TRUE AMERICANISM

STORY BY NATHAN FELLER PHOTOGRAPHY BY ALEC BUTTERFIELD & CALEB MINOR





Rokuzaemon Matsumura and Takeko, his wife, immigrated from Japan to the United States in the early 20th century after he, like thousands of other Japanese men, was recruited to continue railroad expansion across the Western United States.

Matsumura worked as a railroader in Wyoming for around 30 years before finally retiring, ready to begin a new chapter for his family. He invested the couple's retirement savings into a small storefront in East Hollywood, California, and named it The Wyoming Market.

For a short time, the Matsumura family flourished – serving, primarily, the Japanese American and African American communities of East Hollywood with the hospitality and friendliness of rural Wyomingites.

But on Dec. 6, 1941, "a day that will live in infamy," naval forces of the Empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. With thousands dead and a nation in shock, Japanese Americans like the Matsumura family found themselves subject to a fresh wave of propaganda – transforming them into spies, traitors and dangers to the republic.

On Feb. 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, which authorized U.S. military commanders to "prescribe military areas in such places and of such extent… from which any or all persons may be excluded."

"There was a point soon after Pearl Harbor was bombed, where the U.S. government was actually encouraging Japanese Americans to relocate themselves – kind of like the narratives we've been hearing for the last couple of decades about self-deportation if you're from Latin America," said Dr. Aura Sunada Newlin, the executive director of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation

However, due to widespread lack of participation and outright refusal to comply with the recommendation to vacate their homes, the government quickly abandoned the idea.

Official military announcements spread across the West Coast like an infection. Those who refused to vacate the area of their own volition were now being forced to stay put until the government decided where they would place them. Of course, not everyone felt compelled to obey this new order.

"My grandmother herself was not actually incarcerated, but all of her siblings and her parents were," Newlin said. "She left the West Coast after she was allowed to, but before she was forced to. She ended up coming through Wyoming to stay with relatives and see family on her way to North Dakota, where she was supposed to go to school."

In 1942, over 10,000 Japanese Americans were forced out of their West Coast homes and placed in the Heart Mountain Japanese Internment Site, where many would spend four years of their lives – imprisoned there solely based on their Japanese ancestry.

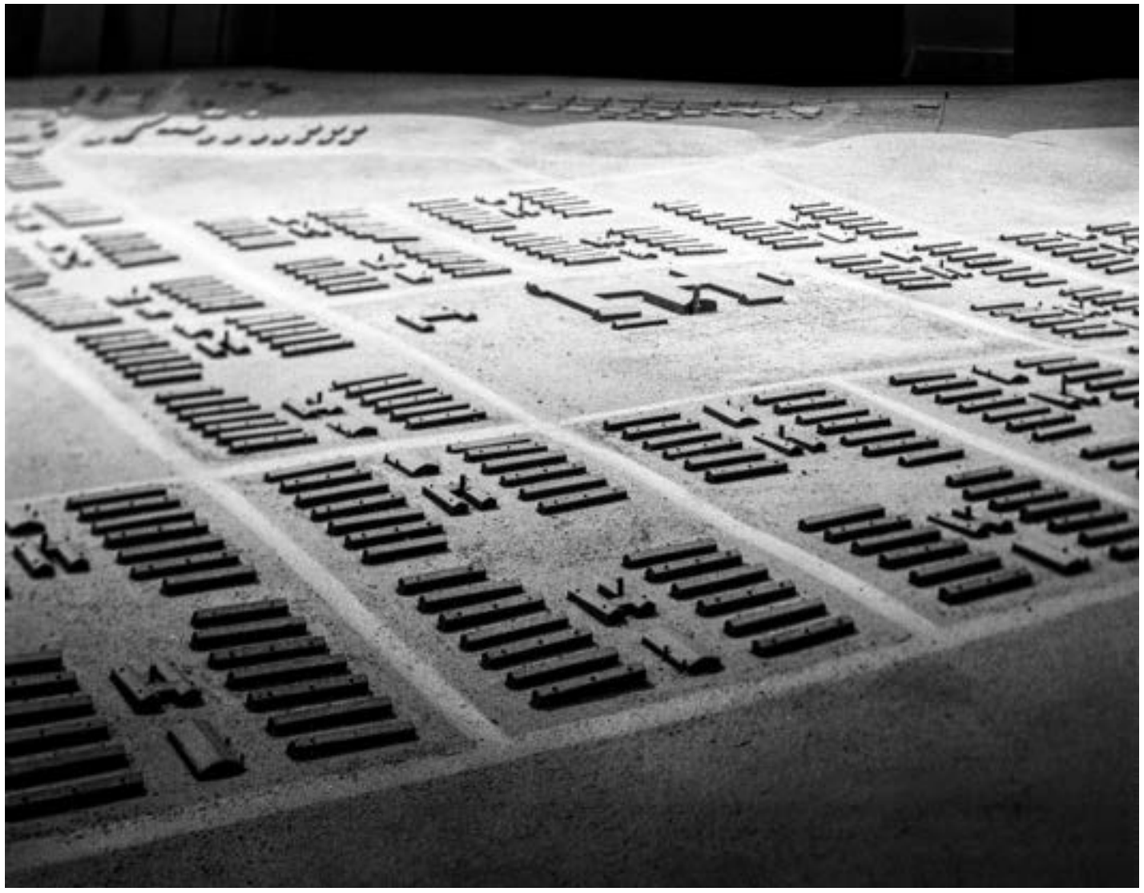
"I believe I had seven family members [who were incarcerated] – my great-grandparents and their kids," Newlin said.

