretary for most of that time. In other ways, I have been on the job for 40 years. I am yonsei, and the picture shown below is from my first Heart Mountain reunion at age two, playing with my big sister in front of the original honor roll on which our great uncle’s name was inscribed. My friend and mentor, Dr. Satsuki Ina, offered a comment about this photo that accurately captures my spirit at present: “I love the coat… Especially the little smudges that indicate you may wear pink, but you definitely know how to get down and dirty!”

I feel a deep affinity with many segments of the Nikkei community, as my family history crisscrosses with multiple Japanese American trajectories: incarceration at Heart Mountain; segregation to Tule Lake; service in the 442; self-evacuation from the West Coast; inland railroad layoffs; and more. Additionally, Latin American and Indigenous concerns have played a dominant role in my own life, which makes me especially passionate about justice for Japanese Latin Americans and new opportunities for Native American and Japanese American collaboration.

The pain of losing Norm Mineta and the trepidation of stepping into Dakota Russell’s very large shoes has made me all the more appreciative of our staff’s professionalism, our leadership’s passion, and our membership’s commitment. I come to you with gratitude, grace, and grit. Thank you all for entrusting me with the sacred duty of caring for the Heart Mountain legacy—maintaining what we have built through the Interpretive Center and ensuring safe passage into our next phase of growth with the Mineta-Simpson Institute.

New Edition of Groundbreaking Heart Mountain History Released

When it was first released in 1976, Heart Mountain: The History of an American Concentration Camp by Douglas Nelson immediately transformed the scholarship of the Japanese American incarceration.

Before its publication, few scholars knew about or discussed the resistance to the military draft that rolled Heart Mountain during 1944. They knew little about the passionate incarcerated who declined to knuckle under to the government that had imprisoned them.

In the 46 years since its publication, the book has inspired activists such as Bacon Sakatani, now known as Mr. Heart Mountain, and scholars such as Eric Muller.

Its importance is one of the many reasons we’re proud to present an updated version of Heart Mountain: The History of an American Concentration Camp in time for the holiday season. This new edition includes more than sixty photos, a new chapter on the history of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation and foreword by legends Norman Mineta and Alan Simpson.

We’re grateful to Doug for everything he’s done for the Foundation and to alert the world to this historic injustice. It makes us even prouder to bring this new edition to the public.

For more information, visit our museum store: shopheartmountain.org
Thank you! Thank you!

On November 1, 2022, my contract ended with the HMWF. I am really grateful for the past four years that have definitely been a turning point in my life. I’ll now spend more time working on my own family history with even more knowledge, connections and enthusiasm. I am really excited that Eva Petersen, with her knowledge of the museum and life in Wyoming along with her DC savvy roots will be continuing as the executive assistant to the Chair.

During my time with the HMWF, we were able to accomplish so much. I always told people, “I am just trying to keep up with Shirley!” Shirley published her book during the Pandemic and we participated in over 25 authors events on-line and in-person at universities, libraries, law schools, museums and bookstores. We conceptualized the Heart Mountain Institute that eventually became the Mineta-Simpson Institute. We developed closer relations with the Embassy of Japan in Washington, D.C. and welcomed Ambassador Sugiyama and a delegation to our Pilgrimage, the first time to host an Ambassador. Shirley was chosen as a storyteller in the Japan Up Close program and traveled to Japan, toured schools and was reunited with family members. As a result of that trip, we were able to have a closer relationship with her father, Dr. William Higuchi’s former graduate students who recently fundraised for and completed the Japanese translation of Satsuki Ina’s Secret. Shirley became a Friend of the US Japan Council and strengthened relations with an important partnership for the Mineta-Simpson Institute.

While assisting Danielle McAdams and Dakota on their visit to the National Archives, I learned that the Fair Play Committee were not “No-Yes” but “Qualified No-Yes” respondents to the Loyalty Questionnaire. Shirley, Dakota, Cally, Brandon, Sam, Takashi, Bacon, Shig and I participated in the first ever Tsuru for Solidarity Community Virtual Pilgrimage. It was truly a groundbreaking program that continues today and creates a safe, open and highly accessible space for Nikkei and allies.

During this time, we saw the strengthening of the Japanese American Confinement Sites Consortium that was spearheaded by Shirley and the HMWF. With the leadership of Mia Russell, we hosted the first in-person advocacy day on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, Congressional Briefings, film screenings and receptions with the Embassy of Japan and two well-attended, sold-out educational conferences. Shirley and I participated in the early days of the formation of Tsuru for Solidarity and Dr. Satsuki Ina’s Healing Circles© which has deeply impacted my life.

We were able to partner and deepen relations with organizations such as JACL National, JACL DC, the National Japanese American Memorial Foundation, the Japanese American National Museum, the Smithsonian National Museum of American History, the American Psychological Association, the National Park Service and Friends of Minidoka on local and national events, both virtual and in-person. I now consider the people of these organizations friends and family.

Working on the NEH Landmarks of American History and Culture educator workshops with Ray and Tyson was definitely a high point. I learned so much about the layered diverse histories of Wyoming with a multitude of voices: incarcerated and non-incarcerated Japanese Americans (and the diversity within) and the past and present Aspaaaloke people and Homesteaders. I also learned a great deal from our diverse participants who came from all across the country.

Finally, I learned so much from the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation board, advisory council, the Heart Mountain staff and community. Early on, La Donna Zall and Joyce Harkness were so kind to me, invited me into their home and shared their stories and infectious passion for Heart Mountain. I learned a lot from Shirley and Dr. Higuchi. I had the honor of working with Norm, Deni Mineta and their family. I met so many people on the phone or at virtual or in-person events and Pilgrimages with a desire to learn and connect and always kept me clear on why we do our work. I’ll always ask myself, “What would Bacon or Sam think?” I’ll always remember the words of Naomi Oshika, “Stories and memories not shared are lost.” Okagesama de...

Kokoro kara,

Julie

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John Kim • • • • • Board of Directors

John Kim comes to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation as the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s inaugural chief administrative officer. In this role, he oversees all administrative and operational functions at the Foundation. Before his most current position, he also served as director of grants management, chief of staff, and vice president of the Foundation. John earned his law degree from the University of Baltimore while working at Casey. He holds a master’s degree in international affairs from Georgetown University and a bachelor’s degree in public policy from the University of Chicago.

Growing up in a Korean-immigrant family that worked in retail in the South Side of Chicago, John noticed at an early age that there were vast disparities in the opportunities people had depending on where they grew up in the city. He firmly believes that if you are actively engaged in finding the right solutions, have the right resources and point of view about what it takes to bring about change, you can actually improve lives.

He decided to join the board because he believes HMWF’s efforts to educate and remind all Americans of the dark history of the incarceration of Japanese Americans will help safeguard the American values of liberty and freedom from oppression. In serving on the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation board, he hopes to contribute to honoring those whose family histories include Heart Mountain, and to make certain that the Center remains a poignant reminder of what we must never allow to happen again.

