

## Japanese Internment at Topaz

By Lisa Barr

### Understanding Japanese Internment

#### U.S./Japan tensions and Pearl Harbor

In 1940, the United States began to see Japan as a threat with its increased military presence in the South Pacific. President Franklin D. Roosevelt grew concerned that Japan might seize Hawaii, the Philippines, and British colonies in the region, which led to his decision to move the Pacific Naval Fleet from California to Pearl Harbor, Hawaii. In 1941, Japan seized Indo-China (Vietnam) and prepared to attack the Philippines. The U.S. imposed economic sanctions and then a total embargo to limit Japan's resources and prevent its military expansion in the Pacific. These tensions led to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. Japan's goal was to hinder U.S. military presence in the region that might jeopardize its empire. Japan's attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base led to the United States entering World War II.

#### Executive Order 9066 and the "Japanese problem"

Following the attack, federal and local governments were concerned that all people of Japanese ancestry might be loyal to the Japanese government and jeopardize U.S. security.

On February 19, 1942, FDR issued Executive Order 9066, which authorized the deportation and incarceration of over 110,000 Japanese Americans who lived in Pacific coastal cities from 1942 to 1945. The government, however, never officially charged or convicted these Japanese-Americans for any crimes and 70,000 of the 110,000 were U.S. citizens.

Executive Order 9066 revealed prejudices that Anglo-Americans had held toward the Japanese since the late 1800s. Japanese immigrants in the Pacific States were racialized as the "Yellow Peril" and labeled with the derogatory term "Jap." In 1924 the U.S. moved to formally limit immigration from Japan, and California later passed a law to prevent Asian immigrants from owning land.

#### About These Documents

**Map:** Internment Camps in the U.S.

**Our Daily Diary:** Third grade class diary from March 8<sup>th</sup> to August 12<sup>th</sup>, 1943. This diary offers children and teachers' perspectives of what life was like at Topaz.

**Photographs:** Images are from the 1987 documentary about the Topaz Internment Camp. These sources can be used to interpret major themes in Japanese internment history, including racism, and questions of citizenship and loyalty.

**Oral History:** In "Topaz: An Account of Japanese Americans Interned in Utah During World War II," Yoshiko Uchida describes her experience at Topaz including her time as an elementary teacher.

#### Questions for Young Historians

What was daily life like for children at Topaz? For adults?

What were the living conditions like at Topaz?

How did the weather/climate impact life at Topaz?

How did Japanese-Americans show their loyalty to the United States? Why was this important?

How did people at Topaz celebrate holidays and special occasions?

Where did Japanese-Americans go to live after they left Topaz?

Explain the implications of Executive Order 9066.

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### Relocation and Internment Camps

In March 1942, the Federal War Relocation Authority (WRA) gathered 8,000 Japanese-Americans from the San Francisco Bay area and moved them to temporary lodging at Tanforan Racetrack in San Bruno, California. Allowed to bring only what they could carry, families left behind their homes, farms, and businesses, most of which they were forced to sell for pennies on the dollar. At Tanforan, they lived in converted horse stalls for six long months until they were sent to Topaz, near Delta, Utah.

Topaz was one of the 10 Japanese “relocation centers” across the country. It was the fifth largest city in Utah while it was in use, with an average population of 8,300 residents. From its opening on September 11, 1942, to its closing in 1945, Topaz housed more than 11,000 people of Japanese descent. Most of the internees at Topaz came from California, with the exception of 10 from Washington and Oregon, and 226 who arrived from Hawaii in 1943.

### Life at Topaz

When internees arrived at the camp they were required to go through a registration process that included medical examinations and loyalty pledges, and were then assigned to small apartments in hastily constructed barracks. Living conditions were difficult at Topaz due to the high altitude and arid climate that created hot, dusty summers and cold, snowy winters. The barracks were ill equipped to provide adequate shelter from the elements and many barracks did not have beds. None of the apartments had private bathrooms or kitchens.

Topaz was both an internment camp and a temporary city, with two elementary schools, one secondary school, a mess hall, newspaper, and church. Men and women married and had funerals, children and youth attended school and graduated from high school. Internees worked in a variety of skilled and unskilled jobs at Topaz. Men performed agricultural work throughout Utah and Idaho while women worked in the mess hall and taught at the schools with wages ranging from \$14 to \$21 per month. Families did their best to create a feeling of community by having football and baseball games, and holding large celebrations for U.S. and religious holidays. These acts of solidarity, however, did not change the fact that they lived behind barbed wire fences patrolled by armed guards.

On April 11, 1943, a guard shot and killed internee James Wakasa, 63, as he approached the southwest section of camp. The guards claimed the shot was meant as a warning and that he had gone through the fence, although

### For Further Exploration

Yoshiko Uchida, “Topaz: An Account of Japanese Internment,” *Beehive History* no. 25, 1999.

Yoshiko Uchida, “Topaz, City of Dust” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Summer 1980.

Sandra C. Taylor, “Interned at Topaz: Age Gender, And Family in the Relocation Experience,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Fall 1991.

Marian Roberson Wilson, “Wanda Robertson: A Teacher at Topaz,” *Utah Historical Quarterly*, Spring 2001.

Michael O. Tunnell and George W. Chilcoat, *The Children of Topaz: The Story of a Japanese-American Internment Camp*, 1996.

Ken Verdoia, *Topaz* (DVD), KUED, 1987.

Topaz Museum, Delta, Utah.

[topazmuseum.org](http://topazmuseum.org)

Borders and Heritage: Nidoto Nai Yoni (Let it Not Happen Again)

<http://video.kued.org/show/borders-heritage/>

Utah State University Topaz Japanese-American Relocation Center Digital Collection

<http://digital.lib.usu.edu/cdm/landingpage/collection/Topaz>

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investigators established that his body was several feet inside. The guard was found not guilty for Wakasa's death. This incident illustrates the risks that internees faced from racism and incarceration at Topaz.

### Resettlement and the Legacy of Japanese Internment

In 1943, the federal government created a Japanese-American combat unit to join U.S. forces fighting in Europe. The camp began to thin out later that year as the government allowed internees to move into the interior of the U.S. After Topaz closed in October of 1945, only half of its population returned to coastal cities in California. Instead, new Japanese-American communities emerged in inland states such as Illinois, Ohio, and Michigan, with Chicago as the largest resettlement city.

### About "Our Daily Diary"

Mrs. Yamauchi Hori's Third Grade class kept a daily diary from March to August 1943. The 1942-43 school year was postponed as classrooms were unfinished when internees arrived in September. Classes were then cancelled during the winter due to freezing temperatures and resumed in the spring. The students discussed what they would write each day and took turns making drawings for each page. Mrs. Hori did the handwriting.

The diary excerpts illustrate what daily life was like for children at Topaz. Children celebrated American holidays such as the Fourth of July as well as Japanese holidays including Hana Matsuri (Buddha's birthday). The diary provides evidence of how Japanese-Americans showed their patriotism from saving money, buying war bonds, and several Topaz internees volunteering for military service. It also conveys the poor living conditions at Topaz, from lack of running water to the spread of viruses and infections.

### Sources

Mountain View School High Third Grade. "Our Daily Diary, March 8-August 12, 1943." *Utah Division of State History and Willard Marriot Library, University of Utah*. Accessed September 25, 2017.

