"from our heart"
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www.heartmountain.org/kokoro-kara-magazine

KOKORO KARA
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Challenges & Optimism
Chair Shirley Ann Higuchi

Our recent Pilgrimage provided yet another example of why I’m so excited about our future.

Amid the dust and chatter of the construction of the new Mineta-Simpson Institute, visitors to our Pilgrimage saw the tremendous progress we have made throughout our National Historic Site.

It will be just weeks before the two key additions to our center—the fourth barracks for archives and artifacts and the mess hall for conferences—are done. As I toured the Mineta-Simpson Institute with Senator Al Simpson, he was overcome with emotion as we walked through the corridor that will house the exhibit about him and Secretary Norman Mineta.

We are making progress on exhibits for our original Heart Mountain barracks, and we continue to look at the land where the former hospital and boiler room stand. Pilgrimage attendees were able to see everything the corridor that will house the exhibit about him and Senator Al Simpson, and the mess hall for conferences—are done. As I toured the Mineta-Simpson Institute with Senator Al Simpson, he was overcome with emotion as we walked through the corridor that will house the exhibit about him and Secretary Norman Mineta.

Next lawyers affiliated with the Bar Association of the District of Columbia led by President Rawle Andrews Jr. joined DC Superior Court Chief Judge Anita Josey-Herring and several of her judges for three days of meetings at the center. They saw how the Mineta Foundation is making American incarceration tied to issues in today’s legal environment.

We also hosted a class of 35 teachers from around the country as part of the sixth session of workshops in the Landmarks of American History and Culture program of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH). It was the second workshop class of the year, and the teachers have called it the most moving and informative session they have attended. We have just received word that we have received another NEH grant to offer the program next year.

These 10 days taxed our staff and volunteers, who all rose to the occasion. They also, however, represented a new normal for our Foundation, as we keep adding staff, developing new programs and enriching the work we’ve done for years.

We’re no longer just a little museum on the road between Cody and Powell. We’re a force for teaching, learning, healing and understanding.

Few things have better communicated that message than the exhibit that debuted in the days just before the Pilgrimage, which you may recall reading about in the most recent issue of Kokoro Kara.

‘Making a Neighborhood: Exclusion & Community in J-Flats, Los Angeles’ told the story of the part of Los Angeles called J-Flats or East Hollywood. Its Japanese American residents were part of a multi-ethnic group of people, many of them barred from living elsewhere, who came together before, during and after World War II to show what can happen when people seek out their common good, not emphasize their differences.

The Albright-Marshall family, who first came to Los Angeles at the end of the 19th Century, were Black Americans whose history was steeped in slavery and oppression. They were among the first homesteaders in the neighborhood, which attracted Japanese Americans in the first decades of the 20th Century.

They shared the same values as their immigrant neighbors. They worked hard, tended to their families and homes, and when the government forced the Japanese Americans into camps around the country, the Albright-Marshalls stepped forward to help their neighbors.

We were honored to present the LaDonna Zall Compassionate Witness award to three members of the extended Albright-Marshall family—Barbara Marshall Williams, Karen “Kiwi” Burch and Robin Waller. Their allyship during a time of national turmoil is a lesson for all of us.

We’re in trying times as a country, but we’ve been here before. Our community had more than 120,000 people forced from their homes and into camps for more than three years. Many of us, whether incarcerated or not, are still working through the trauma of this difficult history.

What gives me strength and optimism about the future is how many people are following the example set by the Albright-Marshall family. They know that working together and often working through our differences makes for a stronger nation and world.

That’s why when I see the various groups of people coming to Heart Mountain, many for the first time, and see how moved they are by the power of place and our message, I am hopeful the spirit embodied by so many of our members will live on.

Stay inspired!

—Shirley Ann Higuchi

Act as if what you do makes a difference. It does.”

William James
Executive Director Aura Sunada Newlin

Can I get a round of applause for our staff? This issue of Kokoro Kara feels like a celebration with its updates on pilgrimage, construction, visiting groups, and more. As Shirley notes in her article, we caught a glimpse this July of the future we are creating at Heart Mountain: a “new normal” in which a steady stream of educators, professionals, leaders, and learners seek out our hallowed grounds to find a sense of belonging and experience what we have to offer.

