

Camps are a reminder of what should not have been

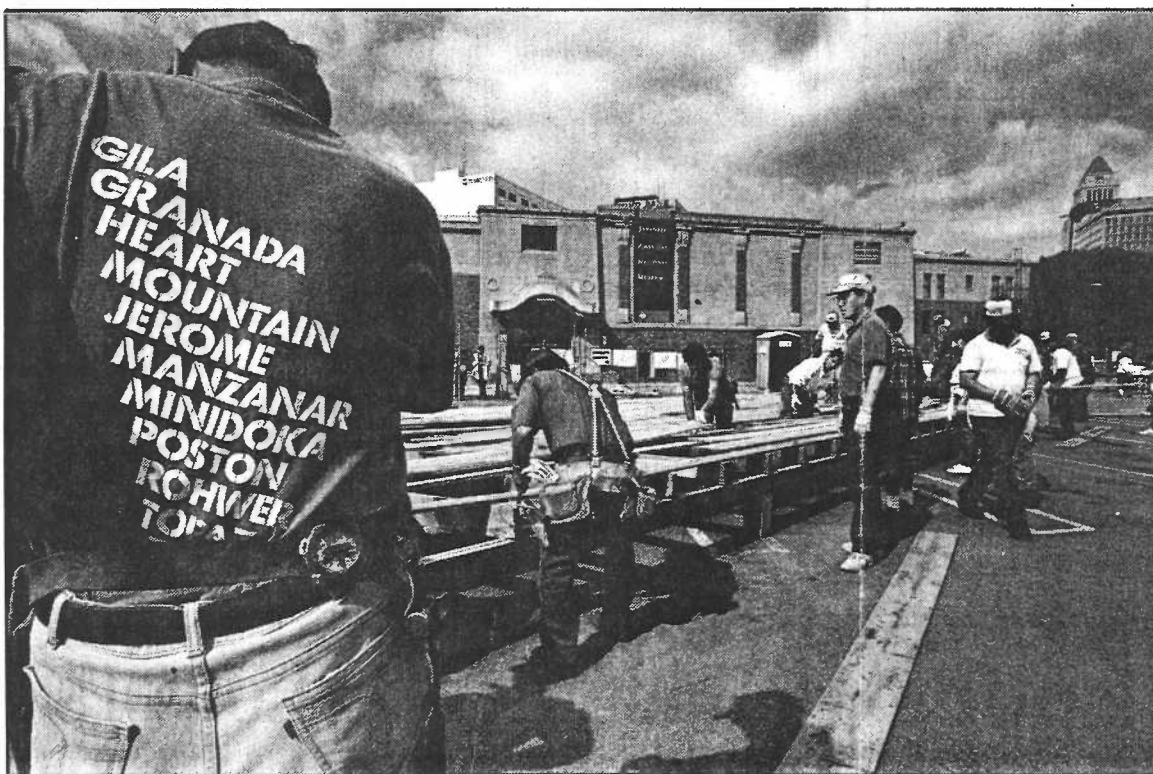
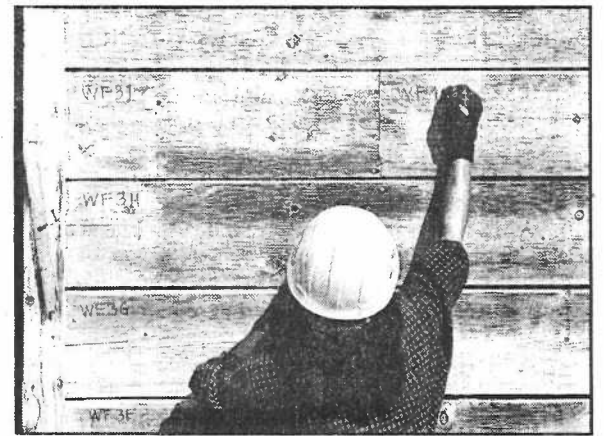
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In Wyoming: Volunteers (above and at right below) disassemble the barracks at what was the Heart Mountain Relocation Center during World War II. More than 120,000 Japanese-Americans were incarcerated in the camps during the war years.

