



Gayle Greetham

Civilian

Topaz Internment Camp

Date Interviewed: 7/27/06

Location of Interview:
Eccles Broadcast Center, Salt Lake City, UT

Interviewer:
Rick Randle

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Rick Randle: Go back to when you first heard about Topaz and the fact that you might go there to live there. Tell us what your thoughts were.

Gayle Greetham: Well as best I can remember my uncle, before he got the offer to go down to Topaz and work for the CCC in some capacity, I don't remember what it was, it was an opportunity, as I can recall for him to go down there. I don't remember what his job title was, but it was quite a step up working in the government. So he was pretty excited about going down, of course we didn't know what the conditions were down there at the time and we didn't really understand what was going on until we got there, and how the internees were. I think that was kind of a jolt for everybody.

Rick Randle: Where were you living?

Gayle Greetham: We were living in Salt Lake City. Actually we were living in Sugarhouse enjoying a normal life. I remember when December 7th happened we came home from church and he had to point out to me where Pearl Harbor was and with an atlas. I didn't, at that time, know where I was and particularly didn't care. However you know like all children at twelve years old, why I was immediately unhappy with the Japanese for having done that. So that was sort of the background when I went down there. I had in my mind that they were probably getting what they deserved.

Rick Randle: Were you attending school here in Salt Lake?

Gayle Greetham: Oh yes.

Rick Randle: Where were going to school?

Gayle Greetham: Forrest School on 2100 South and 900 East.

Rick Randle: Did they have air-raid drills and things like that?

Gayle Greetham: I don't recall that they did. Yes, I think they did come to think of it. They taught us how to evacuate the schools as I recall now thinking about it, yes.

Rick Randle: When you first heard that you were going to have to move, tell us of your thoughts and what you were thinking about going down there.

Gayle Greetham: Well, my uncle Dorin... I called him Pete but Dorin was quite excited about going down so I looked forward to it. There again I had no clue what it was like down there. I wasn't too disturbed as I recall about going down there. I didn't like leaving my friends at school but something new.

Rick Randle: So you looked on it as an adventure maybe. When you got there and saw the conditions, try to describe those conditions and what they were like.

Gayle Greetham: Well, when we got down there the housing for staff and internees was half a WWII barracks. They were made into duplexes. They were basically one big room with some partial walls up and there was a big sink for the kitchen. I can remember that. It was one of the old stone-type sinks that they had in those days. The heating was a coal space heater that heated the whole thing. There was one bedroom, and the living (if you could call it that) and dining kitchen area were sort of an "L". It was tarpaper shack basically. There was no sheet rock or anything on the inside. It was the black tarpaper that was on the outside and you saw it from the inside. I don't recall that there was any lighting in there other than what hung from the ceilings. They were pretty basic. There was a small bathroom and bathtub, a toilet and a washbasin. I don't remember much more than that as far as... I think the floor was all linoleum, the whole floor. I can remember it was very cold. We went down in November in '42 and then when the really cold weather came the barracks had no skirting along the bottom and the wind blew underneath the barracks and it made the cold very very cold. The living conditions weren't all that great. We had the same living conditions as the internee staff did. Whether or not it improved after I left I don't know. I know they did put skirting around the bottom of them later on, but I don't know what other improvements were made in those buildings.

Rick Randle: Did they just have one Japanese internee family living in one half just like you guys were?

Gayle Greetham: Ya. They were split into duplexes and each duplex side had a family in it and it didn't matter how many people were in that family. I imagine for some of those internees with many kids it was probably pretty bad.

Rick Randle: At twelve years old I imagine you made some friends with some of the internees.

Gayle Greetham: Yes, we had to go to school in Delta. The staff children had to go to school in Delta so we were up before the sun came up, on the bus and went into Delta and by the time we got home it was dark so we didn't get to play with any of the children during the week. However on weekends we played with the internees and had a great time as far as that was concerned you know playing with the other children. Unfortunately I don't remember any of them particularly. There was one boy named Tommy and another one named Jack. They all seemed to have American names. I think probably they had Japanese names but they were called Tommy and Jack. I can remember those two but other than that I don't recall too many of them.

