



Photos by DEWEY VANDERHOFF / For The Times

Tomo Mukai of Whittier looks over the barracks in Heart Mountain, Wyo., internment camp that he and his family lived in during World War II.

Japanese Americans Revisit Their Painful Past

■ **History:** World War II internees dismantle barracks at Wyoming prison camp and send it back to L.A.'s Little Tokyo as a permanent reminder.

By MICHAEL MILSTEIN
SPECIAL TO THE TIMES

HEART MOUNTAIN, Wyo.—Running his hand over the 2-by-4 studs, scuffing the years of dust with his tennis shoes, Tomo Mukai looked for and found the number on the wall: 22799.

"It was our family number," Mukai, 60, said as he and his son Ron inspected the weathered barracks his Southern California family shared in the internment camp that confined thousands of Japanese Americans during World War II.

"When I think of that number, I think of the way we lived," said Mukai, who now lives in Whittier. "I think about what my family had to give up when we rode the train out here."

Hammers pounded the roof above as Mukai last week viewed his wartime quarters for the first time in 50 years. Others who also spent time



Japanese American volunteers begin dismantling barracks at World War II internment camp for shipment back to Los Angeles' Little Tokyo.

behind the barbed wire and guard towers at Heart Mountain were dismantling the building around him.

Soon the structure, about 60 miles east of Yellowstone National Park, sat piecemeal aboard a flatbed truck, destined for Los Angeles and perhaps its most important duty yet.

In early November, the building that once housed those forced from their homes on the West Coast and

has since sheltered farm equipment, will go on display in Little Tokyo as a lasting reminder of the only prison camps meant for Americans who had not committed a crime.

As part of the project organized by the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, about 25 former inmates last week made an unusual, and this time voluntary, pilgrimage to Wyoming and the site of their war-

time incarceration. They came from California and other states not only to revisit childhood friends, but also to take a piece of their history back with them.

"This is my boyhood home," said Bacon Sakatani, 65, of West Covina as others knocked wail studs apart and pulled nails from the bare floorboards. "Taking back this barracks, taking our whole experience back to California for our children to see."

Two barracks will make the trip from Wyoming to Los Angeles. One, where Mukai lived, will go on display Nov. 11 in the Downtown museum's new exhibition, "America's Concentration Camps: Remembering the Japanese American Experience." The other will await resurrection as part of a permanent exhibit in a new museum wing set to open in 1997.

Though just 8 years old at the time, Mukai remembered his first glimpse of the distinctive flat-topped peak that lent its name to the internment camp known as the Heart Mountain Relocation Center.

He remembers how winds howled as he, his parents and two brothers found their assigned stretch of freshly built barracks that would their home for two years. A coal-fired potbelly stove offered the warmth in the 20-by-20-foot room insulated against Wyoming's frigid

Please see BARRACKS, A

Just missed going on this trip - will be helping re-assemble the barrack in LA - 10/15!

BARRACKS: Past Is Reclaimed by Former Internees

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winters by no more than tar paper.

Barracks sat in blocks of a dozen each.

"Block 30 would be over there," Mukai's friend Keiichi Ikeda told him, pointing, as they took a break from prying apart the barracks and walked across the fields that once held the internment camp. "You were in block 27? You would have lived right over there."

"There used to be a baseball diamond right there someplace," Mukai said, aiming his finger beyond. Though they never knew each other during their days in the internment camp, Mukai and Ikeda, from Los Angeles, struck up a friendship at internee reunions in recent years.

Ikeda turned, figuring where guard towers stood. "There was one right up on this hill behind us."

Said Mukai: "I remember sledding down that hill on a sled I built myself."

A counterpart of wartime internment centers at Manzanar and Tule Lake, Calif., Heart Mountain was one of 10 desolate places where the federal War Relocation Authority sent 120,000 Japanese Americans, then thought of as a subversive threat to the domestic war effort. More than 60% were Nisei, American-born U.S. citizens.

Mostly forgotten now, except by those who lived there, Heart Mountain was the fourth-largest camp. Local work gangs lined the sagebrush scrubland with row upon row of barracks.

The camp held as many as 10,767 people, making it the third-largest city in Wyoming at the time.