[http://cdmbuntu.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ushs\\_oddtwr/id/77](http://cdmbuntu.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ushs_oddtwr/id/77)

Uchida, Yoshiko. "Topaz: An Account of Japanese Americans Interned in Utah During WWII." *Beehive History no. 25, 1999, Utah State Division of History*. Accessed September 25, 2017. <https://heritage.utah.gov/history/uhg-topaz-account-japanese-americans>

"KUED Topaz Residents Photograph Collection." *Utah State Historical Society*. 1987, 2012, accessed September 25, 2017.

[https://collections.lib.utah.edu/search?q=&fd=title\\_t,setname\\_s,type\\_t&rows=25&sort=&page=1&gallery=&facet\\_setname\\_s=dha\\_kued\\_trc](https://collections.lib.utah.edu/search?q=&fd=title_t,setname_s,type_t&rows=25&sort=&page=1&gallery=&facet_setname_s=dha_kued_trc)

"Densho Digital Archives." *Densho: The Japanese American Legacy Project*. Accessed September 25, 2017.

<https://densho.org/archives/>

"Digital History: using new technologies to enhance teaching and research." *University of Houston*. 2016, Accessed September 25, 2017. <http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/>

"Justice Deferred: Executive Order 9066 and the Geography of Japanese American Imprisonment." *Esri Story Maps*. Accessed September 25, 2017. <https://storymaps.esri.com/stories/2017/japanese-internment/index.html>

"Topaz Museum." *Topaz Museum Foundation*. Accessed September 25, 2017.

"Understanding Sacrifice Activity: A Japanese American Family's Experience During WWII." American Battle Monuments Commission. Accessed September 25, 2017.

[http://abmceducation.org/sites/default/files/A Japanese American Family Experience During WWII.pdf](http://abmceducation.org/sites/default/files/A%20Japanese%20American%20Family%20Experience%20During%20WWII.pdf)

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### STUDENT READING: Japanese Internment at Topaz

In 1940, tensions between the United States and Japan grew as Japan moved to build an empire in Southeast Asia. After Japan seized Indo-China (Vietnam) and prepared to attack the Philippines, President Franklin D. Roosevelt imposed economic sanctions and then a total embargo against Japan to limit the country's resources and expansion in the Pacific. Japan's attack on the Pearl Harbor naval base in Hawaii on December 7, 1941, was intended to hinder American military power in the Pacific region. The attack then prompted the United States to enter World War II.

Following the attack, many American leaders feared that people of Japanese ancestry living in the United States might be loyal to the Japanese government and threaten American security. On February 19, 1942, President Roosevelt issued Executive Order 9066, which forced more than 110,000 Japanese Americans who lived in Pacific coastal cities to leave their homes and live in internment camps for the remainder of the war. 70,000 of these Japanese Americans were U.S. citizens who had been born and raised in the United States.

Located near Delta, Utah, Topaz was one of 10 Japanese "relocation centers" established by the federal government. It was the fifth largest city in Utah while it was in use. Topaz housed more than 11,000 people of Japanese descent between 1942 and 1945. Most of the internees at Topaz came from California, with the exception of 10 from Washington and Oregon, and 226 who arrived from Hawaii in 1943.

When internees arrived at the camp they were assigned to small apartments in uninsulated barracks made of plywood and tar paper. Living conditions were difficult at Topaz due to the high altitude and arid climate that created hot, dusty summers and cold, snowy winters. Many barracks did not have beds. None of the apartments had private bathrooms or kitchens.

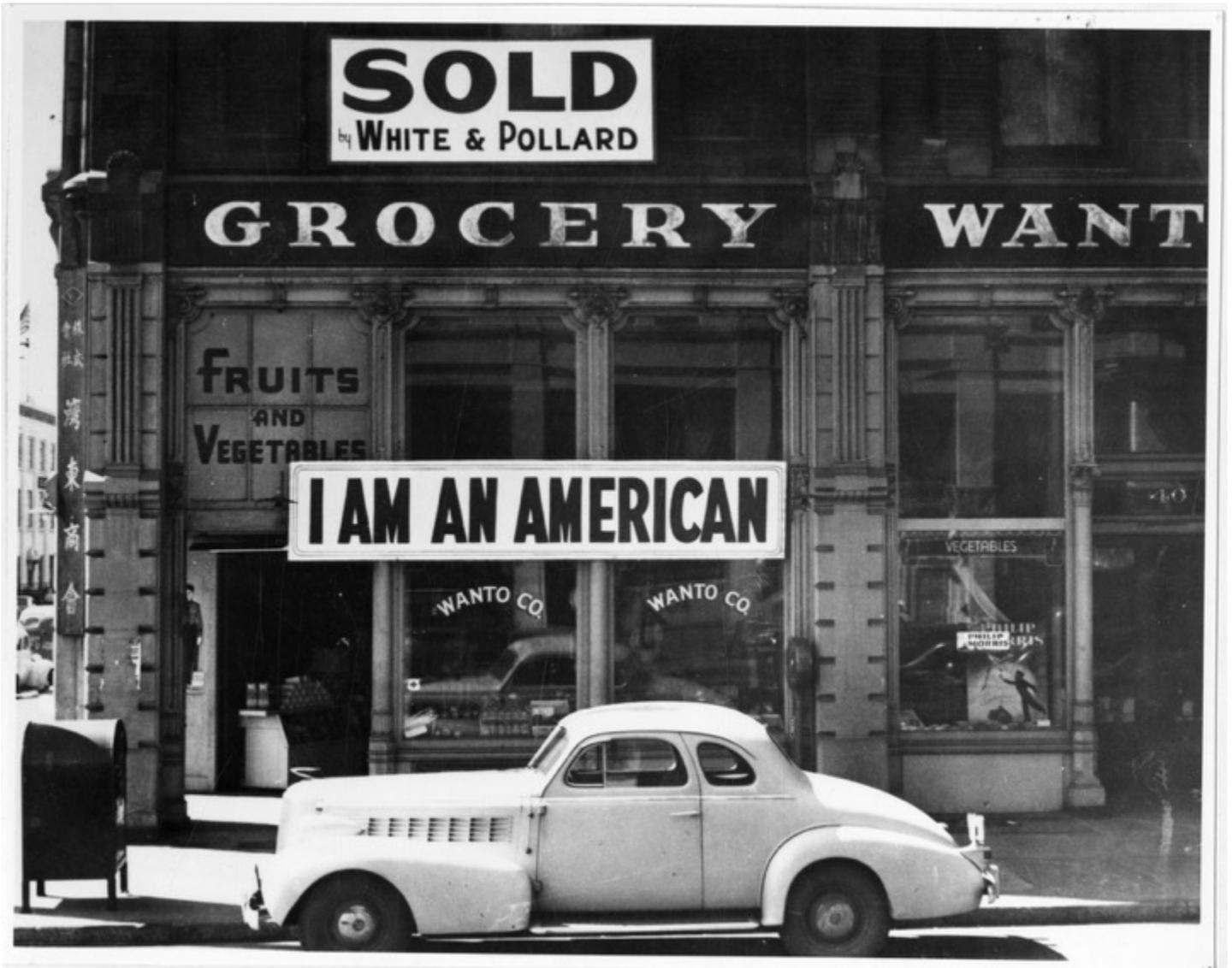
Topaz was a temporary city, with two elementary schools, one secondary school, a mess hall, newspaper, and church. Men and women married and had funerals, children and youth attended school and graduated from high school. Internees worked in a variety of skilled and unskilled jobs at Topaz. Men performed agricultural work throughout Utah and Idaho while women worked in the mess hall and taught at the schools with wages ranging from \$14 to \$21 per month. Families did their best to create a feeling of community by having football and baseball games, and holding large celebrations for U.S. and religious holidays. These acts of community, however, did not change the fact that they lived behind barbed wire fences patrolled by armed guards. In 1943, a 63-year-old Japanese man was shot and killed by guards, even though he was inside the fence.