With just over a year under my belt as Executive Director, the sense of celebration feels even greater because I get to work with the staff members and board leadership who keep this whole thing running. So as the dust settles from tourist season and we ease into autumn, I offer you a behind-the-scenes glimpse of life in our growing organization.

During these months of construction, staff rotate between makeshift workspaces at the Interpretive Center: the staff kitchen, a couple of storage rooms, and the picnic table out back. The staff calendar captures our range of activity: Bus tours, school groups, construction meetings, media visits, meetings with internal staff, and thank you to our members for ensuring that the work continues.

Sybil Tubbs

Sybil Tubbs originally came to Heart Mountain in June 2022 for a one-year service position through the AmeriCorps VISTA program. In June 2023, she joined our full-time staff as Education Manager. Over the past year, Sybil has helped us advance several initiatives including our Children’s Day Festival, state-wide school field trips, and virtual museum tours. As Education Manager, she is developing new educational materials and taking the lead on our national and regional teacher workshops (including the NEH Educator Workshops pictured here). This fall she presented at the annual conferences of the Mountain-Plains Museum Association and the Montana Federation of Public Employees. Sybil holds an MA in Museum Studies from the State University of New York in Oneonta and a BA in Public History from Athens State University. Heart Mountain-Plains Museum Association and the Montana Federation of Public Employees. Sybil holds an MA in Museum Studies from the State University of New York in Oneonta and a BA in Public History from Athens State University. Heart Mountain and Park County are so lucky to “keep” Sybil as a vibrant member of our community!

Rebecca McKinley

Rebecca McKinley joined Heart Mountain’s leadership team in May as Deputy Director. A critical hire at this point in the Foundation’s growth, Rebecca brings to this position a wealth of museum, collections, and development experience supplemented by an academic background in anthropology and bioarchaeology. She worked previously as Special Events Coordinator and Donor Advisor at the Buffalo Bill Center of the West in Cody; Curator and then Interim Executive Director of the Washakie Museum & Cultural Center in Worland, WY; and Collections Intern for the Meeteetse Museums in Meeteetse, WY. Originally from Oregon, Rebecca has lived in Wyoming for the past six years. She is an animal lover, outdoor enthusiast, and relationship builder whose presence at Heart Mountain elevates our capacity as we grow to new heights. Welcome, Rebecca!

Miranda Bickford

Heart Mountain is thrilled to welcome Miranda Bickford as our new Collections Manager. Miranda moved to Cody in May from Tulsa, Oklahoma where she completed her Master’s degree in Museum Science & Management. Also holding Bachelor’s degrees in History and American Indian Studies, she has worked on collections management and exhibits for seven museums. Miranda impressed the search committee with her sensitivity to sites and stories of racial trauma, having worked directly with members of the Kootenai, Cheroke, and five Apache Nations as well as Greenwood Massacre survivors and descendants. At Heart Mountain, she has jumped in with both feet to safeguard our collections during construction, accession new items, and help us plan the much-needed expansion of our collections space as part of the LaDonna Zall Research Lab. Welcome, Miranda!

NEH Educator workshop participants visit former incarceree graves at Crown Hill Cemetery outside of Powell, WY.
A delegation of judges and lawyers, including four past presidents of the DC Bar, visited the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center in July to learn about the site where 14,000 people were imprisoned without due process during World War II.

Led by Bar Association of the District of Columbia (BADC) President Rawle Andrews Jr., the group met with local lawyers and judges from Cody, to share their perspectives on the legal system and enjoy the scenery of Northwestern Wyoming.

Anita Josey-Herring, chief judge of the District of Columbia Superior Court, attended with other Superior Court judges, including Kelly Higashi, the first Japanese American judge on the court. Her mother’s family was incarcerated during the war at the Portland, Oregon, fairgrounds, Tule Lake, Jerome, & Rohwer.

The group spent two days at our site and was hosted by Board Chair Shirley Ann Higuchi, a former DC Bar president and BADC member.

During their visit to Heart Mountain, the delegation met with 35 teachers from around the country who were attending an educational workshop about the Japanese American incarceration sponsored by a grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities. It was the second NEH workshop of the summer. The first was in June. Higashi stayed after the BADC trip to attend the Heart Mountain Pilgrimage.
As of our last update in the most recent issue of Kokoro Kara, the walls were going up on the fourth barrack, and the concrete foundation of the Mineta-Simpson conference hall was in place.

