

WISCONSIN ACADEMY REVIEW

Published Quarterly by the Wisconsin
Academy of Sciences, Arts and Letters.

"HEART MOUNTAIN" (WYOMING)

"A SCHOOL BEHIND BARBED WIRE"

By: Clarice Chase Dunn,
(former teacher)

December 1980
Volume 27, Number 1



Heart Mountain: A School Behind Barbed Wire

By Clarice Chase Dunn

When I arrived in Cody, Wyoming, grimy and exhausted, my reception was less than cordial. I approached the desk clerk at the hotel which Buffalo Bill had named after his daughter Irma and asked, "Can you tell me how to get to the Heart Mountain Relocation Center?"

The middle-aged woman held a pack of mail in mid-air and glared at me.

"You mean that Jap camp?"

"Yes, I was told that it was half way between Cody and Powell."

"You can't go there," she snapped. "Why would you want to anyway?"

"I have a job there," I explained. "Is there a bus?"

She gave me a scornful look, turned her back, and began sorting mail.

As I sat down in one of the overstuffed chairs in the lobby to ponder my predicament, two young men, who had been watching, introduced themselves and asked if they might join me. They told me that since they would soon be entering the armed services, their parents had given them a farewell gift, a trip through Yellowstone National Park.

"We passed that camp you were asking about," the lanky one said. "Black tar paper shacks. Pretty bleak looking."

"Barbed wire fence all around it," added the other. "Did you know you would be working behind barbed wire?"

"Yes," I answered. "I know what I'm getting into. I'm a teacher. The camps need teachers."

I could see that they still didn't understand.

"Don't you see?" I continued. "It's precisely this situation which challenges me to work in the camps. These kids are in a tight spot. They've grown up in a democracy, and behind barbed wire their faith in democracy will be shaken up. They've got to have teachers who realize this."

We talked about Executive Order 9066 issued by President Roosevelt on February 19, 1942, which had authorized the removal of the West Coast Japanese from their homes and their dispersal and resettlement in ten camps located in wastelands of Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Idaho, Utah, and Wyoming. We talked about minorities in general and the inherent danger to society when the rights of democracy are not available to all of its citizens.

Finally, the sandy-haired one gave his summation.

"Yes, I know all that stuff. I got A's in sociology in college. But, this is different."

That statement coming from this intelligent young man shocked me into the realization that democracy proclaimed is not necessarily democracy practiced.

When after two days I managed to get to Heart Mountain with some other War Relocation Authority (WRA) employes, I was further shocked by the knowledge that I too had ingested prejudice.

We couldn't start teaching until school barracks were completed, and housing for evacuees naturally took precedence. In the meantime, teachers were assigned clerical work in the administration building and a variety of other tasks. Between assignments we were on our own.

One day as I sat in the back of the mess hall reviewing some of the textbooks I had brought with me and making tentative lesson plans, an elderly Japanese cook brought me a cup of tea and piece of cake. I froze. The ugly posters, the signboards depicting a Japanese face and a rat's body which I had seen all the way from Washington to Wyoming flashed before me. The concern of acquaintances, "Will you be safe out there with the Japs? Why don't you stay here and work where you'll be safe?"

The moment of terror passed. A kind, gentle man was inviting me to share a mid-morning snack. I smiled my gratitude.

That same day, I met my first Japanese friend, Lafayette Noda. Together we organized an evening class on cooperatives, which gave me an opportunity to work with adults, both Issei and Nisei, and to acquire a wider knowledge of the camp community.

After the first meeting with my adult study groups, the orientation material put out by the WRA began to take on meaning in human terms. This civilian agency created to administer the centers had issued bulletins detailing the background of relocation and explaining terminology.

I learned that Japanese aliens, those born in Japan and thus ineligible for American citizenship were called Issei. Their children, born in the United States and therefore citizens, were Nisei. Third generation toddlers were Sansei. The Kibei were Nisei who had spent considerable time in Japan.

And—I saw references to Caucasian personnel. Except in a textbook category, I had never thought of myself as a Caucasian. Somehow being classified made me feel uncomfortable.

About two weeks after my arrival at Heart Mountain, the schoolroom barracks were ready for use. Ready? Well, each small barrack was equipped with rows of rough wooden benches, a pot-bellied army stove, and a chair for the teacher. No books. No blackboards. No toilet facilities or drinking fountains. No study halls. The gable areas connecting the individual rooms of the six barracks were as yet unfinished.