David Fujioka • • • Advisory Council

David Fujioka is the newest member of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation Advisory Council. He was born and raised in Los Angeles, California. David still calls Los Angeles his home, and is a proud Sansei Japanese American. David is a retired graphic designer who worked for various departments at UCLA during his career.

David’s father and grandparents were incarcerated at Heart Mountain. His uncle, Ted Fujioka volunteered to join the 442nd RCT out of Heart Mountain when he was 18 years old. Sadly, Ted would pay the ultimate sacrifice over in France at the age of 19. David’s commitment to Heart Mountain began in 2011, when he attended his first pilgrimage there. Since then, David has volunteered at every Heart Mountain Pilgrimage with his cousin Coleen. He has pledged to honor and preserve the memories of the Fujioka Family.

Okage sama de – I am what I am because of you.

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During this time, we saw the strengthening of the Japanese American Confinement Sites Consortium that was spearheaded by Shirley and the HMWF. With the leadership of Mia Russell, we hosted the first in-person advocacy day on Capitol Hill in Washington DC, Congressional Briefings, film screenings and receptions with the Embassy of Japan and two well-attended, sold-out educational conferences. Shirley and I participated in the early days of the formation of Tsuru for Solidarity and Dr. Satsuki Ina’s Healing Circles© which has deeply impacted my life.

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Kokoro kara,

Julie

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Eighty years after the signing of Executive Order 9066 is no time to give in to the demands to sanitize the history of the Japanese American incarceration, President Joe Biden said in a proclamation released on February 18, 2022.

"The words we use to describe the historical and present treatment of communities of color and other underrepresented communities have profound meaning," Biden said.

"Today, we recognize that euphemistic terms that we have collectively used in the past—such as ‘assembly centers,’ ‘relocation,’ or ‘internment’—do not accurately describe the injustice experienced by some 120,000 people; we recognize the forced removal and mass incarceration of Japanese Americans and others during World War II; and we reaffirm our commitment to Nidoto Nai Yoni, which translates to ‘Let It Not Happen Again,’” he said.

Biden’s proclamation, read by White House aide Erika Moritsugu, was released at the start of three days of online panels on the incarceration and its effects 80 years after it was authorized by the executive order signed by President Franklin D. Roosevelt on February 19, 1942.

The panels were presented by the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, the National Park Service, the Japanese American National Museum, Japanese American Citizens League, and the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

“We must be able to look into the past with clear eyes,” Smithsonian Secretary Lonnie Bunch III said.

Bunch’s call came at a time when some local school systems and state legislatures have banned books and passed laws to sanitize the teaching of history that involves racial discrimination and oppression, such as the Japanese American incarceration.

Biden, Vice President Kamala Harris, and multiple panelists said it was essential to present American history accurately, particularly to ensure that abuses such as slavery and incarceration don’t happen again.

It’s essential, Harris said, “to look without flinching at the human cost of racism and xenophobia.”

**Heart Mountain Representation**

Shirley Ann Higuchi, the Heart Mountain board chair, was among the many participants with strong ties to Heart Mountain. She appeared on a panel with Ann Burroughs, president and CEO of the Japanese American National Museum and a Heart Mountain board member. Former Executive Director Dakota Russell also spoke on the panels, which were organized with the help of former Washington Affairs Director Julie Abo.

Burroughs said Bunch’s call to action about confronting the nation’s racist past is a critical part of her museum’s mission. “It’s a new direction for all of us,” she said.

Higuchi said she also didn’t learn about the incarceration in school or at home, even though both of her parents were incarcerated at Heart Mountain. She appeared on a panel with Ann Burroughs, president and CEO of the Japanese American National Museum's Heart Mountain was well-represented at the Japanese American National Museum’s Day of Remembrance events, including the signing of one of Judge Gogo’s 48-star flag. Pictured here are a gathering of former incarcerated (top) and Shig Yabu & Willis Ito (right), the dynamic duo behind the story Hello Maggie! Read more about this in the article starting on page 23.
Keiichi Ikeda (1926–2022)

Keiichi was born on October 30, 1926, in Los Angeles, California. Just prior to World War 2, his family moved to the Hollywood area. After the war started, the family was first sent to the Santa Anita Assembly Center and later to the Heart Mountain, residing in block 29. He spent his high school sophomore year in the barracks of block 7, but starting in the fall of 1943, he attended the new high school with sports facilities for basketball and football. The Heart Mountain High School was able to join the Big Horn Basin Athletic Conference. Keiichi never played high school football before and in his first game, he made a 50-yard run which turned out to be the longest run of the game. Later, he caught a pass and ran for 30-yards, the second longest gain and Heart Mountain finished undefeated winning all 4 games in 1943.

The Heart Mountain basketball team played 19 games with outside school teams during the 1944 season, they finished 5 – 1, losing their final game against the eventual state champion Casper High School. They were the Big Horn Basin champs. During the 1945 basketball season, the team played 10 games with outside high school teams and won 6 of them. Keiichi was the Senior Class president for one semester.

In April of 1944, the high school had its “Students Day” where the students took over the running of the school for the day. Members of the Student Council selected him to the top position of superintendent of the school. After graduating from Heart Mountain High School in 1945, he served in the U.S. Army. After his discharge, he returned to the Los Angeles area and was employed by the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power.

In 1982, he became a member of the Heart Mountain Reunion Committee of Los Angeles that put on the first of many Heart Mountain camp reunions. Following suit, the cities of San Jose put on two reunions, Seattle two, and Salt Lake City one. A total of 16 Heart Mountain reunions were held, with Los Angeles leading with 11 of them. Keiichi was one of 5 Heart Mountain persons attending all 16 reunions.

Keiichi’s and his teammates’ exploits on the football field are chronicled in the book The Eagles of Heart Mountain by Bradford Pearson.

He is survived by his wife Toshi, sons Darrell and Gary, brother Harry and sisters Hiromi Uyeda and Sachiko Alice Ikeda, and other relatives. He was predeceased by his younger brother Masami.

As far as the eye could see along Road 90 where it meets Lane 9, stretching down the vast dusty farmland of Powell, Wyoming, and extending for miles in the shadow of Heart Mountain, sixty tractors paraded by the homestead farm that Tak Ogawa tended and nurtured for more than seventy years. The procession of farmers was there to pay tribute to the man they knew as a pioneer, neighbor, co-worker, helper, and friend.

On March 31, Ogawa passed away quietly at the age of 96, just as the sun was rising and most likely around the time he was usually heading out to plow the fields. The oldest working homesteader out of 215 veterans awarded homesteads after the war, Tak faithfully toiled the fields on one of his John Deere tractors until the age of 93. After his wife Emmy died a decade ago, he readjusted to a solitary farming life without her by his side. With typical humility, Tak used to say that there was nothing else he knew how to do and, perhaps more accurately, that his life would be empty without it.

