

LANDMARKS

WWII station to get marker

Japanese-American internment
camp in La Tuna Canyon is cited

By Julia Wick

Correspondent

Unlike many other landmarks, Los Angeles Cultural Monument No. 1039 does not demarcate an architecturally significant structure, a century-old house or the former home of a historical figure. Instead, it marks a 1-acre grove of mature oak trees, which is all that remains of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station.

But it's here, just north of the 210 Freeway in Tujunga, that more than 2,000 primarily Japanese-American individuals were imprisoned during World War II. From 1941 until 1943, the Tuna Canyon Detention Station served as a waystation of sorts, where men labeled by the government as "dangerous enemy aliens" were brought and temporarily housed before being sent to internment camps around the country.

This morning, the city's Department of Transportation will install a beige and brown sign at the intersection of La Tuna Canyon Road, Tujunga Canyon Boulevard and Honolulu Avenue marking Monument No. 1039 and labeling it as a World War II confinement site. All evidence of the detention center had been razed by 1960,

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when the site was converted into the Verdugo Hills Golf Course. Though the mere act of adding signage may seem small, it has been nearly five years since the site was officially added to the city's Register of Historic Cultural Monuments by the Los Angeles City Council. Councilmembers Monica Rodriguez and David Ryu introduced the motion for the marker.

"It's like evidence that we were here, so to speak," Nancy Kyoko Oda, one of the driving forces behind the campaign, said of the sign.

The 72-year-old retired elementary school principal is a self-described "child of the camps." Oda was born at the Tule Lake camp in Northern California, one of 10 permanent relocation centers where Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast were forcibly housed during World War II. Approximately 120,000 Americans of Japanese descent, roughly two-thirds of whom were American citizens, were incarcerated by the federal government during a dark chapter of the nation's history.

The United States Immigration and Naturalization Service opened Tuna Canyon Detention Station on Dec. 16, 1941, less than two weeks after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The site had been a work camp for the Civilian Conservation Corps, a New Deal-era federal public works program. Constructed by Army contractors in 1933, the camp's buildings, including seven barracks and a mess hall, were in use by the CCC until the fall of 1941. All that was added was 12-foot-high barbed wire fence and lighting enclosing the entire compound.

"Most people stayed only two weeks," Oda said of the Tuna Canyon Detention Station. "They were moved here and then they were moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico



The Tuna Canyon Detention Center during World War II. A guard sits in an office with a view of the camp and communication systems.

COURTESY PHOTO

Bismarck, North Dakota, Crystal City, Texas," Oda continued, naming the locations of a number of Justice Department detention camps.

According to Oda, the detainees arrived in waves, with the first group including prominent community members.

"The first wave — according to the diaries and letters and poems I have — were mainly people with influence, like Buddhist and Shinto priests, successful business people, newspaper journalists," Oda said.

The detainees were largely Japanese-American, although their numbers also included individuals of Italian, German, and Japanese-Peruvian descent.

"We are prohibited to go within 10 feet of the fence, and it is most painful to be cut off from the outside world," Daisho Tana, a teacher and Buddhist priest wrote in a March 1942 diary entry.

The path to landmark status was far from simple. The site, which was used as a county boys' probation school from the mid-1940s until the early 1950s, was purchased by a group of doctors with big plans for a golf course. According to a Department of City Planning report, all the original buildings were demolished in 1960 when the site reopened as the Verdugo Hills Golf Course.

According to Oda, there was often familial stigma

around internment.

"Most of the Japanese-Americans and Japanese chose not to speak about it," she said, though her own family did discuss their time imprisoned at Tule Lake.

Lingering shame and limited access to records — wartime documents related to the camp weren't declassified until the 1990s — curtailed public knowledge of the golf course's dark history.

Local historians such as Lloyd Hitt — a retired Sunland pharmacist, Korean War veteran and former president of Sunland-Tujunga's Little Landers Historical Society — played a pivotal role in raising awareness about Tuna Canyon Detention Station, and gathering information on its history. Hitt also helped push for preservation status after Snowball West Investments purchased the golf course in 2004 and announced plans a few years later to convert the golf course into a several-hun-

dred unit housing complex.

But what, exactly, was there to preserve? The watchtower, barbed wire perimeter fence and barracks had already been gone for more than a half-century when the historic-cultural monument application came before the city's Cultural Heritage Commission in April 2013. The commission unanimously rejected the application, arguing that the site failed to meet the criteria for historic designation since none of the physical buildings associated with the camp remained.

But the City Council, led by then-Councilmember Richard Alarcon, overturned the commission's decision, voting unanimously in June 2013 to grant landmark status to a 1-acre plot of the site where the oak trees date back to the site's World War II-era incarnation as a detention center.

Developer Snowball West Investments brought a lawsuit seeking to reverse the historic-cultural monument designation that same year.

Thought for the Day

ELIE WIESEL,
AUTHOR, NOBEL LAUREATE AND HOLOCAUST SURVIVOR

"The opposite of love is not hate, it's indifference. The opposite of art is not ugliness, it's indifference. The opposite of faith is not heresy, it's indifference. And the opposite of life is not death, it's indifference. Because of indifference, one dies before one actually dies. To be in the window and watch people being sent to concentration camps or being attacked in the street and do nothing, that's being dead." (1986)

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