

## Beyond the Barbed Wire CSU Alt Breakers Work to Preserve History in California Desert

By Brandon Iwamoto  
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The first car ride to Manzanar was silent — the radio was off, and the only sound was the steady hum of the van’s massive engine. At the end of a barbed-wire fence that stretched to the horizon, a wooden guard tower ascended into view.

The tower, 20 feet tall with platforms on two sides, overlooks a square mile of land that, six and a half decades ago, hosted the 10,000 people who were forced to live here.

Under the watchful eye of the armed soldiers who stood atop one of eight guard towers that once surrounded the land lived families and strangers of all ages and backgrounds.

But they had a few things in common.

They had slanted eyes and ate rice with most meals. They had ancestors who were warriors and farmers. They were Americans of Japanese descent.

And they were constantly reminded of their incarceration when they looked up and saw the guard towers.

These days, down a remote stretch of Highway 395 between the snow-capped Sierra Nevada and earthy Inyo Mountain ranges, the antiquated-looking replica guard tower serves as a prelude to 800 acres of land that was once dotted with military-style barracks and populated by over 10,000 persons of Japanese ancestry.

Last week, that prison tower greeted two vans of college volunteers.

The students, participants in a CSU-sponsored Alternative Spring Break, will remember the image of the wooden sentinel station long after the trip is over.

“That tower — seeing that tower — that’s when it hit me,” CSU student and co-leader Andrew Stewart said one night around the fire at the group’s campsite about five miles north of the one-time prison. “And we’re here to preserve it.”

These students were here to restore parts of the once-abandoned land to the way it looked in the 1940s when then-President Roosevelt ordered 110,000 Japanese Americans to one of 10 relocation camps across the country, including one in Grenada, Colo., about 130 miles east of Pueblo.

Once the vans were finally parked inside the barbed wire, the students walked at their own paces past a national historic marker on a rock toward the interpretive center.

During World War II, the people imprisoned here constructed this building to be used as an auditorium. Today, it is the educational epicenter of this National Park Service site, where visitors and students come to learn the plight of people banished from their homes to this nowhere in response to the attack at Pearl Harbor, in addition to several thousand years of history in the area.

“Volunteers have really transformed the landscape and many of them brought their stories with them,” said Richard Potashin, park ranger and oral historian. “Many of them bring not only manual labor but valuable stories that we’re impoverished without.”

In the CSU group, there were plenty of stories. There was a history major and a Japanese-language student. Three other students, including this *Collegian* reporter, had family members locked in these camps. The rest had heard of internment but didn’t know many of the specific details.

#### 十四丁目 — **BLOCK 14**

Just outside the Manzanar National Historic Park’s interpretive center is Block 14, a plot of land covered in tumbleweed and sagebrush. At the west end of the plot is a black structure lined vertically with wooden beams that looks more like the skeleton of a building than a finished replica of a 1940s-era military mess hall.

Park Ranger Kirk Peterson, a soft-spoken oral historian who has spent the past two years at Manzanar, thumbed through the stack of pen-marked black and white photographs used as guides to accurately restoring the mess hall and passed them around to students as he introduced them to the restoration efforts.

Soon, the group would be donning gloves and grabbing pitchforks and rakes and spending four days pulling weeds and clearing brush on this particular block. The mess hall would offer shade and a place to rest from the heavy sun.

One of 36 nearly identical residential blocks, Block 14 contained 14 barracks that housed around 300 internees in total — approximately 20 people per barrack.

Each block also contained two latrines, a laundry room, an ironing room and a recreation room.

Since the designation of the National Historic Site in 1992, the National Park Service has relied on volunteers like the CSU alternative spring break crew to help renovate the land to resemble its former existence.

This is important, park officials say, because thousands of people visit Manzanar (which is Spanish for “apple orchard”) each year for many different reasons. Some are survivors and some are their families, while others are looking for answers about all races in the wake of 9/11 and the ongoing immigration debates.

“Initially we saw a large majority of visitors of Japanese descent,” Nancy Haddock, park ranger and Potashin’s wife, said about the site’s early days. “That seems to be changing because I think the message that this isn’t just about Japanese-Americans but everybody.”

According to Manzanar superintendent Les Inafuku, the park is close to achieving the goals set on its 1996 General Management Plan, which allows for the construction of at least two replica barracks, the replica guard tower and maintenance of the three existing historic structures out of an original 800.

“I’d like to eventually amend the General Management Plan to allow for an entire block – barracks, classrooms and all,” said Inafuku, a *sansei*, or third generation Japanese-American, who did not have family interned during the war.

