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The Winds of Minidoka: Preserving the Japanese American Past

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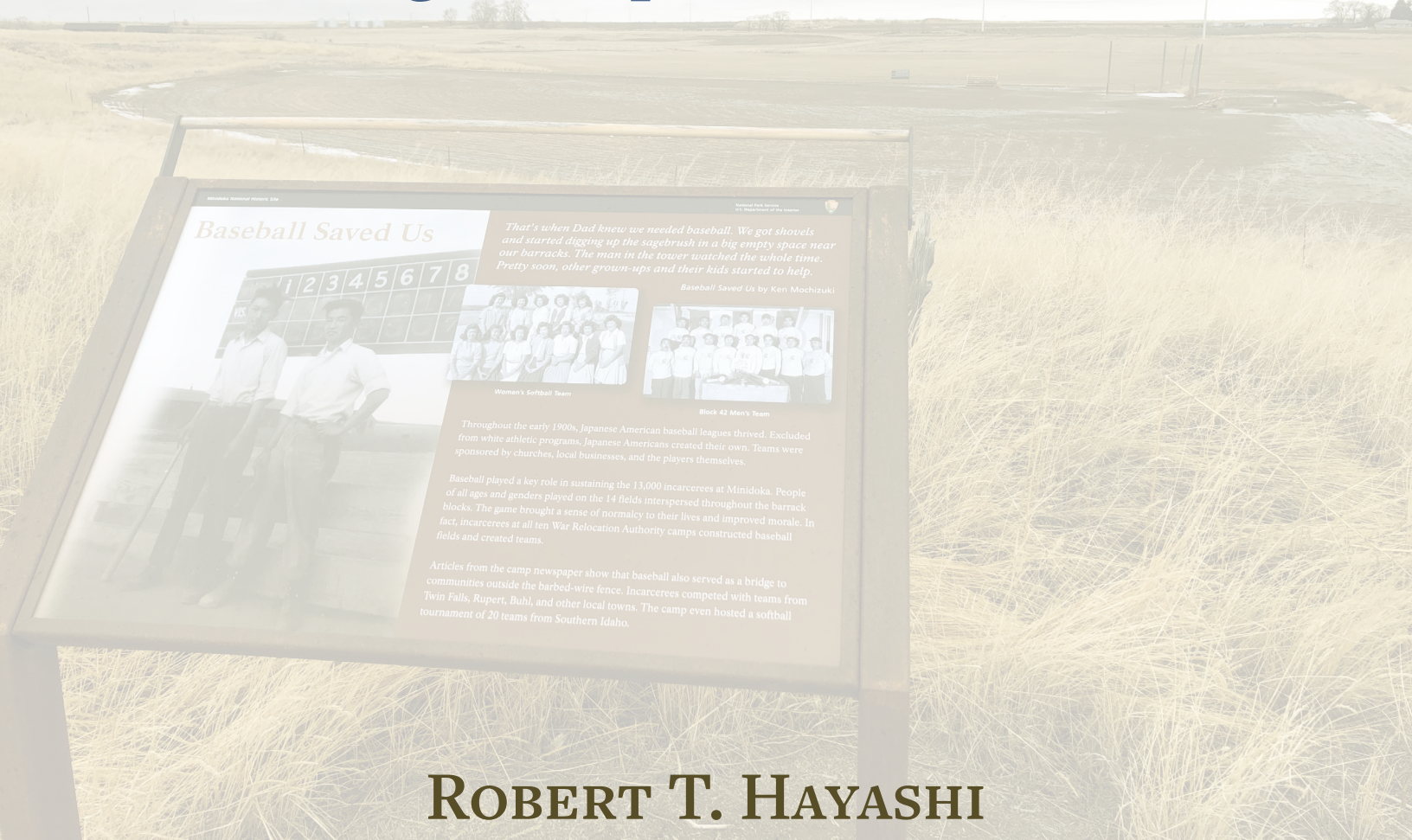
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BACK TO THE BATTLEFIELDS:  
HISTORIANS TAKE A FRESH LOOK AT AMERICAN SITES OF CONFLICT