Rick Randle: Did you ever discuss with them about there situation?

Gayle Greetham: No, we really didn't get into that. We were mostly interested in playing games and having fun. If they had any feelings about it, they never said anything. They seemed to be happy.

Rick Randle: What kind of games did you play on the weekends?

Gayle Greetham: A lot of it was hide and seek—things of that type. In the winter down there it was pretty cold so you know we weren't able to play—well we did play a little bit of football... ya we played a little football. But nothing was really organized at that point in time. I can

remember when we went into Delta at recess and there they had basketball standards and we did play some basketball until it got too cold.

Rick Randle: How did the children in Delta treat you when you went to school there?

Gayle Greetham: Well I don't think that the families in Delta were happy to have Topaz there. I think the attitude rubbed off that we were outsiders and I don't know if it was any worse if a bunch of us had moved down from the big city because Delta at that time of course was a small town. We never had any fights particularly. As my attitude changed towards the Japanese I had to be careful what I said because I had some Japanese friends and I'm sure if I had said something about it, it would have caused trouble so I just kept my mouth shut.

Rick Randle: How has your personal attitude changed about those internment camps having been there and reflecting on it?

Gayle Greetham: It was probably one of the biggest mistakes the United States has ever made. My attitude changed considerably after I was down there probably less than a month once I got to know the children and the families and the parents. They were very nice people. And what was going on just wasn't right. My uncle's attitude was that way very early. He felt that it wasn't a thing that we should have done.

Rick Randle: So you never heard any of the Japanese-Americans complain about that?

Gayle Greetham: Never heard a word about it. The children all seemed to be happy and the parents went about their business. I'm sure in private there was plenty said but, you know, they seemed to accept it and they went along. As far as I know everything was fine. I never heard anything. Maybe they were being careful around me, I don't know, but as far as the children were concerned, we never had a minute struggle. As far as I know there were never any fights between the staff children and the internees. I never heard of anything.

Rick Randle: How about fights among the Japanese themselves?

Gayle Greetham: Not that I know of. There was a situation where the married men... the older men had jobs around the camp hauling coal or doing maintenance work or something of that nature. I think the kids that had it toughest were the ones that were out of school. They did have school there for the internee children, but there were that group of kids that were out of school but they weren't married and didn't have families and they didn't have a lot to do. I can remember watching those older kids playing football and it was freezing cold and it was terribly muddy. They seemed to be having a great time. Maybe that's when they were taking out their aggressions, I don't know.

Rick Randle: Talk about the type of jobs the older men had.

Gayle Greetham: They had people who... the space heaters in each one of the units was a coal-fired space heater and so the coal had to be distributed to the duplexes and they had these men (I remember that distinctly) that would carry the coal and deposit it, if I remember it right, in a bin. There was a bin there that they would put the coal in and then there were people who were like fire wardens and I remember some of them were carpenters. I remember distinctly one man walking around and he had a toolbox and he had carpentry tools in it and they had plumbers that did that kind of stuff, you know some maintenance work. I don't remember too much about any of the other people but I distinctly remember those men carrying coal.

Rick Randle: What year was this?

Gayle Greetham: It was 1942 and the spring of '43.

Rick Randle: What were the circumstances when you left? Did you have Japanese-American friends you said goodbye to?

Gayle Greetham: Well yes, some of the children. There again I kind of hated to leave the kids but I was not unhappy to leave Topaz, I really wasn't. That place was enough. I'd had it! I was ready to leave and go to California.

Rick Randle: You were there in the winter?

Gayle Greetham: We went down there in November and I left sometime in the spring.

Rick Randle: Can you surmise what it must have been like in the summer?

