A Concentration Camp in America—One man's experiences in the Heart Mountain Japanese Relocation Center near Cody, Wyoming

Excerpted from the interview of Bill Hosokawa, October 22, 1991, by Wyoming State Historian Mark Junge. Included in wyomingstories.com with permission of the Oral History Archives of the Wyoming Department of State Parks & Cultural Resources, who retain all rights.

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- Subject: William (Bill) Kumpai Hosokawa (b.Jan. 30, 1915—d.Nov 9, 2007).
- Occupation: Editor and columnist for the *Denver Post*.
- Interviewer: Mark Junge, October 22, 1991.
- Topic of interview: Racial discrimination and Japanese internment during WWII at the Heart Mountain Relocation Camp east of Cody, Wyoming.
- Source recording for transcription: MP3 Podcast from Wyoming Dept of State Parks and Cultural Resources

Photo: 1—Bill Hosokawa, early 2000s

- Please visit http://wyoarchives.org for the complete audio and written transcription of this and many other oral history interviews.

Introduction

On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066 which gave the military the authority to establish "exclusion areas" from which designated persons would be forbidden to reside. No mention was made in this order of any specific nationality of people.

EO-9066 was followed by EO-9102 on March 18 which created the War Relocation Authority—WRA. On April 1, 1942, Civilian Exclusion Order #5 specifically named "All persons of Japanese Ancestry," delineated the specific areas in which they were to be excluded, and ordered them to report to Civil Control Stations within their area of residence, where they received their assignments and transportation to one of the camps.

These were hastily built low-security prisons, in effect, many ringed with barbed wire and sentry towers, designed to remove the Japanese from the West Coast and to isolate and contain what was perceived to be a national security threat. Most of these people were either naturalized or natural born U. S. citizens. They were stripped of their property and relocated to places far from their homes and businesses, frequently with only hours notice.

Bill Hosokawa, then 27, was one of those whose entire family was moved to the Heart Mountain Relocation facility about 10 miles east of Cody, Wyoming. Bill started and ran the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*, a camp newspaper. He went on to become editor and columnist for the *Denver Post*. Bill died in 2007

Photo: 3—Heart Mountain Relocation Center.

Photo: 2—Heart Mountain Relocation Camp, Heart Mountain in background.

Beginning of Interview: Bill Hosokawa speaks

Let me start with my father. He was born on a very small farm outside of the city of Hiroshima, Japan. He was sixteen years old when he came to the United States as an immigrant. He liked what he saw. He went back home got married, brought his bride here to the US, and I was born in Seattle, Washington on January 30, 1915. My father, having come to the United States so early, was indeed among the pioneers of the Pacific Northwest. It was nothing but a frontier at the time he arrived. I went to the Seattle public schools. I was graduated from the University of Washington in 1937. As I got out of school, there were two strikes against me: one was, this was the middle of the depression, and very few jobs were available for anybody; the second was that I was of Asian parentage, and there was a lot of hostility toward Asians on the Pacific Coast. If my schoolmate, classmate, John Smith, and I, Bill Hosokawa, went to apply for the same job at the same time, [and] we had absolutely identical grades, you know who would have got the job.

So in 1938, I headed out to the Far East and I worked for a little over a year on an English language newspaper in Singapore and then I went up to Shanghai and worked about a year, year and a half up there. I could see that war was coming. The United States and Japan were on a collision course, and so I headed back to the US in July of 1941. I had got as far as Japan when all commercial shipping across the Pacific was suspended. So I went back to Shanghai and booked passage on an American ship. Things would be very different if war did come, and I wanted to get out of there before the shooting started. Some of my friends were stuck there. They waited too long and they were promptly put into Japanese civilian prison camps.

But I got back to Seattle late in October of ’41 and I was looking for a job and not doing a great deal. On the morning of December 7, 1941, I was out in the yard raking up leaves when my mother told me that I had a phone call. I went to the phone and there was a friend of mine, and he said, “Have you been listening to the radio?” and I said, “No.” And he said, “Well, the Japanese have bombed Pearl Harbor in Hawaii.” And I thought, “Oh, boy! It’s really hit the fan now!” It was a very dark moment, partly because I knew that we, Americans of Japanese parentage, would be having a very difficult time because of the long history of anti-Orientialism on the West Coast. And this was a feeling that was intensified by racial differences. The German-

Americans in World War I had a terrible time in all parts of the country. And they were white! And you couldn't tell a German-American from an Irish-American or a French-American.

Well, you *could* tell a Japanese-American. He had certain facial features that identified him immediately, and there had been a lot of discrimination based on race on the West Coast, and I knew that that would rise to the surface. It had been pretty well contained up to that time, through the '20s and the '30s, but I knew it would surface again, and sure enough it did. At first there were political leaders saying, "Let's not be guilty of bashing"—that's a new word, but—"bashing these Japanese-Americans like we treated the German-Americans in World War I." But pretty soon that sort of feeling was overwhelmed as Japan continued to score military victories in the West Coast. There were people saying, "Well. Blood is thicker than water. Here these Japs have been in our midst for 20, 30 years, we don't know what they're thinking. They must be loyal to the Emperor, and when the word comes from Tokyo they will rise against us. There are spies in our midst. Who knows what they might do to sabotage the war effort. We've got to do something about it."

