

Land Purchase to Ensure Topaz Is Remembered

BY CHRISTOPHER SMITH

THE SALT LAKE TRIBUNE

TOPAZ — During World War II, a young Japanese-American boy whose family was sent to live in this former federal internment camp in Utah's bleak Sevier Desert, complained to his parents: "I don't like it here. When are we going back to America?"

As far away from civilization as Topaz seemed, a half-century later development now is creeping onto the remains of this sad reminder of wartime hysteria. A few new houses and trailer homes dot 78 acres of what was once the fifth largest city in the state, about 140 miles southwest of Salt Lake City near the town of Delta. Greasewood and salt grass plants clinging to the windswept plain hide the old concrete footings of a square-mile complex of barracks and barbed-wire fence that held more than 8,000 Japanese-Americans.

Fearing the bittersweet memories of Topaz soon may be erased by encroaching construction of new homes, a group of local residents, former Topaz internees and Japanese-American citizens last month purchased 400 acres of the 640-acre site to preserve it indefinitely.

"We are just delighted that it's going to be saved," says Eleanor Sekerak of Castro Valley, Calif., a Japanese-American woman who was sent to Topaz at

■ First "Day of Remembrance" D-3

age 25 and taught school at the camp. "When we learned that people were building houses out there we couldn't believe it, especially because the water was so bad, almost undrinkable. It's terribly barren, isolated and lonely."

And the Topaz Museum Board, which raised money for the land purchase, would like the site to retain some of that emptiness.

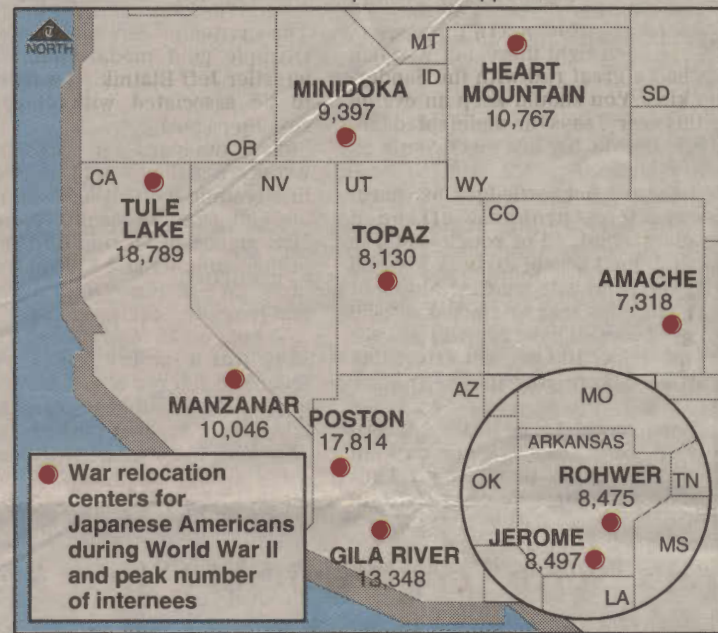
"We wanted to keep the remains intact, because inasmuch as there were 10 internment camps in the country, this is the only one I know where so many artifacts are still there," says Ted Nagata of Salt Lake City, who was sent to Topaz when he was 6 years old. "Most of the other camps have become farmland or have homes on them now, and Topaz is a place we don't want to lose."

Only the Manzanar War Relocation Center in the Owens Valley of eastern California has more preserved relics of the 1942-1945 internment period. Managed as a National Historic Site by neighboring Death Valley National Monument, Manzanar covers about 800 acres at the foot of the Sierra Nevada and includes a pagoda-like police and sentry post, the camp auditorium, rubble from the administration building and a cemetery.

The internment camps — be-

Reserving Topaz

A nonprofit group has purchased 400 acres of the former Topaz Internment Camp to protect it from development. All but one — Manzanar — of the nine other camps have disappeared.



Source: "The Price of Prejudice" by Leonard J. Arrington

Steve Baker / The Salt Lake Tribune.

nignly dubbed "evacuation," "relocation," or "assembly" centers by the U.S. government at the time — were created in the wake of the surprise Japanese attack on the American military base at Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, in December 1941 — a strike that plunged the United States into war and called into question the loyalty of Americans of Japanese ancestry.