Four months later, the drywall for the fourth barrack is fully installed, and the first coat of paint is finished on the future office spaces for our expanding staff. The collections space is less finished, due to the more demanding environmental control equipment to keep our collections safe, but overall the fourth barrack has begun to feel like a real building.

In addition, we finally broke ground on the restoration of the root cellar! Starting in late May, our work crew was busily digging away, opening up the front entrance of the cellar and the sides of the ramp walls, which had been starting to collapse. They have removed the non-historic elements from the entrance and lifted up the entrance itself back to its original height, and established new concrete foundations to protect the structure into the future. This has been slow and careful work, done with an archaeologist on site at all times, and our workmen are carefully recording, cataloging and storing all original elements that they have to remove, for reuse either in the restoration or as part of the planned exhibit. Now the crew is hard at work putting in the final touches on the restored ramp, and will soon finish replacing the damaged rafters before putting the roof of the cellar back together and battening the structure down for the winter.

The biggest progress has been on the Mineta-Simpson Institute side! Four months ago, the Institute was only a concrete foundation. Now the exterior of the building is almost completely finished, with four brick chimneys facing the entrance of the driveway and black paneling all the way around, giving it the look of a historic mess hall. The non-historic bump-outs for the entrance and recording studio are done up in masonry. On the inside, the drywall is almost fully installed and awaiting plaster, and above the conference space the finished wooden ceiling is almost complete. From the outside, the only thing that shows the building is still under construction are the open spaces where the large glass windows looking out at Heart Mountain will be...

...the entrance of the root cellar...

BEFORE...

...AFTER

Mineta-Simpson Institute

Root Cellar

The non-historic addition to the entrance...

Has been removed

In the first time since the 1950s...

Back to its original layout!

All photos by Cally Steussy

Drywall and general structure taking shape in the future Mineta-Simpson Institute.

Temporary wall in the lobby near the front desk of the museum.

Future hallway entrance into the Mineta Simpson Institute.
When over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were unjustly incarcerated in World War II concentration camps, how did they clothe and dress themselves during those tumultuous years? Sewing and fashion were popular classes behind barbed wire. Advertised under adult education, sewing encompassed alterations and costume design, fashion illustration, pattern making, and tailoring. It was taught at all of the camps and incarcerees displayed their work in exhibitions and fashion shows.

A fashion show at the Tule Lake site, September 07, 1943.

Drawings by Mary H. Sakai, featured in the Tulean Dispatch, April 1, 1943.

A sewing teacher stands at the door of her shop in Sacramento, CA, prior to forced removal, May 11, 1942.

Incarceres take a pattern making class in the Amache site, December 10, 1942.
DRESSING FOR AN UNFAMILIAR CLIMATE

Margie Fujiyama shed some light on the logistics of creating clothes in the camps from the standpoint of practicality, comfort, and health as well as morale and appearance, wrote an anonymous author in the Heart Mountain Sentinel.

Heart Mountain incarcerees were used to the warmer climates of California, Oregon, and Washington. To survive the harsh Wyoming winter they were encouraged to make or wear clothes made of heavy, insulated fabric. Sweaters, wool-lined leather gloves, wool mittens & dresses, sheepskin vests, knee-high socks, wool and corduroy pants, and layered T-shirts were “fashionable and practical here this winter,” explained the anonymous author. But layering on a tight budget or none at all was no match for weather that dipped below -30 degrees during the winter.

As jobs and classes became available in camp, incarcerees worked in tailoring & dressmaking fields, learned how to sew, or saved their money to order clothing from catalogs. At the Tule Lake concentration camp and segregation center, over 200 young women modeled the clothes they created for their pattern drafting and design classes. Their work was captured by War Relocation Authority photographer Francis Leroy Stewart and the Daily Tulean Dispatch columnist Alyse Hikiji. “The designs were unique and original, the workmanship outstanding,” she wrote.

Fashion advice, along with coverage of events, was also dispensed in the Tule Lake publications: “With our low income, and war shortage up against us, the new trend in fashion has turned toward more practical, streamline, simple, and yet smart-looking clothes. Practice economy by buying quality. And remember that it always pays to choose clothes adaptable to many situations,” wrote Fumi Yumibe in the Daily Tulean Dispatch.

