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Wyoming prisoner: a str

by Robert Roten
Boomerang Staff Writer

During World War II, a charismatic leader signed an order which put a young woman named Bettie on a train to an unknown destination.

She didn't know where she, or her fellow prisoners were going, or if she would ever see her family again. Even though it wasn't tattooed on her arm, she was given a number by the government, 5586. She was not a German Jew headed to Dachau. She was not one of the millions of European or Asian refugees displaced by the war She was a U.S. Citizen, born in Los Angeles.

She was being forced by the U.S. Government to relocate to a camp in Wyoming, despite the fact that Executive Order 9066, which authorized the relocation, signed by President Franklin Roosevelt was in violation of the U.S. Constitution.

"Where is Heart Mountain?" Bettie Kadota asked her fellow passengers. Nobody knew. It took them two nights and a day traveling in the old creaking, dirty train to get to Heart Mountain Japanese Relocation Center, located between Powell and Cody in Wyoming.

All Bettie knew about Wyoming was what she had learned in school, that the capital city was Cheyenne. She now knows a lot more about Wyoming, having lived in the state 56 years, the last 30 years in Laramie.

"I never thought I would see my family again," says Bettie Hashimoto (her maiden name was Kadota) the decades-old memories of those first fearful days in Wyoming still fresh in her mind. "Why are they separating me from the family?" she asked. She said the authorities promised her before the trip she would not be separated from her family. "It was a frightening experience," she said.

Welcome to Wyoming

Arriving at Heart Mountain in 1942, she was greeted by the barren, windswept Wyoming wilderness. Heart Mountain was a hastily-built city in the middle of nowhere. Row upon row of army-like barracks were surrounded by barbed wire. Armed guards manned towers around the perimeter. She found a bag stuffed with straw to sleep on Bettie said, "I was floored," when she saw the conditions. To those on the inside, it seemed more like a concentration camp than a "relocation center," its official name.

Bettie hooked up with the rest of her family two weeks after arriving in Heart Mountain. The entire family and some friends had been relocated there from Baldwin Park, in the Los Angeles area of California where they had lived. The family was assigned to Block 20-8-AB of Heart Mountain.

If they had lived a few miles further inland, they would not have been relocated. Executive Order 9066 applied to some coastal areas considered strategically sensitive. The Japanese weren't the only ones moved to relocation camps. Some German and Italian immigrants were also kept behind barbed wire. Even those who were free sometimes lost their jobs because of wartime hysteria.

The relocated families took with them what they could carry. A kindly neighbor of the Kadotas, Louie Wiggins, let the family store their belongings in his garage, but about a month later, someone broke into the garage and stole everything of value. Earlier, neighbors who had heard of their impending relocation, offered to buy things from them, but at far less than market value, she said. People broke into her uncle's house and stole his range and refrigerator in his absence.

At first, the Kadotas were put in an "assembly center," the Pamona Fairgrounds, where they stayed for three months in barracks before being moved to Heart Mountain, one of 10 relocation centers for Japanese-Americans. Some people avoided the camps by moving inland, away from the coastal areas affected by the executive order.

Life at Heart Mountain

Bettie spent her entire time at Heart Mountain as a nurse in the camp hospital helping with surgery and obstetrics. It was a tough job with long, varied hours. She was also served as a nurse at the assembly center and on the train to the camp.

A total of 550 babies were born in the hospital. A total of 128 prisoners died there. "I was kept pretty busy over there," she said. A total of 10,767 prisoners, most of them, like Bettie, from California were held there between 1942 and 1945. It was the third largest city in Wyoming, surrounded by barbed wire and armed guards. There was even a fire department in the camp, manned by detainees.

One of the many adjustments the prisoners had to make was to adapt to Wyoming's climate, which is a lot colder and windier than California's. Bettie was relieved when she was issued a Navy pea coat which helped protect her from the cold.

The families also had to adapt to having less privacy than they were used to. The barracks had partitions, but when the green wood dried, wide cracks developed between the boards. Neighbors could see everything. Bettie said "we plastered newspapers on the wall" to get some privacy. They also hung up blankets on ropes or wire for privacy.

Heat was provided by pot-bellied, coal-fired stoves. "You either got too cold or too hot," she said of the heating system. There were also games, including baseball, for the children and craft classes for the adults, along with movies, but she did not participate in those diversions because of her long hours at the hospital.