The HEARTBREAK

of Heart Mountain



In Los Angeles: Wearing a T-shirt listing the names of internment camps, a volunteer works with others to reconstruct the barracks for an exhibit at the Japanese American

Story and photos by STAN HONDA

I had never seen an internment camp before, or even imagined what it would be like to stand inside one. I had seen photographs, showing rows and rows of wooden structures, covered in tar paper, sitting in a desolate part of the country. I had heard the stories, told by family members, of life in the camps.

And now I was there. Next to a field of crops in northern Wyoming, off a small dirt road, stood a barrack from the Heart Mountain Relocation Center. It was the same rectangular, simple design that made up the thousands of barracks in the 10 concentration camps that held more than 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, most of them U.S. citizens, during World War II.

Two of those people were my parents, native Californians, sent with little warning to the camp in Arizona that was known as Poston.

In the shadow of Heart Mountain, about 15 miles northeast of Cody, Wyo., about 20 volunteers chipped away at the building. Their intention: not to destroy, but to preserve. My intention: to document the event.

The Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles has organized the Heart Mountain Barracks Project as a way to preserve two of the structures where many Japanese-Americans spent two to three years of their lives.

They will be part of an exhibition called "America's Con-



STAN HONDA

Remembering: The author's father, Masami Honda, 77, in Los Angeles as the exhibit is put together. A native of San Diego County — Honda lives in Chula Vista — he was interned at Poston, Ariz., during World War II.

Heartbreak

Exhibit to detail horrors of camps

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centration Camps: Remembering the Japanese-American Experience," opening tomorrow at the museum.

In Wyoming, some of the volunteers were up on the roof, precariously perched, scraping away tar paper from the wooden planks. Most of them were *nisei*, second-generation Japanese-Americans in their 60s and 70s, my father's generation. In 1942, when the internment was ordered, they were children and young adults.

Some of the volunteers were my generation, *sansei*, third-generation Japanese-Americans. Although few of us have more than a second-hand knowledge of the camps, the interest in finding out more about them is great.

Wyoming seems to be the only state where the original barracks exist. After the war, homesteaders

were allowed into the northern part of the state. Recipients of a lottery were given the opportunity by the government to purchase the barracks for as little as \$1.

Many barracks have been remodeled into essentially ranch-style houses. Many (like the two in the project) were used for storage and left in almost the original condition.

It was inspiring to photograph the workers as one barrack came down, plank by plank. For 50 years, some had tried to forget their incarceration, to the point of not being able to tell their children about the experience.

But all were in agreement about why they were helping with this project — so that the history of the camps can be told, so that the forced internment will not be forgotten, and so that this will never happen again.

It was very hard to imagine living inside the barrack, with gaps in the wooden floor that allowed the frigid winters of Heart Mountain to seep in.

The voices of those who were incarcerated, though, say more than any history book. My parents did talk a lot about their experiences to

DATEBOOK

"America's Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese-American Experience"

The exhibit opens tomorrow and will continue through October 1995 at the Japanese American National Museum, 369 E. First St. in Los Angeles. Admission is \$4 for adults; \$3 for seniors and students; children under age 5 are admitted free. For more information, call (213) 625-0414.

my sisters and me. My mother, Ruth, has died, but my father, Masami, has related incredible details of those years he spent at Poston.

I showed him the photographs I took in Wyoming, and he began to describe the small ways in which his barrack was different.

In mid-October we were in Los Angeles and saw one of the barracks being reconstructed in a parking lot across from the Japanese American National Museum.

I introduced my father to Sharon Danley, a *sansei* volunteer who also had been in Wyoming. Her parents were in Poston, but they never talk-

ed much about it. My father told her more in a few minutes than she learned in a lifetime.

My father got a tour of the almost-reconstructed barrack one afternoon. He noticed a solid wall area where he remembered a door had stood. And he was right as Jim McElwain, an architect specializing in restoration, pointed to the modifications made to the internal frame when the structure was cut in half, eliminating the doorway.

My father touched the wood, the tar paper, walked on the wooden floor boards, moved through a space that defined the identity of a segment of our population and was a concrete reminder of the prejudice and discrimination that our government brought upon some of its citizens.

The experience reminded me that my father, my mother, my aunts and uncles and cousins were part of history, part of American history, part of something that should not be forgotten.

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