# The WINDS of MINDOKA: Preserving the Japanese American Past



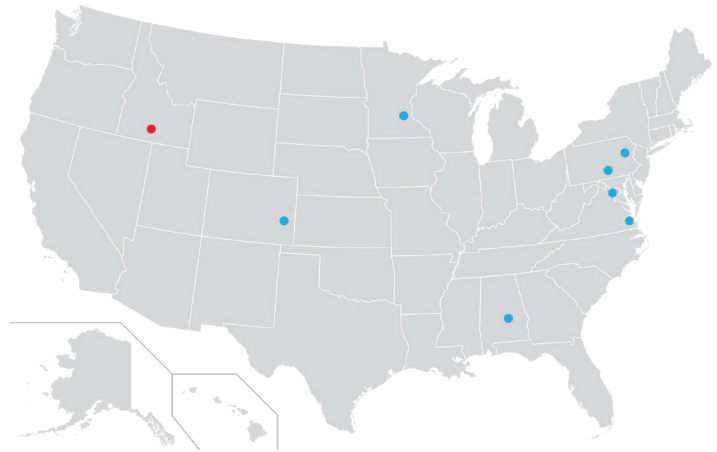
## ROBERT T. HAYASHI

### ABSTRACT

Like other sites of Japanese American incarceration, Minidoka Relocation Center was long neglected after World War II. Buildings were removed or deteriorated, and few visited the isolated spot. Increased public recognition of the injustice of mass incarceration, culminating in the Civil Liberties Act of 1988, catalyzed public history projects to preserve sites of Nikkei<sup>1</sup> World War II history and led to the eventual establishment of Minidoka National Historic Site. In recent years, significant restoration and interpretation projects have transformed the site, providing visitors with a rich historical context. However, its future is threatened by a proposed massive wind farm near the historic site. The project has mobilized both Japanese Americans and local Idahoans in resistance for divergent reasons that speak to the historical tensions over land use in the American West. The situation underscores the precarious state of Japanese American history, how its establishment and preservation rely upon the community, but is still powerfully shaped by the federal government and, now, the exigencies of responding to global climate change.

**The West is scenic. Or at least that is the way Hollywood and influential shapers of the American imagination have portrayed it: what Easterners picture.**

“Oh, you’re going to Idaho. It must be beautiful!” people will exhort. But southern Idaho is the desert: miles of open scrubland and ankle-breaking lava fields. Early White settler and writer Mary Hallock Foote described the Snake River Plain as “thousands of acres of desert empty of history.”<sup>2</sup> It lacks the dramatic canyon vistas of John Ford films or the gorgeous Sierra Nevada Mountains of an Ansel Adams photograph. Summers bring windstorms, searing heat, and cold nights. Winters are defined by biting winds and temperatures well below zero. The ground here is unforgiving of humans and their mistakes.



The land outside my car window is brownish, yellowish scrubland spread out under a gunmetal gray sky. I am here at the cusp of spring, but it is 37 degrees and a cold rain has blown in from Utah. A snowstorm is beginning just north in the mountains, near Sun Valley, where privileged Americans have for decades come to play. When I was last here years ago, in the summer, the irrigation ditches were filled with rushing water. They are now black mud. I feel my pulse rise as I near the former site of my family’s incarceration: Minidoka Relocation Center in Hunt, Idaho. The rolling terrain is familiar. But much of what I am about to experience will be vastly different from my first visit decades ago; and the potential for further change has locals and others gravely alarmed: those who love this place, live here, feel a part of it in them.