For escapees like Susan Sunada, née Matsumura and those who did not reside on the West Coast, the war years were not much easier. Jobs were difficult to find, and wartime hysteria and racism spread to nearly every corner of the U.S.

"When [my grandmother] showed up at school to enroll in college, they looked at her face and said they weren't accepting new students," Newlin said.

In under half a year, over 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry, about two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, were stripped of their constitutional rights, relieved of many of their possessions and removed from their homes. Many of the remaining Japanese Americans who did not live on the West Coast – approximately 7,000 – found themselves fired without reason or removed from their schools.

However, many of these removal orders were executed before the government actually had a place to send the newly incarcerated population – many of the camps across the nation were still under construction, and the ones that were complete were incapable of holding that many people.





"Before the camps were done, the Japanese were put into small facilities, like where they had small county fairs, or where they had small horse tracks," said Johnny Tim Yellowtail, the historic site caretaker and a tour guide at the Heart Mountain WWII Interpretive Center. "A lot of the Japanese Americans were living in horse stalls before the camps were done. They had to remove all the manure first [before] they could move in."

By November 1942, nearly every person of Japanese ancestry from the West Coast was shipped off to one of ten internment camps scattered throughout the more inland areas of the country.

"Ironically, my family was sent back to Wyoming to be incarcerated here at Heart Mountain," Newlin said. "They had lost their freedom. They had everything taken away from them – all of their property, everything they built their lives for."

Conditions at the Heart Mountain concentration camp – or relocation site, as the government defined them at the time – were far from ideal. Construction was rushed and poorly planned, leading to shoddy workmanship.

"The first group that arrived here in Heart Mountain was on August 12 of 1942," Yellowtail said. "Within a week, somebody [had] already passed away. There were one hundred and eighty-two deaths here. The Japanese Americans were not ready for that winter when they arrived here... a lot of them did not have winter clothes."

Many of the incarcerees noted the winter of 1942-1943 as one of the coldest winters they'd ever endured, according to Yellowtail. With ill-prepared wardrobes, inadequate shelter and bodies accustomed to the balmy conditions of the West Coast, the Japanese American incarcerees were forced into a battle for survival against the desolate, unforgiving Wyoming climate.

The government essentially hired anyone who could swing a hammer to aid in the scramble to create a small city within the span of a few months. Speed, not quality, was of utmost importance.

"They built the barracks really fast," Yellowtail said. "The people who were building the barracks even started having competitions. They wanted to know who could build the fastest barrack. The fastest barrack that was built was in fifty-eight minutes."

In just two and a half months, the camp was complete. 468 barracks, a 150-bed hospital, schools, workshops, warehouses and over 10,000 incarcerees – the Heart Mountain camp had just become the third largest city in Wyoming at the time.