There was a great deal of hysteria. The FBI had been watching the community very, very carefully during the period in which we were moving toward war. On Pearl Harbor Day, and the next day, the FBI swooped down on the Japanese-American communities and picked up aliens who were considered potential dangers to the national security. I emphasize the word 'potential'. Because none of these people was ever tried on charges of sabotage or espionage. Since there were no trials, there were no convictions, and we must assume under the American system, that a person is considered innocent until found guilty. Well, none of them was ever found guilty. But, J. Edgar Hoover, who was the head of the FBI at that time, said, "We have the situation well under control. We don't have to worry about these people. We know who they are; we know what they're doing. And we have picked up the 'potentially' dangerous people who we have identified over a period of time."

Now these were aliens. And they expected to be picked up. They were aliens because of the laws of the United States that persons of Asian ancestry could not become naturalized. The US naturalization laws very early said you had to be a free, white person to become a naturalized citizen of the United States. The word 'free' is in there because there were indentured servants

that were brought to the United States. And they had to serve out their period of indenture before they became free. And after the Civil War, the words 'Persons of African Nativity' were added to the naturalization laws so that Blacks could become naturalized citizens. After the Chinese began to be brought to the United States to supply a demand for labor, some of them tried to get citizenship and they took their cases to court. And the court ruled that you, John Chinese, are neither white, nor of African nativity, and therefore you are off in limbo and there is no provision made for you to become a naturalized citizen. And that same law applied to the Japanese-Americans. And my father had been in this country for over forty years, but the law said, because of your race you cannot become a naturalized citizen.

At the time of Pearl Harbor [my father] was deeply depressed. He was frightened. He was angry. Angry that Japan would start a war in this manner. And he feared for the future. Because he had been here for so long, he knew the latent feeling of hostility toward Orientals on the West Coast. But he was very, very angry at Japan for starting the war in that way.

There was really mass hysteria. There are any number of stories. Like the lantern, the light that was being swung as a signal, on a bluff overlooking the ocean. They said, "Somebody's signaling to a submarine out there." And they went and investigated and found there was an old Japanese farmer who had to go to the outhouse, carrying the lantern with him. (Laughs)

Another case was where there was a red light swinging on a high hill, and this was five hundred miles inland, and somebody called the Sheriff , "There's a Jap signaling a Japanese spy plane or something." So they went up there. And it was a red light on a barbed wire fence that had been strung there and had been there for years so that people wouldn't run into the barbed wire fence. Been there for years!

And there were stories about arrows, white round things, shaped like an arrow, pointing at the Boeing Aircraft factory in western Washington. And they went there and found that these were white caps put on tomato plants. And the field was pointed in that direction and had been that way for years, and here were these caps on the tomatoes! (Laughs) But those things got in the paper.

Mark Junge: Well, where were people like Westbrook Pegler[1] and Walter Lippmann[2] and some of the journalists, some of the respected journalists?

Pegler was *not* a respected journalist. He was well read, but he was not respected. He's the guy that said, "Let them suffer," referring to us. But Walter Lippmann was one of the great disappointments. Walter Lippmann had a position in the media at that time that has never been repeated. Almost anybody of any influence read Lippmann twice or three times a week, however often he wrote his column. He was a very thoughtful man. I think he was genuinely disturbed by what was happening on the West Coast. But he committed the cardinal error of failing to talk to people on various sides of the issue. He talked to people like Earl Warren, people in power on the West Coast, and he got only their side of the story. I don't think he ever talked to a single Japanese-American. There were Japanese-American spokesmen, primarily in the Japanese-American Citizens League who could have given him a more balanced picture. But he did not talk to them. And so he wrote the column saying, "We have to remove these people from the West Coast as a national security measure." He was as responsible as anybody in swaying public opinion to support that action.

Mark Junge: What about the Jack Carberry thing? Or the, the Best—what's his name? Isn't that the same sort of thing? The lack of information?

No, there's a big difference there. Carberry was sent up to Heart Mountain to *get* the place. He and his editors had their minds made up. "There are a bunch of incompetents, pampering the Japs in the camp at Heart Mountain," and the *Denver Post* was out to expose the camp. See, the *Denver Post* was, at that time, opposed to anything that the New Deal did. Anything that Roosevelt did, except declare war. There was a knee-jerk reaction: "It's them democrats in Washington that's screwing up the country!" And there was a man named Earl Best, who was the steward at the camp. He had charge of bringing in food supplies and distributing food to the various mess halls. And Best was fired for incompetence. He came down to Denver and went to the *Post* and said, "I've got a great scandal for you. They're pampering the Japs there. They're bringing tons and tons of meat that's unavailable to the people outside the camp, and these

[1] **Francis James Westbrook Pegler** (August 2, 1894 – June 24, 1969)
[2] **Walter Lippmann** (23 September 1889 – 14 December 1974)

people are living off the fat of the land. They've got a three-year supply of canned goods in the warehouse." And so on, and so on, and so on. And the people at the *Denver Post* bought that story, hook, line and sinker. And they sent Jack Carberry up there, to Wyoming, to do some investigating. I'm pretty well convinced that Carberry had his story written before he ever went up there. But that sort of thing was going on in other camps. We had a lot of very hostile press.