Like other Japanese Americans I never realized until late in life my connection to this remote slice of southern Idaho. The sum knowledge of my family’s experience of imprisonment was a collection of snippets: short anecdotes about “camp” recalled at the dinner table among aunts and uncles and my father or among his friends on rare trips to California. In the 1990s I began research on a book about Idaho that brought me out here each summer for many years, and I became enamored with its desert sunsets, wildflowers, lunar landscapes, and most of all, its trout rivers. My dad had left the Tule Lake internment camp in California for Philadelphia before my family was sent to Minidoka; so, I never heard the word growing up. Over the phone when I told her I was driving out to Idaho, my aunt asked me in an angry tone, “Why the hell would you go there?!” The outside world provided little else in the way of information. Growing up in Pittsburgh there was no mention of Japanese American incarceration in my school textbooks or on TV, nor much left of the sites—most dismantled and reclaimed by the natural elements, a fitting process of neglect that reflected the national mindset in relation to our mass incarceration. It was best to forget. After all, while a painful violation that traumatized Japanese Americans, until recently their incarceration was still considered by many Americans a warranted, if perhaps unfortunate, measure necessary to protect the homeland. Not until the pathbreaking research of historians such as Roger Daniels, Audrie Girdner, and Anne Loftis did scholars begin to discredit the putative necessity of wartime incarceration.<sup>3</sup> The findings of the Commission on the Wartime Relocation and Incarceration of Citizens in 1982 and the subsequent Civil Liberties Act of 1988 further aided the establishment of a public reckoning with this history. Until then, as scholar Caroline Chung Simpson notes, the events were best characterized by their absence from public memory, a pattern of veiled invocations of Japanese American incarceration that minimized its impact and delayed a faithful reckoning with its causes and legacies.<sup>4</sup>

For Japanese Americans remembrance was for decades after the war a personal endeavor, contained within the oral histories of families like mine, among community members at social gatherings, and in the practice of individuals,

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many of them descendants of the incarcerated, who made pilgrimages to the former sites of incarceration to honor the dead, clean the grounds, and recollect on ground made sacred by their families' suffering, endurance. These activities were particularly noteworthy at the site of Manzanar Relocation Center, located in the Owens Valley and once home to thousands of Japanese Americans mainly from Los Angeles, two hundred miles south. California designated the former concentration camp as a California state historic landmark in 1972, and the federal government designated it a national historic landmark in 1985, and as a national historic site 1992.<sup>5</sup> The recognition of Minidoka and other sites would follow, but not without contestation.

The Minidoka Relocation Center sprawled across over 68,000 acres of federal land, owned by the Bureau of Reclamation, the federal agency that turned arid regions of the American West into productive agricultural land via massive water projects. It was, in fact, to develop an irrigation project that brought Mary Hallock Foote's husband, Arthur, to southern Idaho. The relocation center ran along the northern boundary of an irrigation canal for nearly three miles and its potential impact on access to the region's precious water caused concern among locals who relied on it to grow their crops and feed their livestock.<sup>6</sup> Idaho's governor at the time, Chase Clark, was openly hostile to Japanese Americans and initially resistant to their relocation to Idaho, but his opposition and those of other Idahoans was tempered by the realization that Japanese Americans offered an answer to local wartime labor shortages, especially in Idaho's critical farmlands. Even before arriving in Minidoka, within weeks of evacuation Nikkei West Coast residents destined for Minidoka were working in the beet fields of Washington state. The concern about the incarceration program's impact on the area's natural resources exemplified a historical contestation defining many Western spaces and explains their violent histories. These tensions are manifest in struggles to establish an inclusive public history at Minidoka and the contesting definitions of land use value that feed the most recent debates about the site's future.

The land where the federal government placed the incarceration site had long been inhabited by Indigenous groups, including Shoshone and Bannock Peoples who harvested local food sources like the camas plant. Due to its challenging environment, the region was ignored by many White migrants passing through for elsewhere until the discovery of mineral deposits and the region's water resources being made more accessible. Eventually, White settlers increasingly infringed upon Native communities and their access to resources, and federal troops violently quashed resistance, overtook Native American territories, and relocated survivors to the Fort Hall Reservation in southeast Idaho in 1868, which would later lose most of its land mass to White hands.