The blueprints for these barracks were simple. Each structure was 120 feet long and 20 feet wide. There was no insulation, and little to no effort went into preparing these buildings for the dry, windy Wyoming conditions.

Crews used what materials they could get their hands on as the government pushed for large shipments of timber from wherever they could. A lot of which was green timber that had been freshly cut and not yet cured – leading to openings in the walls, roofs and floors that only grew larger as the wood dried out.

"When the first storms came, the snow came through the cracks and gaps between the wood through the windows and floors," Yellowtail said. "There were a lot of knotholes [in the floorboards], so the Japanese had to cut tin and cover them. They said so much snow came into the barracks, they had to shovel snow out all the time."

In addition to the inescapable elements, day-to-day life in the barracks was cramped and uncomfortable. Up to six family units lived in a single barrack – one room for each unit. Thin walls separated the families, but privacy was essentially nonexistent.

"Japanese teenagers said that it was awful being in here," Yellowtail said. "They always had to change in front of their parents; they had to build little privacy rooms out of their sheets or blankets. Also, the walls were thin, and there was no ceiling, so the sound traveled through the top. You pretty much heard everything your neighbor did."

Sickness and disease were also large issues within the barracks. Overcrowded washrooms made it difficult to maintain proper hygiene, and the close quarters made the spread of illnesses a near guarantee. Many incarcerees also experienced respiratory issues from the dry landscape and frequent wind and dust storms during the warmer months.

Despite the hardships and emotions incarcerees faced, many of the Japanese Americans felt they needed to prove to their government and their country that they truly belonged in the U.S.

"Resentments that came up were about how the United States was treating them," Newlin said. "But the response to that, for most of them, was to double down on their Americanism instead of defecting and becoming more allied with Japan. They expressed their anger through resistance, protest and asserting their American constitutional rights."

In a seemingly collaborative effort, the U.S. government and the Japanese American incarcerees both worked to remove as much ancestral culture as possible. Assimilation was key. If a Japanese American could walk like a white American, talk like a white American and act like a white American, then they could be trusted and accepted like a white American.

"Most Japanese Americans felt the need to really wear their American identity on their sleeves," said Carter Reed, J.D., the community projects specialist at Heart Mountain. "A large part of the community that ended up in camps like these went out of their way to emphasize American norms."

The majority of the incarcerated Japanese Americans were natural-born U.S. citizens, or "Nisei," many of whom had never even been to Japan. Inside the camp, the incarcerated worked hard to show just how American they were.

In 1943, a group of teenagers in the camp formed the Heart Mountain Eagles, an 11-man football team comprised entirely of Japanese American high school students.

The squad quickly became a point of pride for the Heart Mountain incarcerees – an evident symbol of their equality to the predominantly white locals – as they emerged as a dominant force on the gridiron, defeating teams across the Bighorn Basin, despite battling scheduling issues, hostile crowds and typically being outweighed by 20-40 pounds per player on average.



Through two seasons, the Eagles lost only one game. However, in 1944, members of the Eagles, along with many other families inside the camp, were faced with one of the most important decisions they would have to make during their time incarcerated at Heart Mountain.

As if a final test of their American patriotism after nearly three years of persecution, the U.S. government reinstated the Selective Service Act for all Nisei, including those interned in the 10 camps, after suspending it in 1942.

"There were rifts between those who went to serve in the military and those who refused, both of which are patriotic and very American choices," Newlin said. "It's very American to resist when you see something that is clearly not constitutional. It's also very American to show your patriotism by serving in the military."

Over 800 men from the Heart Mountain camp served the U.S. in WWII. Joe Hayashi and James K. Okubo both received the Medal of Honor for their actions in the war. Hayashi and Okubo are also among the 15 Heart Mountain incarcerees who never returned from service.

The Heart Mountain camp is still remembered today for the incarcerees who chose to serve. But it is also remembered for those who chose to fight for their freedom on their home soil.

"One of the things that we are actually really proud of at Heart Mountain is [that this camp] had the largest and most organized movement of draft resisters," Newlin said.

In 1943, a group of Heart Mountain incarcerees founded the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee to protest the government's decision to begin drafting Nisei from the concentration camps. 85 resisters were convicted of Selective Service Act violations as they refused to show up for physicals or inductions – many of whom, like the Matsumura and Sunada families, were members of families who had lived in the U.S. for nearly half a century.