I met Tak in 1994 when I volunteered to help move two barracks from the former site of the Heart Mountain camp to the Japanese American National Museum, where one barracks still greets visitors at the entry to its permanent exhibition. Tak graciously donated a part of the only barracks he received as part of his homesteader allotment. The ramshackle building remnant held bleak memories for those once forced to live in them and later provided sparse shelter for incoming homesteaders. The whitewashed 20 by 40-foot segment that Tak used for a storage shed was discovered by former Heart Mountain incarceree Bacon Sakatani, who befriended Tak and arranged for its transfer.

An Idaho native, Tak escaped incarceration because he lived outside the military zone and became the only Japanese American to be awarded a homestead at a time when the area was still reeling from the nearby incarceration camp that held as many as 14,000 Japanese Americans. As an army veteran who was first turned away from the Navy when he tried to enlist in 1941, and later drafted in 1944 to serve at Fort Bliss, Texas, until 1946, his military service qualified him to receive 114 acres and a barracks.

When photographer Stan Honda and I went to Wyoming in 2016, to work on our book and film project, Moving Walls, we found Tak coming home from another hard day’s work, having just endured a protracted hospital stay for a heart condition a few months earlier. Appearing as robust as ever at age 90, he talked about retiring but somehow you knew it wasn’t going to happen, at least as long as he had an ounce of sweat left in him.

Tak was never “just” a farmer, as he would like to call himself, but he embodied the qualities that make farming more than another humble profession. He gained the respect of all his farming neighbors by working hard, quietly doing his chores, and frequently helping them do theirs if they needed him. You could always find Tak out in the fields—severe Wyoming weather permitting—and I would venture to guess when harvest season rolls around, Tak’s spirit can still be seen atop his trusty John Deere—much like the congregation of faithful farmers riding by to say farewell to their dear friend for the last time.

This remembrance was written by Sharon Yamato. A version of this article previously appeared in Rafa Shimpō.
As a young boy, Norman Y. Mineta witnessed one of the darkest chapters in American history. His experience being incarcerated with his family at Heart Mountain inspired him to pursue political office. This was no easy feat. When Mineta ran for Mayor of San Jose in 1971, no Japanese American had ever led a major U.S. city or represented a congressional district outside Hawai’i. Mineta was first on both counts, but he was far from the last. He led the way for other Japanese Americans like Representatives Robert Matsui, Doris Matsui, and Mark Takano to serve in the United States Congress.

When Mineta left public service in 2006, he had led two Cabinet agencies—Commerce and Transportation—for two different presidents: Democrat Bill Clinton and Republican George W. Bush. He had also chaired the House Transportation Committee when it passed landmark public transportation laws to build the nation’s infrastructure. One of his greatest acts of political leadership was to help create the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians, tasked with investigating the reasons behind the incarceration during World War II and its effects on the Japanese American community.

Mineta never forgot Heart Mountain, where he, along with the rest of his family, was incarcerated for 18 months of his childhood from 1942 to 1943. Before the war, the Mineta family built a successful life in San Jose. Kunisaku Mineta, Norm’s...
American Boy Scouts inside the Heart Mountain camp invited scout troops from surrounding towns to join them in a jamboree. All of them refused, except for one troop from nearby Cody.

Simpson was among the Cody boys who passed the barbed wire fence to enter Heart Mountain for a jamboree unlike any other. Mineta and Simpson were paired together for a variety of activities, including erecting a tent and building a fire. Together, they enjoyed pulling pranks on their fellow scouts and came to realize they were kindred spirits. They never forgot that day together in the shadow of the mountain.

More than 30 years passed before they met again, when Simpson arrived in Washington as the newly elected Republican senator from Wyoming in 1979. Mineta had arrived just four years earlier as a Democratic House member from San Jose. Despite Mineta and Simpson being from two different parties and having two very different life experiences, they picked up their friendship right where it left off. They regularly worked together to pass legislation in Congress and better the lives of all Americans.

In a sincere and profound act of bipartisanship, Mineta and Simpson helped pass the historic Civil Liberties Act of 1988 in which the Federal Government apologized for the Japanese American incarceration and paid each surviving incarceree $20,000. They also worked together to designate Heart Mountain as a National Historic Landmark, and fostered the creation of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation in 1996.

The multiple examples of cooperation that Mineta and Simpson set during their political careers inspired our foundation to create the Mineta-Simpson Institute at Heart Mountain. The Institute is dedicated to honoring Mineta and Simpson’s legacy of bipartisanship by fostering empathy, courage, and cooperation among our nation’s next generation of leaders. Mineta believed in the need for this institute and the message it sends to a nation that needs and wants unity, even as some forces try to tear us apart. His life and career were inspiring examples of what we can accomplish when we work together and help others.
A headline from the December 18, 1943 issue of the Heart Mountain Sentinel proclaims “Making Shell Corsages Hobby of Former Tule Lake Resident.” The article profiles 31-year-old Faye Fujiiye Mayeda from Kelso, Washington, who crafted exquisite corsages out of tiny shells “with infinite patience and care” to give and sell at Heart Mountain. While this may seem like a straightforward human interest story about the life of one Japanese American incarceree at Heart Mountain, it is also notable as an example of disabled representation at the Heart Mountain camp. As the article notes, Faye used a wheelchair due to a childhood bout of polio.

Disabled incarcerees like Faye were very visible in the Heart Mountain camp. Peruse other issues of the Sentinel, and you’ll find dozens of mentions of disabled incarcerees, from advertisements for Braille lessons to a notice for a blind man’s missing cane. Given that the disability community is one of the world’s largest minority groups, this should be unsurprising. However, until recent decades, disability history has often been neglected. By looking more closely at the stories of disabled and chronically ill incarcerees, we can gain a fuller understanding of incarceration and the Japanese American experience during WWII.

Initially, the government issued exemptions to forced removal orders for orphans, Deaf and blind Japanese Americans, and others with severe disabilities. However, the government later amended these exceptions to only cover severely disabled people who were institutionalized. Sadly, at least a few people passed away in institutions on the West Coast or in Hawai’i while their families were incarcerated during the war and unable to visit them. These exceptions included many patients residing in tuberculosis sanatoriums on the West Coast; however, the government established two segregated, Japanese-American only sanitariums in California. While not everyone with chronic illnesses like tuberculosis identify as disabled, many of them do. Furthermore, many chronic illnesses can lead to further disabilities.