This history and the site certainly did not suggest much promise to its Japanese American residents when they arrived in Idaho, victims, too, of the racial order that increasingly controlled Western spaces and directed the lives of nonwhites. Writer Monica Sone noted the challenges of the local environment in her memoir: "On our first day in camp, we were given a rousing welcome by a dust storm.... We felt as if we were standing in a gigantic sand-mixing machine as the sixty-mile gale lifted the loose earth up in the sky, obliterating everything."<sup>7</sup> Even the carefully monitored and generally optimistic camp newspaper, *The Minidoka Irrigator*, noted in its inaugural edition that Minidoka was "a vast stretch of sagebrush stubble and shifting, swirling sand—a dreary, forbidding, flat expanse of arid wilderness."<sup>8</sup> Despite the irony, the Wartime Relocation Authority (WRA) invoked the American frontier mythos to define this and the other nine large incarceration sites in the United States, labeling them "pioneer communities."<sup>9</sup> These sites were part of the larger mission of Western settlement and settler colonialism, with incarcerated Japanese Americans in the ironic role of settlers in a nation that denied many of them property and their liberty. The incarcerated did successfully transform the dry scrub plain into productive farmland, establishing an impressive farm that grew to over 700 acres, and improving the canal system as well as working on regional Bureau of Reclamation projects, including the massive dam project on the Boise River that dwarfed even Arthur Foote's imagined plan. As predicted, Nikkei also provided a crucial labor supply for local farmers handicapped by the labor shortages brought on by the war. Soon after the incarceration site opened, residents began work release programs in Idaho and beyond.

The incarceration of Sone's family and others in Idaho was part of a larger history of America's agricultural industry and its reliance on nonwhite migrant labor. And it was linked to a larger domestic and international security infrastructure designed to remove and contain Nikkei and redistribute them across the map.<sup>10</sup> After the camp closed in 1945, half of the incarcerated never returned to their Western homes, and the WRA resettlement program promoted assimilation in its messaging and implementation, seeking to dismantle ethnic enclaves the government felt spurred Americans'



suspicious of Japanese Americans and kept them isolated. Officials directed Japanese Americans away from the West Coast and into White communities, policies that would further complicate community remembrance. After the camp closed in 1945, the land was broken into lots and awarded to White war veterans, some of whom lived at first in the old barracks and repurposed the original structures for a new pioneering period.

When I first visited the site in the late 1990s, some of these veterans' families still lived here. I parked my rental car stuffed with fishing tackle and guardedly walked around. It was August, hot and dry, and the cheat grass was brown and full of grasshoppers. I was surprised, therefore, by the large amount of water coursing through the canal as I approached the land where my grandfather died, a prisoner of my nation. The sign at the highway turnoff was full of bullet holes. The site had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1979, but there was little of the original camp left. The Bureau of Land Management (BLM) owned only six acres of the original site. There was a small turnout near the original entrance and what remained of the

lava rock waiting room and guard house. There were small plaques, one with a map of the camp layout. There were cigarette butts, toilet paper, and cans lying around the area. Few of the original 600 structures remained, and the concentration camp was mainly covered by potato fields and some powerlines. I walked down the street and among some old concrete foundations with a few boards and rusty nails amidst the gravel. I found an old partially collapsed root cellar and snapped off a few photos, but got out quickly before the whole roof failed. Across the street was a heap of old cans, broken dishes, and bottles that I rummaged through as if a memento were warranted. But this was not a vacation. It was a pilgrimage to the scene of my family's humiliation.

Not much changed at the site until recently. In 2001, President Bill Clinton utilized the Antiquities Act to designate 73 acres of the original site the Minidoka Internment National Monument. The National Park Service (NPS) then developed a general management plan for the site, lobbying for the acquisition of more land, the reconstruction of former structures, such as living quarters, and a change in the site's official name. At the time, the official name, the Minidoka Internment National Monument was not in line with that of the agency's other related site, Manzanar National Historic Site. The term "Internment" was unacceptable to some Japanese Americans and their organizations like the Japanese American National Museum who use "concentration camp" to define the American World War II civilian incarceration sites. In 2008, Minidoka was redesignated as a national historic site. Thus its name was changed,



