Can Museums Take a Stand?

by Sarah Bartlett

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These so-called "internees," two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were never given a trial; they were guilty of nothing but their ethnic heritage.

To reach Powell, Wyoming, you drive along a solitary stretch of highway about an hour west of Yellowstone National Park. Wind kicks up swirls of dust along the treeless plain. Heart Mountain, a jutting fist of limestone, keeps constant company on the horizon. Sixty-five years ago, this remote location is where nearly 14,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry were imprisoned during World War II under a governmental "internment" program.

A lone brick chimney and two shuttered buildings are all that remain of what was once the third-largest town in Wyoming. For three years between 1942 and 1945, Japanese and Japanese Americans lived in tarpaper-clad barracks surrounded by barbed wire and armed guard towers. These so-called "internees," two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were never given a trial; they were guilty of nothing but their ethnic heritage.

At the base of the site, in the shadow of that ubiquitous peak, stands the Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center (ILC). Designed to resemble internee barracks, the ILC, which opened in August 2011, houses a 3,600sf permanent exhibition, a changing exhibits gallery, a research library, and a reflection space.

The permanent exhibition tells the story of the uprooted internees, from their lives before the war to the reverberations of illegal imprisonment on generations of Japanese Americans. The main gallery explores life at "camp" through artifacts, immersive displays, video history stations, and interpretive graphics. The heart of the exhibition is two small rooms set up like internee barracks. The first depicts a barrack as it appeared when internees first arrived: bare, except for a few army cots and mattresses, an iron stove, and a single light bulb. The second shows a claustrophobic room after a family has lived there for several years, crammed with makeshift furniture, artwork, and the detritus of daily living.

A Clear Position

In December 2009 the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, the governing board of the ILC, hired Split Rock Studios to design and build the permanent exhibition. The board includes many former internees and their families—people for whom Heart Mountain retains emotional potency. From the start of planning, the Foundation emphasized that the exhibitions should be comprehensive but not objective. This was intended to be a museum from the point of view of internees, not just about them. At the same time, the target audience for the ILC consists primarily of family and school groups—many with little or no previous knowledge of this chapter of American history.

The location in Wyoming presented another challenge: many of Powell's current residents have parents and grandparents who lived there during the period when Heart Mountain operated. Some befriended internees; but others—echoing the general tone of the time—signed petitions attempting to remove Japanese from the state or put up signs in town reading "No Japs Allowed."

Today Powell residents are some of the ILC's strongest supporters. We didn't want to isolate these stakeholders even

as we told an internee-focused story. Throughout the exhibition, we include historic opinions from Wyoming residents—from those who objected to the presence of Japanese to those who aided and supported the displaced internees. We also celebrate the continuing collaboration between former internees and Wyoming residents that made the ILC possible.

> *A commitment to truth, to remembering for all time, and to healing.*
> Mission of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation

As exhibit professionals we strive to include a diversity of voices in our exhibitions, to present facts, to be anonymous experts and dispassionate recorders of history. But we also need to be true to the missions of our institutions—and to our visitors. Are museums required to be impartial observers, or can we be active participants in addressing modern and historic injustices?

The ILC Foundation established a firm position that the internment of Japanese and Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain and other internment camps was unjust and illegal. This is backed by decades of research and documentation. In the 1980s Congress opened an inquiry into the internment, which resulted in a report, *Personal Justice Denied*. The congressional commission concluded that the incarceration was not justified by military necessity but was based on "race prejudice, war hysteria, and a failure of political leadership" (Kashima 1996). In 1988 President Ronald Reagan signed the

An administration building and hospital chimney are all that remain of the original Heart Mountain Relocation Center. Courtesy of Flickr Creative Commons user Mike Carroll.

Civil Liberties Act, making an official apology to internees on behalf of the government.

The foundation had begun interpretive planning months before engaging Split Rock's services. They brought in outside experts to run workshops and design charrettes. After several days of meetings, the facilitators presented what they saw as the main themes of the ILC. The first included wording that "the internment of Japanese Americans at Heart Mountain was controversial when it happened and *remains controversial today…*" (italics mine). This statement sparked a heated discussion, because the word "controversy" seemed to imply that there might be a valid doubt or question that an injustice had been done. The result of this discussion was a renewed commitment that the ILC did not need to leave open for debate the illegality of the internment program. The initial thematic misstep ended up being a positive development, as it galvanized the board and forced them to articulate the centrality of internee voices.

This was intended to be a museum from the point of view of internees, not just about them.

The entrance to the Heart Mountain Interpretive Learning Center, with the recreated guard tower in the foreground. Courtesy of Steve Leger, Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

(continued from page 47)

By the time Split Rock was brought onto the project, the foundation's stance was clear: while the exhibition would explore myriad historic opinions, we did not need to reopen an inquiry into the fundamental wrongness of the internment.