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Helen Yoshida is the Communications Writer at the Japanese American National Museum (JANM). She earned her BA in English from the University of California, Irvine, and her MA in History, with a focus on oral history, from California State University, Fullerton. Her work has appeared in *The Atlantic*, *The Oral History Review*, *Kokoro Kara*, and JANM’s blog, First & Central, among others.

Previously, Helen worked for the HMWF as Executive Assistant to our board chair (2015–2017) and was instrumental in rescuing the Eaton Collection by working with Heart Mountain board and staff to halt its public auction.

Incarceres used their skills and expertise to make the years behind barbed wire more bearable. They grew gardens and crops for fresher food, built furniture out of packing crates, and befriended local animals such as Maggie the magpie. Through their ingenuity, they not only created practical, climate-appropriate clothing, but fashionable and attractive pieces that promoted individuality and creativity, even in such bleak surroundings.

*Incarceres attend the fashion show at Tule Lake, September 07, 1942.*

"Tule Lake Fashion at a Glance" by Frances Okamoto in the *Tulean Dispatch*, August 1, 1942.

**2023 Heart Mountain Pilgrimage**
Powell & Cody, WY • July 27–29, 2023

Janet Reed-Bradley

Darrell Kunitomi

Mako Inouye

James Gleason
By Ray Locker

The Heart Mountain Pilgrimage conducted July 27 through 29 attracted more than 260 registrants who attended panels on mixed-race identity, multigenerational trauma, books about the incarceration, and tours of the multiple exhibits and projects being developed at the site. More than 60 percent of the visitors were attending the Pilgrimage for the first time, and many of them came with questions about their families’ incarceration experiences. The Foundation started a program offering family research sessions for members interested in learning more about how their family members were incarcerated, what happened to them in camp and where they went after the war.

The Foundation introduced its research work during its opening session on Friday, July 28, with a panel featuring actors Tamlyn Tomita and Ally Maki, who are Heart Mountain descendants making their first visit to the camp site. They appeared with Los Angeles documentarian and newscaster David Ono as they learned more about their family members who had been incarcerated. Tomita’s paternal great grandparents were at Heart Mountain, where her great grandmother, Take Tomita, died in April 1945.

Three of Maki’s grandparents were incarcerated at Heart Mountain, while her maternal grandfather, Bryan Honkawa, met her grandmother when Honkawa and his mother visited Heart Mountain from their home in Billings, Montana, not long after the camp opened in August 1942. Heart Mountain plans to offer similar family research for members later this year or in early 2024.

Pilgrimage attendees also had a chance to tour the under-construction Mineta-Simpson Institute, the new facility that will host conferences and other activities dedicated to promoting the values displayed by Secretary Norman Mineta and Senator Alan Simpson. The two first met as Boy Scouts behind the Heart Mountain barbed wire and remained friends until Mineta’s death in May 2022. Simpson toured the institute building with Shirley Ann Higuchi, the Foundation’s board chair.

The Foundation will celebrate the Institute’s grand opening during next year’s Pilgrimage. Along with the conference center, the Institute will feature a new wing dedicated to former Heart Mountain board member LaDonna Zall, the longtime board member who watched the last train filled with incarcerated leave Heart Mountain on November 10, 1945. Zall, who died in 2021, was Heart Mountain’s first curator, and the new wing will hold artifacts and archives.

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The Foundation gave its annual LaDonna Zall Compassionate Witness Award to members of the extended Albright-Marshall family, the descendants of some of the original residents of the Los Angeles neighborhood known as J-Flats.

Before, during and after World War II, the J-Flats neighborhood, also known as East Hollywood, was home to Japanese Americans and Black Americans, such as the Albright-Marshall family. Rufus and Crystal Marshall ran a catering business and were close to their Japanese American neighbors, who were forced from their homes after the signing of Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942.

When their neighbors, such as the Hoshizaki family, were incarcerated first at the Pomona Assembly Center and then Heart Mountain, the Marshalls watched over their homes and belongings. Takashi Hoshizaki, a Heart Mountain board member, remembered how the Marshalls brought apple pie and ice cream to his family while they were at Pomona.

Crystal and Rufus Marshall’s daughter, Barbara Marshall Williams, Barbara’s niece Karen “Kiwi” Burch, and Barbara’s daughter Robin Waller received the award for the family.

The award presentation coincided with the opening of “Making a Neighborhood: Exclusion & Community in J-Flats, Los Angeles”, our new exhibit about the history of the J-Flats neighborhood from its founding through the various communities that found a home in it.