According to the National Park Service, approximately 1,000 of the 120,000 Japanese American incarcerees subject to forced removal were disabled or infirm. Predictably, the government’s plans for forced removal and incarceration often overlooked or blatantly ignored the needs of disabled and chronically ill people. In one case, a Deaf Japanese American man was unaware of the removal orders posted in his neighborhood; when he did not report for removal, government officials arrested him in the middle of the night without giving him any time to pack or prepare. In another instance, a man hospitalized on the West Coast for a heart condition was loaded on a train to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, which did not stop for medical attention until it reached Cheyenne. One camp administrator described it as a “case of premeditated murder.” This lack of care and support for the needs of disabled Japanese Americans was layered on top of the already egregious disregard for their humanity and rights as citizens and residents of the United States.
incarcerated at the Santa Anita temporary detention facility in California. Emi would spend the next three years in the Heart Mountain Hospital. In her first year at Heart Mountain, there were no arrangements for Emi to receive an education. Emi wrote to the principal of the Heart Mountain High School to enquire whether she could catch up through summer school and eventually received books to continue her education independently. Unfortunately, lack of an adequate educational system was an appallingly common experience for disabled students in the camps.

The WRA initially attempted to place Deaf and blind Japanese American students at schools for the Deaf and blind. However, many of these efforts failed due to racist anti-Japanese sentiment at these schools. The first class for disabled students in the camps was organized by a teacher at Manzanar in the spring of 1943. In the months before, students like Hannah Takagi, a Deaf fourteen year old from Berkeley, California, had no access to schooling. Like Emi, Hannah attempted to educate herself by spending hours in the camp library around her job making camouflage nets for the war effort. While the new class may have been better than nothing, the quality of education was still distinctly lacking.

In May of 1943, the WRA hired Natalie Perry, who had worked with mentally disabled students on the East Coast, to begin a school for disabled students at Tule Lake. Excited by the prospect, Hannah’s family transferred to Tule Lake so she could attend. Hannah suggested they name the new school the “Helen Keller School,” and wrote to Keller to share her news. Keller responded with encouraging words for the students, urging them to “remember this,—their courage in conquering obstacles will throw its bright rays into others lives besides their own.” Unfortunately, the school suffered from many problems. Students were grouped together regardless of their age or disability, and according to Hannah, Miss Perry was unequipped to address all of their needs. Deaf students like Hannah were not allowed to use sign language in favor of lip reading and speaking, a practice called oralism which was common at the time. In 1943 when Tule Lake was converted into a segregation center with the advent of

the loyalty questionnaire, the Helen Keller school was shut down. The Takagi family eventually relocated to Illinois, where Hannah ended up at a school for the Deaf which allowed her to use sign language.

After the Helen Keller School at Tule Lake closed, Natalie Perry came to Heart Mountain to establish a similar program. Although a Sentinel article from December of 1943 announced that Miss Perry would create a separate school for “children requiring special guidance and instruction,” just two weeks later another article explained that after conducting a survey of disabled children at Heart Mountain, Miss Perry would not be starting a special school. Instead, she planned to offer tutoring services to students who needed additional support. In a third apparent turnaround, an article from April, 1945 implies Miss Perry did begin a formal classroom, as a New York church donated toys and supplies to “the special corrective classes of the Washington Elementary School.” Unfortunately, there is very little additional information about the makeup of these classes or the quality of education offered in them.

Much of the social workers’ time was occupied with transporting mentally ill and mentally disabled patients to institutions. While the Heart Mountain Hospital was equipped with a mental ward, complete with a padded cell for patients, the space was never intended to provide long-term care for mental patients. Given negative attitudes and a general lack of understanding towards disability and mental illness in the 1940s, institutionalization was a common response to all kinds of disabilities at the time. At least 25 individuals were institutionalized at Heart Mountain. Most ended up at the state hospital in Evanston, although a few were actually placed at institutions in California as early as February, 1943, an exception to the exclusion zone created by General DeWitt.

There were limitations and drawbacks to the services the WRA provided. Often when social workers attempted to obtain services or resources for disabled or chronically ill incarcerees, they were flatly denied. In one case, a man with tuberculosis of the hip was denied services by the Wyoming State Department of Rehabilitation because he was not a Wyoming resident—never mind that he couldn’t access services on the West Coast because of the executive order. Other tuberculosis patients were denied admittance to state sanatoriums. Although disabled or ill Japanese Americans who were unable to work at Heart Mountain were eligible for compensation, disability payments generally fell in the lower range of the already meager pay scale in the camp.

The stark reality of forced removal and incarceration resulted in many becoming chronically ill or disabled at the camps. Poor living conditions and tight quarters led to a high incidence of communicable disease. Diseases like tuberculosis, German measles, or polio could lead to further disabilities. Inadequate medical care in the camp and lack of access to specialists

The WRA did set up some support systems for disabled Japanese Americans. At Heart Mountain, many of these systems were administered through the Social Service or Medical Social Service departments. Social workers met with families on a case-by-case basis and could help incarcerated secure mobility aids like canes or artificial limbs, hearing aids, or books in Braille. In several cases, people who became blind at Heart Mountain were connected with state services for the blind, who offered Braille instructors and talking book machines.

The Medical Social Service Department ran what they called a “Crippled Children’s Clinic,” to connect families with physically disabled children to doctors and services in the area. They also ran a hostel where chronically ill patients at the Heart Mountain Hospital could have slightly more independence while still receiving care, similar to an assisted living community.

The Limitations of WRA Support

Tokinobu Mihara and the Braille Board

One of the most well-known stories about disability at Heart Mountain is that of Tokinobu Mihara and the Mihara Braille board. Tokinobu lost his sight at Heart Mountain when the WRA denied his requests to see a medical specialist outside the camp. He created his own Japanese system of Braille and taught it to other blind and low-vision incarcerees in the camp. Learn more about Tokinobu’s story in Sam Mihara’s article in the Spring/Summer 2020 issue of Kokoro Kara, “Beyond the Braille Board: Tokinobu Mihara’s Legacy” and in the article on page 22 of this issue.

It’s impossible to sum up the experiences of every disabled Japanese American unjustly incarcerated during WWII. Many of their stories have been lost or overlooked due to prejudice and stigmatization. For instance, stories of physically disabled people can be easier to research than those of mentally disabled individuals. However, attitudes towards disability and illness have come a long way since the 1940s. Whenever you are confronted with history, ask yourself which perspectives are missing or misrepresented. Asking these questions is the first step in writing a more inclusive and representative history.
The Roots of a Movement: Disabled Nisei Veterans

According to the front page of the December 16, 1944 issue of the Heart Mountain Sentinel, "Morale of Blinded Nisei High During Training." The army provided training for veterans who lost their sight in combat, including training with guide dogs. The article focuses on one Nisei veteran: Yoshino Omiya, who lost his sight in a land mine explosion during the crossing of the Volturno River in Italy. Although Omiya was from Honolulu, Hawaii, and had never been incarcerated, he was well-known at the Heart Mountain camp. Omiya was featured in a full-page feature in Life Magazine, praising his courage and service in Italy. It seems that incarcerees were eager to follow his story, as the Sentinel printed a follow-up story just two months later as Omiya headed back to Hawaii with his new guide dog, Audrey.