Mrs. Yamauchi Hori's Third Grade class kept a daily diary from March to August 1943. The students discussed what they would write each day and took turns making drawings for each page. Mrs. Hori did the handwriting. The diary pages show what daily life was like for children at Topaz. They celebrated American holidays such as the Fourth of July as well as Japanese holidays including Hana Matsuri (Buddha's birthday). The diary shows how Japanese-Americans displayed their patriotism. It also conveys the poor living conditions at Topaz, from lack of running water to the spread of viruses and infections.

In 1943, the federal government created a Japanese American combat unit that was sent to Europe to join American soldiers fighting there. Some of the men who joined that unit were from Topaz.

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**Photo: Wanto Company Grocery Store Signs, California, 1942**

Source: Utah State Historical Society, KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012.

<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483223>

Japanese-owned store with “SOLD” and “I AM AN AMERICAN” signs. Once relocation was ordered, Japanese-Americans were forced to sell their businesses and leave their jobs regardless of their citizenship.

Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think the owner posted this sign?
- How could the owner continue to make a living after being forced to sell the store?
- How would losing the business effect the owner’s family?

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**Photo: "Japs Keep Out" sign, Barstow, California, 1942**

Source: Utah State Historical Society, The KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012.

<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483251>

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Photo: *San Francisco Examiner* headlines, 1942

Source: Utah State Historical Society, The KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012, <https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483285>

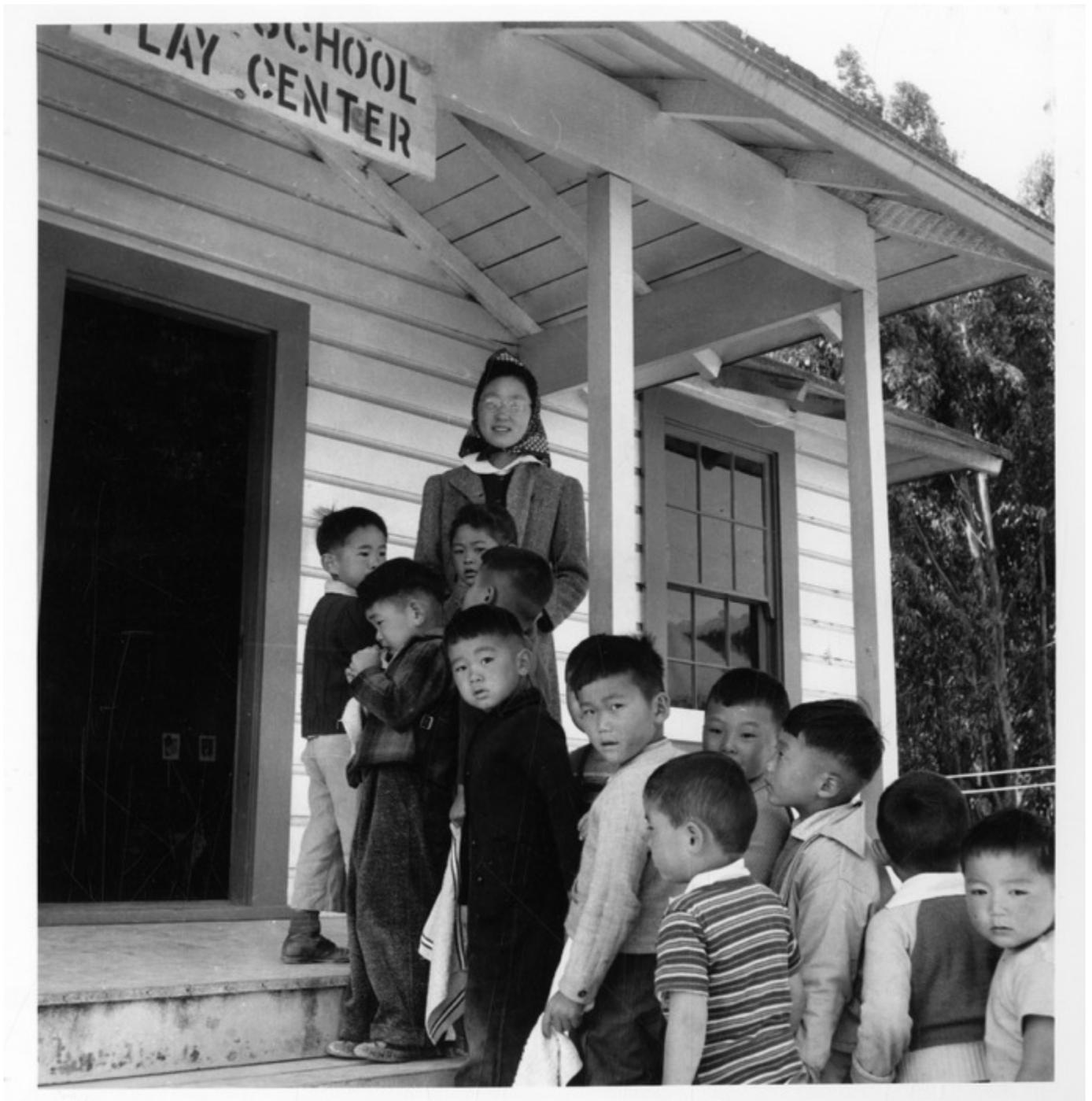
Newspaper headlines proclaim the “Ouster of all Japs” from California is near. Lower headline reads “Thousands of Allies Face Japs in Java.”

Discussion Questions:

- Does the newspaper appear to support or oppose the removal of Japanese-Americans from California?
- How did the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor influence American racial attitudes toward Japanese people?

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**Photo: Preschool at Tanforan Racetrack, 1942**

Source: Utah State Historical Society, KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012,  
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483219>

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**Photo: Converted Horse Stalls at Tanforan, 1942**

Source: Utah State Historical Society, KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012,  
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483242>

Horse stalls at Tanforan Race Track were roughly converted to temporary living quarters for relocated Japanese-Americans.