Now you mentioned Senator Robertson a while ago. E. V. Robertson[3] lived within a few miles of the camp, but he never visited the camp. And the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*, the [camp] newspaper that I was editing at that time, sent him a telegram inviting him to visit the camp and see for himself what it was like. And we published the text of the telegram on the front page of the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*. He never replied, he never came to the camp, but back in Washington he was the "expert" on how the camps were being mismanaged and how the dirty Japs were being pampered. And that sort of kicked the guy who was down. [That] activity was very harmful to us.

Mark Junge: I'm trying to find the key to the whole relocation idea, the WRA [War Relocation Authority], and I'm wondering if it's a matter of, on the part of certain particular individuals, political leaders, as you mentioned, who are just politically unsophisticated, historically unsophisticated, that allow them to be swayed by other people, or whether there's a feeling of pressure on them from the masses who are hysterical. What is the mechanism there that causes this thing to go into operation?

Well, there's a little of all of those elements that you mentioned. There's a long history of anti-Orientialism that led to most of the Western states having what were called anti-alien land laws. In California it said a person who was ineligible for citizenship—another word for Japanese—a person who was ineligible for citizenship could not buy real estate. You could run a farm for three years, but you couldn't buy it. So you went to the farm and farmed for three years and then whatever improvements you made were left on the farm and you had to get out and find another place to farm. Well, under circumstances like that, you aren't gonna build a nice home for your family, because you're gonna lose it. So, the guys who were backing that law said, "Look at

[3] Edward V. Robertson was a Wyoming Senator from 1943 to 1949.

these damn Japs, they don't care about the country! They don't care about their homes! Look at the kinda shacks they're living in!" A vicious circle!

The whole evacuation was justified by an Executive Order, it was called Executive Order 9066, signed by Franklin Roosevelt, President Roosevelt, on February 19, 1942. This was two and a half months after the attack on Pearl Harbor. Suddenly they say, "Well, gee whiz! Something might happen here. We better get rid of these guys." So Roosevelt signed the Executive Order 9066. The impetus for that, the pressure for that, came from the congressional delegation on the West Coast, primarily California, which has been called the fountainhead of anti-Orientialism in the United States. There've been books written with titles like *California's War against Japan*. Roosevelt signed this and with a stroke of a pen, he suspended the Bill of Rights for a specific minority in the United States.

[Executive Order 9066] gave the military the authority to remove any and all persons from sensitive areas on the West Coast. The military interpreted "any and all persons" to mean all persons of Japanese descent. What was a person of Japanese descent? Anyone with as little as one-sixteenth Japanese blood. A man named Adolf Hitler said if you were one-eighth Jewish, you were a Jew. The US military said one-sixteenth.

There were a series of evacuation orders issued up and down the coast. Certain areas were to be cleared of all Japanese on such and such a day. We usually got a week or less of notice. We were allowed to take only what we could carry. And for farmers, that meant abandoning their crops, the grocery store operator tried to sell his business and if he couldn't sell it, he just locked it up and left it. We were moved a thousand or so at a time into temporary camps which were built on racetracks, fairgrounds, anywhere where there was an open space and access to water and sewage facilities and so forth. We were held there temporarily until inland camps could be built. And the camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming, was one of those, one of ten inland camps that were built.

Mark Junge: Where did you first go? What temporary camp did you go to?

We were at Puyallup, Washington. The state fairgrounds in Puyallup, Washington. Families were kept together. There were a lot of cultural things, there were letters from Japan from the

members of the family that had been left behind, and things like that were all burned or dumped because the fear that any connection with Japan would be interpreted as sentimental ties, cultural ties, maybe political ties with the old country. The physical loss was in furniture, cars—there are authenticated cases of used furniture dealers driving down the street in the Japanese residential areas, "Hey you Japs! You're gonna get kicked outa here tomorrow. I'll give you ten bucks for that refrigerator. I'll give you fifteen bucks for that piano. I'll give you two dollars and fifty cents for that washing machine." And the material loss of the evacuation, just the physical material loss has been estimated at 300 million dollars, in 1942 dollars!

We were at Puyallup about three months while the government was building the inland camps. At first the government's intention was to build a series, fifty, sixty, maybe a hundred temporary shelters, inland, until the Japanese Americans could be relocated somewhere where they would be accepted, where they could be checked out and it could be made certain that they were not a security risk. But in the spring of 1942, the Federal Government had a meeting in Salt Lake City in which the governors of many of the western states were invited to come and the federal people told them of their plans to scatter the Japanese-Americans from the West Coast and various parts of the West, and almost unanimously they raised their hands in horror, and said, "Well, if these people are too dangerous to be left on the West Coast, we sure don't want 'em in our state!" And you can't blame 'em for saying that. But the one man who said, "They will be welcome to come to my state. They have done nothing wrong, you have not charged them with anything, except being of the wrong race, so if they want to come to Colorado that's okay by me." And that was Ralph Carr[4], then the Governor of Colorado.