Many Japanese Americans who fought in WWII became disabled in combat situations. While many of these men were either from Hawaii like Yoshino Omiya or did not return to the camps after being discharged from the military, their stories clearly resonated with Japanese Americans in the WRA camps. Additionally, disabled Nisei WWII veterans played a role in the larger disability rights movement. In the years following WWII, disabled veterans advocated for greater support and resources for disabled individuals. Their advocacy contributed to advances such as the advent of Social Security Disability Insurance in the 1950s.

Several disabled Japanese American WWII veterans were instrumental in the passage of the Americans with Disabilities Act in 1990. Among them were Senator Daniel Inouye from Hawaii, who lost an arm in combat in Europe, and Senator Spark Matsunaga, also from Hawaii. Another Japanese American politician involved in the disability rights movement was Congressman Robert Matsui from California, who was not disabled in military combat but lost 20% of his hearing when he contracted an ear infection while incarcerated at Tule Lake. Without the work of these men and others, the disability rights movement may not look the same today.

In August, the Japanese American Citizens League awarded its Japanese American of the Biennium award to two incredible contributors to our community: Dianne Fukami in the field of Arts, Literature, and Communication and Heart Mountain’s own Sam Mihara in the area of Education and the Humanities.

Sam has been lecturing for the past eight years, reaching more than 90,000 people through upwards of 450 presentations. Audience members are introduced to the parallels between the Japanese American incarceration and more recent and contemporary injustices and constitutional violations.

While giving an overview of this chapter in history, he also shares his personal experiences from his time at Heart Mountain, specifically the medical hardships his family had to endure. Pictured on the right is Sam with his brother and parents in 1937 on a visit to Yellowstone National Park. The photo is significant as his father is looking straight at the camera, showing that his eyesight was still good at this time after 17 years of treatment for glaucoma.

Mihara was incarcerated at Heart Mountain, he was denied specialist treatment and was left permanently blind. Sam’s work supports efforts to aid in humane treatment for immigrants and other marginalized communities. His lectures engage the public and ensure this story is spread far and wide.

This is my message: be proactive. Don’t wait for audiences to come to you. Go out and find them. Find the people who want to be part of our history that should never be forgotten.

Despite never having been incarcerated, Yoshino Omiya was well-known at Heart Mountain due to his feature in Life magazine, and went on to feature in two Sentinel articles.

Sometimes resulted in disabilities, as in the case of Tokinobu Mihara. Mihara became blind at Heart Mountain when the administration refused to allow him to leave the camp to see an ophthalmologist to manage his glaucoma.

As Japanese Americans began to leave Heart Mountain in 1945, the Social Services Department was inundated with requests for financial assistance from families who had received aid while incarcerated. In March of 1945, 746 families were on the list for welfare services after camp. This list was compiled by social workers with assistance from education staff and community leaders. One of the most common qualifications for welfare recipients was a disabling condition that prevented one from working.

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In 1959, a cartoon mouse named Hashimoto-San stepped onto the silver screen for the very first time. He wasn't destined for celebrity—like that other mouse—but to his creator, Bob Kuwahara, he was everything. Bob had been an animator in some of America's biggest cartoon studios before World War II. He watched as those same studios made cartoons depicting people of Japanese ancestry as grotesque and evil caricatures. The incarceration of Bob's family at Heart Mountain was testament to the consequences of such insensitive and racist representation.

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depicted the misadventures of an awkward lad adjusting to life at Santa Anita. When Ishii was moved to the Amache camp in Colorado, Neebo came with him, appearing in the pages of the Granada Pioneer. Japanese Americans incarcerated at the Tanforan Racetrack near San Francisco also had a character to call their own. Jankoe was created by Bennie Nobori and published in the Tanforan Totalizer. Like his fellow animators in Santa Anita Nobori had also worked for Disney Studios before the war. Both Nobori and “yankee” moved from Tanforan to Utah’s Topaz camp in September 1942. Willie Ito, then just a boy, remembers flipping through the Topaz Times in search of Nobori’s comic strip. It was one of his early inspirations to become a cartoonist.

In 1943, Nobori and his wife obtained a transfer to Heart Mountain, where her parents were held. For the Heart Mountain Sentinel, Bennie created Zootsuo, a character based on Heart Mountain’s rebellious pachuko zootsuiters. Other camps had comics, too. Eddie Sato drew the character ‘Dokie’ for Idaho’s Minidoka Irrigator. The Jerome, Arkansas camp paper featured Harry Kuwadai’s ‘Alec’ and ‘Pete & Zeke.’ Amache had characters in abundance: Tom Okamoto and Jack Ito continued ‘Li’l Neebo’ after Chris Ito left for the army, and he was joined by Esther Takei’s ‘Ama-Chan,’ Rosie Arima’s ‘Eva-Cure,’ and Tom Yabu’s ‘Curlie.’ These strips reflected on the humorous parts of life in the camps, and injected some much-needed levity into the lives of incarcerees.

Where Topaz’s Jankoe was helpful and kindhearted, Heart Mountain’s Zootsuo was more of a fashionable rebel.

Bob Kuwahara did not cartoon much while incarcerated. Instead, he focused his energy on painting and teaching. While at Santa Anita, Kuwahara organized art classes for his fellow incarcerees. He believed that art could help Japanese Americans express the anger, pain, and fear they were feeling. “Art is not only cultural, but practical,” Kuwahara told a reporter from the Piscemaker. “It is a natural part of our existence.”

In 1943, the government sent filmmakers to Heart Mountain to record life inside the camp. It was probably Mekuh, who recommended the Kuwaharas to them as an example of a model Japanese American family. Bob and Julia staged scenes of life inside the barracks for the cameras. The footage was used in the 1944 government propaganda film “A Challenge to Democracy.” The film emphasized the loyalty of Japanese Americans, but ignored the indignities of camp, painting an image of life that was far more comfortable than it really was.

After almost a year at Heart Mountain, Kuwahara was allowed to leave camp to seek work in Chicago, under the watch of the American Friends Service Committee. He found just enough freelance work to keep him in Chicago, but not enough to send for Julia, Dennis, and Miki, who were still in Wyoming. The family would not be reunited until 1945, when they all moved to Larchmont, New York.

In 1945, Bob Kuwahara launched his first comic strip. In truth, it was a family business. Julia did all the lettering, and Miki—with his imaginary friend, Uncle Harry—provided the inspiration. The result was a success. Miki’s adventures ran for five years in over twenty newspapers across the nation.