The Lessons of Manzanar

One exhibition that inevitably came up in discussions with the ILC board was Manzanar National Historic Site in California, the first internment center to open as an interpretive site. The National Park Service, which runs Manzanar, takes a deliberately objective position in the exhibition. In the minds of many on the ILC foundation, the Manzanar exhibition fails in this regard. It does not allow the incarcerated to be central to the story but leaves visitors to decide whether they believe the internment was justified or not. Unlike Manzanar, the ILC is a private non-profit. This allows it some leeway to take a stronger position than is available to a federal organization like NPS.

Some would argue that we negate free speech and openness by not including fringe voices in dialogue.

Alisa Lynch, Chief of Interpretation at Manzanar, explains why her institution took the interpretive approach it did: "People confuse a site like Manzanar with *memorial* rather than *historic site*" (personal conversation, June 20, 2011). She believes that a memorial can tell single point of view, but that a historic site—and especially a national one—holds a larger responsibility.

Voices From the Fringe

In recent years, Manzanar has come under fire from visitors and scholars for selling Michelle Malkin's 2004 book, *In Defense of Internment: The Case for Racial Profiling in World War II and the War on Terror*. In the preface Malkin writes, "This book defends both the evacuation and relocation of ethnic Japanese from the West Coast (the so-called 'Japanese American internment')" (Malkin, 2004). Malkin's arguments are at best unsubstantiated, and at worst, willfully falsified. Nonetheless, her book hit many bestseller lists and garnered national attention.

Manzanar offers a letter of explanation to visitors who criticize the inclusion of the title in their bookstore, writing that the decision, "followed extensive review

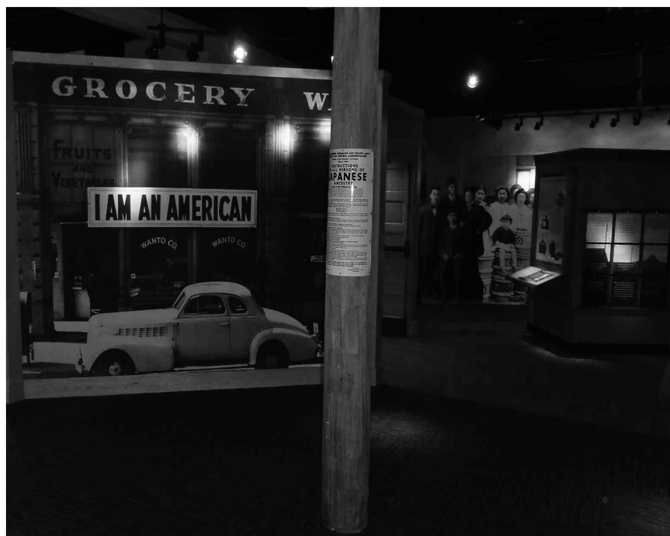
We struggled …with reconciling internees' and residents' recollections with documented evidence.

and consultation with historians, academics, former internees, and others. The consensus was that, while none substantially agreed with Ms. Malkin's conclusions or scholarship, it is not the role of the National Park Service to censor dissenting viewpoints, past or present…. We do not feel that by including Michelle Malkin's book, or any others, we are inferring National Park Service endorsement of the author's perspective and/or opinions" (Alisa Lynch, personal conversation, June 22, 2011).

Is this the only way to ensure inclusiveness in museums? Is it possible to present multiple perspectives—historic or modern—without questioning the historical facts of a story? Some would argue that we negate free speech and openness by not including fringe voices in dialogue. On the other hand, doing so could be seen as supporting propaganda and disinformation. Don't museums have the authority and expertise to challenge wrongful notions?

A 2001 study by AAM found that 87% of people polled saw museums as trustworthy sources of information, ahead of books and television news (MacArthur, 2007). This has been borne out by additional studies (Reach Advisors, 2008). Museums continue to be valued as providers of "independent and objective information."

Given the position of intellectual authority that museums hold, aren't we responsible for vetting content? I would argue that deciding not to include a widely recognized incorrect belief (such as Holocaust denial) is different from censorship, and



In the lobby of the ILC is an evacuation notice tacked to a telephone pole, like the ones posted on the West Coast in 1942. Courtesy of Chris Wilson, Split Rock Studios.

Visitors pass through a train door to enter the "Life in Camp" gallery. The exhibition uses life-size cutout figures to populate the space. Courtesy of Steve Leger, Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

(continued from page 49)

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that presenting all opinions without reservation doesn't necessarily reinforce or aid learning. We cannot—and should not—rewrite history. We should not gloss over points of historical record, even if they are distasteful today. But that doesn't mean that we need to include all modern perspectives, especially ones based on inaccuracies. Provoking debate is admirable; provoking uninformed debate is not.