Samanta Helou Hernandez, a resident of nearby Virgil Village, wrote much of the exhibit and took many of the photographs of the neighborhood and its residents, including Takashi Hoshizaki, who still lives on the street where he grew up.

The centerpiece of the exhibit is a vintage kimono owned by the Kakiba family and protected by the Albright-Marshalls while their neighbors were at Heart Mountain. The Making a Neighborhood exhibit will remain in Heart Mountain’s temporary exhibit space until next spring.
Legendary animator Willie Ito showed participants in a workshop how to create cartoons, such as those included in *Hello Maggie!*, the book by Heart Mountain incarceree and board member Shig Yabu. *Hello Maggie!* is now being produced as an animated film that will premiere during the 2024 Heart Mountain Pilgrimage. The trailer was shown during the Friday session of the Pilgrimage and received an enthusiastic response.

Doug Nelson was part of a panel of Heart Mountain authors that included author and documentarian Frank Abe, a Heart Mountain descendant, and Eric Muller, a University of North Carolina law professor and one of the creators of the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center’s permanent exhibit.

Muller talked about his new book, *Lawyer, Jailer, Ally, Foe: Complicity and Conscience in America’s World War II Concentration Camps*, which tells the stories of War Relocation Authority attorneys who worked at Heart Mountain and two other camps. The book uses fictional techniques to recreate the conversations held by camp attorneys and incarcerees.

Abe’s book, *We Hereby Refuse*, tells the story of resistance inside the various camps, including Heart Mountain’s draft resisters and Mitsuye Endo, who waged the only successful legal challenge to the Japanese American incarceration during World War II.
In late February, a Chinook wind blew down from the Rockies and enveloped Heart Mountain in an unseasonable warmth. Even the locals were fooled into thinking spring had arrived early, but it didn’t last. “The temperature dropped so fast,” wrote Velma Kessel in her diary, “that icicles froze in crooked patterns.”

Velma was the overnight nurse at Heart Mountain Hospital, the rough collection of green shingled buildings serving the medical needs of the incarcerated Japanese American community. The only way to reach the hospital was on foot, so winter nights were typically quiet. People wouldn’t bundle up and walk a mile across the frozen camp for anything short of an emergency. It was similarly still at the camp’s front gate, where a military guard kept watch from a little booth 24 hours a day. The soldier glanced down at his watch, noted it was just after 2 a.m., and looked up to see a young Nisei woman in front of him. She was completely undressed and sobbing quietly. The guard tossed his wool great coat over her shoulders and escorted her up the hill to the hospital.

Velma Kessel recognized the woman as a patient she had seen just days earlier, in much happier spirits, with a newborn infant in her arms. It occurred to her that, somewhere in the camp on this subzero night, there could be an infant alone. After admitting the young mother, Velma dispatched a messenger to the staff dormitories with an urgent mission: Find Virgil Payne.
By the time she became Director of the Social Welfare Department at Heart Mountain in 1942, Virgil Payne had amassed a résumé that put her male colleagues to shame. A farm girl from the Missouri Ozarks, she had gone on to earn a degree in education, a master’s in sociology from NYU, and a certificate from the New York School of Social Work. The field of social work was largely created by ambitious women like Virgil, women who completed an education only to find most career paths closed to them.

Jobs in social work—even for women—became plentiful after The Great Depression and the New Deal that followed. Virgil first led the Federal Transient program in Missouri, then moved to Wyoming and served as Director of the state’s Emergency Relief program and Director of Professional and Community Activities for the Works Progress Administration. This wide breadth of experience would prove useful at Heart Mountain.

To the incarcerated Japanese Americans, Virgil was something of a curiosity. They told a story of how Virgil, on leave in Cheyenne, missed her bus back to Heart Mountain. Without hesitation, she flagged down a truck full of road workers, jumped into the back, and rode all the way to Cody.

Unusually for a department director, Virgil lived in staff housing at the camp. In the winter, she could often be found ice skating in the rink off Block 17, and in summers she was on the dusty nine hole golf course the incarcerees had built in the administration area. She volunteered to lead a troop of Girls Scouts in camp, coordinated the YWCA and Red Cross programs, and even helped harvest vegetables on the farm. In 1943, a profile in the Heart Mountain Sentinel marveled over her “democratic and somewhat Bohemian ways.”