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**Photo: Clearing Land at Topaz, 1942**

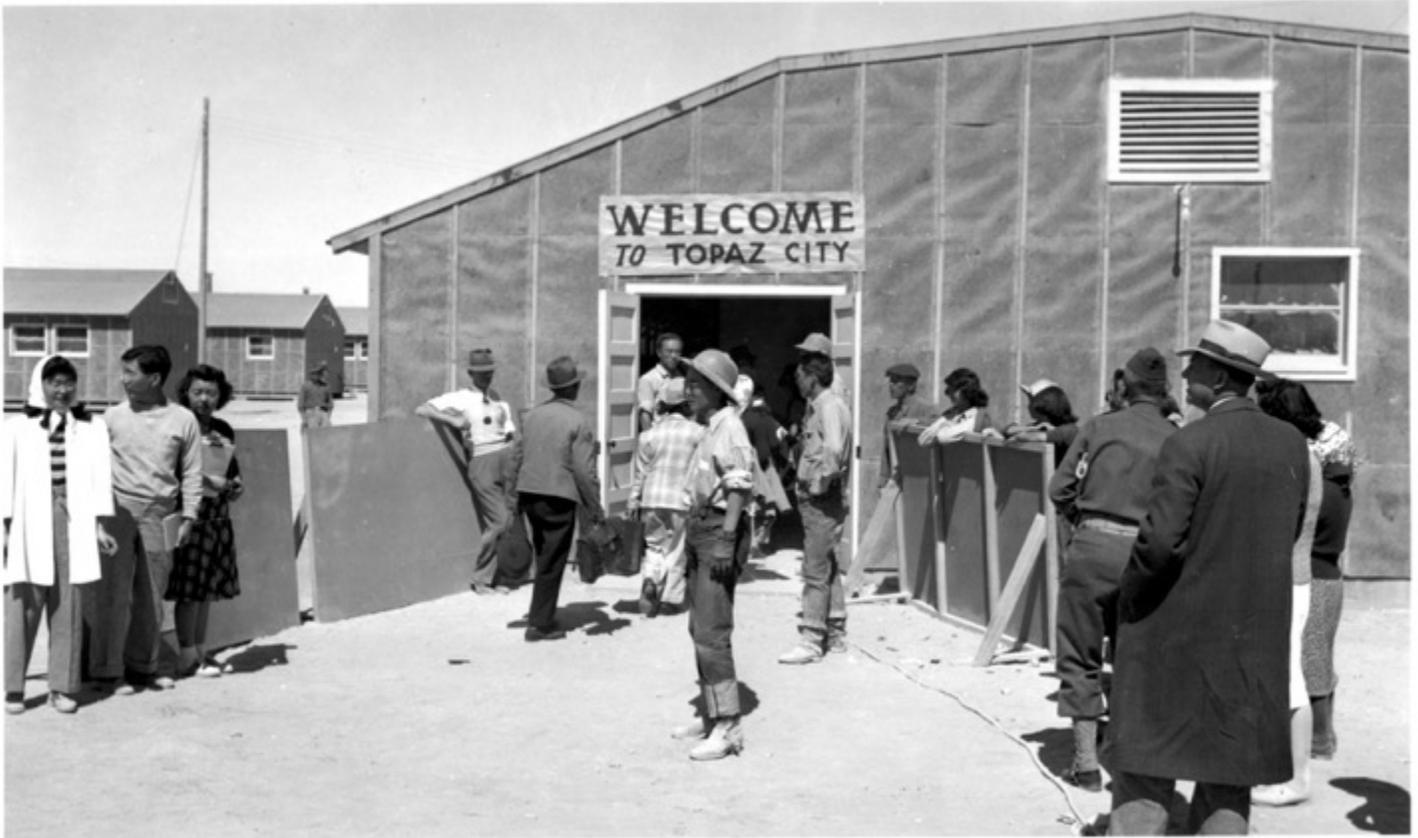
Source: Utah State Historical Society, KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012,  
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483199>

Topaz residents immediately began clearing rangeland to farm.

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**Photo: Welcome to Topaz City, 1942**

Source: Utah State Historical Society, KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012,  
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483226>

Japanese-Americans enter and observe the induction center at Topaz, officially known as the Central Utah War Relocation Center.

Discussion Questions:

- What are the buildings made of?
- Why does the sign say “Topaz City”?
- Does this look like a town or a military camp?
- Analyze the clothing.

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**Photo: Boy Scouts Ceremony, 1943**

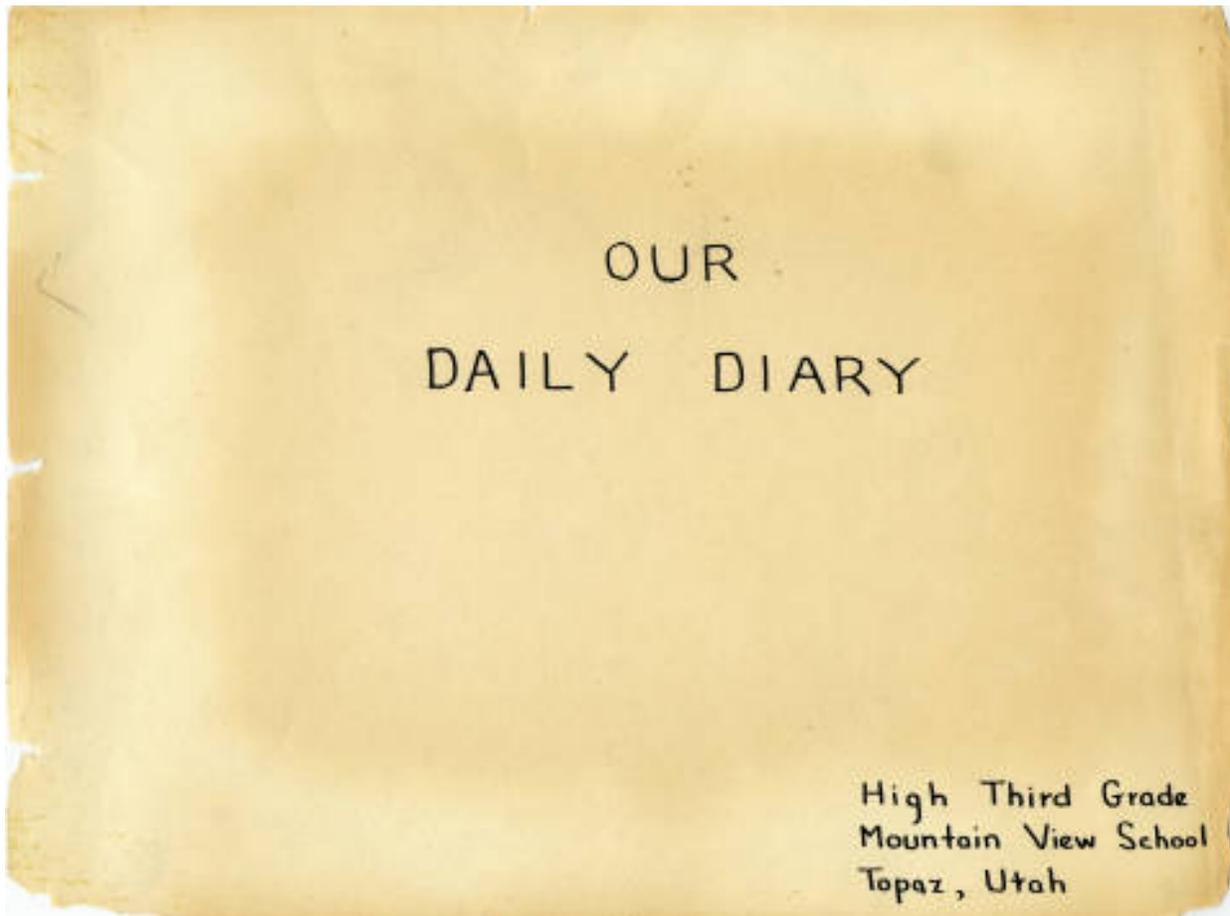
Source: Utah State Historical Society, KUED Topaz, Utah Residents Photograph Collection, 1987, 2012,  
<https://collections.lib.utah.edu/details?id=483334>

#### Discussion Questions:

- Why were there Japanese-American Boy Scouts?
- What role do you think the Boy Scouts played in the community at Topaz?

