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Internment led to joining the Mormon church

By Sharon Haddock , For the Deseret News

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GUNNISON, Utah — Because Charles and Bessie Inouye were interned together in the inhospitable Heart Mountain camp in Wyoming for Japanese-Americans, they met, fell in love and had a baby boy.

That child joined the Mormon church at 11 and so today, there's a whole bunch of Inouye cousins who are working to give back to their country.

Though it initially seems more than a little ironic, the grandchildren of Charles and Bessie feel gratitude for their many blessings and want to

honor their family's story.

"We feel it's a little like Lehi's story," said Melissa Inouye, one of the cousins running a summer arts camp each year in her grandparents' name. "Lehi ends up in the promised land after starting out in desolation. They always talked about this story."

"One thing they always told us was to remember to give back, following the Japanese saying 'Giri to Ninjo,' which means reciprocity," MeiLi Inouye said.

"Grandpa at some point had to make a conscious decision not to be bitter, accept your fate," Mika Inouye said.

He easily could have been.

During World War II, more than 100,000 Japanese-Americans like the Inouyes were herded together in relocation camps as fear took over the nation. Heart Mountain became the third largest "city" in Wyoming when 11,000 people were sent to live in 465 tarpaper barracks inside a barbed-wire enclosure.

"My uncle Dillon's first memory was of sand blowing through the fence," MeiLi Inouye said. Dillon

was the first in the family to join The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, followed soon after by his parents.

The internment camp was extremely cold and barren and offered little to the people who'd left behind comfortable homes, thriving businesses and productive lives.

But they took what they had and built a community that included a health care, irrigation, education and social system. They played sports, formed clubs and published a newspaper. They cleared the land and gardened. More than 500 babies were born. Nine hundred volunteered to serve in America's armed forces.

At the end of the internment, each person was given \$25 and a train ticket and sent out to start over.

The Inouyes went to Sigurd and Gunnison, where they raised their six children, joined the LDS Church and became staples of the community.

That's largely why the grandchildren hold their arts camp in Gunnison each year. They have friends and family and a legacy dominated by their grandparents' story. (Charles became the president of the Lions Club and Bessie organized an annual firefighters' dinner that featured her famous sweet and sour chicken and chow mein.)

The children and grandchildren are in awe of their grandparents. They recognize the inhumanity of the time and how easily the family could have decided to be bitter about their circumstances.

They're also aware that out of hardship comes strength and courage.

They proudly share journal poetry from their grandfather as he vented about the camp and the treatment of Japanese-Americans.

They keep pictures of relatives and people who suffered because of their internment. One aunt died as a direct result of exposure to the toxic down winds.

They all know the family narrative.

At the same time, they are cheerful, open and enthusiastic about giving freely of their time and talents through the arts camp which involves the entire family of now-educated, talented people.

"Every year, we just break even (on our costs)," said Mika Inouye. "But we all come."

"It's like a reunion for our family with a project," she said. "It's such a blessing and a way to keep our parents' memories alive."

Last year, 18 members of the Inouye family came to help teach the classes which include Japanese calligraphy, Japanese handwork and Japanese "Gyoza" or food art.

The classes, held this year June 28-July 2 in Gunnison, filled up with all kinds of children from 3 to 14 who learned about creative writing, making music, dance and beauty from their teachers.