Energetic as Virgil was, she could not look after the social welfare of the camp alone. Virgil found an ideal partner in Peggy Fujioka, a bright Nisei woman of 28 who became the department’s second in command. Before the war, Peggy had been recruited by the Foreign Service, and spent several years working for the US government in Japan. Her record of service didn’t stop the FBI from arresting her father on dubious charges in early 1942, or the military from removing her and her family to Heart Mountain.

Social work was new to Peggy, but she had a natural talent with people. She was warm and outgoing in a way that made them trust her. In 2022, sociologist Sara Kekki mapped social networks in Heart Mountain, looking for “hidden power”—individuals outside positions of authority that nonetheless wielded enormous influence in the camp. Peggy emerged as one of Heart Mountain’s most influential figures. Her connections opened doors that allowed her and Virgil to take on some of the camp’s thorniest problems.

“Foster Parents Sought” read the headline in the Sentinel. Virgil and Peggy had found the missing infant safe on the night of March 1, but problems with the case continued to multiply. The baby’s parents were two young Nisei who “became very briefly animated of each other” while incarcerated at the Pomona Assembly Center. By the time they arrived in Heart Mountain, the relationship had gone sour. Virgil advised against marriage. The young woman’s parents didn’t take news of her pregnancy well, so arrangements were made for prenatal care and delivery at a Salvation Army Home in Denver. The girl had been back in camp just a few days when the guard discovered her at the gate.

The combined stresses of family dysfunction, life behind barbed wire, and care of a newborn pushed the young mother past her breaking point. Her condition continued to deteriorate. Heart Mountain had no mental health facilities. The doctors recommended sending her to the State Hospital in Evanston, and her parents consented. Neither they nor her father wanted the baby, so the little girl remained at Heart Mountain Hospital. The nurses who looked after the infant, to Virgil’s embarrassment, started calling the little girl “Baby Virgie.”

Virgil announced the search for foster parents in the Sentinel, but withheld most of the personal details. It didn’t matter. Gossip spread fast around Heart Mountain. Soon, the whole camp was following the story of Baby Virgie.
This kind of case was all too common to Virgil and Peggy, and they had virtually no resources to help solve it. The architects of the camps had only thought about humanity in its most generic, interchangeable form. The work they anticipated for the Social Welfare department was mostly administrative: distributing financial assistance, issuing winter clothing, and arranging transfers between camps. They hadn’t planned for the infinite unpredictability of real people, or the complex problems that Virgil and Peggy would have to untangle.

The trauma of forced removal and incarceration had left deep emotional and psychic wounds on the Heart Mountain community. Shell-shocked parents found themselves too overwhelmed to care for young children. Peggy and Virgil set up a system of home visits and worked to establish a rest home. When teenagers slid into juvenile delinquency, Peggy and Virgil stepped in to act as parole officers. They learned that one of the most important things they could do was just to listen. Once a week, they opened the doors of the Social Welfare office, arranged the chairs and waited for incarcerees to come in. People, otherwise shunned that Peggy and Virgil made plans to set aside specific barracks to house them.

Amy Iwasaki Mass, just a small girl at the time, remembers Virgil calling on one of those women in her barracks:

“My next-door neighbor was a beautiful, pregnant, 19 year-old, kind, young woman... As you can imagine she had no friends at camp... I spent a lot of time with her. Virgil Payne came to see her regularly to help her plan for what she would do with the baby. Ms. Payne always greeted me warmly, and after months of thinking all Americans hated me, it meant a lot to find a Caucasian professional woman treat me like she liked me.

Years later, inspired by the kindness shown to her and her neighbor, Amy decided to go into social work herself.

In the summer of 1943, the camp’s administration began to encourage “resettlement” among the incarcerees. Nisei were given permission to seek jobs outside Heart Mountain—afer, of course, their successful completion of a loyalty questionnaire and a mountain of other paperwork. If they were hired, they could leave the camp indefinitely.

Many saw resettlement as a way to escape the indignities of camp life, but there was a sinister motive behind the government’s plan. Resettlement allowed officials to control where Japanese Americans went after camp. The West Coast was off-limits entirely, and leaves were approved in such a way as to ensure that no one city ever gained a large Japanese American population. By separating the Nisei from their elders and their peers, the government hoped to force their assimilation and erase their culture.

