

A Skelton in the Closet

TOPAZ

INTERNMENT

CAMP

Millard Co., [UTAH](#)

by

Gary B Speck

hysteria that swept the nation at the beginning of that horrible conflict is through the words of those affected, and through the written word and photographs discovered via research. The subject of this vignette IS a physical location that was one of the largest of the ten Relocation Centers established during that conflict.

These Relocation Centers were part of a larger network of camps and centers of varying levels to hold upwards of 120,000 people, most of whom were American citizens. The subject of the incarceration of these folks is a tender, emotional topic, both for those involved and the general public of the time. However, looking back from a generation differential, the fact remains that it DID happen and I am not passing judgment on the yeas or nays, or the whys and wherefores of the situation, but hopefully just presenting the facts of what did happen, and the physical remnants of this specific location. With that in mind, let's pay a visit to Topaz, Utah.



SHORTLY AFTER

the Empire of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, American history changed. Our innocence was gone, and the United States was tossed onto the world stage. The results of that attack and our subsequent declaration of war on both Japan and Germany are well documented, and not a subject for this vignette. I am a baby-boomer, born a half- decade after World War II (WWII) ended, and my only knowledge of the

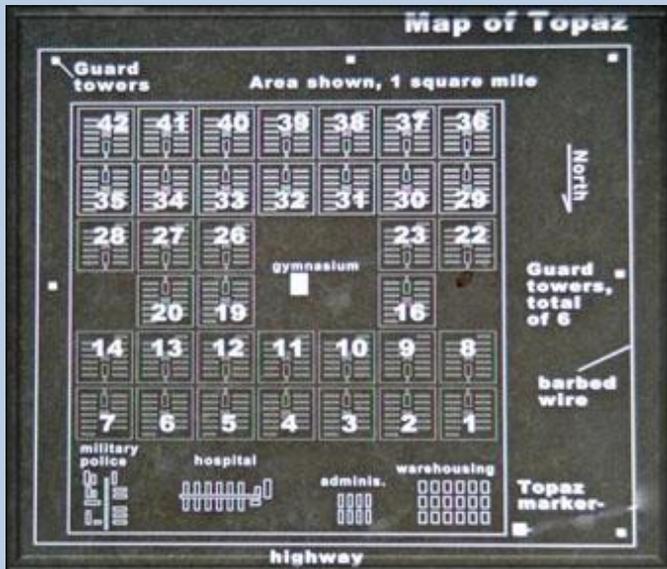
Topaz Relocation Center is located 16 miles northwest of Delta and readily accessible via paved roads.

This one of the researched stops on my summer 2008 Utah Ghost Town tour, because I really wanted to see this infamous camp. I have visited the [Manzanar Relocation Center](#) many times and actually knew several people who spent the war years interned there. Because of that, there is a bit of a personal attachment to the story of these camps.

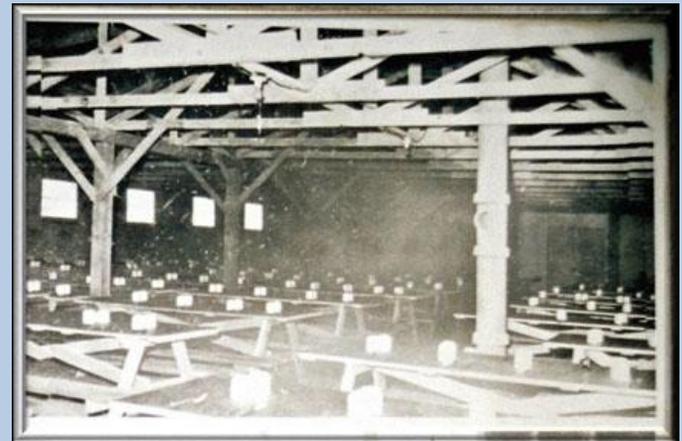


Contemporary view of Topaz - from an onsite plaque

The site is open to drive in, and before doing so, I highly recommend reading the story of Topaz on the entry plaques. As you cruise up and down the deteriorating roads, roll the window down, or better yet, get out and walk. Absorb the feelings of this historic place. Free your imagination and try to feel what it would be like to have been forced from your home in California's San Francisco Bay area, loaded onto busses or trucks and relocated to the barren, windswept Sevier Desert. What would it have been like to live in almost total isolation for several years with 8000 of our fellow Americans.



