

THE TOPAZ WAR RELOCATION CENTER

The Topaz War Relocation Center was an *internment camp* in Utah that imprisoned a total of 110,000 Japanese-American people during World War II. After the attack on Pearl Harbor on December 6, 1941, people began to fear Japanese-Americans or Japanese immigrants. Many Americans assumed that people of Japanese descent must be loyal to Japan and not to America, or worse, that they may be spies for the Japanese government. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin Roosevelt signed an executive order which forced 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent to leave their homes in the West Coast, and be “re-located” to internment camps.

When it opened on September 11 of 1942, the Topaz Center was known as the Central Utah Relocation Center. It became the nation’s 5th largest town. It had two elementary schools, a middle/high school, a hospital, cafeterias, nearly 40 blocks of “apartment buildings” and various government/adminis-



Francis Stewart photograph, Topaz War Relocation Center

tration buildings. When the camp opened, not all of the buildings were finished, so some of the “internees” had to finish building their own apartments and other structures. These “apartments” were heated by coal stoves, but were crudely constructed and had little protection against the cold winter weather. Some of the *internees* worked jobs around the camp, and were paid wages from \$16-\$19 a month. Internees could also get “passes” to go shopping in nearby towns, or to go hiking in the nearby desert/mountains. There is only one record of anyone dying in this camp—a 63-year-old man who was shot by a guard, because he was standing too close to the fences. This caused serious uproar for the internees living there.

The center was closed on October 31, 1945. Still, the Japanese-Americans were victim to racism and prejudice even after the war ended. There was no formal apology from the government for this treatment until 1988, when President Reagan issued an apology and a call on Congress to re-compensate families who had been forced into these camps.

Vocabulary

Internment Camp- imprisonment or confinement of people, usually in a large group, without a trial.

Internees- people who were housed in the internment camps.

Answer the questions below on a separate piece of paper.

The Random House Dictionary defines a Concentration Camp as: “a guarded compound for the detention or imprisonment of aliens, members of ethnic minorities or political opponents.” The American Heritage Dictionary defines it as: “A camp where civilians, enemy aliens, political prisoners, and sometimes prisoners of war are detained and confined, typically under harsh conditions.” By these definitions, was the Topaz War Relocation Center a concentration camp? How can it be compared to concentration camps in Nazi Germany during WWII? Discuss your feelings on this issue.

Take a look at the words in quotation marks. Why did the author of this article decide to put quotes around these words? Please discuss.