Minidoka guard tower. ROBERT T. HAYASHI

and it was also joined with the Bainbridge Island Japanese American Exclusion Memorial, a decision that makes some historical sense as the Bainbridge Island Nikkei community was the first one relocated after incarceration, with its community members sent to the camp in Minidoka. NPS's decision, however, complicates management of what are two very disparate and distant locations. Despite the new name and added scope, it would take several years before funding became available for significant restoration work, and at the time of its redesignation, a journalist noted the site "now sits mostly deserted."<sup>11</sup>

The federal government's increased recognition of Japanese American history, as signified by the increasing use of the term "concentration camp" in public history to define these sites, catalyzed archaeological and interpretive work here after decades of neglect and increased support both among the general public and Japanese Americans. NPS, local organizations, community members, area colleges, Japanese Americans and their organizations (especially the Friends of Minidoka), and others have worked to preserve and interpret this history long obscured. It has become a more visible part of Idaho history, if one still easily overshadowed.

I had returned a few times since the national historic site designation, once to speak at a civil rights symposium in association with the annual pilgrimage to Minidoka, where I met my father's college friend who greeted me with, "I know who you are!" At that time, in 2017, a memorial for the Issei, the immigrant generation, those who lost the most, was being planned by descendants. Restoration of the honor roll of service members that stood at the camp entrance was planned for the following year. Minidoka had the highest rate of voluntary military service of the camps during WWII, and Nisei<sup>12</sup> veterans have been crucial in establishing and preserving Japanese American wartime history, and especially important in winning redress.<sup>13</sup>

When I returned to the Minidoka National Historic Site in March 2023 the road rolled over familiar short undulations, but the parking area was transformed. The honor roll was there across the street: three large wooden panels, adorned by an eagle. It was eerily accurate. And off to the left I could see the low outline of the new visitor center in the distance: site of the former auto shop. But most striking was the replica of one of the eight guard towers now looming beside the small parking area. It was unveiled in 2014, designed and built by Boise State University students, and it is an impactful, if limited, way to convey the constant surveillance and violence that undergirded the lives of Japanese Americans on this lava plain. I grabbed my rain jacket and hat and stepped out of the car to snap shots of it. During my first visit here, I was wary of anyone else, conscious of the things that can happen and have happened recently to Japanese Americans in rural Western sites, including here at Minidoka. However, I was warmly welcomed on this return visit. In 2017 a temporary visitor center opened, staffed by the NPS, but in 2021 the permanent center was open and notably its staff have been Japanese Americans directly connected to this history. Although the center was closed at this time of the year, NPS staff generously opened it for me to tour.

The center is a small one-story black building with a striking mural image on the side and an opening that separates the restrooms and exhibit space and offers a view to where the former housing blocks sprawled out across the plain in the 1940s. As one approaches the center entrance, a group of men appear to be sitting inside the former auto shop peering out at the viewer: a visual trick created using a historic black and white photograph within the glass doors. It is one of many effective uses of historic photographs in the space and across the site and its now 1.6-mile outdoor walking tour. The use of the former camp building immerses visitors into the lived camp experience, and exhibits offer them a grounding in the larger historical experience of Japanese migration and settlement on the West Coast, the rhythms of everyday communal life, and the virulent racism many faced that presaged eventual incarceration. The incorporation of material culture from the era further contextualizes the daily lives of the incarcerated: old suitcases brought by internees, pieces of ceramics they ate meals on, and the contemporaneous hand-carved and -polished pieces of brushwood hanging from the ceiling. The Issei Memorial is there, too, with names of the 4,000 who were imprisoned here. I scanned the plaque for my grandfather's name, at first unable to find it until the NPS staff pointed me to it, "Jinnosuke Hayashi." I snapped off shots with my phone to send to family.