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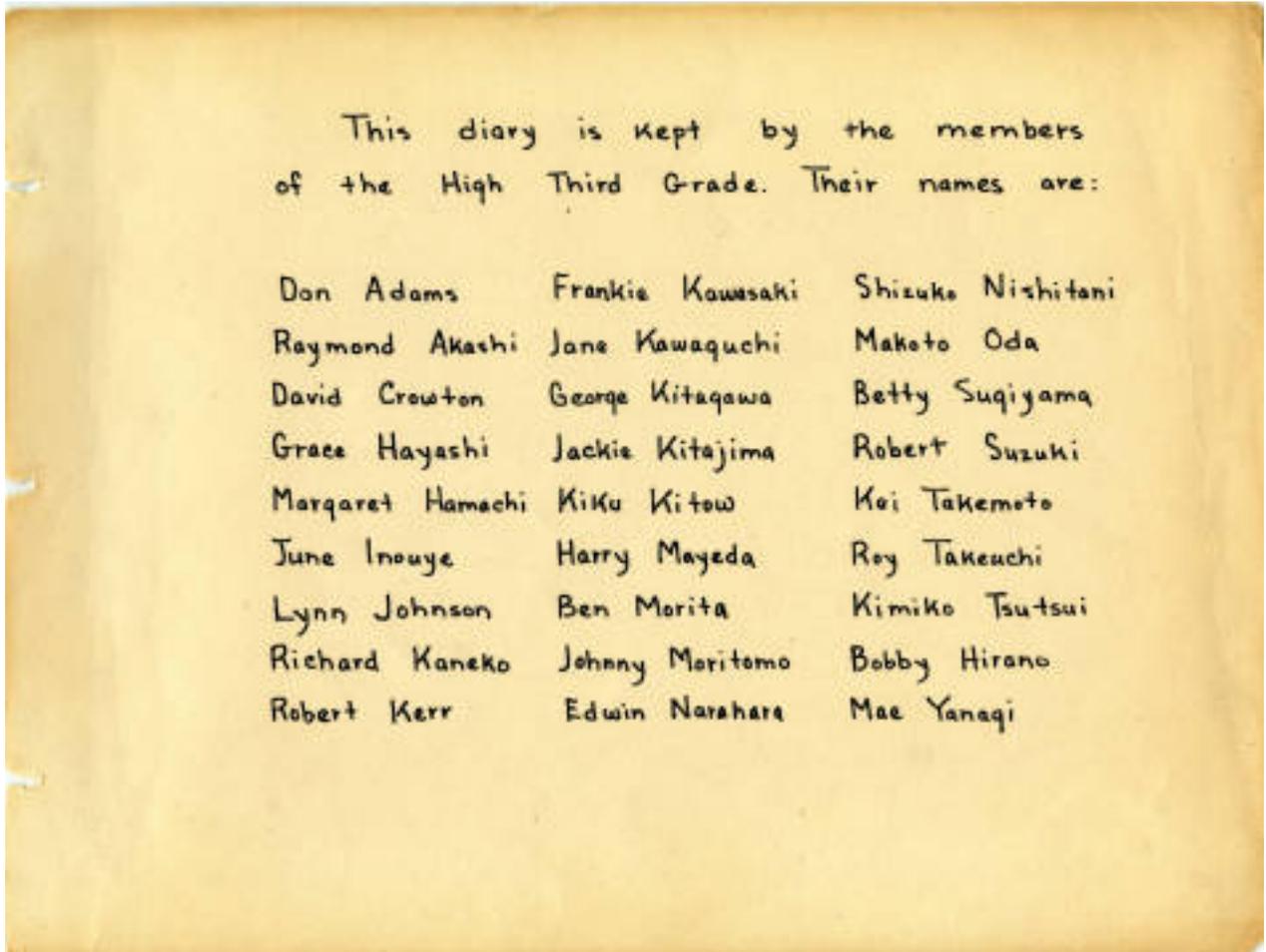
**"Our Daily Diary" Title Page, 1943**

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943,  
[http://cdmbuntu.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ushs\\_oddtwr/id/77](http://cdmbuntu.lib.utah.edu/cdm/ref/collection/ushs_oddtwr/id/77)

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### “Our Daily Diary” Student Names

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943

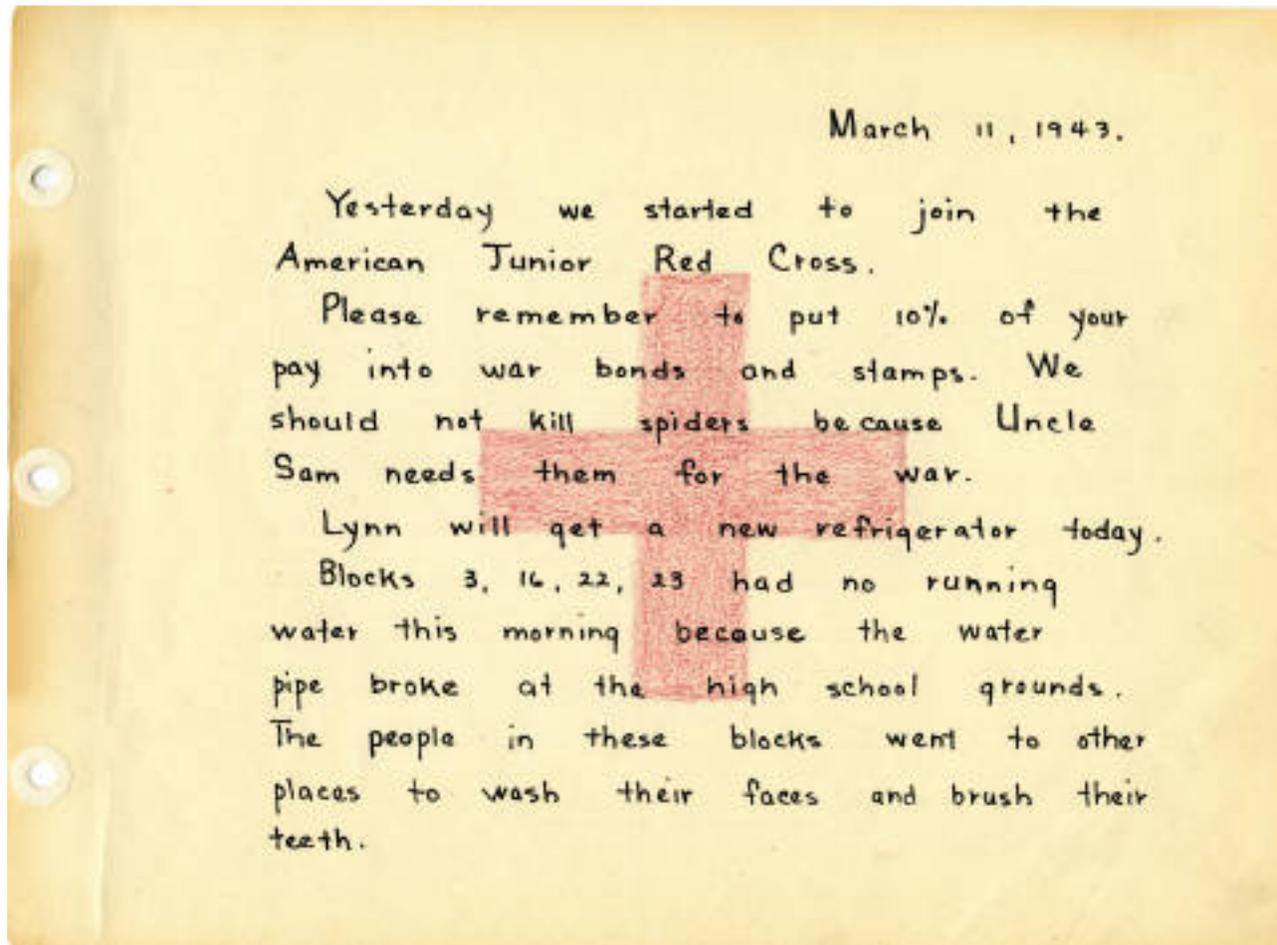
#### Discussion Questions:

- Analyze the names of the students. Do they seem American, Japanese, or both?

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#### "Our Daily Diary" March 11, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943

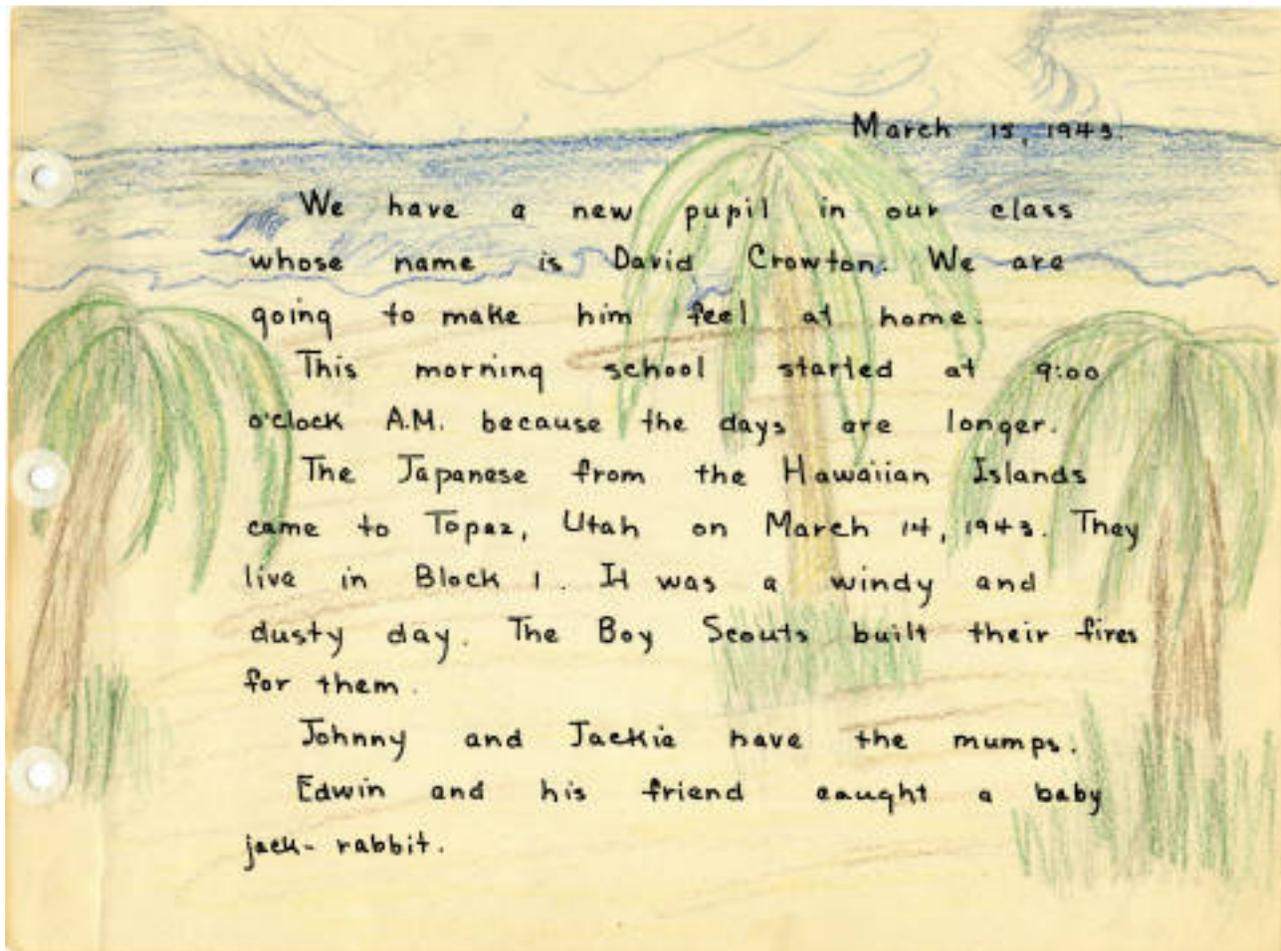
#### Discussion Questions:

- Why were internees encouraged to buy war bonds and stamps?
- What do you think a "Block" was?

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### "Our Daily Diary" March 15, 1943