Bettie said the area was also infested with rattle snakes. Some camp people made a wooden cage for a rattlesnake and put it outside one of the barracks. It would rattle when people would pass by. There were numerous children in the camp and numerous infants as well, so milk stations were set up around the camp, Bettie said.

There was a problem with thefts around camp. Bettie said she thought the theft problem was caused by the fact that people had no money. All the assets of Japanese Americans were frozen by the government. She said people would steal tubes of toothpaste, blankets or anything else left unguarded.

Death at Heart Mountain

One of the most traumatic experiences she had at Heart Mountain was the loss of her friend, Shoichi Okamoto. He was shot and killed by a guard at the camp. "When I heard about his death I was really devastated," Bettie said.

Okamoto, the brother of her girlfriend, used to drive Bettie and his sister around when they lived in California. He was driving a truck at the camp and had a permit to drive the truck out of the camp. A young guard shot him at close range for some unknown reason after asking to see Okamoto's permit, Bettie said, adding, "We don't know what happened. Nobody seems to know what happened."

In a normal situation, there would have to be some accountability for what happened to Okamoto, but Heart Mountain was not a normal situation. "You don't know what's going to happen," Bettie said, "you don't know what to expect." She said, "I'd say during the war we were without a country."

The Nisei and the Kibei

In addition to the occasional shooting, there were also fights between different factions of prisoners, including battles between the *Nisei* and the *Kibei.* Nisei means second generation. They were more Americanized than the *Issei,* the first-generation Japanese immigrants. The Kibei, on the other hand, although born in the U.S. were *Nisei* sent to Japan as children to be raised as Japanese. Bettie said "These two groups don't agree on a lot of things."

According to Bill Hosokawa's book, "Nisei, The Quiet Americans," the number of Japanese Americans during World War II with at least three years of schooling in Japan was only about 12 percent, while 73 percent, like Bettie, had never been to Japan.

Hosokawa, a retired Denver Post writer who has taught writing courses at UW, writes in his book, "Prior to the evacuation, the loyalty to the United States of the great majority of *Kibei* was unquestionable, and the doubtful ones were well-known. It was as wrong to condemn the *Kibei* as a group as it was to make blanket accusations against all *Nisei.*"

Some of these groups, however, were bitterly divided. Hosokawa writes that those Japanese Americans who refused military service and had refused to sign loyalty oaths were separated from the *Nisei* who had signed. The non-signers sometimes heard the following taunt from their fellow relocation camp members as they left for other camps or prisons: "Go on you dirty Japs. We'll kill you the next time we see you."

Bettie said she can understand both sides of the controversy, those who wanted to prove their patriotism by fighting for their country and those who said they should not have to fight when the U.S. treated them as prisoners rather than as citizens.

Heart Mountain Soldiers

A total of 22 men from Heart Mountain died fighting for the U.S. in World War II of the over 900 men and women from the center who served in the armed forces. Clarence Matsumura of Heart Mountain was one of the first U.S. soldiers to walk through the gates of the notorious German death camp Dachau to liberate it.

Walking through Dachau evoked a feeling of Deja Vu for Matsumura, according to "Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Both Sides of the Fence," a UW history thesis by Michael Mackey.

Mackey writes: "The barbed wire and hastily-built wooden barracks looked somewhat familiar. While he was helping to care for Jews who had been sent to Dachau because of their race and religion, his parents sat behind the barbed wire of Heart Mountain in America because of their race."

Mackey quotes Mits Koshiyama, one of the Heart Mountain draft resisters as saying, "if a person is going to fight for freedom and democracy, shouldn't he be enjoying the same rights he is entrusted to defend?"