Recordings and placards also capture the recollections of the former prisoners: their disdain for the guard towers, the relentless mud, and the suffocating windstorms and dust. The postwar movement for redress and establishment of this and other related historic sites is also presented in the exhibit space, and the artistic responses of Japanese





Visitor Center exhibit of ceramic and glassware. ROBERT T. HAYASHI

Americans to their imprisonment: the words of Monica Sone, the art of Roger Shimomura. I admit being wary as I monitored the site's development over recent decades, concerned that the evocative desolation of the site might be compromised by development too slick, too pretty, too benign. As former Minidoka Superintendent Neil King noted in 2006, "People who were sent here told us what they did not want was a shiny, modern new visitor center. They want visitors to get a sense of how it looked when they were living here."<sup>14</sup> While the new visitor center, walking trail, and signage may have been too much development for some, it seems appreciated by most invested in the site and the history it seeks to preserve. And restoration projects like the tower construction have created and reaffirmed bonds among survivors and their descendants and Idahoans.

The area was desolate the morning I came here. After touring the visitor center, the rain continued, but I slogged through the muddy trail that reminded me of what spring in my part of the world, New England, is termed: Mud Season. My running shoes sank inches deep as I made my way along the trail, reading the signs that detailed life here: the root cellar, swimming hole, and one of the baseball fields that volunteers, NPS staff, and Friends of Minidoka rebuilt. There were deer and coyote tracks, but no signs of recent human visitors. I peered into the windows of one of the old barracks that was brought back to the site, and I looked out over the ball field thinking about what my family endured and still searching for a reason they had to come here. Why it has taken so long to get to this point in the telling of their story. But now a new threat looms over the site and its mission, or may soon—literally.

As I crested a hillock on my way to the site that morning, I quickly encountered signs. There was a large green one with dramatic splotches of yellow, red, and orange: "We Will Burn ... Stop Lava Ridge." Lava Ridge is one of two large-scale





(top) The camp's root cellar: fish-eye view showing construction details. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE/STAN HONDA (bottom) Baseball field and signage. ROBERT T. HAYASHI

wind farms proposed by Magic Valley Energy, a subsidiary of LS Power: a nationwide investor in, and developer and operator of, clean energy sources. In March 2020, Magic Valley Energy announced the company's plan to develop one of the nation's largest wind farms in southern Idaho, on land mainly owned by BLM and just on the edge of the national historic site. On the highway driving to the turn-off for Minidoka, I saw several survey crews and trucks off in the fields and scrub. Company officials touted the estimates of nearly 700 jobs the project would create during construction and millions in added annual tax revenue to local counties to fix roads and fund schools.<sup>15</sup> At the time, the company was hoping to begin the project as early as 2022, once BLM issued its environmental impact statement (EIS), after a period



of public comment, as required by federal law. The EIS would steer the agency's decision-making about the project, whether to approve or amend the plan.

In the meantime, Magic Valley Energy began to hold public hearings in the local area, and as the scale and possible impact of the project became clearer, local opposition grew. The public began to raise concerns especially about the potential environmental footprint of the wind farm. The company revealed that the project would span 76,000 acres and include as many as 400 wind turbines, with some as tall as 740 feet, and require 381 miles of service roads and the building of related energy transmission and storage infrastructure.<sup>16</sup> The proposed site includes habitat for the rapidly declining sage grouse, as well as pheasant and other birds of prey. It also included a grazing allotment that local ranchers have relied on for a century. The company was vague about the actual consumer of the project's energy—specifically, whether it would benefit local consumers or out-of-state markets.



