

Nonfiction

Behind the **WI**RE



FENCE

During World War II, the American government forced thousands of Japanese Americans from their homes and made them live in prison camps. This is the story of one boy who was there.



Author's Purpose As you read, think about why the author wrote this article and what she wants you to learn.

**LOOK FOR WORD NERD'S
9 WORDS IN BOLD**



Eleven-year-old William “Bill” Hiroshi Shishima was in prison. He was watched by soldiers with guns. He lived behind a fence made of sharp barbed wire. Beyond the wire were many acres of harsh wilderness. Trying to escape would be pointless.

Bill couldn't believe how quickly his life had changed. Just three months earlier, he had been enjoying tacos with his friends, playing baseball after school, and spending his extra pennies on comic books.

But the president of the United States decided that Bill's family and about 120,000 other Americans were a threat to the country. They were forced to leave their homes and sent to live in faraway prisons called **internment** camps.

They had broken no laws. They had done nothing wrong. This happened simply because they were Japanese American.

**DON'T MISS
OUR GREAT
VIDEO AT
STORYWORKS
ONLINE!**

BY KRISTIN LEWIS



GOING TO WAR

Japan's surprise attack on the Pearl Harbor military base in Hawaii shocked and horrified Americans.

Trouble on the Way

Bill was born in 1930 in Los Angeles, California. His parents were **immigrants** from Japan. They owned a grocery store. By 1941, the family's business was doing very well. It even included a small hotel. But trouble was on the way.

World War II was raging around the globe. Germany had invaded many countries in Europe. Japan had taken over parts of China and was planning to attack other Asian countries.

Americans were determined to stay out of this war.

And then America was attacked.

Attacked!

On the morning of December 7, 1941, Japanese planes bombed the U.S. military base in Pearl Harbor, Hawaii.

Bombs rained from the sky. Torpedoes shot through the water. More than 20 U.S. ships were damaged or destroyed. So were hundreds of planes at nearby air force bases. More than 2,300 Americans were killed. Another 1,200 were wounded.

Bill was 11 when the attack happened. Like most Americans, he felt horrified, angry, and scared.

The next day, the U.S. declared war on



Japan and entered World War II. The attack on Pearl Harbor changed American history. It was about to change everything for Bill and his family too.

Loyal Americans

At the time of the attack on Pearl Harbor, there were about 127,000 Japanese Americans living in the U.S. Most lived on the West Coast.

Bill and his family, like most Japanese Americans, thought of themselves as Americans. Bill's parents had left Japan before Bill was born. They'd worked hard to create a good life in their new country. Bill had spent his whole life in California. He was an American **citizen**. He had almost no connection to Japan.

But all of a sudden, Japanese Americans were viewed with **suspicion** and fear. People wondered: Were some Japanese Americans secretly working as spies for Japan? Did they really want Japan to win the war? Were



they helping plan another attack on the U.S.?

Harmful rumors swirled. There was no proof to support them. But that didn't matter. Prejudice against Japanese Americans grew into panic and hatred. They couldn't be trusted, many said. Something had to be done to protect the U.S.

In February 1942, two and a half months after the Pearl Harbor attack, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed an order. It gave the military the power to remove all Japanese Americans—

every man, woman, and child—from America's West Coast. They would be taken to prison camps in far-off parts of the country.

Crowded, Smelly, Dusty

By spring, signs had appeared in Bill's neighborhood. They ordered all people of Japanese descent to report to a local church by noon on May 9. They were to bring bedding, clothes, and other personal items, but no more than they could carry. The signs did not say where they would be going or how long they would be gone.

Bill's family sold their belongings. They gave up their store and hotel. They tried to sell their truck, but no one would buy it. They had to give it away for free.

At the church, Bill and his family joined dozens of others. Many wore their best clothes—mothers in flowered dresses, fathers in suits. Small children clutched their mothers' hands, wearing their finest coats—and frightened expressions.