The Heart Mountain area had once been known as "Wide Open Gulch," a pocket of sand, sagebrush, and buffalo grass. In the distance loomed the Gibraltar-type prominence which gave the camp its name. The sparse vegetation had been practically eliminated when housing for 10,000 people was erected in a period of six weeks. The result was one big dust bowl.

On that first day of school, an October rain, sand, and sleet storm raged around the tar-paper shacks which would become Heart Mountain High School. Students, many unaccustomed to this type of weather and inadequately clothed, stood huddled against the buildings waiting for classes to begin.

When I entered my classroom, fifty sophomores were waiting for me. Those in the rows near the army stove were wiping the perspiration from their foreheads. Away from the stove they were shivering with cold.

All eyes were upon me. I tried to read them. Expectation? Foreboding? I couldn't tell. I thought of the usual first day of school. Excitement. Noise. Laughter. Reunion. Nothing

here but a silence which only intensified the howl of the wind outside the barracks.

The usual teacher-to-student greeting wouldn't do, but what should I say?

"Students. This is not the type of school we are used to. We're used to brick buildings, libraries, blackboards, green lawns. That's what school means to us, doesn't it? I wonder if we've been wrong in our definition. If we don't have a comfortable, well-equipped building, can we still have a school? If we change our definition, perhaps we can. Let's say that a school is a teacher who wants to teach and students who want to learn. OK?"

Hollow words, spoken to reassure myself as well as my class. I went on telling them about the strolling classrooms of ancient Greece and about the primitive pioneer schools of early America. Students had managed to learn sitting on wooden benches with only a few ragged books and a slate for equipment.

When I thought I saw a flicker of response, I switched to the personal and told them about growing up on a Wisconsin farm during World War I, feeling guilty because of my half-German heritage and not knowing why. I asked them to tell me about themselves. Timidly, a few hands went up, a few brief introductions, but most remained silent. Then I passed out paper and pencils and asked them to write letters of introduction to me.

Because I couldn't think of anything better to do, I followed the same procedure in all of my classes.

That evening as I sat in my barrack room reading the introductions, one item of similarity caught my attention.

"My name is Matsuo Nitta. I am an American citizen."

"I, Mary Wada, am a Japanese American citizen of the United States."

"I am Mariko Ono. I was born an American citizen on June 8, 1927, at Wapato, Washington."

During my previous four years of teaching, no student had ever mentioned American citizenship as an item of identification. Nor had I!

My freshmen were more articulate than the sophomores. In their letters of introduction they told in simple poignant terms just what evacuation had meant to them: the puppy given to a Caucasian friend to care for; the pony ridden alongside the departing trainload of evacuees by the tow-headed lad who promised not to let Ranger forget his Nisei master. As the days passed, they also spoke up more in the classroom. Occasionally they would request that I just talk to them a few minutes before starting class.

"What shall I talk about?"

"About Wisconsin. What does it look like way out there? Are there any Quakers in Wisconsin? After we went to the assembly center, we thought all Caucasians hated us, but the Quakers didn't. They talked to us through the fence and brought us things we needed. Like soap. Can you sing 'On Wisconsin?'"

I sang it off key and out of tune. How I wished I could carry a tune well enough to open each class session with a rousing song.

These youngsters came to school straight from the crowded family barracks where fear, confusion, and despair were a part of the very air they breathed. Group singing would have relieved tensions far better than a ten minute chat.

In Civics 9 when we studied the constitutions of Wyoming and the other states the students had come from, Tomokichi suggested that we study Wisconsin too. He

wrote for a copy of the state constitution. I grew fond of all my students but especially fond of Tomokichi. After the first week of class he waited until his classmates had left the room and then asked anxiously, "Do you think we look like the cartoons?"

The cartoons! Those ugly evil caricatures. The faces of a Japanese male, buck toothed, slant eyed, leering out of the body of a rat, the most detested of all vermin. And here stood Tomokichi, with his wide eyes and little boy face, needing reassurance that he looked like a human being.

I looked him over, slowly and carefully, full face and profile, tilted his chin in my hand and said seriously, "No, Tomokichi, I really can't see any resemblance between you and the cartoons."