Because of the hostility the government dropped its plans for numerous small camps and they decided that they needed to build detention camps that could be guarded by troops and so they set about looking for federal land that would be suitable for this purpose. The land had to be fairly remote from any large populated area, and have access and have water and power, and about the only land that was available was Federal land. Bureau of Land Management land, mostly, and so ten sites were selected and one was Heart Mountain, Wyoming, on the bench

[4] Ralph Lawrence Carr (December 11, 1887 – September 22, 1950) was the 29th Governor *of* Colorado from 1939 to 1943. *Wikipedia*

lands between Cody and Powell. Power was available from the Buffalo Bill Dam[5] and water was also available from the reservoir behind Buffalo Bill Dam, although it had not been brought down to the camp site at that time. It had to be—the ditches had not been completed. These camps were built in a big hurry; they were very crude camps, built very much like military camps very close to the theater of operations. Camps in Wyoming, the floors were built up off the ground and framed with 2 x 4s with eight inch planks that were the walls, and they were covered with black tar paper. And there were no inner walls. The inner walls, the wallboard was put in later by the residents themselves. They were imperative in that area where sub-zero temperatures were common in the winter time.

I reached Heart Mountain in the middle of August. The camp was far from complete at that time. The barracks were going up very rapidly. The carpenters kept just one step ahead of the train loads of evacuees that were coming in every two or three days. The trainloads, oh, about five to six hundred people on a train.

My situation was a little bit different from most of the, the rest of the people. The people in Puyallup, from Seattle—it had been announced that they would be going to Minidoka, Idaho, near Twin Falls, Idaho. And suddenly one afternoon I was summoned to the camp director's place and he said, "I've got instructions to tell you that you're not going to Idaho, you're going to Wyoming." I asked, "Why?" and he said, "I don't know. I've told you all that I know. Anyway, you have to be ready to go in three, four hours." There were four, five other fellows that were notified at the same time. I've never found any documents to tell me why I was separated from my group. But my conclusion is that the military saw me as a potential troublemaker who had asked tough questions.

I had been active in the self-government in the camp, had gone to the camp director and said, "Look there's a sick child here and the hospital facilities, the medical facilities are totally

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[5] Originally known as the Shoshone Dam and reservoir, on March 11, 1946 the following resolution was approved: *Resolved by the Senate and House of Representatives of the United. States of America in Congress assembled, …* the name of the Shoshone Dam and Reservoir in Park County, Wyoming, is changed effective February 26, 1946, to the "Buffalo Bill Dam and Reservoir".

inadequate. You owe it to us to do something about this. Take 'em out to a hospital outside the camp or get 'em the kind of medical [treatment they need]." I had been kind of a spokesman saying, "Look this food is intolerable." Or, "The toilets are completely plugged up and you've got to do something about getting this situation straightened out." And I think that they saw me as a potential agitator, so they separated me from my constituency and put me among a bunch of strangers, over whom, presumably, I would have no influence.

I was shipped on a train with a guard and we changed trains at Billings, Montana, and then took the Burlington train down to Deaver, and a fellow from the camp met me there and drove me to the camp. I was one of the first to show up at the camp.

I thought, Jeez-us! (Laughs) Here's a bench land that's dry and dusty and sandy, with sagebrush and the buffalo grass that can hold the dust down pretty well. But there were three, four hundred guys working there, and trucks running back and forth, and bulldozers, and backhoes putting in water lines. The place was all torn up. And any puff of wind would raise a great cloud of flour-like dust. And I thought, this is desolation; nothing but desolation. But at least it was larger, it was not quite so confining as the temporary camp that we were in, in which we were housed in long rows of—really, chicken coops.

I was impressed by the sight of that mountain (Heart Mountain). And at that time, there was no fence around the area. And some weeks later they put up the barbed wire fence, and they put up the watchtowers.

Mark Junge: Was camp life for you, Bill, was it pretty hum-drum? Our existence today, your existence here, my existence in Cheyenne, in ways gets to be sort of repetitive and redundant and I wonder if things became sort of mundane, you know, after people finally got settled into their little cubby-holes?

Well, being in prison isn't much fun, whatever way you look at it. What you could do was limited, within barbed wire. You settled into a routine which was rather dull. In my case I remained very active running the paper and doing other things. Physically of course, we lived in these rude barracks, and we had to go to a mess hall to eat, we went to a central sanitation building which might be fifty yards away for toilet facilities, for showers. You woke up to the

mess hall gong, so it was not a normal life. On the other hand, the discomfort was comparable to that faced by young men in the military. So if you were young and single, that was no big deal. If you had young children, if you were old, it was quite uncomfortable. We did everything possible to keep people busy, interested, a lot of, all sorts of hobby shops. We played softball, English classes for the older people, there was a lot of visiting back and forth. You could stay up as long as you wanted. There was no curfew.