Fearful that audiences would not accept a Japanese American cartoonist so soon after the war, Kuwahara adopted the pen name “Bob Kay.” Miki, too, was whitewashed. Kuwahara did not draw the character to look like his son, but instead gave him light skin and fair hair. Miki would be further transformed in the 1950s, when cartoonist Gérard Alexandre bought rights to publish the character in French. Alexandre translated many of Kuwahara’s original strips, but also created new Miki adventures.

Bob Kuwahara, art pictured here, and his family made their move to Wyoming. The Kuwaharas older son, Dennis, did not appear with them in the 1944 government propaganda film. A smaller family made their barracks room look much less crowded.

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In 1956, while still working at Terrytoons, Kuwahara entered a United Features Syndicate contest seeking out new comic strips from across America. He placed fifth—not high enough to win any prize money, but enough to get a contract for his submission, “Marvelous Mike.” Coming in first was Tom Okamoto, one of the former cartoonists for the Amache camp newspaper. “Marvelous Mike” ran in papers nationwide until the end of 1957, and was the first and only time that Kuwahara was able to publish a strip under his own name.

Bob Kuwahara’s “Barker Bill” comic strip turned the Terrytoons’ cartoon host into the frazzled owner of a struggling two-bit circus.

In 1942, Terry and his team had an idea to spoof the popular Fleischer Studios Superman cartoons. They settled on a tale about a heroic mouse protecting his city from feline criminals. The character of Mighty Mouse was a smash hit, putting Terrytoons back in the game. Throughout the 1940s, Terrytoons continued to debut popular new characters like Gandy Goose and Heckle and Jeckle. Terry scaled up production, moving to a bigger building in downtown New Rochelle and hiring more animation talent. Bob Kuwahara joined the Terrytoons crew in 1950 and quickly adapted to the breakneck speed of work, helping to create 19 cartoons in that year alone.

Ever the shrewd businessman, Paul Terry saw that the future of cartoons was in television. He partnered with CBS to create Barker Bill’s Cartoon Show in 1954, recycling old theatrical shorts for new audiences of children. He sold his studio to CBS the following year and retired. A new chapter had opened in animation history—the era of Saturday morning cartoons had arrived.

By 1950, Bob Kuwahara had been out of the animation business for eight years. Living on the East Coast, far away from Hollywood, there were few chances for Kuwahara to break back in. However, just a few miles away in New Rochelle, New York, a legacy animation house was springing back to life. Terrytoons Studios would be Bob Kuwahara’s home for the rest of his career.

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The Japanese House Mouse

Work at Terrytoons did not change much after CBS bought the studio in 1955. Bob Kuwahara and his animators were still tasked with producing cartoons as quickly as possible for as little money as possible. However, the small studio offered Kuwahara opportunities he would never have had at Disney. By the end of the 1950s, he was directing his own cartoons, and had the chance to create a new character.

For his first character, Kuwahara drew upon his Japanese heritage for inspiration. Hashimoto-San, a small and unassuming mouse, lived in the idyllic countryside of Japan. He outfitted evil cats, pursued adventures with his wife and kids, and told stories to his American reporter friend. Hashimoto-San cartoons prioritized entertainment over education, but most taught a lesson or two about Japanese history or culture along the way.

Hashimoto-San challenged the presumption in 20th century cartoons that white America was the only place where living, supportive families existed.

The first Hashimoto-San cartoon short was released in theaters in 1959. ‘Hashimoto-San’ was simply animated, but Kuwahara’s passion for the project ensured it was more artistic than the studio’s typical output. CBS even screened the cartoon for Academy Awards voters, though it failed to get a nomination. Kuwahara made sixteen more Hashimoto-San cartoons over the next four years. Though Kuwahara and Terrytoons never called attention to it, Hashimoto-San was a groundbreaking character. In the early years of Western animation, Asian and Asian American characters were racist stereotypes that echoed anti-immigrant views. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor in 1941, cartoons joined other forms of media in making villains of all people of Japanese ancestry. These stereotypes persisted through the 1950s and beyond.

The Hashimoto-San cartoons were the first positive portrayal of Asian culture in American cartoons. The character of Hashimoto loved his family, was kind-hearted toward his friends, and expressed an open mind and worldview. Quietly, Kuwahara used Hashimoto-San as a tool to change audience expectations about Asian characters on-screen.

One mouse could not fix all the problems of racial stereotyping and representation in American cartoons. Many of those same problems still persist today. But Kuwahara created a space—however small— for Asian American kids to see heroes that looked like them on television, and opened a door for artists of color to create characters that faithfully reflected their own backgrounds and experiences. It’s a fitting legacy for Bob Kuwahara, an immigrant from Japan who helped shape the course of some of the most celebrated pop culture in America.
Two men recognized Takamoto’s talent and debated how best to ensure his success after the war was over.

Takamoto was too poor to go to art school and didn’t want to move to Japan to make comics, so his mentors finally suggested he apply at Disney. His confidence boosted, Takamoto called Disney Studios as soon as he was released from Manzanar. The studio hired him as an inbetweener.

Takamoto had a talent for designing characters, and soon rose through the ranks at Disney. He left the studio in 1961 to join Hanna-Barbera Productions, where he spent the rest of his career. Takamoto is most celebrated today for his animated adaptation of E.B. White’s Charlotte’s Web and his character design for Scooby-Doo.

In 1954, Willie Ito walked into the Disney offices with his portfolio of artwork under his arm. He was interviewing for his dream job. In the hiring office, Ito was surprised to come face-to-face with another Japanese American. Iwao Takamoto silently and seriously looked through Willie Ito’s portfolio, then gave him a wide smile. “Takamoto became my mentor, my sensei, and my friend,” Ito later said. Ito spent his first week at Disney working on the spaghetti scene for Lady & the Tramp, one of the most memorable sequences in animation history.

Ito followed Takamoto to Hanna-Barbera, where he worked on The Flintstones, Secret Squirrel, Wacky Races, and much more. He rejoined Disney in the 1980s as a creative artist for products and publications—much the same role Gyo Fujikawa had held at the studio years before.

Meanwhile, in Los Angeles...

The incarceration abruptly ended the careers of many promising Japanese American animators. However, their work inside the camps—whether drawing comics or teaching art classes—had an impact on the kids who looked up to them. After the war, these young Nisei artists followed in the footsteps of their idols. Iwao Takamoto was incarcerated at the Manzanar camp in California when he was just 17 years old. Bored, he passed the time by sketching in his notebook. His drawings caught the eye of two older incarcerated—possibly Kango Takamura and Albert Nozaki—who had been art directors at major studios before the war. The
The 2022 Heart Mountain Pilgrimage opened with the Wyoming premiere screening of *Omoiyari*, a song film directed by Kaoru Ishibashi, who performs as Kishi Bashi, and Justin Taylor Smith. In a darkened Wynona Thompson Auditorium, former incarcerees and descendent families watched the weaving of archival footage, music, and stunning imagery to tell a story all too familiar to them. As the film ended, the lights came up and the applause dissipated, people were visibly moved by the film. Aura Sunada Newlin, struggling to express her gratitude through her tears, began a Q&A with Kishi Bashi and Smith about what it meant to them to create the film and the journey that Kishi Bashi took in examining this history.