"Call me Tomo," he said and stood there a minute grinning.

My seniors in Social Problems class talked not about the pony left behind but about their present situation and the reasons for it. Some blamed their parents. Why had they segregated themselves into Little Tokyos? Why hadn't they become a part of greater America?

But how could they, others asked. The cards had been stacked against them. They were the personification of the "yellow peril." Since the turn of the century that battle cry had been used by every power-seeking group on the West Coast to unite in fear those they could not reach by rational argument.

I learned of the age barrier between Issei and Nisei. Most Japanese had married late. They came to America alone, worked hard for even minimal security, and sent back to Japan for picture wives. There was almost a grandfather-grandchildren relationship between some of the Issei and their children.

When students spoke of Nisei problems, I asked, "Why do you always speak of Nisei problems. Don't Issei have the same problems?"

They looked at me in surprise.

"There's a big difference," they explained. "Our parents aren't citizens. They're helpless to do anything about their future. Because we are citizens, we can. Nothing will be done for them unless we do it."

Role reversal. What a bitter pill it must have been for the Issei to swallow!

When I discussed these interpretations of Issei versus Nisei problems with the young adults in my evening class, I was told of the tremendous sacrifices parents had made to give children the best education possible. They knew that the citizenship status of the Nisei was a valuable asset but that it did not guarantee full acceptance. Education was the key.

After that discussion I understood why so many of the Nisei in camp were intent upon entering the professions despite innumerable obstacles. Parental expectations did not die behind barbed wire.

Eventually, we received a few textbooks, but by the time they arrived, it was apparent that these Social Problems students didn't need a book to provide topics for study. Their social problems were all around them. Together we structured our curriculum and chose the topics to be investigated. One committee organized a speakers' bureau and invited Caucasian and Japanese residents to our classroom to speak. My students were really teaching themselves. I acted as their guide and learned with them.

Perhaps the saddest lesson we learned was that oppressed people sometimes imitate their oppressors. While we were



Sign posted in army mess halls shows wartime government caricature of Japanese.

discussing the tremendous property loss suffered by the evacuees, one student remarked, "The Jews really sold us out!"

"The Jews?" I asked in surprise.

"Yes, we'd get a telephone call saying we should sell everything we owned right away because they had it on good authority that within a week all our property would be confiscated. Ten minutes later they came to the door and offered us \$25.00 for all our living room furniture."

"How did you know they were Jews?"

"Well, a Jew will cheat you every chance he gets."

I asked Sadako to go to the piece of tar paper which we had tacked up as a blackboard. As several students told how Jews acted, she wrote the charges on the board. Several of the students showed considerable embarrassment at this procedure, but I asked them to hold their rebuttal until later. When our list was complete, I asked, "Did any non-Jews ever cheat you?"

"Well—yes."

"Orientals? Christians? Buddhists?"

". . . I guess so. Sometimes."

"Then Jews aren't the only people who sometimes try to cheat others?"

When all the items had been discussed in a like manner and erased, there was an uneasy silence until Teruo exclaimed, "We've done it too!"

That incident led us into the problems of minority groups in general. Soon we were discussing world problems, and our horizons expanded immeasurably.

Most tragic was the plight of the Kibei students. Many had been sent to Japan to stay with an aged relative, to take advantage of educational scholarships, or to prepare for careers involving trade with Japan. When they returned to their homes on the West Coast, some were more Japanese than American. With few exceptions they were more like Issei in behavior and interests than the members of their own age group and were deeply resented by many Nisei.

One day I saw that resentment in action. The Heart Mountain Boy Scouts had tried for months to obtain a large flag and flagpole for their celebration of national holidays. Before the camp director could act in their behalf, a woman from neighboring Powell, Wyoming, presented the boys with a beautiful flag.

The first public flag-raising ceremony was held in sub-zero weather. As both grade school and high school stu-

dents stood at attention, I heard an angry shout from one of my freshmen:

"Get that damned Kibei cap off."

The startled boy hastily and guiltily complied.

Most Kibei had to carry their Japanese-English dictionaries with them to class and use them in preparing every lesson. With classes of more than fifty students, I couldn't give the extra help they needed.

