

## THE WINTERS OF HEART MOUNTAIN

The winters were cold in Heart Mountain. As a native Californian, I was ill-equipped to deal with the biting winds, sub-zero temperatures, and knee-deep snows. The snow did not fall gently in Heart Mountain. It came horizontally like icy spears across the barren plains to crash into the tar-papered barrack walls as if to obliterate this abomination, euphemistically called a "relocation center", at the foot of the majestic mountain it was named after.

The wind was incessant. Even in the heat of summer, the dust storms would coat our faces and hair with a fine white powder as if to make us look more like our oppressors, in a vain attempt to mask the damning evidence of our ethnicity; the apparent root of our woes and persecution.

The mountain took little note of the insanity occurring at its feet. It had, no doubt, witnessed in passed eras, the massacre of others of dark skin, brutally stripped of their land, their culture, their livelihood and their power of self-determination. It had, no doubt, witnessed the butchering of herds of buffalo for their hides and horns, leaving their bloody naked carcasses to bake and rot under the blazing desert sun, while their young calves stood about, bewildered and abandoned.

So, when the caravan of trucks came with loads of lumber, tarpaper, and spools of barbed wire, perhaps the mountain sighed and thought to itself, "not again?"

But that was over 57 years ago. Parts of the dry, desolate prairie has long since been converted to verdant, productive farmland, thanks in part to the labor and ingenuity of the inhabitants of the former prison camp, who built life-giving canals from a nearby river.

The camp itself no longer exists. A single tall brick chimney at the far corner of what was formerly "home" for eleven-thousand wartime "hostages", stands starkly, like a sentinel guarding three ancient abandoned barracks; a grim reminder of what occurred there many years ago.

It is a memory which is visited <sup>rarely</sup> by those who, by chance of ethnicity, were imprisoned there, and even obliterated by others, overwhelmed by the pain and self-imposed shame for allowing themselves to be so blatantly victimized.

Indeed, some have created illogical myths based on the rationale of a desperate survival expedience, devoid of all restraints of ethics and principle. They sought personal salvation by accommodating government actions regardless of how brazenly the government defied the founding principles of our country. They claimed this constituted undeniable proof of unwavering loyalty. LOYALTY TO WHAT ??



Though the camp no longer exists, the controversy simmers on. But it is no longer a question of the resisters versus the JACL, or the "no-nos" versus the inductees, or even the government versus an ethnic minority.

The inescapable issue is ---and always has been--- WHAT IS A CITIZEN'S RIGHTFUL RESPONSE TO CONSTITUTIONAL TRANSGRESSIONS? What indeed, is a citizen's responsibility when racially-based civil rights restrictions are imposed by an errant government?

Japanese America has evaded this essential question, using various distractions and excuses too long. Even the glorious sacrifices of our fighting men, painfully reminiscent of ancient, ritualistic human sacrifices to appease the white gods of antiquity, seem only to confuse the issue further.

Heart Mountain still stands, proud and un-bowed, like the memory of our Issei parents who endured a lifetime of senseless humiliation, sometimes from their own offspring, but whose integrity, for the most part, remained intact and their dignity, resolute. The undulating hills at the foot of the mountain play a fanciful game of tag with the shadows of windblown clouds dancing over them, when viewed from atop the venerable old mountain; a good half-day hike from the old campsite. The ever changing shadows flit over barren hills and plains and the more recently cultivated patchwork of farms, unmindful of the changing character of the once desolate landscape. The clouds bring to all equally, sprinkles or deluge and even horrendous floods when nature's laws are ignored.

A continuous circle of mountain ranges form the far, far horizon. The range to the west, the Rockies and Yellowstone Park, are by far the most dramatic. Heart Mountain sits isolated in this great basin like an off-center hub of a lopsided wagon wheel, but seems to find dignity in its solitude; much like the chimney at the former campsite. Silent witnesses of eras gone by.

The winters are still cold in Heart Mountain --- but not as cold as the winters in the hearts of men.

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