The emphasis was on Americanization. You are in the camp because you are Japanese. We want to make you an American. Younger people, most of them, spoke no Japanese. Born in America, the product of the American school system. There was no more reason for us to speak Japanese than second or third generation Italian or German would speak Italian or German.

Mark Junge: Okay. But there were classes in sumo, or judo at least, and then they tried to get a class going in sumo, I'm not sure they ever did.

Really not classes. This was part of the recreational activity. There was judo, there was judo classes outside the camps, there were classes inside the camps. There was baseball, softball leagues, in the camp.

Mark Junge: It's interesting that you say there was this strong identification on the part of the Nisei toward America and American values and American life.

Bill Hosokawa: Yes, there was. That took a beating, because there's some of us who are 110% American. And there were some who were not. If there were some, we said, "Look. We've got to become Americanized. We've got to do this. We've got to salute the flag, and we got to do this." And there were others who said, "You think you're so damn good, why don't you walk out of the gate? If you think you're an American, stand up for your rights." They're hard to answer.

I felt that if we wanted any kind of a future in this, our country, our only country, we had to take that extra step to demonstrate that we were worthy of this country. It would have been easy to say, as many of them did say, "If you want me to fight for my country, open the gate. If you want me to serve this country, let my family go back to the West Coast." That was awfully hard to argue, I guess, that kind of logic. But there were others who said, "We've got to make the best of

this. After the war we will win our rights. How can they turn down people who have shed blood for this country." And that's the way it turned out.

Mark Junge: Who started the *Sentinel*? Whose idea was that?

Bill Hosokawa: One of the first guys I met at the camp was a fellow named Vaughn Mechau. He was information officer there and he had been a newspaper man and he and I hit it off very early. He was my boss and I was his right hand man.

He said, "Everybody's going to have a job here. And I think we could work together in this information department." And one of the first things we did was we put out a kind of a handbook, a mimeographed thing that we could pass out to the people when they first arrived there. "You are living now in Heart Mountain Wyoming, Park County, the elevation here is such, the nearest towns are such and such, and these are some of the regulations, and so forth." Washington said that it was—the headquarters of the WRA, the relocation authority—said it was alright for evacuees to put out a newspaper for the town. So Vaughn Mechau asked if I would like to be the editor, and I said sure, I'll take it over, and I was able to go in town and talk to Jack Richard[6] about getting the paper printed there. I think the impetus came from this director from Washington saying that we could have a newspaper.

We had a room in one of the barracks. We let it be known around the town that we were looking for people with newspaper experience who would like to work on a newspaper. The first thing to do was to build up a staff on the editorial side, the news side, and the business side. We sold the paper, I think, for two cents a copy, but we had to have advertising. We had the camp canteen where you could go to buy toothpaste and stuff like that, and we got them to buy an ad, and by that time Sears Roebuck, or Montgomery Ward, or maybe both, were doing business in camp. People needed a pair of socks, there's no place to go buy a pair of socks, you sent off to a mail order house. And we got them to advertise.

We figured we could publish an eight-page weekly. I kinda dummied out the whole thing. The page one would be page one, and page two would be this kind of news, and page four would be

[6] Jack Richard ran a local photographic studio and published a newspaper, *The Cody Times* that eventually merged with the *Cody Enterprise*. Richard photographed in the Yellowstone area from the 1940s to the 1980s.

the editorial page, and these columns on page five, page six we'd have some local social news, page seven would be sports. Jack Richard showed me the kind of headline type that would be available, and so we worked up a head schedule. It was like starting—it *was* starting—brand new with a newspaper! And we got a guy who had some art background and he designed the logo, page one, the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*[7], a fellow named Neil—can't remember his last name. We had some guys who'd worked on Japanese language papers on the West Coast and they would translate our stuff and then they would cut stencils and mimeograph it.

Mark Junge: So that wasn't printed in Japanese. Did they have Linotype in those days?

Jack [Richard] had a Linotype. One of the people in the camp was allowed to go into Cody and work the Linotype. And we had a pressman, who could run the press. Jack was running the *Cody Enterprise*[8]. With his staff he couldn't handle our paper, but we had the mechanical people to handle our needs. But the *Cody Enterprise* was a full time job for these people. Our people went in there and worked what amounted to the second shift on the equipment that Jack had.

Mark Junge: Was Jack pretty receptive to the idea?

Yeah, he was very friendly and we got along fine. And Jack had a brother who was a Light Colonel in the Marines out in the Pacific, flying planes out there, fighter planes, and we'd come in and ask Jack how his brother was doing, and he understood that we were Americans. It was a very strange situation in Cody. There was an attorney named E. J. Goppert, and another attorney, Al Simpson's father, Milward Simpson, and I think he was the other town attorney. And those two were on opposite sides of almost anything. And Milward didn't like us, so Goppert was very friendly toward us. Milward, many years later, when he was elected Governor of Wyoming, and I was working on the *Denver Post*, invited me up for his inauguration in Cheyenne. And I think that was his way of making amends.

Mark Junge: Were you given more freedom then to go back and forth between say, Cody and the camp, Bill?