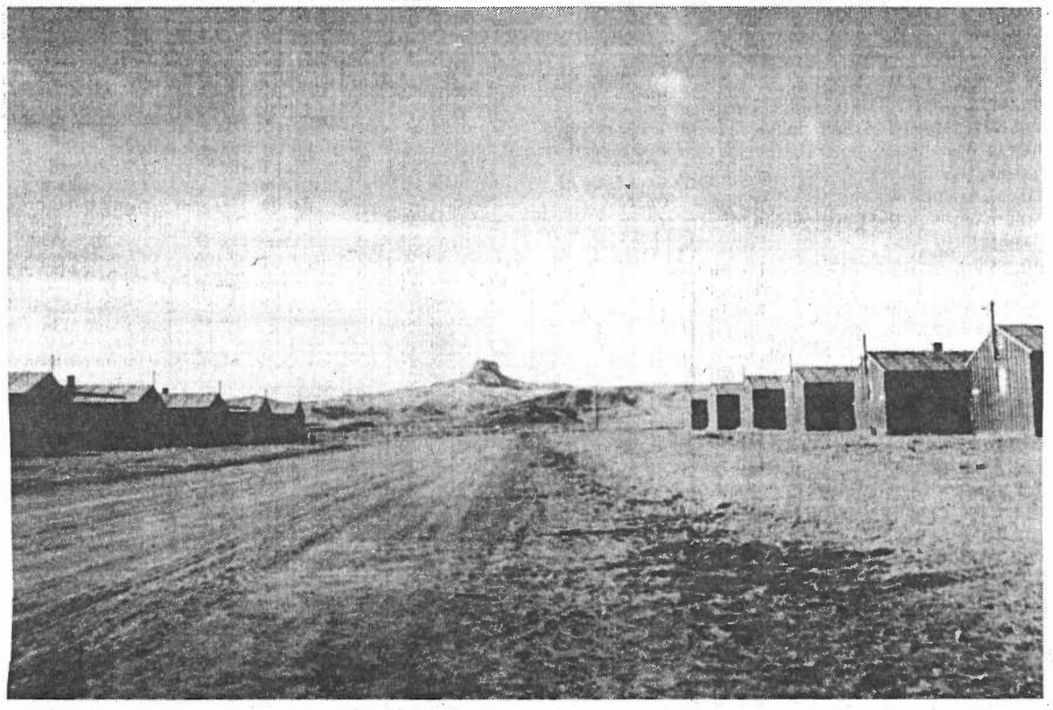
Bettie said some people in the camps are still bitter about what happened. She said their attitude at the time was "Why are we in here? We didn't do anything ... We are citizens." She said the prisoners were especially bitter about the lack of due process, such as a trial before being imprisoned.

One of the bitterest of all those sent to the camps was Joe Kirihara, who had fought for the U.S. in World War I. He was so angry at being ordered to a relocation center that he wore his WWI uniform, complete with medals, as a sign of protest. "I didn't blame him," Bettie said.

"I don't feel that bitter," Bettie said. "It's been so long ago." She added, "There's a lot of people who tried to make the best of what we had. What else can you do?"

Some of the reasons given for the relocation of Japanese Americans, along with some Italian and German-Americans, included concerns about a possible invasion in California, possible sabotage of the war effort, questions about the loyalty of people with close ties to their former native lands. Hosokawa said in his book that even when these arguments proved bogus, the relocation policy was not changed, primarily, he argues, because of racial prejudice.

The Hashimotos both said there was no evidence of any sabotage by Japanese Americans in the Los Angeles area during the war. There were no police records of any kind for them, they said. They attribute this to the Japanese tradition of not bringing any shame on the family.



HEART MOUNTAIN looms in the background in this photograph taken between blocks 12 and 17 of the Heart Mountain Relocation Center in 1943. The outside of the barracks are covered with tar paper and lath. The Heart Mountain Relocation Center cost an estimated $5 million to construct and equip.

(Hashimoto photo)

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A BABY GIRL born to a Mr. and Mrs. Hishiki at Heart Mountain Relocation Center is held by camp nurse Bettie (Hashimoto) Kadota.
(Hashimoto photo)

BETTIE KADOTA (Hashimoto) is shown in Block One at Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming in 1943.
(Hashimoto photo)

anger in a strange land

Free at Last

Bettie was released from Heart Mountain prior to the end of the war. In fact, a number of those in the camp were released for shorter periods of time to help harvest crops for farmers in the area. Bettie said some elderly camp residents were also released before the end of the war. "I think they knew they made a mistake," she said of the relocation camps.

Those held in the camp could get passes into the nearby towns of Cody and Powell. In fact, a number of Japanese-Americans from the camp were married in Powell, according to Mackey's thesis. Bettie said, Powell was considered to be a town more friendly to those in the camp than was Cody, where "No Japs" signs were prominently displayed downtown.