Beet and barley fields now occupy much of the abandoned camp's 740 acres. But Heart Mountain remains one of the few camps where original relics still stand.

Though museum curators considered a replica of the barracks for their upcoming exhibit, they decided that an original structure would be far more impressive. "When you know you're seeing a real building where real people were forced to live against their will, it's that much more powerful," said museum spokesman Chris Komai.

Because Sakatani had returned to Wyoming to erect a memorial to Heart Mountain residents who served and died in the war, he knew some barracks survived and led the museum's effort to retrieve them.

As the buildings came down last week, a historic preservation architect was on hand, numbering each piece to ensure that once they get to Los Angeles, the barracks will retain their original look and form.

"All these years I've tried to forget about it, but now I think it's a history lesson," said Doug Sagara of Denver, who was 17 when his family arrived at Heart Mountain. "If I just told you we lived in a barracks, would you know about the dust, the one light bulb hanging from the ceiling, the holes in the walls?"

"If you actually see it, you'll know," Sagara said.

When the Heart Mountain camp closed, the government sold its 540 barracks for \$1 each. Homesteaders turned the Spartan buildings into stables, sheds and, with much remodeling and improvement, even homes.

"It's a wonder the wind didn't blow it over," said Tak Ogawa, a Wyoming farmer who donated one of



DEWEY VANDERHOFF / For The Times

Jim Marushige, left, Art Dibene and Cel Herrera, all from the San Fernando Valley, disassemble barracks.

the barracks for the museum. He never lived in the internment camp, but he did live in the barracks for three years on land he acquired after the camp's closing.

Those shunted to the Heart Mountain facility, which operated from August, 1942, to November, 1945, came from Los Angeles, Santa Clara County and central Washington state. Often, families who were neighbors in Los Angeles remained neighbors after they were moved.

And sometimes, families started there. The parents of Superior Court Judge Lance A. Ito, now presiding over the O.J. Simpson trial, met at Heart Mountain.

Most of the former internees are retired now. They were in their early teens when they lived at Heart Mountain. The forced evacuation left many of their parents embittered, but they admitted that their recollections are not altogether unpleasant.

Looking back, they recall a kaleidoscope of images: sledding down the first snow they had ever seen on toboggans fashioned from discarded scraps of wood; sneaking through the fence to collect red-brown chunks of petrified wood; or fishing for trout in the Shoshone River.

For Mukai, that American rite of passage—getting his first baseball glove, ordered from the Montgomery Ward catalogue—came while he was imprisoned. His father, vice president of a Los Angeles import-export company before the war, earned \$19 a month in his new job as head chef in the family's block of barracks.

As the barracks came apart, they yielded a few clues about their occupants—Japanese figures etched into a 2-by-4, the shapely outline of a woman penciled upon the siding.

"I still remember Christmas Eve in 1942, because it was the first time I ever heard that song 'White Christmas,'" said George Iseri of Long Beach. "It was

really snowing, and we all went to mess hall to receive gifts.

"It was just a little something for the children. It was just about all we had."

Nearly all those who made the trip to Wyoming have received \$20,000 federal reparation payments and a formal apology. But some misgivings remain.

"Our kids, sometimes they can't understand how we let this happen to us," said Ikeda, 67. Retired after 26 years with the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, he headed back to Wyoming to help move the barracks.

"You have to see something like this before you can understand what was really happening back then," he said, toting planks from the barracks roof to a rented moving van.

As they pulled planks apart, freeing clouds of dust that had gathered in the walls of the barracks for decades, some learned much more than they had expected about their onetime home.

Heading for Yellowstone National Park, Larry Nakashima and his wife, of the City of Orange, had stopped their motor home for a look at what was left of the internment camp where his family was moved when he was 3 years old.

Other former internees enlisted his help, so the couple canceled their tour of Yellowstone and instead turned to pulling out nails.

In return, they heard all the stories they wanted about life at Heart Mountain.

"As I get up on the roof and pull nails, I think about how little my kids know about all this," Nakashima said, the sun casting long shadows beyond the barracks. "None of us want to be reminded of it. But the memories we like the least may be the ones that are most important."