The people were sent by bus to the Santa Anita racetrack. The racetrack was one of 16 temporary shelters. Bill and his family would be held there while prisons were built.

Conditions at the racetrack were awful—

crowded, smelly, dusty. Sometimes Bill would stare longingly at the movie theater across the street. Only days earlier, he could see a movie whenever he wanted. Now the theater might as well have been on the moon.



TAKEN AWAY

Left: A young girl waits with her family's belongings to be taken to an internment camp. Above: Some Japanese Americans attempted to calm the public's fear with signs like this.

Heart Mountain

In August 1942, after three months at the racetrack, Bill and his family were put on a train. They were headed to Wyoming.



LIFE AT CAMP Life was difficult and boring at the internment camps. Meals were eaten in a cafeteria. There were movies and games for entertainment. Families decorated barracks with whatever they could find.

Nothing could prepare Bill for what he saw when he got off the train.

It was a lonely wilderness surrounded by tall snow-capped mountains. In the middle of this harsh land was a large camp. It was called the Heart Mountain Relocation Center.

The camp was guarded by armed soldiers. Later, it would be surrounded by barbed wire. It was made up of rows of **rustic** buildings. Soon, more than 10,000 Japanese Americans were imprisoned here.

Bill, his parents, and his three siblings moved into a tiny room with almost no furniture. (After his mother had a baby, they got a second room.) The thin walls barely kept out the **frigid** Wyoming winds

and snows. That first winter, Bill became dangerously ill with pneumonia [nuh-MOHN-yuh].

Life Goes On

During World War II, there were 10 camps like Heart Mountain. All were built in **remote** areas to separate Japanese Americans from the rest of the country.

Life in these camps was hard. Buildings were cramped and poorly built. Dust and dirt crept in. And there were daily embarrassments that still make Bill cringe. He hated bathing in the one-room shower with seven other people. The toilets were even worse. There were no doors or walls. Bill had to do his business in front of everyone.

Still, many tried to make the best of their imprisonment. They had lost their freedom, their jobs, and their homes. Yet they held

on to their honor and pride. They did their best to make their barracks pretty. Mothers stitched curtains to bring color to dreary windows. Fathers built furniture from scraps of wood. Children went to camp schools and formed baseball teams.

The End of the War

World War II ended in 1945 with the defeat of Japan and Germany. People celebrated all across America. At Heart Mountain, Bill felt relief. His first thought was that he would finally get to see the

friends he'd been forced to leave behind.

All 10 camps were closed. The prisoners could leave. But where would they go? They had lost their homes and businesses. And their sense of safety and fairness had been badly hurt by what the government had done to them.

Bill and his family went back to Los Angeles. They started over. After high school, Bill attended the University of Southern California, where his father had gone to college. He went on to become a teacher.



A Terrible Wrong

Nearly 40 years after the camps closed, Congress launched an investigation. In the final report, Congress stated that the internment of Japanese Americans had been a terrible wrong.

In 1988, President Ronald Reagan made an official apology. Survivors of the camps were each given a \$20,000 payment. Bill donated his payment to the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles. Today, he leads tours there.

Bill is now in his eighties.

He feels a special responsibility to tell the story of what happened during World War II.

“Everyone in America should know what happened to us . . . so it never happens again,” he says. ■

HONOR AND PRIDE Thousands of young Japanese Americans fought for America in World War II. Yet many of their families were imprisoned back in the U.S. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team (above) was made up almost entirely of American soldiers of Japanese descent. It became one of the most famous units. It earned thousands of medals for bravery.

WRITE TO WIN

Write a letter to Bill Shishima telling him what you learned from reading this article and why it's important to know this part of history. Send your letter to “Bill Contest” by June 1, and we will forward it to Bill. Ten students will each receive a copy of *Dash* by Kirby Larson. See page 2 for details.

**FIND AN
ACTIVITY
ONLINE!**

