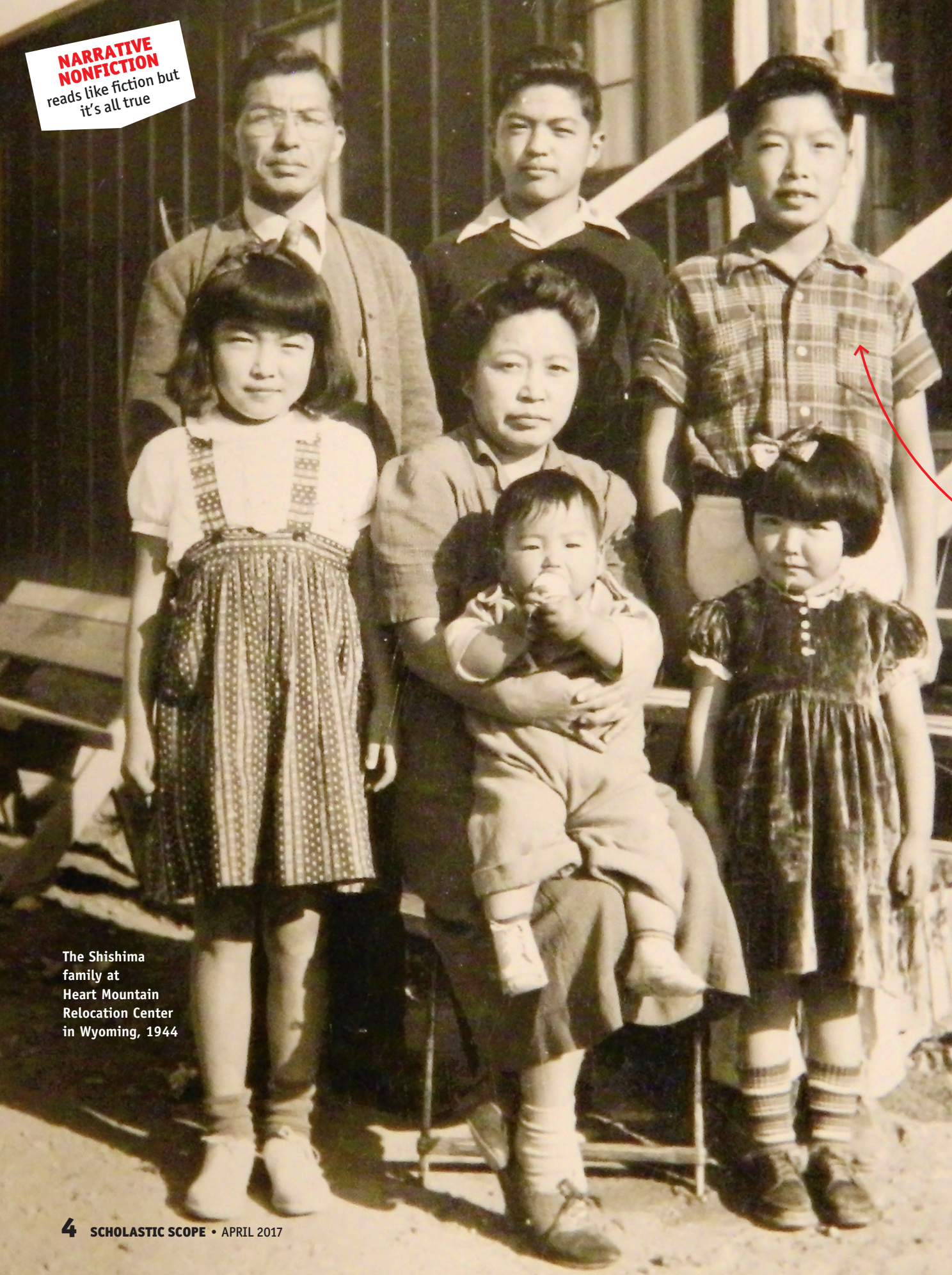


**NARRATIVE
NONFICTION**
reads like fiction but
it's all true



The Shishima family at Heart Mountain Relocation Center in Wyoming, 1944

BETRAYED BY AMERICA

During World War II, the American government forced thousands of Japanese Americans from their homes and imprisoned them in internment camps. This is the story of one boy who was there. **BY KRISTIN LEWIS**

AS YOU READ

What led to the internment of Japanese Americans?

Eleven-year-old William “Bill” Hiroshi Shishima was in prison. He was watched by soldiers with guns. He lived behind barbed wire. Beyond the wire, thousands of acres of unforgiving wilderness served as a brutal reminder that escape was pointless. It was hard to believe how abruptly Bill’s life had changed. Only three months earlier, he was scarfing down tacos with his friends, playing baseball after school, going on picnics with his family, and spending his extra pennies on the latest comic books.

But then the president of the United States signed an order for Bill and his family—along with some 120,000 others—to be rounded up like criminals. They were forced to leave their homes and sent to live in faraway **internment** camps.

This happened not because they had committed any crime.

They had broken no laws. They had done nothing wrong.