"A Jap is a Jap . . . it makes

no difference whether he is an American citizen or not; he is still a Japanese," Lt. Gen. John L. DeWitt, commanding general of the western defense command in San Francisco, wrote in a 1942 report to President F.D. Roosevelt, asking for authority to round up Americans of Japanese lineage. "The Japanese race is an enemy race and while

See **TOPAZ**, Page D-3

Japanese-Americans in Utah To Mark 'Day of Remembrance'

For the first time in Utah, Japanese-Americans will recognize the "Day of Remembrance," the anniversary of the Feb. 19, 1942, presidential order that removed all Japanese-Americans from the western half of California, Oregon and Washington to internment camps in the inland West.

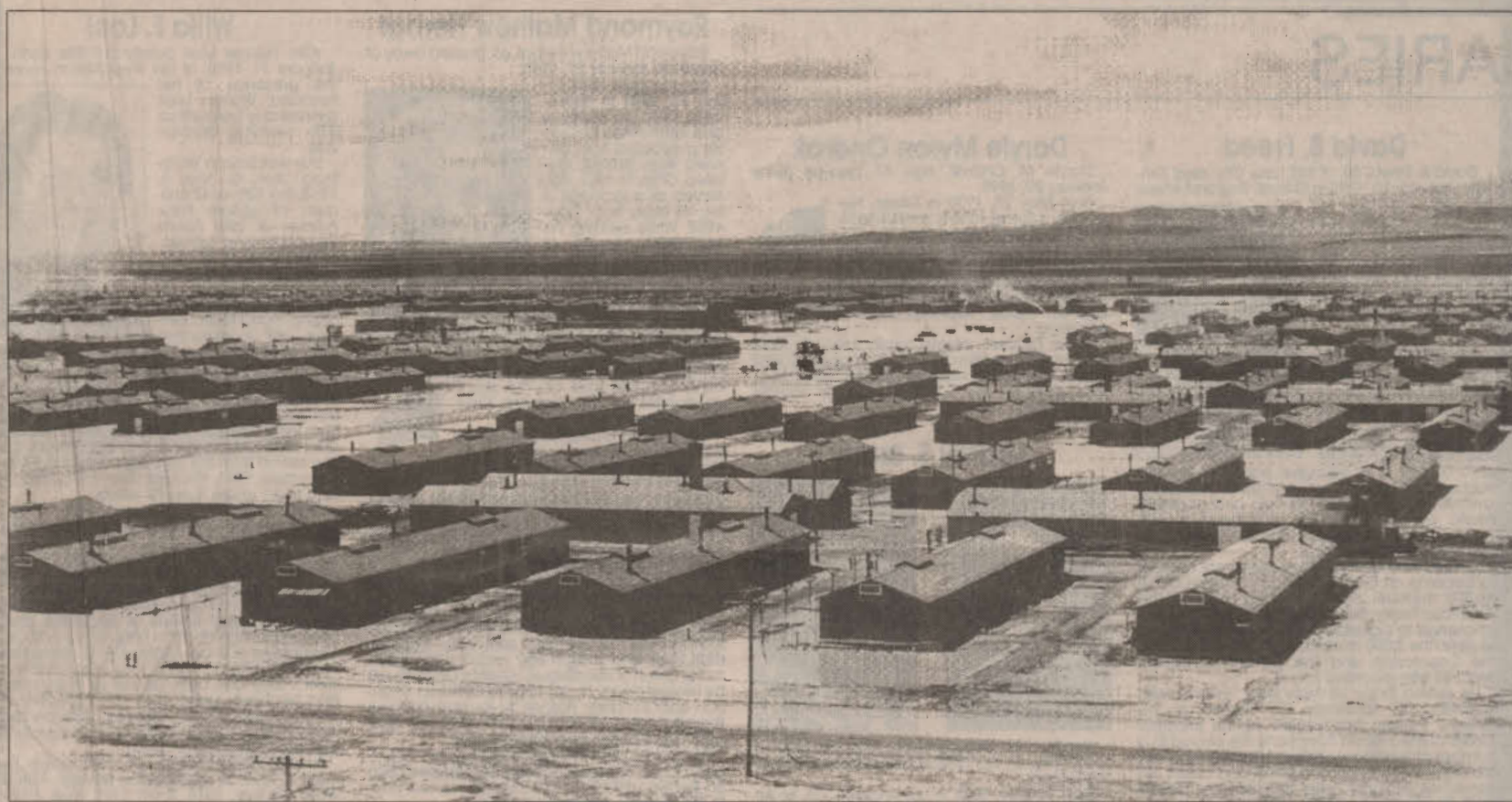
Sponsored by the Utah Humanities Council, the Japanese Church of Christ, Salt Lake Buddhist Temple and three Japanese-American Citizens League chapters, the free program will be held Feb. 19 at 7:30 p.m. at Cottonwood High School, 5715 S. 1300 East in Holladay.