On Thursday, early arrival participants had the opportunity to participate in an array of special workshops, including a behind-the-scenes peek at the production of our podcast, a guided tour of the original root cellar, a hike up Heart Mountain, and a family history and genealogy workshop administered by Densho.

Friday, we hosted four educational panels that featured authors who have written about the Japanese American incarceration, a photography & documentary journey highlighting the unique experiences at each confinement site, a digital storytelling & mapping project, and the firsthand experiences of a former incarceree and his family at Heart Mountain. Each panel ran two separate sessions. They were so well attended that, even after bringing in more chairs, it was standing room only for both sessions. We hope to continue to provide more of these fascinating sessions at future pilgrimages, giving a platform to diverse voices in the Japanese American community.

That evening, we also screened *Fugetsu-Do*, an intimate portrait of a sweet shop that has been an anchor of the Japanese American community in Little Tokyo since 1903. Brian Kito, third generation owner of Fugetsu-do, and Heart Mountain descendant, brought mochi for the audience and participated in a Q&A with filmmaker Kaia Rose. Many in the audience shared their fond memories of going to the shop to buy mochi with their families as children.
Saturday Site Tours

The Saturday tours around the hospital grounds, memorial and honor roll, and the original barrack were full despite the temperature reaching nearly 90 degrees that day. In the sweltering barrack, attendees learned about what life was like inside a barrack and how the incarceration affects each generation differently. On top of the hill, families gathered near the honor roll to hear about the patriotism of the men of the 442nd RCT as well as the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee. Afterwards, many who had a family member serve in the military went to find their name on the honor roll in an act of remembrance. Finally, at the hospital complex attendees heard the story of Sam Mihara’s father, Tokinobu, and how he went blind inside the camp. Heart Mountain board member Lia Nitake helped Sam discover that the Augmented Reality plaque featuring his voice and his father’s story was located at the hospital complex, much to Sam’s delight.

Judge Gogo Flag

We were honored to be a part of Santa Clara County Superior Court Judge Johnny Cepeda Gogo’s flag signing project! Judge Gogo sent one of his 48-starred flags to Heart Mountain during the Pilgrimage and asked that all former incarcerees sign for themselves and any family members they had. The flag was proudly displayed throughout the day on Saturday for everyone to see.
It seemed as if the canopy covering the site of the groundbreaking for the Mineta-Simpson Institute at Heart Mountain could not hold any more people as the members of the families of Norman Mineta and Alan Simpson jammed together on Saturday. They had convened, some for the first time, to help turn the ceremonial shovel to start work on the institute that is dedicated to the lives and careers of Norman Mineta and Alan Simpson, two celebrated public servants who first met as Boy Scouts at Heart Mountain in 1943.

“It’s a physical building that we are constructing, but it’s much more than that,” said Aura Sunada Newlin, interim executive director of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation. “It’s the expansion of our ability to reach a national and international audience with the story of our past here, but also the dynamism of our present and the vision that we have for the future.”

“The friendship of Norm and Al really represents what this nation should be and can be,” Rep. Liz Cheney (R-Wyo.) said. “Their friendship demonstrated what could be accomplished when we come together.” The crowd of about 400 people greeted Cheney, Wyoming’s sole House member, warmly, in part for her support of Heart Mountain and for her work on the committee investigating the Jan. 6, 2021, insurrection at the U.S. Capitol.

Erika Moritsugu, the White House liaison to the Asian American and Pacific Islander communities, said she felt the power of place being at Heart Mountain. “We’re remembering our collective history,” Moritsugu said. “This is not just a Japanese American story, but it’s an American story with implications for the entire world.”

At the Saturday lunch, the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation presented its LaDonna Zall Compassionate Witness Award to the Walk family, which was represented by Margot Walk, a longtime supporter of the foundation. Walk’s father, Maurice Walk, was an attorney who resigned in protest from the War Relocation Authority because of its treatment of Japanese Americans. “He spoke out against the loyalty oath and racism,” Margot Walk said of her father. “My father was one of the first compassionate witnesses.” Cynthia Walk, Maurice’s daughter and Margot’s sister, also shared in the honor.
I never met my grandfather, Tadashi Kinoshita. He died on January 26, 1952 almost 10 years before I was born. Until recently, my knowledge of him was based on family lore from my mother and uncles, a few pictures, and publicly available records.

Being a point of pride for my mother, Tadashi was the first Japanese person to climb Mt. Whitney, the tallest peak in the contiguous United States; a story I have heard many times. Another frequently told story laments the loss of the family samurai sword. According to my mother, not long after Pearl Harbor, the FBI came for her father and interrogated him. I don’t know how long he was gone. I don’t know what he was asked. I just know that is part of the story of the beautiful samurai sword wrapped in cloth and thrown down a well. However, the stories I dwell on most are the stories of camp.

No one ever sat me down and told me that our family, my mother, uncles, and grandparents were imprisoned during the war. It’s just something I always knew. I have spent a lot of time wondering what I would have done when President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order No. 9066 in February of 1942. It is easy for a Sansei raised in the ‘60s and ‘70s to imagine staging a protest or chaining myself to a pole to avoid forced removal, but I can never really know what it was like for my family or the tens of thousands of other Japanese Americans.

My mother, Kazuko Kinoshita, is now 96 years old. It has been 80 years since she was a teenager riding a train to Heart Mountain, and now my twin sister and I are cataloging her belongings for our descendants. Amid the inkwells, baby clothes, carefully wrapped kimonos, and oil change receipts there are hundreds of original documents from camp, both Heart Mountain and the temporary detention center at Santa Anita.

With each tattered yellowing paper and black and white photo passing through my hands to my sisters, a larger understanding, and a deeper sadness washes over me. These contemporaneous records of life in camp, both mundane and historical, amplify the stories of my childhood.