This happened simply because they were Japanese American.

Trouble on the Way

Bill was born in 1930 in Los Angeles, California. The 1930s were a time of widespread unemployment and poverty known as the Great Depression. By 1941, though, when Bill was 11, things were looking up. The economy was growing. The grocery store that Bill’s father owned was thriving, and the family had recently expanded their business to include a small hotel. But trouble was on the way.



In 1941, World War II was raging across the world. Germany's leader Adolf Hitler and his Nazi troops had invaded most of the countries in Europe. The island nation of Japan had invaded China, looking to expand its territory across Asia.

Americans were in no rush to get involved in these bloody conflicts. They had little interest in becoming **embroiled** in what many saw as the problems of other nations.

As Japan continued its military aggression in Asia, however, hostilities with the U.S. grew. Still, the U.S. hoped to prevent all-out war through diplomacy.

But any hope of peace was about to vanish.

Attacked!

On the morning of December 7, 1941, something happened that would change America forever. Japan launched a massive surprise attack on Pearl Harbor, a U.S. military base in Hawaii.

The American Navy posed a threat to Japan's goal of increasing its global power. Japan hoped that by attacking Pearl Harbor, it could cripple the part of the U.S. Navy that operated in the Pacific Ocean.

Bombs rained from the sky. Torpedoes shot through the water. The scale of destruction and the loss of human life were staggering. More than 2,300 Americans were killed and another 1,200 wounded.

Bill remembers where he was when he learned about the attack.

GOING TO WAR

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



Walking out of a movie, he heard a newspaper boy shout: "War! War! Japs bomb Pearl Harbor!"

Bill didn't know what "Japs" meant, though he would soon learn it was a hateful and racist way to refer to people of Japanese descent. He also could not have imagined how the attack on Pearl Harbor would change American history—and his own life.

Just one day after Pearl Harbor, the U.S. declared war on Japan and entered World War II.

Mistrust and Suspicion

Throughout American history, newcomers have often been viewed with mistrust and suspicion. It was no different for Japanese immigrants. By the early 1900s, a large number had settled on the West Coast. They faced enormous prejudice—it was illegal for them to

own property or become citizens.

This was still the case as Bill was growing up. Bill and his siblings were U.S. citizens because they were born in America. But Bill's parents, who had come from Japan, couldn't even buy the building that housed their grocery store.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor fanned the flames of prejudice. Rumors flew that Japanese Americans were loyal to Japan, that they were spies planning another attack on American soil.

There was no evidence that such rumors were true. In fact, a military report in January 1942 stated that less than 3 percent of Japanese Americans posed a potential threat to the U.S.—and authorities were already monitoring those individuals.

Yet as news came in about the gruesome battles and the

growing number of casualties in the war, fear about Japanese Americans turned to panic.

“Get ‘Em Out!”

At the time of Pearl Harbor, about 127,000 Japanese Americans lived in the mainland U.S., mostly in California. After the bombing, many members of the public and the media began calling for anyone of Japanese ancestry—citizen or not—to be removed from the West Coast.

“GET ‘EM OUT!” read one headline in the *West Seattle Herald*.

“They are a dangerous element, whether loyal or not,” said U.S. Army Lieutenant General John DeWitt.

Some argued that such **sentiments** went against everything the U.S. stood for—our principles of equality and justice. Others insisted that because it was

a time of war, extreme measures were justified. One journalist wrote that if any Japanese American were allowed to remain free in the U.S., “it might spell the greatest disaster in history.”

In February 1942, President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066. History would come to regard this order as one of America’s most shameful acts. Executive Order 9066 gave the military the power to remove all Japanese Americans—every man, woman, and child—from the West Coast and relocate them to internment camps in remote parts of the U.S.

Crowded, Smelly, Dusty

By spring, signs had appeared in Bill’s neighborhood ordering all persons of Japanese ancestry to

report to a local church by noon on May 9. The instructions said to bring bedding, clothes, utensils, and **personal effects**, but no more than could be carried. The instructions did not say where they would be going or how long they would be gone.

In the coming days, Bill’s family scrambled to sell their belongings. They gave up the lease on their store and hotel. They tried to sell the family truck, but no one would buy it, so they had to give it away.

Similar scenes played out up and down the West Coast, as Japanese Americans prepared for their forced **incarceration**. They sold what they could—houses, furniture, cars—often getting only a fraction of what they paid originally.

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

Eventually, everyone was loaded onto buses and taken to the Santa Anita Racetrack, one of 16 so-called assembly centers. These assembly centers were makeshift accommodations in fairgrounds, racetracks, and other large spaces, where Japanese Americans were to be held while more permanent relocation camps could be built.

Conditions at the racetrack were dismal—crowded, smelly, dusty. Bill’s grandparents had to sleep in the horse



CORBIS VIA GETTY IMAGES (GIRL); DOROTHEA LANGE/GETTY IMAGES (SIGN)



TAKEN AWAY

Left: Japanese Americans living on the West Coast, like this young girl, were shipped to relocation camps in isolated wilderness areas. Above: Some Japanese Americans posted signs like this after Pearl Harbor.

stalls, which reeked of manure. One day, Bill got lost trying to find the bathroom. “It was embarrassing,” he remembers. “I ended up wetting my pants. I’ll never forget that.”