Officials said the goal behind the reconstruction efforts at Manzanar is to show visitors exactly what life was like inside the internment camps across the country.

Potashin already has a way of demonstrating this.

While giving a tour last week to students from nearby Big Pine High School, he brought them to the concrete slab remains of a typical latrine.

Atop the platform were eight broken pipes spaced about two feet apart, in two rows of four, where he told eight students to squat.

They sat within elbow distance of each other with no partitions between toilets. One student had a sheet wrapped around her head to demonstrate one of the ways internees found privacy in the otherwise degrading bathrooms.

On April 25, as many as 1,000 people — including former internees and their families — will enter Manzanar and drive past Block 14 where a replica mess hall stands alone at the end of an empty lot. Visitors will then proceed to the cemetery where there will be speeches, dances and remembering.

“When they see the construction fence around the mess hall is gone and when they see all the brush that doesn’t belong has been removed and how prominent the mess hall is,” Inafuku said, “I think it’s going to make ... a big visual impact.”

### **明里登公園 — Merritt Park**

Each day under the sun, rakes and shovels brushed against relics and artifacts. Some were practical in nature, others aesthetic, but all were used during the camp’s active days. Rusted red and stone, the items reminded the students of the evidence archeologists uncover when searching for ancient civilizations.

The only difference is these relics and artifacts may have been in the possession of people who are still alive today.

“I remember in school talking a lot about slavery, and, while it was a blight on our history, there isn’t anyone alive who was an American slave,” said senior psychology major Wendy Christensen, also a Japanese language student. “But there are still Japanese-Americans alive who remember being imprisoned by their own country.”

“It reminds me that, even though things have come a long way, this could have happened within living memory.”

After an afternoon of work, Peterson told stories of a once green, stone-lined Japanese-style garden in the camp complete with a waterfall, wooden bridges and benches.

The internees built the peaceful oasis to escape from the sight of guard towers and barbed wire fences. They built a place they could come to forget their imprisonment for crimes they did not commit.

More than half a century later, the former haven had been reduced to the same earthy brown the entire Owens Valley range wears. The trees are bare, and no water flows through the shallow ditch that was once a manmade stream.

The shaded sanctuary was early on known as “Pleasure Park” but was later renamed in honor of the camp director. In the center of a small circular arrangement of trees is a monument inscribed with the words *meirito kouen* — Merritt Park.

Peterson, a veteran of the Chaco National Historic Park in northwestern New Mexico, often told such stories and historical tidbits as the volunteers worked and toured the camp, discussing everything from rock formations that welcomed visitors to their homes, the local wildlife and the ways the former inhabitants made life in the desert bearable.

“The stories were really important to the work, to really understanding the importance of the work we’re doing here,” said Mikiko Kumasaka, director of Asian/Pacific American Student Services.

“(It) helps us understand why this place needs to be preserved and taken care of.”

Senior history major Jim Bertolini said the stories are a reaffirmation that history isn’t just a set of dates and events.

“It’s about people and their stories,” he said. “It’s a process of Democracy.”

Co-leader Sweta Lohani agreed.

“People have to come out here to understand it,” she said. “They don’t understand what it’s like to walk on the same road as the internees walked half a century ago.”

マンザナーに送別 – **Farewell to Manzanar**

As the last living internees pass away, the sands of time threaten to bury their experiences and perspectives — much like the artifacts they left behind — if they are not dusted off and taken care of.

“It’ll change this place, it’ll change the way we tell the story (when internees pass away),” Ranger Hadlock said. “There’s still enough people around who still remember it, but that generation is going.”

“It’s a powerful story,” Potashin said. “It’s stirring and sad and uplifting. That’s what makes history interesting.”

While weathered and wrinkled strands of countless origami cranes that were draped across fence posts danced in the wind, the Fort Collins volunteers stood before a white concrete obelisk in a cemetery built at the base of Mount Williamson in 1943 by stone mason Ryozo Kado, just beyond the barbed wire surrounding Manzanar.

Inscribed on the front of the obelisk in flowing, calligraphic Kanji of the Japanese language are the words *ireitou*, or Soul Consoling Tower. At the base of the tower the volunteers placed a gift, signed by each of the students, with green sticks of Japanese incense burning beside it.

They held hands as they laid the gift — a plastic *kagami mochi*, or layered rice cake decoration traditionally associated with New Years — then, stepping back, bowed to the memorial.

Some say the *kagami mochi* symbolizes the coming and going of years. Others say it symbolizes the moon and sun. But that day in the Manzanar cemetery, the *kagami mochi* symbolized only one thing.

The human heart.