What I knew about my family’s forced removal is this: My grandparents and three uncles had moved from Seattle to Los Angeles in 1921, and Tadashi established himself as a successful businessperson and respected community member. They lived in El Monte; my grandfather was a salesman for Sun Life Insurance of Canada with his office in the heart of Little Tokyo. He was prominent in the Methodist Church, and a sponsor and leader in the Boy Scouts of America. In general, my family was probably luckier or more privileged than most. The evening before their forced removal, they spent the night at the Olympic Hotel and reported to the assembly point on May 9, 1942. Although they had already sold off most everything they owned, they were able to take their car full of belongings from the assembly point to Santa Anita Racetrack which meant they had more than many families.
Recently my mother told me how strange it was to be locked up only three miles from their home in El Monte. But it was through the documents saved over the years that I learned they were assigned to District VII Barrack 1 Unit I at the Santa Anita Racetrack and lived there for four months. When the time came to leave for Heart Mountain, I learned Tadashi was assigned to be the Car #5 Monitor and given this document:

Reading their “Personal Instructions on Evacuation” a feeling of dread washes over me and I cannot believe that a horse stall is referred to as their apartment. Previously, the only thing I knew about their trip to Heart Mountain was an anecdote from my mother. She recalls being shocked upon seeing the “Colored Only” restroom signs while traveling through Texas. I always found that ironic since at that very moment she was being forcibly removed from her home and imprisoned.

My uncle Robert Kinoshita described the trip in an interview for a U.S. Government study, now archived at Heart Mountain:

For the next three days and nights we went through the toughest trip imaginable. We went by way of Texas and Colorado. When we got to Colorado there was a washout on the bridge so that we had to go back down to Texas and then go up to Wyoming by another route. Many times, we ran out of water on the train. The cars were all crowded, and it was very uncomfortable. The little kids had a terrible time, and the food was inadequate. It made me resentful to see all of those American citizens being herded like animals without water all night. We couldn’t wash and the toilets became jammed. On top of that some of the young kids had diarrhea.

I imagine the whole family was relieved to arrive at Heart Mountain on September 1, 1942. Within days of their arrival the Project Director C.E. Rachford, welcomed the “colonists” to Heart Mountain. Reassuring them that their health, welfare, and safety was the primary concern.

While it is absurd for the US Government to refer to the people incarcerated at Heart Mountain as colonists, it reveals the image they were trying to portray. It’s true, the incarceree was afforded some freedoms. But I am reminded of something that has stuck with my mother all these years, a time when the mess ran out of ice cream right before she reached the front of the line, and there was nothing to be done.

A Model Community

“It is our desire to make this city one of the best in the country... Self-governance will be practiced to the greatest possible extent... Ample opportunity will be given residents to discuss policy as regards the governing of the camp. All residents are urged to take an interest in the camp’s welfare and progress.”

C.E. Rachford, Heart Mountain
Program Director
August 26, 1942
repatriated to Japan. Despite the uncertainty and the fear, the residents lived life and practiced self-governance as much as they were able. According to meeting notes I found, on November 19, 1942, the Committee on Election and Office Holding recommended that nominations for councilman be made by each block rather than by the community at large so all residents would be fairly represented.

So it was, Tadashi became the Councilman representing Block 14, or as my mother used to say, “the blockhead.” Given what I know about my grandfather, it seems only natural that he would have taken on a leadership role no matter the circumstances.

That was not the only way Tadashi got involved. He was fortunate to leave the confines of camp to lead hikes with other incarcerees. I know the outdoors was always a place of calm and restoration for him. I like to imagine that even in the desolate high desert of Wyoming, he still found peace in hiking the hills and gazing across the vistas.

The more I learn about the way he spent his time in camp, the more in awe of him I become. He had time to indulge his passion for the natural world, teaching paleontology and other courses through the recreation program. He was also part of the Heart Mountain Community Enterprises Study and Negotiation Committee. He was clearly involved in all aspects of camp life. Among the documents there is also an original typed draft of the Heart Mountain Charter with penciled-in changes and meeting minutes addressing the draft and the loyalty oaths.

Reading through these documents was more emotional than I was expecting. I cried, got a little mad, and felt like I knew my grandfather in a way I hadn’t before. I won’t ever know what motivated my grandfather to keep the papers, many of them items people would have tossed away without a second thought. But he kept them, and they have somehow survived move after move, year after year, family death after family death. In all, there are more than 500 photos and documents which have been digitized for all the members of my family. We are donating the originals to the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation and its collection to preserve the history of Heart Mountain.

Throughout the process, I was moved by all the names, Shimokawa, Okubo, Horiuchi, Tsuda, Tanaka, Nakamura, Murakami, and others. My hope is that through this donation their descendants can see how they exercised their rights, got involved in, and tried to create community in a harsh and desolate place like my grandfather, Tadashi Kinoshita did.

Gwyne Yoko Copeland is a former television journalist, born and raised in Los Angeles. She has lived throughout the U.S. and abroad. Today, she is a business consultant with grown children. As the family’s keeper of memories, she plans to document their stories and help other descendants of incarcerated describe and document the generational impact of the camps on their lives. If you’d like to share your story you can contact her at gwyne@gwynecopeland.com.
This past summer, as the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation broke ground on the Mineta-Simpson Institute, we honored one of the most famous stories to come out of Heart Mountain. Two boys from very different backgrounds, one of them incarcerated in a concentration camp, the other a multi-generational Wyomingite, who, despite their differences, forged a lifelong friendship that transcended political divisions to shape laws in the halls of Congress.

Norman Mineta and Alan Simpson met after Heart Mountain Boy Scouts invited their fellow scouts from Cody, Powell, and surrounding towns to a jamboree. The Nisei scouts relished an opportunity to go camping, work on merit badges, and meet their compatriots. Unfortunately, almost all the troops declined the invitation, with only scouts from Cody attending the jamboree. In an act of serendipity, Norm and Al were assigned a tent and the rest, as they say, is history.

For scouts around the country a common way to support the war effort was to collect scrap materials like paper, old pots, and worn out tires from their friends and neighbors that could then be remade into components used in military fabrications. Heart Mountain troops collected what they could. However, in a community that was already recycling fruit crates into furniture, there was little beyond scrap paper to collect. Scouts who collected paper were given paper trooper badges to distinguish them as contributors to the war effort. Scrap paper was eventually transformed into packaging for everything from ammunition, rations, and medical supplies to protective bands for 1,000 pound bombs.
One of the main ways that scouting could keep a young person busy was of course, merit badges. In 1943, there were 111 merit badges that a Boy Scout could possibly earn. Kazuo Shiroyama, for instance, earned three particularly useful merit badges for life at Heart Mountain; Handicraft, Carpentry, and Firemanship. The Firemanship merit badge, known today as Fire Safety, would be of vital importance to life in camp given how quickly a fire could start or spread in the barracks.

Scouting’s emphasis on service to the community and emergency preparedness as well as its ability to foster love and appreciation for the natural world has impacted millions of young peoples’ lives in the century that it has existed in the United States. For the scouts at Heart Mountain, it gave them something constructive to do while they were incarcerated in a concentration camp. Perhaps more importantly, it gave them an opportunity to leave that concentration camp, if only for a few days. For Norm Mineta and Al Simpson, scouts helped foster a friendship that has lasted a lifetime.
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Warm wishes for a happy & healthy year ahead filled with joy

Happy New Year!