"My Japanese relatives immigrated straight from Japan to Wyoming in the early twentieth century," Newlin said. "They were railroaders, coal miners, laundry workers and they were part of a relatively small community of Japanese immigrants who were in Wyoming at that time."

George Sunada, Newlin's grandfather, was a Wyoming native, born and raised in Green River. As a young man, Sunada entered the railroad industry and began building a life of his own. Wyoming was Sunada's home – it was where he grew up, built a career, met his wife and where his children and grandchildren were born.

But, like so many others of Japanese ancestry in the area, Sunada's livelihood was destroyed seemingly overnight. He was fired from the railroad company he had given most of his life to and shunned from the only community he knew simply because of where his father was born.

"Last week, you had all the Japanese employees on your railroad laid off," wrote Sunada in a letter to the Union Pacific Railroad Company. "You laid them off one and all because he was a Japanese, or of Japanese ancestry. Not because of his conduct or actions. Is this true Americanism? It certainly is not – not to the way that I've

been brought up in our great country, where all the nationalities and races unite to make this country so great."

For many who lost their career and purpose, the war recruitment provided an opportunity to reiterate their allegiance to a country that turned its back on them. Their volunteer enlistment also served as a reminder to their white neighbors of their contributions to the U.S. cause.

"[Sunada] ended up volunteering to serve in the military as soon as they allowed Japanese Americans to serve, so he spent the latter half of the war fighting for the United States in France and Italy." Newlin said.

After some time in the Wyoming National Guard, Sunada enlisted in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team – a segregated combat unit for Nisei and the most decorated combat unit in U.S. military history.

But while Sunada was fighting overseas for a country that dehumanized him and stripped away his rights, his new in-laws remained interned at Heart Mountain – fighting for their humanity.

"The narrative that had been the predominant one for the past several decades was about how resilient the community was," Newlin said. "They set up schools, had their cultural activities, set up dances and made friends. There were good times that were had here, but that's only part of the story."

Beneath the triumphant spin the government now puts on stories about the communal strength and resilience of the Japanese American people entrapped in the concentration camps lies a dark cultural struggle and a deep betrayal.

"When I see some of those examples of how fun camp was and how people made positive lives for themselves here, I see that as a survival mechanism – they had to do something," Newlin said.

The damage wrought by the government on the Japanese American community and its culture is still evident today. And the mass betrayal of thousands of American citizens will forever exist.

"I think that for us, us as Japanese Americans, that level of assimilation – discarding Japanese language and discarding Japanese culture was accelerated by mass incarceration," Newlin said. "We were literally put in prison for having anything to do with our cultural heritage."

Many incarcerees simply didn't have the time to fight for their culture. After nearly four years of incarceration, the world had moved on without them – they needed to worry about their futures as soon as they were allowed to rejoin society.