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.

Heart Mountain

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

Nothing could prepare Bill for what greeted him at the end of his journey.

Stepping off the train, he gazed upon a desolate wilderness surrounded by towering snow-capped mountains. In the middle of this harsh landscape sat what would be his home for the next three years: the Heart Mountain Relocation Center.

LIFE AT CAMP Meals were eaten in communal mess halls. Kids went to school. Recreational activities, including movies and games, provided a distraction from the harsh realities of internment.

Located in a remote area of northwest Wyoming, this internment camp looked nothing like its name would suggest. Heart Mountain was a large compound enclosed by barbed wire and guarded by armed soldiers. The camp comprised row upon row of **barracks** covered in black tar paper. Heart Mountain would eventually imprison more than 10,000 people.

Bill, his parents, and his three siblings crowded into one sparsely furnished room. (After his mother had a baby, they were allowed a second room.) The thin walls did little to shield them from the frigid Wyoming winds and snows, which tended to start in September and last through April. In the beginning, medical supplies were lacking, and disease swept through the camp. Bill himself became dangerously ill with pneumonia.

Every day, there were humiliations that shame Bill even

now. He hated bathing in the one-room shower, with its eight showerheads and no privacy. The toilets were even worse. There were no doors or walls, so Bill had to do his business in front of everyone.

Life Goes On

During World War II, the U.S. operated 10 internment camps like Heart Mountain. All were built in remote areas for the purpose of isolating Japanese Americans from the rest of society.

Life in these camps was extremely difficult.

Barracks were cramped and poorly constructed. Dust and dirt were constantly invading. It always seemed to be too hot or too cold. Day to day life was monotonous—and strictly controlled. Letters were screened, meals served at appointed times, and protests swiftly squashed.

Still, many tried to make the best of their imprisonment. They had lost their freedom, their jobs, and their homes. Yet, they carried on with honor and dignity. They took pride in making their barracks as beautiful as possible; mothers stitched curtains to bring color to dreary windows, and fathers fashioned furniture from scraps of wood. Children attended camp schools and formed baseball teams.

One of Bill’s **consolations** during those long years was the camp’s Boy Scout troop because the troop got to hike outside the fence.





HONOR AND VALOR

Thousands of young Japanese Americans served in World War II, though many of their families were imprisoned back in the U.S. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team (at left) was made up almost entirely of American soldiers of Japanese descent. It became one of the most famous and decorated units, earning thousands of medals for bravery.

The End of the War

World War II ended in 1945 with the defeat of Japan and Germany. Celebrations spilled into the streets from Boston to Chicago. 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.

Eventually, all 10 camps were closed, and everyone was allowed to leave. But where would they go? Many had lost everything—and not only their homes and businesses. Their sense of safety and justice had been shattered by what the government had done to them.

Bill and his family left Heart Mountain and returned to Los Angeles to start over. After high school, Bill was drafted into the military and served in the Korean War. He later attended the University of Southern California, where his father had gone to college. Bill went on to become a teacher.

A Grave Injustice

Nearly 40 years after the camps closed, Congress launched an investigation. In the final report, Congress called the internment of Japanese Americans a “grave injustice” motivated by “racial prejudice, war hysteria, and the failure of political leadership.” The report led to an official apology, issued by President Ronald Reagan in 1988, and a \$20,000 **reparation** payment given to survivors. Bill gave his \$20,000 to the Japanese American National Museum in L.A., where he now gives tours.

Today, Bill is 87 years old. He feels a special responsibility to tell the story of what happened during World War II. “I wanted to tell our story because the general public does not know about it,” he says. “Everyone in America should know what happened to us . . . so it never happens again.” ●

Scope thanks the Densho organization for its generous research assistance.

Poem

Children of Camp

By Lawson Fusao Inada

There was no poetry in the camp.

Unless you can say
mud is poetry,
unless you can say
dust is poetry,
unless you can say
blood is poetry,
unless you can say
cruelty is poetry,
unless you can say
injustice is poetry,
unless you can say
imprisonment is poetry.

There was no poetry in the camp.

Unless you can say
families are poetry,
unless you can say
people are poetry.

And the people
made poetry
from camp.
And the people
made poetry
from camp.

Lawson Fusao Inada, “Children of Camp: IV” from *Drawing the Line*. ©1997 by Lawson Fusao Inada. Reprinted with permission of The Permissions Company, Inc., on behalf of Coffee House Press, Minneapolis, Minnesota. www.coffeehousepress.org

WRITING CONTEST

Explain what led to the internment of Japanese Americans in the 1940s. What could have been done differently to prevent this “grave injustice” from happening? Answer in a well-organized essay. Send it to **BILL SHISHIMA CONTEST**. Five winners will get *Weedflower* by Cynthia Kadohata.



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