As Tom Crouch, National Air & Space Curator of the Enola Gay exhibition, stated (Gallagher, 2008).

> Do you want an exhibit intended to make veterans feel good, or do you want an exhibition that will lead our visitors to think about the consequences of the atomic bombings of Japan? Frankly, I don't think we can do both.

The ILC exhibition attempts to explain the historical context to internment—not to excuse the program, but to explain how, in times of war and fear, individuals and groups can look for scapegoats. By doing so, we hope to shine a light on modern injustices and provoke visitors to reflect before castigating entire groups for the actions of a few.

Perspective and the First Person Plural

The experience of visiting the ILC is meant to evoke the daily lives of the Japanese American internees. We made a conscious choice at Heart Mountain to tell the story of internees—within historical context—from a centrality of Japanese American narratives. Entering the site, visitors pass a guard tower patterned after the nine that once ringed the site. Inside the building, visitors are issued an ID tag like the ones internees were forced to wear. Video and oral history stations give direct voice to the imprisoned. The photographs used in the exhibition mostly come from internees, rather than government organizations like the War Relocation Authority. Even the restrooms suggest the lack of privacy faced by internees.

We struggled to some extent with reconciling internees' and residents' recollections with documented evidence. We decided not to edit opinions, but to include first-hand documents as well. However, opinions are ascribed to specific people, not presented as objective fact.

To expand upon the complicated story of the relationship between the internees and Wyoming residents, we included letters written to then-governor Nels Smith, arguing that all Japanese-Americans should be rounded up and sent to Japan. But we also included information about the first Christmas at Heart Mountain, when local churches organized a gift drive for the children in camp.

An interpretive aha! moment came while writing the text for the exhibition. I had drafted a batch of fairly standard text: layered interpretation, open-ended

FORCED FROM OUR HOMES

In March 1942, the military informed us that all Nikkei on the West Coast would be subject to exclusion orders. Many Issei had their bank accounts and other assets frozen. Even if we wanted to move to a non-military zone, most of us could not afford to.

Within a month, the government determined that we—more than 110,000 men, women, and children of Japanese ancestry—were too "dangerous" to remain on the West Coast. We were informed that we had to make our way to one of 15 temporary detention camps called "assembly centers," while more permanent camps the government called "relocation centers" were built.

The Mochida family of Hayward, California, awaits the bus that will take them to an "assembly center." Before the war, the Mochidas operated a nursery and greenhouses where they raised flowers.

Note the identification tags that the military forced the family to wear.

Women carry their belongings to the bus that will transport them to an "assembly center."

EVERYTHING WE OWNED

We were given anywhere from a few days to several weeks to store or sell our belongings, close our businesses, lock up our homes, and report to the "assembly centers." We were told to bring clothing, bedding, and personal effects—but none of us knew where we would ultimately end up. We had to store, sell, or leave anything we couldn't carry. Some of us had neighbors who offered to keep property for us. While some neighbors were honest, others took our property and didn't return it.

We were assigned family identification numbers and forced to wear identification tags.

We were not allowed to have pets in the "assembly centers." This couple had to leave behind their dog, King. After they left, King refused to eat and eventually starved to death.

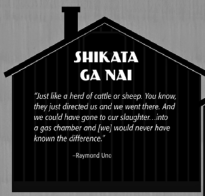
Jeanette Misaka remembered leaving her dog behind with farm workers: "…the dog kept running after the car, then stopped as we were just turning to the main highway. I guess it was the dog who knew that we would never be back. But it was so sad to see that."

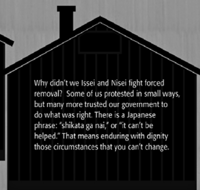
Can you imagine having to give away or leave behind your beloved family pet?

"…Wrap everything up and get the hell out."

—Ben Okura, whose family was given a week to sell their nine-acre farm in California

Within weeks of the exclusion orders, entire communities closed down. This photograph shows the window of a laundry and cleaning business in San Francisco after the removal of its owners.





One of the first-person plural interpretive panels at Heart Mountain ILC. Courtesy of Jane Wilson, Split Rock Studios.

Visitors coming to the Interpretive Learning Center can tell right away that this exhibition has a point of view.

questions, interpretive hierarchy. There were first-hand quotes, but the main text was traditional third-person omniscient. The result was too dispassionate and detached. It didn't reflect the board's goal of internee-driven interpretation. As an experiment, I rewrote a section of text in the first-person plural voice and presented it to the board. They agreed that it was an unusual choice, but one that fit the subject and the mission of the ILC.

Taking this approach, we strove to create an emotional immediacy that engages visitors and makes them part of the exhibition. We provoke visitors to think about the relevance of Heart Mountain to current and future events. And what's more, the experience is clearly not objective: visitors coming to the Interpretive Learning Center can tell right away that this exhibition has a point of view.

And I'll stand by that.

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