The generosity of the flag donor was reassurance that not all area people were as hostile as the desk clerk at the hotel. Stanley Yoshida, a senior, came to me the first day of school and asked if I had a book, any book, he could read. He told me that he thought he could stand anything if only he could read. He could have endured the heat, dust, and lack of privacy at the assembly center if only he had had enough books to read. He walked back to my barracks with me, and I gave him the few nontextbooks I had brought with me. I promised to share each Book-of-the-Month-Club selection as it arrived. When other students begged for books, I went to the library in Cody, told the librarian my problem, and borrowed 100 books for my classroom. Months later I learned that the husband of this kind woman had been one of the first casualties of the war in the Pacific. She didn't tell me.

As the school term progressed, conditions improved. The gable areas of the school barracks were finished off so that the sounds of Spanish being taught on one side and math on the other did not distract my students. As additional barracks were completed I no longer had to teach fifty freshman English students in one-half of a room while the history teacher taught fifty seventh graders in the other half, facing the opposite direction. School desks replaced the wooden benches. Textbooks arrived, but never enough so that each student could take one home to study. When 250 students had to use forty texts, the books had to be collected at the end of each class period and passed out to the next class. In time there was a school library of sorts.

My colleagues on the teaching staff came from the Rocky Mountain area, the Great Plains, the Midwest, and even from New York and New Jersey. Many did excellent work under great difficulties. Others who were attracted to the camps because of the higher salary scale lived in fear of the "Japs" whom they never really got to know.

As labor needs accelerated throughout the nation, selective resettlement of evacuees likewise accelerated. Nisei after Nisei left camp for jobs or to continue an education. We celebrated each departure with a farewell party: Mr. Hatchimonji always sang "A Ruined Castle" in Japanese and with a committee of Issei served tea.

As some of my Nisei students walked me back to my barracks after one of these parties, I remarked, "The Issei always provide refreshments for our class parties. Why don't we Nisei bring snacks and make tea for the next farewell?"

They looked at me in surprise.

"Welcome to the Nisei ranks, Clarice," Teresa Honda laughed. When I realized what I had said, I felt absolved for my moment of bigotry in the mess hall that first day in camp.

Although our school cultural environment improved, health problems became acute. Fifteen-hundred students were housed in fifteen barracks of six small rooms each. Teachers and students had to move each period to go where the textbooks were. The entire area became a furrow of slush and mud. Mud from our boots dried and flaked off

onto the floor and was ground into dust. When the stoves smoked, we opened the windows only to let in the sand and sleet. There was no drinking water in the school area that first year. Although we drank liquids in the mess hall at lunch time, dry rasping coughs became endemic.

I had planned to teach at Heart Mountain as long as I was needed, but respiratory problems plagued me from the beginning. Three times I was hospitalized: for bronchitis, pneumonitis, and flu. Several teachers and office personnel left camp with impaired health. As the year progressed, I tried to hold out, but in March I was again taken to the hospital, this time critically ill. Later I learned that Dr. Irwin had given instructions that the person in least danger should be sent back to the barracks in order to free a bed for me.

When I had recovered sufficiently to receive visitors, I realized the depth of the friendship offered me by my evacuee friends: the huge bouquet of flowers delivered to my room in the dead of winter; the tiny blue flower which Mr. Hatchimonji had found in a sheltered spot while working with a crew to complete the irrigation ditch which Buffalo Bill had started from the Shoshone canyon. The little flower had survived the rigors of a Wyoming winter and become a symbol of hope. Mr. Hatchimonji brought it to my sick room. Another of my Issei students picked up an interesting stone and polished it to a thing of beauty as his farewell gift.

It was six weeks before I was well enough to travel, and I wondered if Dr. Irwin was being too cautious in urging me to leave camp before the onset of another serious respiratory infection. Common sense prevailed, and I left Heart Mountain for Washington, D.C., in late April. When the day of departure arrived, John Kitasaki borrowed a jeep from the motor pool and with a delegation from the co-op class drove me to the camp exit. I had already said goodbye to my Caucasian friends at a farewell coffee in the mess hall. My high school students were there en masse.

As the bus approached, John carried my suitcases outside the fence and placed them next to the road.

The author with her class in front of the schoolroom.



"Sorry," he said. "This is as far as I can go."

He rejoined the others inside the fence. As I rode off, I saw them, my friends, waving from behind the barbed wire, and I wanted desperately to go back.

