

Analyzing a Primary Source

KEY STANDARD
RH.6-8.2

Behind Barbed Wire

In 1942, during World War II, more than 100,000 Americans of Japanese descent were forced to leave their homes and jobs in the West. Relocated to internment camps in remote areas, they spent nearly three years in captivity (see “We Are Americans Too!,” *History Plays insert*, pp. 2-5).

At age 9, Tim Taira (*TYE-rah*) of Fresno, California, became one of those captives. Given

only five days to prepare, the boy, his two brothers, and their parents were forced to leave nearly everything behind—including their pet dog. The family was first sent to a temporary site, then to two internment camps in Arkansas.

Decades later, Taira, now 85, wrote up his memories of that experience. Read these excerpts, then answer the questions.

Our first stop [was] a hastily constructed . . . camp at the Fresno County Fairgrounds. The Assembly Center was designed like a prison. The **barracks** were enclosed behind barbed-wire fencing, with guard towers and armed [guards] patrolling the perimeter on foot. The barracks themselves were bare except for army cots. I remember that there were weeds growing through the wide cracks in the floor. The interior spaces were not [divided] for families, who hung canvas or bedsheets for privacy. We were provided with mattress covers and ordered to fill them with hay from a stack about one-half mile distant. The hay was infested with fleas and other bugs and everyone got bitten. The most miserable part was the heat. There was no [way to cool off] during the hot (over 105°F) Fresno summer. . . .

School was conducted in horse barns with only an open door to provide light and ventilation. The volunteer teachers stood the whole time, while the students sat on bales of hay. We had centralized dining, **latrines**, washrooms. . . . There were long

lines at the mess hall for our unappetizing meals. [We lacked] refrigeration, [so] our food quickly spoiled in the summer heat. An entire block of over 200 [people] was stricken by food poisoning, with no medical help available. . . .

The adults set priorities and made numerous sacrifices in the camps to ensure that the next generation had every advantage possible under the circumstances. Their motto was *kodomo no tameni*—“for the sake of the children.” Instead of simply giving in to despair, they worked hard to make a tight-knit, smoothly running society. . . . Education, public health, fire, and police were mostly staffed and run by the inmates. . . .

[In 1945, when Taira was 12, the internees were finally released.] Eventually most internees returned to their West Coast roots. We were not welcomed back, and faced [widespread] discrimination in housing, jobs, business, schools, and public recreational facilities. Matters have slowly improved over time, but as with all minorities, differences and prejudices will always remain.

- **barracks** (*n*): a group of barn-like structures providing temporary housing
- **latrine** (*n*): an outdoor toilet that is usually a hole dug in the ground

SOURCE: “Relocation Recollections” by Tim Taira. Used by permission of the author.

Questions

1. Which details in Tim Taira’s account reveal the harsh conditions internees faced?
2. How long was Taira in captivity? How do you know?
3. What does *kodomo no tameni* mean? What are some examples of people living by that motto?
4. Why do you think Taira considered it important to write a record of his experiences?
5. Which detail(s) in Taira’s account did you find most vivid or revealing? If you could ask him one question about his internment experience, what would it be and why?