Prior to departure on the trip, I had thoroughly researched the location and knew it would be a worthwhile stop. Online aerial photos showed outlines of the barracks blocks and other buildings, and as a result, I kept thinking of the photography angle. Topaz (sorry - no metal detectors allowed inside the site) has not been restored, nor does it have the scenic appeal of Manzanar, in eastern California's Inyo County. Even though the scenery isn't Utah's finest, the site makes up for it in solitude. During my hour-long visit, no one else showed up on the flat, mile-square plot. Off to the north, a towering thunderstorm rumbling and a brisk breeze coming from it carrying the scent of damp sagebrush and rain. The ghosts of the not too distant past were rattling their skeletons. As I stood next to my car in the gravel parking area on the northwest corner of the site, I tried to reach into the past and sense the hidden stories.



Interior of mess hall during time of use

The Topaz Relocation Center was in operation September 11, 1942 - October 31, 1945. At its peak, the facility had 623 buildings and 8130 people (another source claims 8316) mostly from the San Francisco Bay area of Northern California. When it was full, Topaz was the fifth largest city in Utah.

The main, one square mile part of the site contained the residential and administrative activity, but was just a small part of the overall center. Spreading across 19,800 acres off to the northeast and south-southeast, the outlying land nearly wrapped around the farming community of Abraham and was used for agricultural purposes. Today, most of that outlying land is under private ownership and used for agricultural purposes, although ruins and a few buildings still remain.



Site of the Topaz High School

In the main square mile residential portion, no buildings remain from the 1940s, but rubble and slabs lie scattered all over. Most of the roads are still drivable, and desert scrub has taken over where buildings, gardens and sports fields once stood. Even though a few of the building sites are marked, no brochures or other documents are available onsite to lend a hand in identification. I was able to compare aerial photos of the site at its prime with the ruins and identify the foundations of numerous structures.



Administration area slabs



Onsite rubble

Once you really start researching the site, it starts to take form. Warehouses refill with goods, the Administrative offices come alive with staff members, the hospital is re-staffed with doctors and nurses, all caring for the sick and injured. The entrance sentry post, seven guard towers, the Military Police quarters and barbed wire enclosure also lend an ominous air to the site. Each of 34 blocks are filled with "residences," in reality not much more than a dozen wood-framed barracks aligned in orderly rows with a central mess hall, recreation hall and bathing/laundry/latrine facilities.



Mess hall slab - 2008

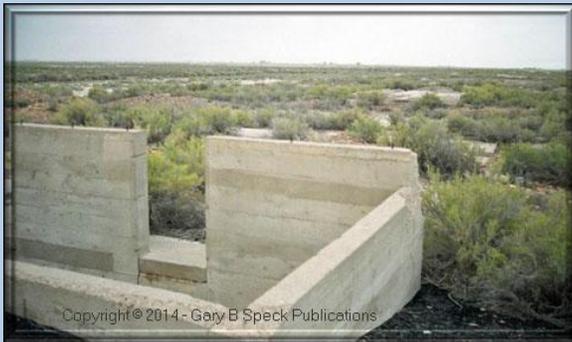
When it was first established it was known as the Abraham Relocation Center, but that name was quickly changed to Topaz.

Other than a few mobile homes and other privately owned houses dating to more recent times and located on the southeastern corner of the site, the class B site of Topaz remains mostly unspoiled, unrestored and unassuming, a true gem in the rough.



Rock wall in Administration area

For more information on Topaz and the other internment camps, I highly recommend the 450-page book *Confinement & Ethnicity - An Overview of World War II Japanese American Relocation Sites*. (ISBN: 0-295-98156-3). Authors are: Jeffrey F. Burton, Mary M. Farrell, Florence B. Lord and Richard W. Lord. Publisher is the University of Washington Press. It is copyright 2002.



Coal storage bin at the site hospital

This was our **Ghost Town of the Month for March 2014**.

LOCATION:

- *Sec 20, T16S, R8W, (Salt Lake Meridian & Base Line)*
- *Latitude: 39.4143965 / 39° 24' 52" N*
- *Longitude: -112.7727318 / 112° 46' 22" W*

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