The *Heart Mountain Sentinel* and a flow of correspondence kept me informed in Washington, D.C., of camp affairs. A more satisfactory school building was erected before the next term. Evacuees were leaving the camps for jobs and reintegration in society despite continued agitation from the West Coast and widespread pockets of hate.

Away from it all, I recalled the good times as well as the grim, the hours of camaraderie, the joy of small triumphs, the wry humor arising out of adversity. With the Nisei in the 442nd Army division fighting in Italy, I became increasingly reluctant to read the *Heart Mountain Sentinel* as scarcely an issue appeared without reports of casualties.

Then one day I read of the death of Ted Fujioko from my Social Studies class. I recalled his summation of the Nisei

dilemma and what had to be done in the postwar period. "We have to win over America," he had said. "Not only for ourselves but for the Issei and Sansei as well. We have to earn our acceptance just as every other immigrant group has had to do."

His good friend Albert Saijo agreed.

"It'll take time," concluded another student.

It has taken a long time. Through the efforts of the Nisei, the Issei did gain citizenship in 1952. But it was not until the Bicentennial year of 1976 that Executive Order 9066 was revoked with an apology from the President of the United States for the suffering it had caused.

The Irma Hotel still stands in Cody, Wyoming, a reminder of the era of Buffalo Bill. Heart Mountain Relocation Center is likewise history. Barracks and barbed wire are long gone. The only monument to its existence are the memories of those who were there. □