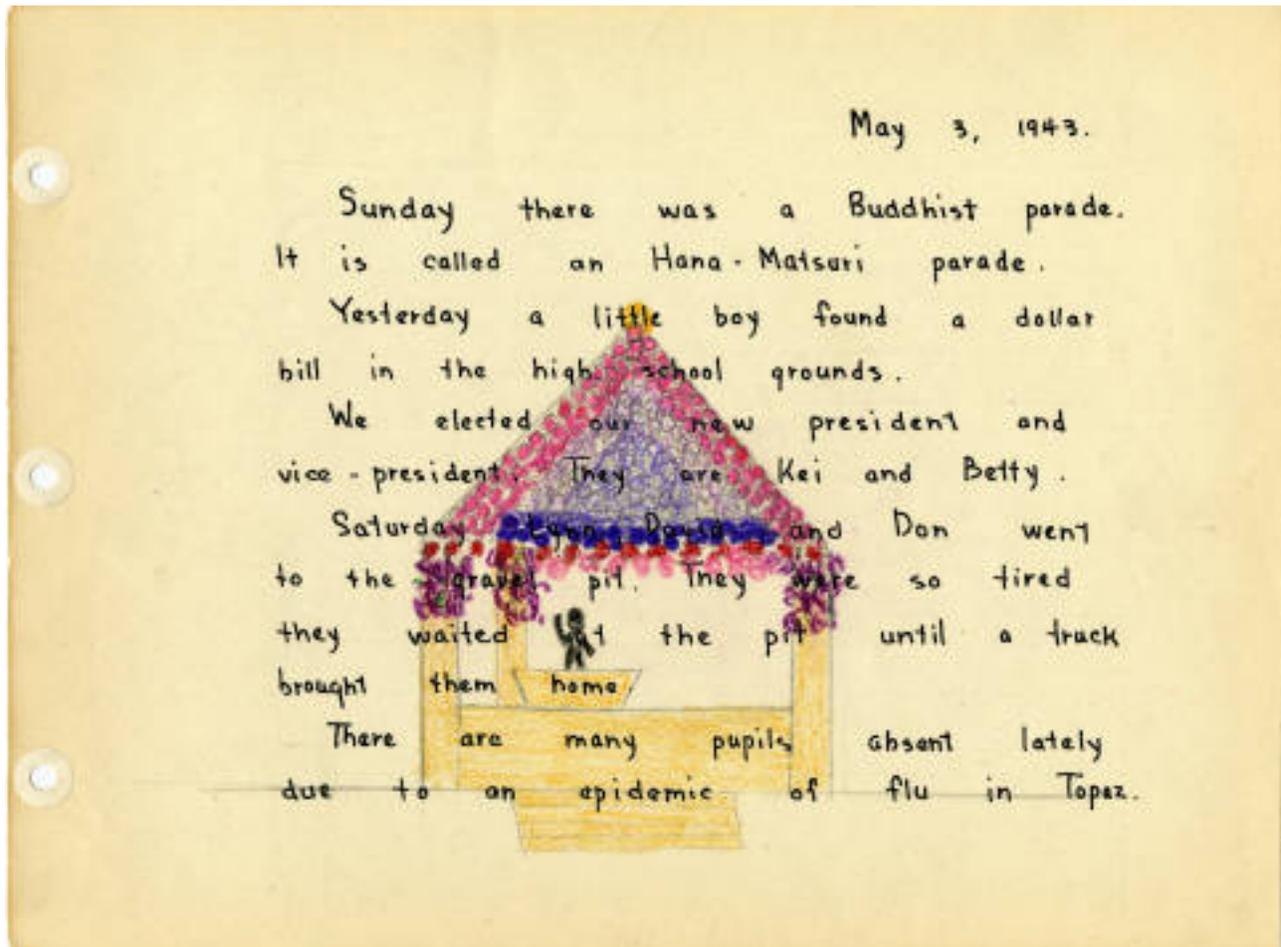
Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943

#### Discussion Questions:

- What is the weather usually like in central Utah in March?
- How would it feel to arrive at the camp in late winter, coming from Hawaii?
- What were the barracks made of?
- Why would the Boy Scouts build fires for these newcomers?

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### "Our Daily Diary" May 3, 1943.

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943

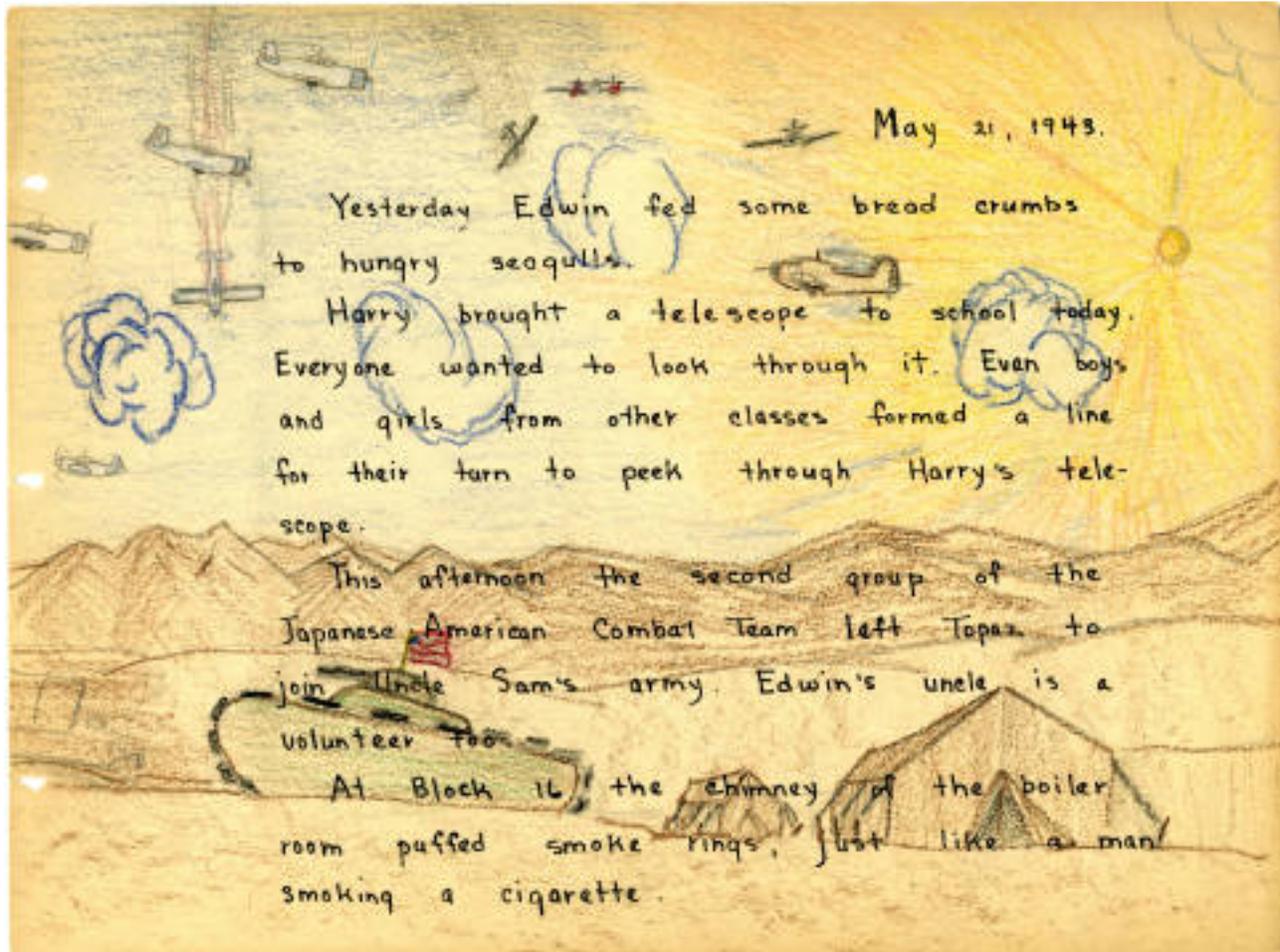
#### Discussion Questions:

- Why would diseases like mumps and flu spread quickly through the camp?
- What do you think the picture depicts?