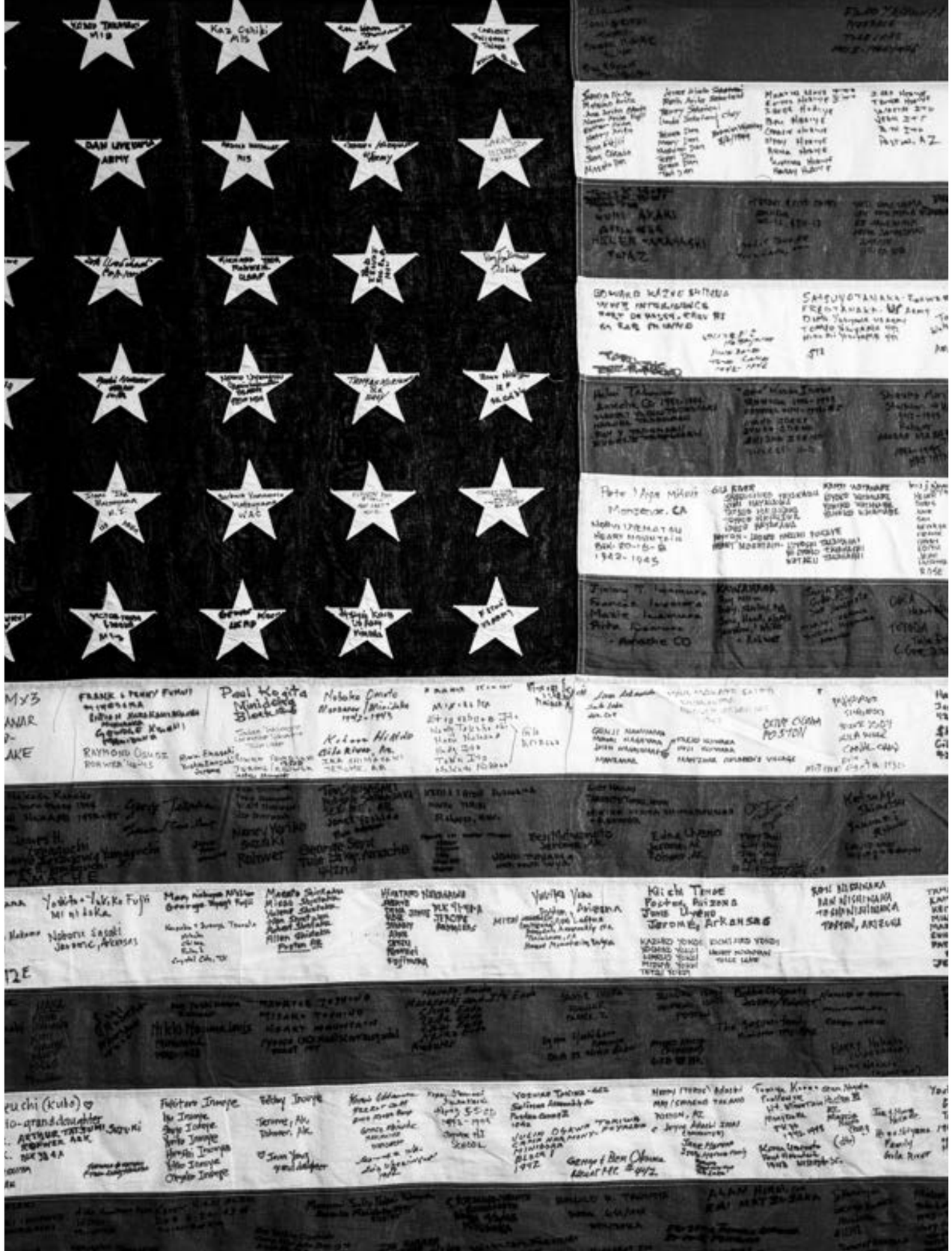
"Parents were really concerned about making sure their kids would have as normal a life as possible, so they did what they could," Newlin said.

On Nov. 10, 1945, over a month after Japan's official surrender to the U.S., the Heart Mountain incarcerees were officially free.

They were given $25 and a one-way train ticket. It was clear they were still unwelcome in the country they called home.

"[After the war] they were discouraged from staying here, and they were discouraged from going back to California, so the vast majority resettled further east after the war," Newlin said. "My relatives went to Minneapolis, a lot of people went to Chicago [or] Cleveland. Eventually, a lot of families made their way back to the West Coast."

The war hysteria and racism towards the Japanese American people were slow to fade – the nation would not soon forget events like the bombing of Pearl Harbor and the devastating loss of white American lives – not as soon as they forgot the bravery and sacrifice of the discriminated minorities who fought alongside them.



In response, many Japanese Americans only worked harder to prove their belonging.

"Their approach was to become as successful [as possible] to leave that dark [period] behind," Newlin said. "The Japanese Americans' response after their incarceration was to not talk about it. Japanese culture is very much oriented around shame, and this was a very shameful episode for a lot of families."

The resilience and work ethic of the incarcerated Heart Mountain community produced many successful individuals – names like Alan Simpson, Bill Hosokawa, Norman Mineta, S. Neil Fujita and many more will forever be ingrained in U.S. history.

"The post-war success of [the] incarcerees in particular is a more complicated story than has been told by history books," Newlin said. "I think as a community, just in the last ten years or so, we've gotten better at telling a more complete story, but the post-war success is best understood in terms of the myth of the model minority."