Bettie married Harry Hashimoto, who at that time lived in Cheyenne, and because of that was allowed to leave the camp. She had first met him in California. Harry joined the U.S. Army and fought with the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team, a unit that earned more commendations and had a higher casualty rate in a shorter time than any other U.S. combat team in World War II.

When the Hashimotos were in the process of buying a house in Cheyenne, their neighbors all signed a petition to keep them out. "They didn't want us," Bettie said, but they bought the house anyway and followed the real estate agent's advice by keeping a low profile. She noted one of their neighbors signing the petition was of Italian descent.

When Harry was getting ready to leave for his military service during the war, one of the neighbors wished him good luck, but another neighbor began an argument with the first saying she should not wish Harry good luck, despite the fact he was going to war to defend them.

Discrimination

Bettie said, "I don't understand discrimination." She added, "They say there's no discrimination anymore, but it is still there. You can't tell me it isn't there." The Hashimotos also said they were not allowed to join some fraternal organizations such as the Elks in Laramie a number of years ago because of their race, but now they decline offers to join, even though they are now allowed membership in the same organizations that once excluded them.

The Hashimotos attended a Heart Mountain reunion in Las Vegas last year and recently visited a former Heart Mountain resident in Hawaii. At the reunion, Bettie said she saw some people she recognized. Some have died, she noted. She knows the camp closed 53 years ago, but "it's hard to believe," it was that long ago. "Time gets away fast," she said.

Bettie said she doesn't like it when people characterize Japanese Americans as "clannish." She said, "Can you blame them when the Caucasians won't accept you?"

The Hashimotos expressed gratitude however, for the support of former Colorado governor Ralph Carr, who welcomed the displaced Japanese Americans when no other western governor would. In his book, Hosokawa notes that decision may have cost Carr the election when he later ran for the U.S. Senate.

More common was the reaction of Wyoming Governor Lester Hunt, who, in a letter to the War Relocation Authority wrote: "We don't want a single one of these evacuees to remain in Wyoming," according to T.A. Larson's book, "History of Wyoming."

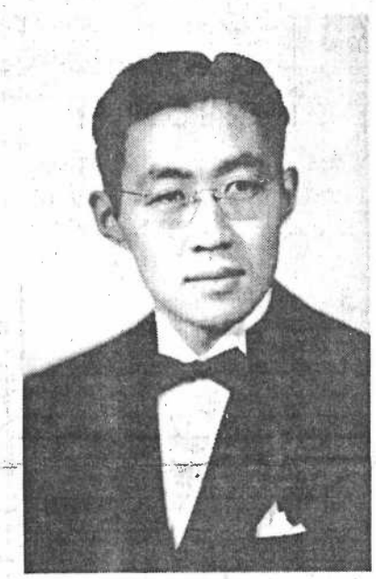
Executive Order 9066

Bettie said she is disappointed that Executive Order 9066 was never rescinded. "They've (the Japanese American Citizens League) been trying for years to erase this off the book because they don't want it to happen to us again, or to any other minority group, but they haven't been able to so far."

Responding to an e-mail question on this issue, Herbert Yamanishi, the national director of the JACL wrote, "Thank you for inquiry. Regarding Executive Order 9066, we do not have a specific agenda for its recision. The Order was President Roosevelt's order to imprison the 120,000 Japanese and Japanese Americans in 10 prison camps without due process. We are always looking for legitimate ways of having the order rescinded but so far have not found one."

Yamanishi went on to talk about a Supreme Court case in which the constitutionality of 9066 was tested by three Japanese Americans. "Because the Supreme Court decision was not unanimous (I think three dissented), we hold out the hope that there will be an opportunity to resurrect the issue." He added, "Today, if a President tried to issue an Executive Order to imprison 120,000 American citizens without due process or the consent of Congress, they would be brought up for impeachment."

An interesting footnote to this sad episode in U.S. history is the controversy surrounding the upcoming release of a commercial film called "Siege." In this fictional movie martial law is declared after a terrorist bombing. All people of Arab descent in one part of New York are rounded up and put in concentration camps. Executive Order 9066 may have been issued almost 57 years in the past, but it is not quite dead history.



Harry Hashimoto