"Many Japanese-Americans have chosen this day to have an annual event remembering the signing of Executive Order 9066 in 1942," says Rick Okabe, secretary of the

Topaz Museum Board. "This is the first time such an event has been held in Utah, and we are hoping the governor will sign a proclamation recognizing Feb. 19 as a day of remembrance."

Meanwhile, the Salt Lake City Public Library is one of only 20 libraries nationwide selected to host a traveling exhibit titled, "A More Perfect Union: Japanese Americans and the United States Constitution." Opening at the library April 30 for six weeks, the exhibit uses photographs, documents and an interactive video system to detail the experience of 120,000 Japanese-Americans who were removed from their homes, lost their property and were imprisoned in "relocation" camps during World War II.

— Christopher Smith



In the 1940s, Topaz internment camp — 140 miles southwest of Salt Lake City — held over 8,000 Japanese-American prisoners.

Topaz Site to Remain as It Was in WWII

■ Continued from D-1

many . . . have become Americanized, the racial strains are undiluted."

FDR agreed and signed Executive Order 9066 on Feb. 19, 1942, authorizing the Army to counter the "enemy alien" problem. Internment camps were built in California, Arizona, Idaho, Wyoming, Colorado, Arkansas and Utah.

According to Leonard J. Arrington's history of Topaz, *The Price of Prejudice*, Utah officials were not thrilled with the selection. Gov. Herbert Maw vehemently opposed any facility on the populous Wasatch Front because internees would be "dangerous." Others worried about sabotage or the loss of limited farmland, while one rural county commissioner declared, "If they are thrust on us, we want them in concentration camps."

In spite of such outside animosity, relationships between the whites who operated the Topaz camp and the Japanese-American internees imprisoned there were surprisingly cordial. Eleanor Sekerak met her husband Emil, a

camp employee, when she was interned at Topaz. The couple have been married 52 years.

"He was from Cleveland, Ohio, and had never even seen a Japanese person," she smiles today. "We got to be friends and became the great romance of the camp. We both fell in love with the high desert and those beautiful mountains on the horizon."

And many Utahns felt a kindred spirit with the Topaz settlement.

"These internees were doing what the ancestors of the Mormon people had been trying to do, trying to redeem a desert landscape into somewhere they could make a living," says Arrington, the Utah State University professor emeritus whose 1962 lecture on Topaz was the first and most definitive history of the camp.

"There was a connection, some sympathy, some bonding between the internees and the people of Utah," says Arrington. "When I gave that lecture, there were six different professors in the audience who had some connection to Topaz. The university vice president's mother was the librarian at Topaz."

Most of the Topaz internees had lived in the San Francisco Bay area and many returned there after the camp closed on Halloween, 1945. For most of the ensuing years, the internees have kept their experiences to themselves, abiding by a cultural principle known as *shikataganai*, the "re-

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alistic resignation" that helped them endure the temporary loss of constitutional rights.

"The people in the camps seem to have a cultural trait of not speaking out, not making waves, never saying 'Look what the government did to us.' None of that ever came across as I was growing up," says Rick Okabe of Salt Lake City, whose parents were internees at another camp. "They tried to make the best of a very bad situation. That's how they survived."

In 1988, President Reagan signed a bill into law directing the government to issue an apology to the 110,000 Japanese-American internees and pay each survivor \$20,000. The first payments were issued in 1990 and since that time, the push for awareness and education of the internment camps has grown.

"Manzanar gets all the attention, but there's a lot more to the story," says Eleanor Sekerak, who will join other former intern-

ees this spring in San Jose, Calif., for a reunion of all Topaz residents and staff.

The Topaz Museum Board has reprinted Arrington's lecture in a new book, complete with never-before published photos and drawings kept by internees. Two-thousand copies of the book are being distributed to schools and libraries in Utah and the San Francisco Bay area. Copies also are being sold for \$20 by the museum board to help raise money to eventually build a Topaz Museum in Delta to house artifacts, mementos and personal remembrances of the camp experience.

"Our board was organized to ultimately build a permanent, stand-alone museum in Delta dedicated to Topaz," says Okabe, the museum board secretary. "When the land purchase came up, we realized we had to take action to preserve the site. In 1998, we will refocus our effort to develop a permanent museum so this important part of our history is not forgotten."