[7] A sample of the newspaper can be viewed at http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt1489r73m/?order=3&brand=calisphere

[8] Actually, at this time Jack published his own paper, called the *Cody Times*, which was merged into the *Cody Enterprise* in May, 1953.

Yes. See, we did our editorial work in the camp. We gathered the news in the camp, we wrote the stories in the camp, edited the material in the camp, and we shipped the copy to Cody during the week as the material was completed. And then on Friday night, we would go in to the—Mechau and I and a few of the staff—I would go in every week and Mechau would go in every week. But we would select people from the staff to go in with us. I would help make up the paper. I handled some of the type and helped the printers who were there. And we buttoned the whole thing up, and then we would go out and have dinner, and sometimes we would go see a movie while they were printing the paper. Ten or eleven o'clock the paper would be off the press and we would load the paper in the car and drive back to the camp. I went every week because I was responsible for the paper and the others were taken along as a reward for their hard work during the week, and it was a great treat to be able to go into a restaurant and order food that wasn't mess hall food.

There were farmers from all over the area coming to the camp saying, we need these people to come help us harvest the sugar beets. People were released to these individual farmers on the condition that they be paid the prevailing wage, that they would be protected, and that they would be given room and board. On Sunday, or Saturday afternoon, some of these guys would go into Lovell, or Powell or Cody, get a haircut, buy stuff at the store, and some of them were not very well treated. And there were signs on some of the shop doors saying, "No Japs Allowed!"

Mark Junge: Did you report those things in the paper?

Oh, yeah, yeah.

Mark Junge: And the paper circulated outside the camp?

Our paper did not. Our paper was a camp paper. More than two-thirds of the papers were mailed out of the camp by the people who read the paper then sent it off to friends.

Mark Junge: What was the purpose of the Sentinel? I mean, sure, you're a newspaper man. You've got experience in it. But what was the purpose of this paper? Just to keep busy?

Two purposes: One, to provide the people with information. People need news. People need to understand what's going on. Without something like that the camp would be just rife with rumors. When you get ten-thousand people without too much to do, complaining, unhappy, all kinds of rumors are possible. So we needed to provide the news. Actually, three purposes: Second, to provide editorial leadership. Get the people to thinking in a positive manner. Third, to give the people a voice. People in California, people in Washington, some of the members of Congress, saw us as easy game, taking pot-shots at us. There was no way for these people to talk back. No way for an evacuee in the camp to say, "That's a damn lie! That's a crock! This is the truth! Why don't you—why can't you understand the issues?" and so many of the editorials in the *Sentinel* were quite militant about that.

There was very little linkage between the camp and the people in the surrounding area. Remember for one thing, that the camp was surrounded by barbed wire and you had to have a darn good reason in order to get in, or to get out. Now some of the church people in Cody and Powell would come in and do some missionary work; visit with the Christian ministers in the camp. Some of the high school athletic teams would come in and play the football team or the basketball team in the camp. I don't think they had a basketball court, but they did have a football field and so games were played.

I think they did pretty well in football, but they couldn't do much in basketball because Wyoming kids are so much taller. For the average guy in Cody or Powell, they never had a chance to come to the camp. They would drive by on Highway 14 which was about maybe a quarter mile from the camp site, and they could see the camp site up on the hill there, but there was no reason to stop in. Though, many of the farmers in the area got boys, young men from the camp to help them with the harvest in the fall of 1942.

I pointed out that there was very little contact between the two groups. People outside were living normal lives. People inside were confined; they were in a prison. If you lived in Rawlins, you wouldn't have much to do with the people in the State Prison there at Rawlins.

There were individual relationships that developed. Ministers would come in, or say, a farmer would come in and there would be a relationship between the farmer who employed a man from the camp temporarily. In the fall of 1942, a lot of the young men in the area had been drafted or

had gone off in the service. Others had gone to the West Coast to work in the munitions plants, the aircraft plants, and there was a great shortage of labor. And here were these tons and tons and tons of sugar beets just sitting out there in the fields waiting for somebody to harvest them. The sugar crop would have been lost without that manpower from the camp coming out to help with it. That helped to fend off some of the hostility. Farmers realizing that they would have suffered great loss without help from the camp.

The camp was on Bureau of Land Management property. Belonged to the Federal Government. And the BLM had been trying to build the irrigation ditch down from the Buffalo Bill Reservoir west of Cody. But the ditches had not been completed and that land was just grazing land unless you brought in water. And the evacuees did complete some of the ditches and brought water to the land. Meanwhile, other evacuees, I included, drove tractors and ripped off the brush and leveled the land, and by the time the camp closed there were more than a thousand acres under cultivation. And there was a lot more land around there that could be cultivated, given time. This was darn good land. It would be productive land.

After the war, the government opened that area for homesteading. There were over a hundred 160-acre plots open for homesteading. And there was a lottery held. Veterans who were interested could enter into the lottery. And Chester Blackburn was among those who did that. The winners of the homesteads were able to buy the barracks buildings that we lived in for a dollar or two and haul them off to their own sites, use them for temporary shelter, and then when they got a house built, they could use the barracks for tools, machine sheds, or animal shelters. Chester was one of those who was very sensitive about the whole situation, and during the early winters of his homesteading experience, he began to think about the people who had broken that land for him, and the people who had lived in those shelters and he felt very sympathetic toward the Japanese-Americans.

