Oregon in Depression and War, 1925-1945: Relocation Camps

Themes: Social Relations, Politics and Government

 

Heart Mountain Relocation Camp Wyoming, c.1942 OrHi 44601

The order for Oregon’s Japanese to assemble at Portland’s Pacific International Livestock Exposition Center in March 1942 gave families only a brief period to gather personal belongings and leave their homes. The Portland assembly center, now home to the Multnomah County Fair, housed approximately 4,500 Japanese during the spring and summer of 1942. Families lived in whitewashed, 200 square-foot livestock stalls with straw mattresses, a single lightbulb, and uninsulated wooden walls and floors. Open cafeterias and communal showers compounded the lack of comfort and privacy. George Azumano, a Portland native, remembered that the stench of animal dung was still in the air.

The War Relocation Authority and its director Dillon Myer eventually operated ten relocation camps. Tule Lake in California, Heart Mountain in Wyoming, and Minidoka on the sweeping Snake River plain housed most of the Japanese Americans from the Pacific Northwest. Although internees could attend college or work as farm laborers in the interior West, most remained in the camps until the war in the Pacific began to wind down in late 1944. The relocation centers were, in effect, concentration camps, surrounded by barbed wire and guarded by U.S. Army troops. Three challenges to the evacuation command went to the Supreme Court, arguing against the internment of American-born citizens. The court upheld the federal order in each instance.

Even before the federal government issued the relocation order, it had restricted the movement of all people of Japanese descent. The city of Portland prohibited local Japanese from being outside their homes between 6 P.M. and 8 A.M., and they could not travel more than a few miles from their residences. One of those who deliberately challenged the curfew was Hood River’s Minoru Yasui, an attorney and reserve army officer. Yasui was convicted in the federal district court, and his appeals eventually gave way to other cases, especially that of Gordon Hirabayashi, who challenged the constitutionality of the evacuation order.