

Arriving in a Strange Place:

Japanese Americans Write About Incarcerated Life at Topaz



Video



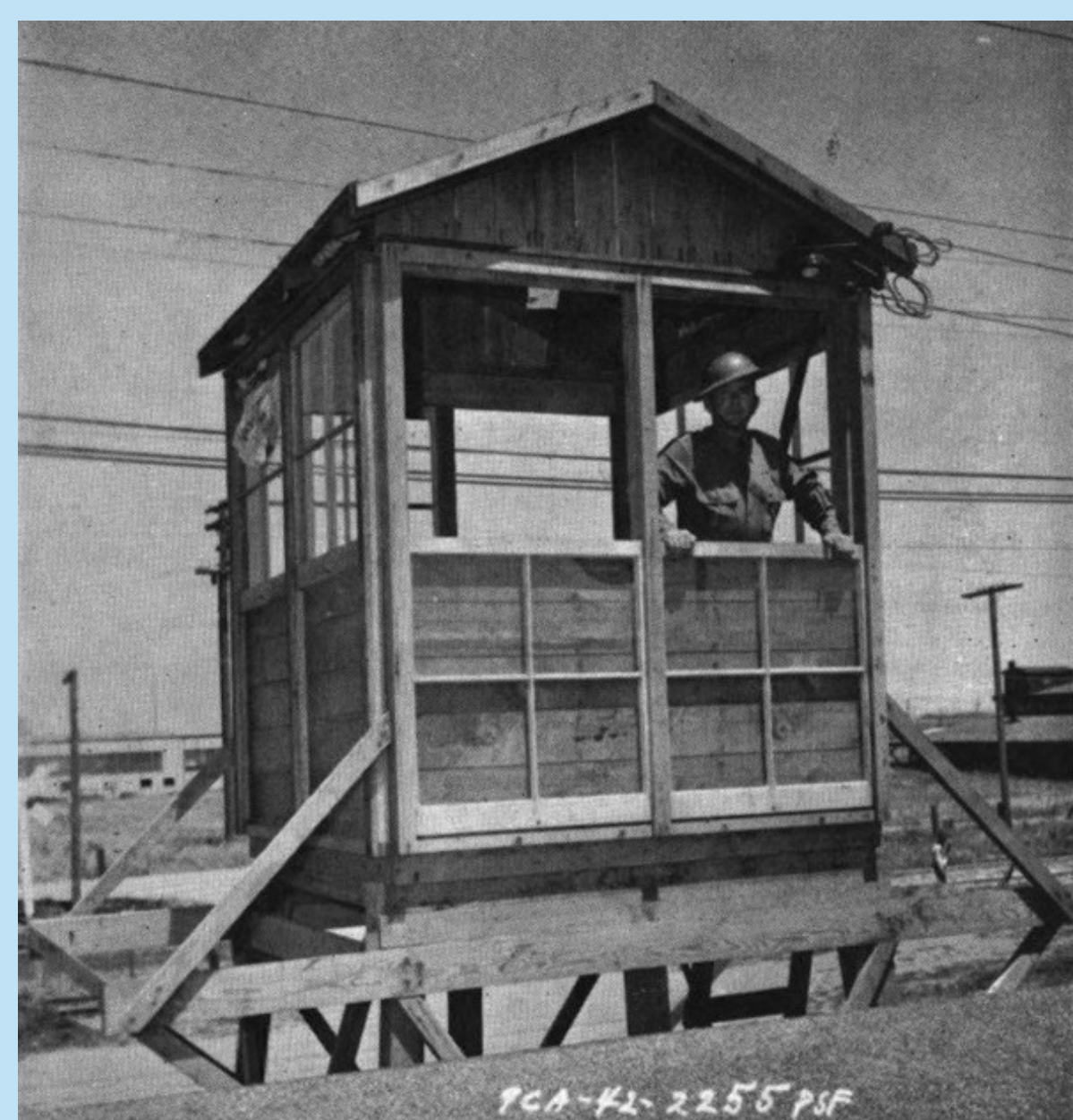
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11,000 people of Japanese heritage, U.S. citizens or not, were forced to live at Topaz

Introduction

The government's own website refers to internment camps such as Topaz as "one of the worst violations of civil rights against citizens in the history of the United States" (www.recreation.gov/camping/poi/25720).

- Data in the USU digital history library archive include partial life histories, memoirs, and creative nonfiction from 1942-45 at the Topaz facility.
- "Justice requires an understanding and critical examination of place not as a background to our social lives but as an active agent in shaping our life experiences and institutions" (Butler & Sinclair, 2020, p. 65).



Captives had to finish building their own flimsy barracks and install barbed wire around the camp perimeter. Winter temperatures were around zero and summer temperatures up to 100 degrees.

Methods

- This study uses grounded theory methods to observe relationships, patterns, and trends in the data.
- The case study dataset for this research is limited to excerpts from documents in the archive written by people while incarcerated at Topaz.

Results

Themes that emerged from coding were noted, and data categorized accordingly:

- Place is described as barren & strange
- Focus is on constructing utility in camp
- People are identified by their roles
- Emotions typically relate to resilience and patriotism

DEPOSITED IN A DESERT CAMP, whipped by sandstorms, they were put in new barracks.



A candid shot of students who are waiting for assembly meeting at the Topaz High School.



Images from Topaz Japanese American Relocation Center Digital Collection, USU

Conclusion

- Space/place theory illuminates how people at Topaz adjusted to the physical setting, approached life in that new space, and developed social relationships (Powell, 2010; Butler & Sinclair, 2020; Andrews, 2008).
- This framework provides a useful way of examining the first-person accounts of people of Japanese descent, forced together in the desolate landscape of Topaz, under an extreme violation of personal justice.



. Project Director Charles F. Ernst wrote in the Topaz guidebook: "It is important also that persons who come to live at Topaz are welcome to stay but they're equally welcome to go," (1943) just five months after James Wakasa, age 63, was shot by a guard for simply standing near the barbed-wire fence.



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