

Heart Mountain Breezes Activity

Overview and Purpose

In this activity, students will analyze an article written by Japanese American writer Mary Oyama in *The Powell Tribune* to consider ways that Oyama combatted negative stereotypes of Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain.

Curriculum Standards

- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.1** Cite specific textual evidence to support analysis of primary and secondary sources, connecting insights gained from specific details to an understanding of the text as a whole.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.2** Determine the central ideas or information of a primary or secondary source; provide an accurate summary that makes clear the relationships among the key details and ideas.
- **CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RH.11-12.5** Analyze in detail how a complex primary source is structured, including how key sentences, paragraphs, and larger portions of the text contribute to the whole.

Materials

- “Heart Mountain Breezes” column by Mary Oyama from November 5, 1942, originally published in *The Powell Tribune* (you can find this article in the Classroom Resources Padlet)

Directions

Mary Oyama Mittwer was a journalist on the West Coast before WWII. When she and her family were forced to leave their home and confined at Heart Mountain, she began writing a column in *The Powell Tribune*, the newspaper for the nearby town of Powell, about life at the Heart Mountain camp. Many of Oyama’s articles either explicitly or implicitly challenged stereotypes about Japanese Americans and the Heart Mountain camp that were common at the time.

Direct students to read Mary Oyama’s first column in *The Powell Tribune*, “Heart Mountain Breezes,” from November 5th, 1942 (located in the resources Padlet). Please be aware that there are uses of several slurs in this article.

Students should write down any unfamiliar words or phrases. As they read, students should keep the following questions in mind:

1. Who is Mary Oyama’s audience?

2. Why is her purpose in writing this column? What goal (or goals) does she hope to achieve?
3. What strategies does she use to attempt to persuade her audience?

After everyone has had a chance to read the article, begin a discussion by asking students to share any words or phrases they didn't understand. Discuss what these words and phrases mean (below see a list of vocabulary and slang used in the article which may be unfamiliar).

- Greenhorns: a person who is new or inexperienced in a particular activity or place
- Kangaroo mice: one of two species of jumping mouse prevalent in the American Southwest
- Poinsettia hedges: shrubs or small trees with red flowers; common in California
- The Real McCoy: the real thing

Once students have shared unfamiliar vocabulary, return to the three questions above. Define Mary Oyama's audience. Why do students think she decided to write in *The Powell Tribune*? What were her goals in writing this article? Keep track of Oyama's audience and goals on the board.

Next, steer the discussion towards how Oyama achieves her goals. What rhetorical devices or persuasive strategies does she use? What is the tone of this article and does it change over the course of the article? How does the structure of the article enforce her argument? Encourage students to be specific.

Introduce that Mary Oyama wrote a series of over ten articles in *The Powell Tribune* between November of 1942 and January of 1943. In many of these articles, she described life at Heart Mountain, dispelling rumors that Japanese Americans were being overfed or coddled. She often openly responded to her critics, both those who sent her mail and those who published editorials attacking her or the camp. In January 1943, she and her family moved to Denver when her husband found a job there.

Read aloud or direct students to read the following segment from Oyama's column from December 17, 1942, in response to a critical response to her column:

To M.V.S.J.

Thanks for your letter. It was not our intention to express or imply a "gripe," although of course, you can't expect people who have given up their freedom and surrendered all their civil rights although they have committed no crime or

single act of sabotage (as proven by FBI and NIB records) to be perfectly, blithely happy in confinement. With you we agree that all pioneers, whether your parents, the fine pioneers who settled the old west or our Japanese pioneers who broke and tilled the land which most people gave up as “impossible” and who came to a totally strange country not even knowing the language, do deserve credit for their courage.

We Americans of Japanese ancestry need the same type of courage, patience, perseverance, faith, and endurance as we go out for resettlement. We need the same high qualities that our parents and our American pioneers had. We wonder if we have it within us? We certainly hope so! But there is a great difference in the status of our parent pioneers and the evacuees. The pioneers were FREE American citizens who were setting forth BECAUSE THEY WANTED TO GO and of their own free will. The evacuees have temporarily LOST their freedom and were compelled to go because they had no choice—whether they wanted to go or not.

Note that Oyama uses language about the camp and Japanese American incarcerated that was used by the government, like “evacuees” and “pioneers.” These are not accurate terms to describe forced removal and incarceration. For more information, we recommend “Words Do Matter: A Note on Inappropriate Terminology and the Incarceration of the Japanese Americans” by Roger Daniels.

Discuss the above segment using the following questions:

1. Can you infer the argument or tone of the letter Oyama is reacting to from this response?
2. What is Oyama’s main argument? How does she convey her argument?
3. How might responding directly to criticism be a useful strategy?

End the lesson by reminding students that Mary Oyama was one of thousands of Japanese Americans who were incarcerated at Heart Mountain. Do they think her opinions on incarceration and the best strategies to combat it were shared by every Japanese American at Heart Mountain? Remind them of the importance of reading multiple sources and perspectives when researching historical events.

Optional Additional Homework

While not many outside the Japanese American community expressed support for Japanese Americans or condemned incarceration, a few did. Some Japanese Americans, like Mary Oyama, wrote editorials arguing against incarceration. As homework, the teacher may choose to assign students to write an editorial arguing

against Japanese American incarceration. Direct students to answer the following questions in their editorial:

1. What prejudices and hatred are driving Japanese American incarceration?
2. How is Japanese American incarceration un-American? How is it unconstitutional?