Government action affecting Japanese Americans

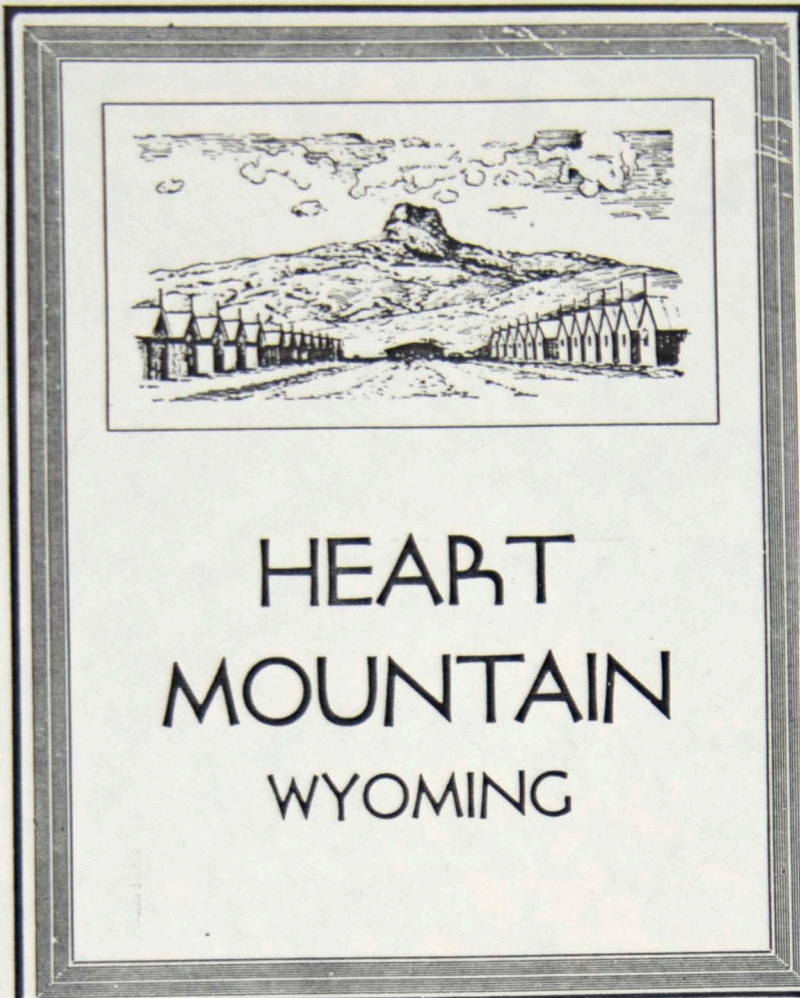
- 1860 First Japanese workers arrive in San Francisco in response to American labor needs
- 1900-8 Period of major Japanese immigration
- 1905-6 President Roosevelt recommends Congress legalize naturalization of foreign-born Japanese (Issei)
- 1908 Gentlemen's Agreement between US & Japan, Japan voluntarily to restrict immigration and halt influx of unskilled Japanese labor
- 1910 US Immigration Commission study shows 72,157 Japanese in US; over half engaged in farming in California
- 1913 California Alien Land Laws prohibit further purchase of agricultural land by Japanese aliens (Issei)
- 1922 Supreme Court decides that the law limits naturalization to "free white persons, aliens of African nativity, and persons of African descent"
- 1924 Immigration Act totally excludes "aliens ineligible to citizenship"; also known as the "Oriental Exclusion Act"; end of Gentlemen's Agreement
- 1940 Federal census shows 126,947 persons of Japanese ancestry, .09% of total population; 112,353 in Pacific Coast States; 79,642 citizens by birth (Nisei), 47,305 aliens denied citizenship by law (Issei)
- 1941 Japan attacks Pearl Harbor on December 7
- 1942 Feb. 11, Secretary of War Henry Stimson authorizes evacuation of Issei and Nisei from strategic military areas on West Coast (no evacuation from Hawaii)
- 1942 Feb. 19, Executive Order 9066 authorizes evacuations of "any or all" persons from "military areas"
- 1942 March 11, Wartime Civil Control Administration (WCCA) formed to handle evacuation of Japanese
- 1942 March 14, First evacuation by Army of Japanese off Terminal Island across the channel from San Pedro, California, after one month's notification
- 1942 March 30, Evacuation of Japanese from Bainbridge Island across Puget Sound from Seattle; one week's notice to settle affairs and leave
- 1942 April 28, First of 15 WCCA assembly centers (mostly fairgrounds and racetracks) occupied
- 1942 June 5, Ten sites selected as camps: *Manzanar* in eastern California; *Poston* in Arizona; *Tule Lake* in northeastern California; *Minidoka* in southcentral Idaho; *Heart Mountain* east of Cody, Wyoming; *Granada* in southeastern Colorado; *Topaz* in central Utah; *Gila River* southeast of Phoenix, Arizona; and *Rohwer* and *Jerome* in Arkansas
- 1942 June 17, Dillon Myer appointed director of War Relocation Authority (WRA)
- 1942 Mid-June, Movement from assembly centers to WRA camps begun, 500 persons at a time by rail with military escort
- 1942 July 20, Dillon Myer announces program to get Japanese-American citizens (except Kibei) out of camps and into jobs outside the Western Defense Command (West Coast)
- 1942 Nov. 1, With last trainload of evacuees, more than 107,000 men, women, and children moved from WCCA assembly centers to WRA camps
- 1945 Jan. 2, Supreme Court decides that confinement in camps violated constitutional rights of Japanese
- 1948 July 2, President Truman signs into law Japanese American Evacuation Claims Act; evacuees have until Jan. 3, 1950, to file claims against government
- 1952 Walter-McCarran Immigration and Naturalization Act repeals the Oriental Exclusion Immigration Act of 1924, eliminating race as barrier to naturalization
- 1952 California Supreme Court strikes down Alien Land Law
- 1965 President Johnson signs Public Law 89-236, eliminating race as barrier to immigration
- 1976 Executive Order 9066 revoked by President Ford

Selective chronology prepared by Pat Powell with the help of Mae Hara, based on information from Dillon S. Myer's *Uprooted Americans* (Tucson 1971), Frank F. Chuman's *The Bamboo People: The Law and Japanese-Americans* (Del Mar, Cal. 1976), and Bill Hosokawa's *Nisei* (New York 1969).

Heart Mountain Relocation Center

Winter 1942-43

Pages from a scrapbook



HEART
MOUNTAIN
WYOMING

1943		JANUARY						1943
SUN	MON N. M. 6	TUE F. O. 13	WED F. M. 21	THU L. O. 29	FRI 1	SAT 2		
3	4	5	6	7	8	9		
10	11	12	13	14	15	16		
17	18	19	20	21	22	23		
24 31	25	26	27	28	29	30		

1942		DECEMBER						1943		FEBRUARY						1943														
SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT	SUN	MON	TUE	WED	THU	FRI	SAT										
		1	2	3	4	5	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28		
6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	19	20	21	22	23	24	25	26	27	28	29	30	31					