As time went on the people who had lived in the camps would come back; maybe they lived in Chicago and they were going to visit friends in California and they'd drive by, come by the camp site, and everything was gone by then. Virtually everything, except that tall chimney at the hospital. They would come by Chester's place and ask him if he could show them the way to the camp site and where the barracks were, and where the schoolhouse was and Chester felt that

something ought to be done to help these people. So he was among the very first working to do something about setting up a memorial and there was a war honor roll, a big bulletin board type that, at one time, had names of four-, five-hundred camp kids who had gone off into service. The wind and the sand had erased all the names but the board itself was there. But he and some of the other homesteaders got together and built a very nice memorial park. I think without the help of Chester and the people who supported him, that there would be nothing there today except farms.

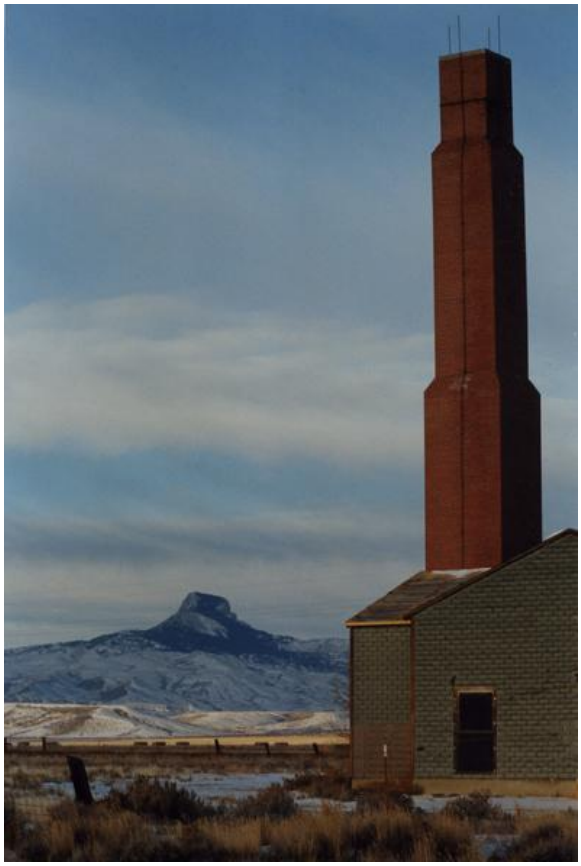

Photo: 4—Heart Mountain camp hospital chimney.

Mark Junge: Why didn't the local population rise up as a group of businessmen and say, "we had this camp plunked down in our back yards, and now we don't get a chance to sell things to these people. Why can't these people buy from us?"

Some of them did come in with specialty items, but early on, the camp set up a cooperative, and the camp stores were co-op and we kept our receipts and got a rebate at the end of a particular period. They'd buy from wholesalers; Chicago, Billings, Denver. We were in direct competition. But they couldn't come in. We couldn't go out. And later on, when we were allowed to go out, people bought in the stores there, but they were in such short supply during the war that many of the merchants resented the evacuees coming in. Meat was rationed, coffee was rationed, canned goods were rationed.

Mark Junge: This was partly then the reason for the Denver Post and other newspapers jumping on this idea that the internees are well-fed. Did they have a good selection? I mean, if you went to the store, could you, like today, get what you wanted to get?

You could get things like toothbrushes and toothpaste, and cigarettes— some cigarettes. You could get pencils and notebooks, and sometimes you could get candy bars. This was a wartime economy. Sugar was rationed. Even canned tomatoes were rationed.

Mark Junge: Where did people get the money to buy in the first place?

You got paid sixteen bucks a month. And you didn't have to buy any overcoats because they gave you these pea-jackets. You didn't have to buy any food because they fed you at the mess hall. You could spend everything they gave you, which was $12, $16 and $19. On the other hand, that was not enough to keep up your life insurance policy, unless you had a little money set aside. Postage, I think, was three cents at that time, and if you wanted to correspond, and you bought ten stamps, that was thirty cents, that was a pretty good part of your income.

Family is built around the meal, in many respects. Dad comes home in the evening and Mom cooks a meal and you sit around and have dinner, have a meal together. The father has provided the food, the mother has prepared it, you tell about what you learned in school that day, what you did, and in some families you discuss the news or whatever. When you line up in a mess hall the food is provided by somebody other than your father, the food is prepared by somebody other than your mother, and you just go through the line and they plop your food on a tin plate. And you don't sit together as a family. You may try, but pretty soon the teenager wants to go over and sit with his friends there. Then all the teenagers are sitting together over here. Parents have no control over the table manners of the little kids. So the family disintegrates, and the kids lose the respect for their parents. It dehumanizes the father. He's no longer in control. And the kids would say, "Well, you can't boss me around! You don't support me anymore. You don't provide the food. You don't buy my clothes for me anymore. You're just like the rest of us."

