

Heart Mountain center lands grant

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HEART MOUNTAIN -- An interpretive learning center under construction here has received a boost in the form of a \$282,000 federal grant, and organizers are planning a celebration to mark progress on the project and gather artifacts from the former camp.

"We're very pleased with that award, and it is going to help us as we continue to meet our fundraising goals. We've raised over \$2.6 million already, so we have met the 50 percent match requirement for the grant," said Dave Reetz, executive director of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

The foundation received the largest share of nearly \$1 million in National Park Service grant funding awarded in support of several projects to study and preserve sites where a total of 110,000 Japanese-Americans were detained during World War II.

Reetz said the Heart Mountain project fared well in the grant process because it has already received significant private donations, it has completed construction on its first phase, and it "leverages the power of place" by being the only private museum located at the site of a former internment camp.

The foundation is hosting a gathering Aug. 15 to celebrate progress on the \$5.5 million project that will re-create the primitive barracks that were home during the war to 11,000 people.

The group also is seeking artifacts from residents and former internees to add to an archival collection documenting camp life, with items to be used in displays at the center when it is completed.

Organizers have been collecting artifacts for more than a decade, Reetz said, adding that former internees and others will be traveling to Heart Mountain next month to donate documents and items for the center's archives.

"We need to broaden and deepen our collections so that the Heart Mountain story can be effectively told with actual items from this period of history," he said.

"We therefore urge everyone, particularly in our area, to look in their attics, basements, storage sheds to see if they have items to help us," Reetz said, adding that each item recovered is an "invaluable and unique resource with a story to tell."

Residents of the Independence, Calif., area have donated numerous items that have become part of a collection documenting life at an internment camp there, said Carrie Andresen, a park ranger at the Manzanar National Historic Site.

"There were over 800 buildings here, and only three original buildings remain," Andresen said of the site, managed by the National Park Service and visited by 90,000 people each year.

Andresen is organizing volunteers working this summer on archaeological digs at what were a camouflage netting factory, a community garden and a chicken ranch where internees worked.

Several private companies employed detainees at facilities inside Manzanar, including a mattress plant, garment factory and soy sauce brewery, Andresen said.

Reetz said plans called for opening a ceramics factory at Heart Mountain, but internees focused instead on growing crops, including a number of vegetables used in Japanese cuisine but not otherwise available locally.

The Heart Mountain center will feature a large vegetable garden re-creating many of the crops grown by internees, Reetz said, adding that volunteer gardeners may host a farmer's market on the site.

Planning continues on the displays and exhibits, with former Park Service interpretive specialists working with the group, Reetz said.

With the first 7,000-square-foot building shell completed, the foundation will seek bids this fall on the second phase, an additional barracks-style building that will be connected to the existing two.

"We've only moved ahead as far as we've had funds, so we've shown everyone that we're using the money wisely," Reetz said.

As funds become available, work will begin on the interior and exhibits, with a goal of completing the project for a late 2010 or early 2011 opening, he said.

Reetz said the federal grant marks an "exciting step forward," adding that "the momentum on the project will continue, so the future looks promising for us."