

### **Going Blind at Heart Mountain**

The hospital at Heart Mountain was made of 17 barracks connected by hallways that would allow staff and internees to evacuate should a fire break out and also enable the ward to be isolated from the others if needed. The hospital had a staff of approximately 150 employees, which included both caucasian and Japanese American medical professionals, and there was often underlying tension between the Japanese American staff at the hospital and WRA management over the working conditions. Since there was no climate control, the hospital was incredibly hot in the summer and bitterly cold in the winter. Although Japanese American doctors were only paid \$19 a month, caucasian nurses were paid \$150 a month. Despite the hospital conditions being less than ideal, 550 babies were born within the confines of the camp.

For one of the camp's internees, Sam Mihara, the inadequacies of Heart Mountain's healthcare system hit close to home. When Sam's father, Tokinobu, arrived at Heart Mountain, he was already stricken with glaucoma. Before being interned, Tokinobu did not need glasses, but after mere months, he required glasses just to manage his vision. Unfortunately, there were no specialists in camp who could help ameliorate his worsening vision, and eventually, even glasses did not help. Back in San Francisco, he had an ophthalmologist capable of treating his condition and keeping his glaucoma under control, but once in camp, General John DeWitt would not grant him leave to visit his specialist back in California. Sadly, there were no glaucoma specialists in the state of Wyoming, so on 31 May 1945, Tokinobu was sent to a hospital in Billings, Montana. Unfortunately, by that time, it was already too late to save his sight and he eventually went completely blind. However, with the help of a camp craftsman, Tokinobu was able to create a system of Japanese braille that was eventually also adopted by Japan.

---

### Historical images



Sam Miharra, 8, far right, is pictured with his family before they were interned at Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming with other Japanese-Americans during the 1940s.

Source: Cairns, Becky. "Survivor Shares Memories of Heart Mountain, a WWII Internment Camp." Standard-Examiner, March 9, 2016. <https://www.standard.net/entertainment/2016/mar/09/survivor-shares-memories-of-heart-mountain-a-wwii-internment-camp/>.



Hospital emergency entrance and ambulance  
Courtesy of the National Archives and Records Administration

Source: Hikaru, Iwasaki. *Hospital Emergency Entrance and Ambulance*. November 18, 1943. Photograph. *Densho Digital Repository*. <https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-37-797/?format=img>.



Braille board created by Tokinobu Mihara while incarcerated at Heart Mountain. He went blind while in camp and got help from a craftsman to build the board. Courtesy of Delphine Hirasuna

Source: “Childhood at Heart Mountain.” Order 9066. APM Reports, June 18, 2018. <https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2018/06/18/order-9066-childhood-at-heart-mountain>.

---

Works cited

Cairns, Becky. “Survivor Shares Memories of Heart Mountain, a WWII Internment Camp.”

Standard-Examiner, March 9, 2016. <https://www.standard.net/entertainment/2016/mar/09/survivor-shares-memories-of-heart-mountain-a-wwii-internment-camp/>.

“Childhood at Heart Mountain.” Order 9066. APM Reports, June 18, 2018.

<https://www.apmreports.org/episode/2018/06/18/order-9066-childhood-at-heart-mountain>

“Densho Digital Repository.” Densho. Accessed February 1, 2022. <https://ddr.densho.org/>.

“Digital Collections .” University Libraries. University of Washington . Accessed February 1, 2022. <https://digitalcollections.lib.washington.edu/digital/search/searchterm/PH%20COLL%20522/field/all/mode/exact/conn/and/order/title>.

Hikaru, Iwasaki. Hospital Emergency Entrance and Ambulance. November 18, 1943.

Photograph. Densho Digital Repository. [https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-37-797/?form  
at=img](https://ddr.densho.org/ddr-densho-37-797/?form%3Fid%3D1&at=img).

“Life in the Camp--Medical Care.” Heart Mountain. Heart Mountain WWII Japanese American Confinement Site, January 13, 2022. <https://www.heartmountain.org/history/life-in-the-camp/>.

Mackey, Mike. *Remembering Heart Mountain: Essays on Japanese American Internment in Wyoming*. Powell, WY: Western History Publications, 1998.

Mihara, Sam, and Alexandra Villarreal. *Blindsided: The Life and Times of Sam Mihara, as Told to Alexandra Villarreal*. Second edition. Costa Mesa, CA: Sam Mihara, 2019.

---

### Additional resources

Arnold, Billy. “Survivor of Japanese Internment to Speak about Mass Incarceration.” Jackson Hole News & Guide, October 9, 2019. [https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/scene/events/  
survivor-of-japanese-internment-to-speak-about-mass-incarceration/article\\_6a836db7-d1](https://www.jhnewsandguide.com/scene/events/survivor-of-japanese-internment-to-speak-about-mass-incarceration/article_6a836db7-d1)

[29-59fa-bd7f-c4168a2db00a.html](https://sammihara.com/29-59fa-bd7f-c4168a2db00a.html).

“Japanese American Prisons: Keynote Speaker on Immigration and Imprisonment.” Memories of Heart Mountain as experienced by former prisoner Sam Mihara, January 25, 2022.

<https://sammihara.com/>.

“Life in the Camp--Medical Care.” Heart Mountain. Heart Mountain WWII Japanese American Confinement Site, January 13, 2022. <https://www.heartmountain.org/history/life-in-the-camp/>.

Mihara, Sam. “Sam Mihara.” Discover Nikkei, January 2012.

<http://www.discovernikkei.org/en/journal/author/mihara-sam/>.

---