The families, Japanese-Americans, have a very close knit family system. I think it resulted in the independence of the young people at an earlier age. They were more inclined to strike out on their own. A kid straight out of high school would say, "Well, Mom and Dad, I'm going to apply for a leave and I'm going to go to Chicago and look for a job." Many cases the parents said, "Go! Go ahead. It isn't doing you any good to be in this camp." Within a few months after the camps were filled, the War Reallocation Authority changed its policy. These guys that ran WRA had no experience in this line. Several of them went out to the camps—some of them had experience in

the Indian service, and they said, "We're gonna have another 'Indian problem' on our hands unless we do something."

Mark Junge: Was it tough to have Anglo supervisors, or the guys in key positions being Anglo, instead of being Nisei?

It wasn't so much a matter of race. It was a matter of competence. My boss was a competent newspaper man. I respected him. But there were other guys who knew much more about the business than their supervisors. The accounting department, or the purchasing department, or the farm department. The guy who was working for the white man knew more about how to run that department than the white man did. And some of the schools. High schools; the teachers among the Japanese-Americans are better qualified than the teachers, the white teachers. They had more education, more experience, and yet they were being paid $16 and $19, and the other folks are getting Civil Service income, four, five thousand dollars in those days, I guess, a year.

After the war, the American Legion posts in Cody and Powell got together and put up a little memorial, just off the highway, Highway 14, down the hill from the camp. This is what the legend there says:

Heart Mountain Relocation Center, 1942-1945.

During World War II years, Heart Mountain Relocation Center was located on a 740-acre tract of land across the Burlington Northern right-of-way, westward from where you stand facing the monument and Heart Mountain itself, on the Heart Mountain Division of the Shoshone Project. 11,000 people of Japanese ancestry from three West Coast states were loosely confined by the US Government in this center for about three years. They lived in barracks as singles or as families, according to their marital status. The camp was equipped with modern water works, sewer system and modern hospital and dental clinic, staffed with people from the ranks of evacuees. First rate schooling was provided for the children of evacuees through their high school years.

Now, I'm convinced that these veterans had put up this monument as a good will gesture. Their hearts were in the right place. But the legend here is very offensive. Yes it's true, there was a

sewer system, there were modern water works, there was a modern hospital, and that schooling was provided for the children of the evacuees, but it says nothing about *why* the people were there. The fact that they were confined behind barbed wire, that there were troops there, wearing the same uniforms as the sons of the guys in the camps, the families in the camps, and these people were confined against their will, they had lost their homes, that they were under constant guard, that their rights as Americans had been violated. [There was] this lack of understanding on the part of the people of that area.

They didn't mean to insult anybody. They didn't mean to rub the noses of the evacuees into the dirt. There's a feeling among Japanese-Americans who've seen it, the people who wrote this were ignorant or insensitive, really didn't understand what this was all about.

Chester Blackburn and his people have put up several plaques up on top there, where the administration building was. It's about a quarter-mile up the hill. And that tells the story accurately. What I would like to see is this thing re-written. This came up again very recently, and my friend Cal Taggart says, "Well, why don't you write something that would be more fitting, and I'll see about what we can do to change it." I will do that.

Mark Junge: Do you think the same thing could happen [again] to the Japanese-Americans?

The average guy can't tell a Vietnamese from a Thai from a Burmese from a Chinese from a Japanese from a Korean. Japanese-Americans today are very well established. There are four Japanese-Americans in Congress. A Japanese-American's a Federal judge. Lots of 'em in the state and local justice system. They're police officers. Presidents of universities. Great physicians, surgeons. Scientists. They're leaders in their field; business people; financial advisors to some of the big corporations. They've made it, quote—*made it*—unquote. But if they would walk down in some parts of town they'd look just like a fresh off the boat Vietnamese boat person. This business of not being able to accept or understand the point that you don't have to be blonde and blue-eyed to be an American—

This happened up in Wyoming: I was the guest at a party at a very nice home in Casper, and one of the guests was a well known political figure, and he was trying to be friendly, and he came up to me and he said, "Mr. Hosokawa, how long have you been in this country?" I looked him over,

and he was somewhat younger that I. I said, “Sir, I think I have been in *our* country about 20 years longer than you have.”

But that sort of thing happens. I don’t care anymore, but I cite that as an example of how difficult it is for a person with an Asian background to be accepted and recognized as an American. Now in all my years with the *Denver Post* I never did run into that sort of problem, if you can call it a problem, because I was the guy from the *Denver Post*. And I was accepted as the guy from the *Denver Post*. But without that sort of shield, you do run into things like that. But there are people who still haven’t sat down and shared a meal with an Asian-American. Never went to school with ‘em. There are many people who are completely color blind in this respect. I was up in South Dakota one time, speaking to a writers’ conference, if anybody noticed that here was a person with an Asian face telling them how to write better in English, it didn’t seem to occur to them. But after a while a little old lady came up to me and said, “Mr. Hosokawa, how do you spell your name?” I said, “It’s right here on my name tag.” She looked at it, says, “Oh. You must be Polish!” (Laughs) Completely colorblind!

End of interview