Protest sign near Minidoka National Historic Site. ROBERT T. HAYASHI

The growing public awareness that LS Power is a New York-based private equity firm, and that the power was likely headed to out-of-state customers, brought into question the actual benefit to Idahoans and touched on a historical antipathy against outsiders and their capital taking Idaho resources, like Arthur Foote and his investors had planned years before. This knowledge also increased local opposition. BLM began public scoping of the plan in 2021 and the agency eventually supported modifications of the company's proposal when it published its draft EIS in January 2023, offering alternative plans that reduced the project scale to as few as 280 turbines and moved it farther away from the former camp's historic footprint. Numerous historic sites across the globe are alarmingly threatened by climate change; and, as Jonathan van Harmelen and Nina Wallace recently noted, sites related to Japanese American history have ended up threatened not just by the changing climate, but by efforts to mitigate it. Los Angeles Water and Power once proposed a solar farm adjacent to Manzanar, too.<sup>17</sup> In 2022, the National Trust for Historic Preservation placed Minidoka National Historic Site on its list of *11 Most Endangered Historic Places*, noting how the project "could irrevocably change" the landscape, "Minidoka's sweeping vistas" that "continue to convey the isolation and remoteness that Japanese Americans experienced there."<sup>18</sup> When BLM released its initial EIS in January 2023, it extended the normal comment period due to the increased public interest.<sup>19</sup> Japanese American groups like Friends of Minidoka, local environmentalist organizations, six county commissioners, Idaho congressional leaders, the Shoshone-Bannock Nation, and the governor have all stated their opposition to the project. Individual Idahoans of diverse interests and political leanings have joined them, including

one letter writer to the Twin Falls paper who warned of “selling our birthright of wild and scenic public lands” and turning “southern Idaho into a wind farm ghetto for California.”<sup>20</sup>

For now, the letter writer and others await the federal government’s decision. BLM has a wide range of constituents using the land in diverse and sometimes conflicting ways: private corporations, ranchers, birders, hunters, hikers, and history pilgrims. But, in this current moment, a common threat has united them. Their specific worries about Lava Ridge are sometimes in opposition to one another, or at least very divergent; for instance, the concerns about the integrity of Minidoka as a historic site that is so central to groups like Friends of Minidoka and other Japanese Americans, was often not repeated by locals in opposition to Lava Ridge. Preserving a desolate sense of place may not have been important to a local resident, or less a concern than the destruction of the wildness it connotes. Perhaps, locals still feel the camp was justified. But, this is their home, and part of the public commons, sacred in that way, too.

What the wind farm controversy reminds those concerned with preserving this history, and most of all those remaining survivors of incarceration and their families, is that the federal government and private interests still hold such power over the recognition of our stories. Japanese Americans have acquired some greater leverage, but only due to a fierce desire and sometimes personal commitment to keep what is easily erased in desert winds: the true harshness of American life, a less scenic view.

#### ENDNOTES

1. “Nikkei” refers to Japanese emigrants living outside Japan and their descendants.
2. Victorian Gentlewoman, 265.
3. Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA* and Girdner and Loftis, *The Great Betrayal*.
4. Simpson, *An Absent Presence*.
5. See Hayashi, “Transfigured Patterns.”
6. Densho, “Minidoka.”
7. Sone, 192.
8. *Minidoka Irrigator*, September 10, 1942.
9. See Hayashi, *Haunted by Waters*, 70-110.
10. See Robinson, *A Tragedy of Democracy*.
11. Bonner, “WWII Camp Preservation Proves Difficult.”
12. “Nisei” refers to the children of Japanese immigrants.
13. Hayashi, “Transfigured Patterns” and Murray, “Historical Memories”.
14. Smith, “Agency Wants ‘Internment’ Off WWII Site Name.”
15. Tierman, “The Windy Windfall.”
16. Ridler, “Comment Period Opens for Lava Ridge.”
17. Densho, “Proposed Lava Ridge Wind Farm.”
18. <https://savingplaces.org/stories/11-most-endangered-historic-places-for-2022>
19. As of this writing, the comment period is to close on September 20, 2023.  
[https://eplanning.blm.gov/public\\_projects/2013782/200493266/20072054/250078236/Lava\\_Ridge\\_DEIS\\_V1\\_ExecSum-Chapters.pdf](https://eplanning.blm.gov/public_projects/2013782/200493266/20072054/250078236/Lava_Ridge_DEIS_V1_ExecSum-Chapters.pdf)
20. Morris, “Idaho Will Become Wind Farm Ghetto.”

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#### On the cover of this issue

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GARY E. DAVIS