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“Our Daily Dairy” May 21, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943

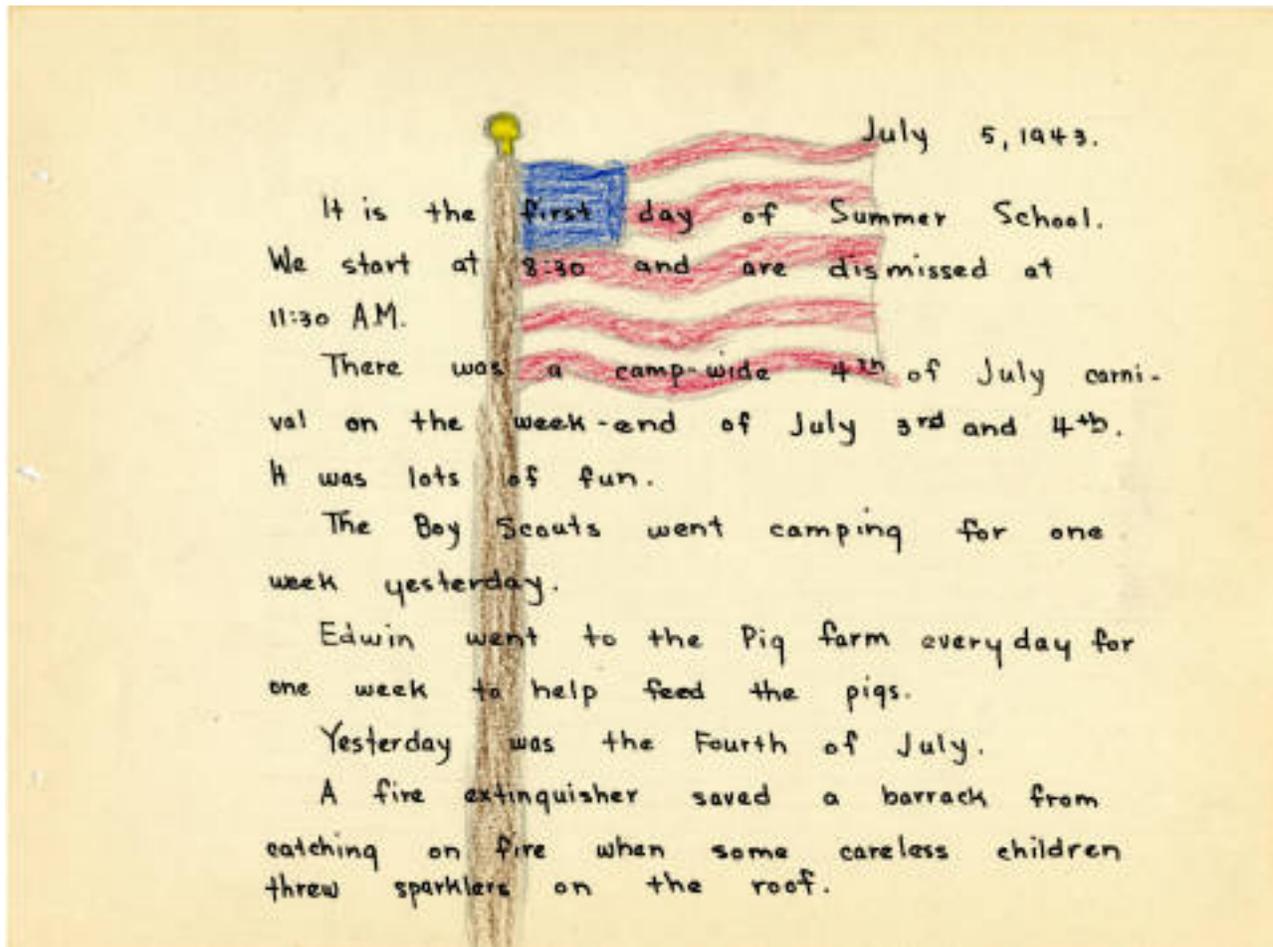
### Discussion Questions:

- How do the students feel about the Japanese American Combat Team?
- If your family had been interned by the government, would you want to fight for your country? Why or why not?

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### "Our Daily Dairy" July 5, 1943

Source: Utah State History, Mountain View School High 3<sup>rd</sup> Grade, Our Daily Diary, March 8 –August 12, 1943

#### Discussion Questions:

- Why do you think the camp celebrated American holidays like the Fourth of July, along with Buddhist ones, like Hana-Matsuri?
- Where do you think the pig farm was located?
- Why would sparklers be a threat to the camp?

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**Yoshiko Uchida**, "Topaz: An Account of Japanese Americans Interned in Utah During World War II", *Beehive History* no. 25, 1999. <https://heritage.utah.gov/history/uhg-topaz-account-japanese-americans>

In September 1942, we were shipped by train to a concentration camp which we knew to be somewhere in Utah and was called Topaz. There were no trees, or growth of any kind, except clumps of dry greasewood. We were entering the Sevier Desert some fifteen miles west of Delta, and the surroundings were now as bleak as a bleached bone. As the bus drew up to one of the barracks, we heard the unlikely sound of band music. Marching toward us down the industry road was a group of young Boy Scouts who had come with the advance contingent, playing bugles, trumpets, and drums and carrying signs that read, "Welcome to Topaz---Your Camp." It was a touching sight to see them standing in the burning sun, covered with dust and making such a determined effort to lessen the shock of our arrival at this bleak desert camp.

We found that our [barracks] room contained nothing but four army cots without mattresses . . . Those who arrived still later did not even have barracks to go to and were simply assigned to cots set up in empty mess halls, laundries, or the corridors of the hospital. As the mornings and nights grew colder, we looked with increased longing at the black iron stove that stood uselessly outside our barracks waiting for work crews to bring it inside and connect it. One day, almost a month after our arrival, a work crew composed of resident men appeared and finally installed our stove. . .

By now my father, sensing the tremendous needs of the struggling community, had volunteered to serve on several committees. My mother, in her own gentle and quiet way, continued to be a loving focal point for our family, converting our dreary barracks room into a makeshift home, where we invited our friends as we did back in Berkeley. Having been a close family, ours did not disintegrate, as many did, from the pressures created when entire families were confined to living in a single room.

I applied to work in the Topaz elementary school system [and] earned a salary of \$19 a month for the forty-hour week. [One day] about noon, gray-brown clouds began massing in the sky, and a hot sultry wind seemed an ominous portent of coming storm. Before I was halfway to school the wind grew so intense I felt as though I were caught in a hurricane of dust. Barracks only a few feet away were soon completely obscured by walls of dust, and I was fearful that the wind might sweep me off my feet. I stopped every few yards to lean against a barracks and catch my breath and then plodded on to school. When I got there, I found that many of the children had braved the storm to come to school. It touched me deeply to see the eagerness of the children to learn despite the desolation of their surroundings and the meager tools for learning. At the time they seemed to adapt with equanimity and cheerfulness to this total and bewildering upheaval of their young lives.

I tried to conduct class, but dust poured into the room from all sides as well as from the hole in the roof, which still lacked a chimney. It soon became obvious that we could not continue classes, and it seemed prudent to send the children home before the storm grew worse and stranded us all at school. That night the wind reached such terrible force I was sure our barracks would be blown apart. For hours, the wind shrieked around us like a howling animal, rattling and shaking our flimsy barracks. The following day, the non-Japanese head of elementary schools reprimanded the teachers of Block 41 for having dismissed school without consulting him.

A succession of dust storms, rainsqualls, and a full-fledged snowstorm finally brought our limping schools to a complete halt in mid-November. Snow blew in from the holes that still remained in our roof, and we all shivered in ten-degree temperatures even though we wore coats, scarves, and boots. An official notice finally appeared stating that schools would close and not reopen until they were fully winterized with sheetrock walls and stoves. It seemed close to miraculous that we had been able to hold any kind of school for as long as we had, and I knew it was possible only because the children had been so eager to come and the residents so anxious to have some semblance of order in their lives.

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**Map: Internment Camps and Relocation Centers, 2016**

Source: Digital History,

[http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active\\_learning/explorations/japanese\\_internment/internment\\_map.cfm](http://www.digitalhistory.uh.edu/active_learning/explorations/japanese_internment/internment_map.cfm)