In 1966, William Peterson, an American sociologist and demographer, wrote an article for the New York Times Magazine titled "Success Story, Japanese American Style." The article covered the idea that, despite the constant adversity Japanese Americans faced since their initial arrival in the U.S., they remained resilient and focused on becoming as successful in the U.S. as they could be – a superior minority.

"By any criterion of good citizenship that we choose, the Japanese Americans are better than any other group in our society, including native-born whites," Peterson wrote. "They have established this remarkable record, moreover, by their own almost totally unaided effort. Every attempt to hamper their progress resulted only in enhancing their determination to succeed."

Although the article, in general, praises the Japanese American community for their statistical successes, the ideas expressed are actually responsible for a large cultural issue that the Heart Mountain museum has been fighting to correct.

"U.S. society held up Japanese Americans as an example of how minority populations should behave," Newlin said. "What's toxic about that is it compared Japanese Americans to other [minorities] in America instead of recognizing the value of ethnic diversity in our country and the beautiful things that different cultures bring to us."

The rapid transition in status from public enemies to becoming the "model minority" – comparable to white Americans – only placed more pressure on the Japanese American population to pursue perfection.

"Part of what makes the myth of the model minority a myth is that we now have this stereotype of Japanese Americans all being very successful, but that glosses over the fact that a lot of people never recovered after camp," Newlin said. "They had very difficult lives because they were sent back into a world where nobody wanted them."

For many, four years of incarceration, coupled with heavy prejudice, made it nearly impossible to recover financially or socially. Prior to their incarceration, many Japanese Americans were left with no other choice but to sell their homes and property – for business owners and farmers, that meant selling their only source of income.

"People talk about the ten years after camp being the hardest," Newlin said. "There was still a lot of racism, and people struggled to get jobs. People struggled with being targeted and not wanted, and a lot of folks never did recover from that."

Despite desperately needing it, many former incarcerees never asked for help. At the time, silence was the preferred

option – what happened to them during the war was to be ignored and forgotten.

“There was a whole generation of suppressed feelings and silence after what happened to these people,” Reed said. “People were ashamed by what had happened to them, even though they were innocent. There was a lot of this [generational] suppression of their culture so they can continue to fit in and be good American citizens, so something like that doesn't happen again."

The trauma the Japanese Americans faced for decades metastasized in silence, unchecked and ignored by a community keen on forgetting the past by focusing on the future.

“For Japanese Americans, we’re now starting to learn more about the dynamics of multi-generational trauma and the effects of our relatives bottling up their emotions,” Newlin said. “That’s part of what motivates me as a Japanese American who has experienced great privilege in life. I feel like it’s my responsibility to commit myself to working on cross-racial healing.”

Since becoming the executive director of the Heart Mountain Foundation in May of 2022, Newlin and her team have worked tirelessly to expand and improve the interpretive center to better tell the story of what happened there.

“What makes Heart Mountain different is the element of control,” Reed said. “It’s not the only one of the ten camps to become a museum, but, as far as I know, we’re the only camp that has a museum that’s run by a private foundation. The people that this happened to are controlling the narrative here at Heart Mountain, and that matters very much to us.”

All of the information within the center was decided upon and approved by the members of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation board of directors, which is comprised of family members and descendants of former incarcerees, as well as scholars and other professionals.

The center also works with the Japanese Outreach Initiative (JOI) and hosts reunions, cultural workshops and other events to promote the importance of the culture and the importance of communication.

"We're bringing that [cultural education] back,” Reed said. “Not only are we telling these stories of American citizens who were trying to assert their American rights when they were violated, but we're also telling the story of American citizens who had to hide part of their ancestral culture and identity. And now, years later, they are reintroducing it to the community that they once lived in."

In that way, the Heart Mountain WWII Japanese American Internment Site stands not only as a historic reminder of past injustices carried out by the U.S. government against its own citizens, but also provokes comparisons to the present through the reexamination of historical facts that continue to haunt the country.

“I think the most important thing to remember is that this was part of a pattern in U.S. history,” Reed said. “We will probably always be dealing with governments that overstep their authority and abuse the rights of their citizens – there’s very little we can do about that, but we can ensure that we remember things like Heart Mountain and the Native American reservations and that we do a good job of challenging our officials to not make those mistakes.”