Social workers like Virgil Payne, who had gained the trust of the incarcerated, were to play a key part of this plan. Virgil’s superiors urged her to push all her Nisei contacts to relocate, regardless of their personal circumstances. She went along with the plan initially, even posing for propaganda photos with the Sashihara family as they prepared to leave Heart Mountain for Cleveland.

After watching the Resettlement program in action, though, Virgil grew skeptical. Housing was in short supply nationwide, and wages offered to Japanese Americans weren’t always enough to support a family on the outside. In order to save money, men would go out for work alone and leave their wives and children behind at Heart Mountain.

Virgil’s growing frustration seeped into her monthly reports. She increasingly complained about problems in the camp in “in connection with broken families because of the relocation of certain family members.” Saddled with all the domestic work and little communication from their husbands, wives occasionally developed “strong friendships with other men.” Some men were actively preying on them. Virgil noted that one repeat offender at Heart Mountain had “three other women in this center he is seeing regularly and a fourth lady at Poston.” If any of Virgil’s bosses shared her concerns, they never wrote her back.
Unable to change the resettlement policy from Heart Mountain, Virgil hoped to reshape it from higher in the organization. In September 1944, she took a position helping to lead the War Relocation Authority’s Resettlement Office for the Great Lakes Region. She lasted just under a year there, and then left for an overseas assignment with the United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration, on a mission to rebuild war-torn Europe.

The new Social Welfare Director at Heart Mountain, Adeline S. Kell, offered a marked contrast to Virgil Payne. Kell’s view of social work centered less on building relationships and more on the efficient management of people. In many ways, she was exactly the type of person the government had been looking for. No one at Heart Mountain liked her.

Kell brought her own assistant to the camp, effectively pushing Peggy Fujioka out of the department. Most of the rest of the Japanese American staff resigned shortly afterward. Peggy transferred to the camp’s Reports Department, where she stayed until her departure from camp in August 1945. Years later, Peggy would return to diplomatic work, enjoying a long career in the Japanese Consul General’s office.

After Adeline Kell had been on the job a few months, even her superiors had to admit she “lacked warmth in her approach.” Confronted with this criticism, Kell argued that Virgil’s job had been easier than hers. The main focus in the first years of camp, she said, was “giving disaster relief.” She, on the other hand, was being asked to do “everything possible to hasten people’s departure.”

Unsurprisingly, no one came to Kell’s defense; but her statement had a grain of truth to it. Once the government lifted its restrictions on Japanese Americans returning to the West Coast in 1945, they wanted to close the camps as quickly and inexpensively as possible. The politicians and bureaucrats of the War Relocation Authority had little concern for the lives they had ruined or the fact that many Japanese Americans had no homes to return to. When Heart Mountain finally closed in November 1945, many families were sent to live in cheap hotels, trailer camps, and even tents—some for years.

The stories from the Heart Mountain Social Welfare Department aren’t pleasant or easy to tell. Our instinct is to talk about the resilience of the Japanese American community in the camps, rather than the people who were broken by their incarceration. We want stories about them lifting each other up in a time of need, not about them hurting each other further. But if we want to understand the trauma of this experience, we can’t just understand it in the abstract. We need to see all the messy, unpleasant ways that trauma manifests. We have to allow the people of Heart Mountain the humanity that their government tried so hard to deny them.

Closure

For years after their release from Heart Mountain, artist Estelle Ishigo and her husband Arthur lived in a series of makeshift trailer camps with other Japanese American families.

January 4, 1944

Over the course of December, several couples visited the Social Welfare office to inquire about Baby Virgie. Newspapers in the other camps had picked up the stories in the Sentinel and reprinted them. The news had even leaked out into the nearby towns of Cody and Powell. Two white couples contacted the camp administration about the child. Virgil Payne decided it would be best to place Virgie with Japanese Americans, though, and began interviews of applicants inside the camp.

When Velma Kessel next visited Ward 5 to play with Baby Virgie, she found the little girl was gone. Virgil had found her a family. “The foster father is a Christian minister,” she wrote, “and the mother is an extra refined person and there are already two little children.” The Sentinel announced the adoption later that week, and the whole camp celebrated. In a place where the whole future seemed uncertain, this was the rarest of gifts—a happy ending.

Dakota Russell is the executive director of The House of the Seven Gables, where he tells the story of the Settlement House Movement and the beginnings of social work in America. He serves on the Heart Mountain Advisory Council.
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