Gayle Greetham: I can only imagine that it must have been terribly hot, particularly with those barracks being black tarpaper. It would have just absorbed the heat like crazy. I can't imagine how bad it must have been, and it was probably very dusty. I don't know that and wasn't there but judging by... when we got down there the camp had just opened and there was of course no grass or plants that I recall of any kind... no trees. So I would imagine when it dried out in the spring that with the wind blowing in Delta it was probably pretty bad with the dust and the heat. I just don't know how they would have made it.

Rick Randle: Was there a fence around the perimeter?

Gayle Greetham: Yes, there was a gate because we had to go through that gate every morning when we went out and when we came in. There were military police there at the gate and I assume they were all around the perimeter. I don't know. I never went over by the gate. Where we were I don't remember exactly, but we must have been somewhere more towards the interior of the camp because I don't remember the fence. There had to have been a fence around it. I'm sure there must have been a fence. We did go through a gate both going out and coming back... I recall that. They had to stop the bus and the MP would go in and he'd look to see if the children were in there each time we went out or came in.

Rick Randle: One thing that surprised me was that each of them had a toilet facility... they didn't have a central latrine or anything like that?

Gayle Greetham: No, not that I recall. Each one of them, as I recall, had a small bathroom in them. I'm pretty sure I would have remembered a latrine because I can remember when I went into the service about the latrines. I'm pretty sure there was a toilet facility.

Rick Randle: Did you ever have an opportunity to go inside one of your friend's places?

Gayle Greetham: Yes, if I remember right... one particular family and I sure can't remember their name. It would have been Tommy's parents. I was in their place but I didn't really pay much attention to it other than it was just like ours.

Rick Randle: Did any of your pals that were internees ever talk about where they came from?

Gayle Greetham: I'm pretty sure they came from Central California but I don't know. I'm reasonably sure they came from Central California. I don't remember much other than that. I've read some things that would color my thinking on that but as far as I know they came from Central California.

Rick Randle: I understand for years they've had a reunion of these internees. Did you ever go to one?

Gayle Greetham: No I never did. My uncle use to go quite often, particularly if it was somewhere here close. As I understand, they use to move them around. If it was really close here my uncle attended, my aunt and uncle both and from what I can understand, he was quite well liked or I don't think they would have invited him. The one family, and there again I'm having to quote my cousin; I think their name was Harata and they were quite close. They continued their friendship and they wrote letters back and forth all through the year's right up until my uncle died.

Rick Randle: Is there anything else that you can think of that we haven't covered that you think might be important for future generations?

Gayle Greetham: Ya... don't do it again! When you look back on it, as far as I know there was never ever, even in Hawaii, a case of espionage by the Japanese-Americans. I don't think the same thing can be said for Germans. And yet nobody ever considered locking up all the Germans which again would have been a mistake, but nonetheless that's how unfair I thought it was... that they would pick these people out and round them up and put them in a place like that. I mean they could have put them in a better place. Again, it's my own opinion but I feel almost like some of them had their big farms taken away from them because other people wanted those big farms.

Rick Randle: It's certainly an unusual episode in our history.

Gayle Greetham: Like I say, I wouldn't want to hear of it again!

Rick Randle: What do you remember about the hardships incurred during the war; rationing, and VJ day and the atomic bomb? Give us a brief rundown on what you remember about that.

Gayle Greetham: Well there were things that were a little bit tough; I mean there I was a youngster, a teenager. Candy was hard to come by. Chewing gum was definitely hard to come by. If you heard that somebody had chewing gum at one of the drugstores you flat-footed up there and got some. Gasoline rationing was a problem because if the family wanted to take a ride on Sunday it was only if you had saved up enough ration stamps to go on your Sunday trips. Meat rationing again was another that you learned to get along with the cheaper cuts and of course most of the cheaper cuts now are the expensive cuts today. Tires were hard to come by so you were restricted in your traveling. In order to buy a new bicycle you had to get approval and go through a rigmarole to get approval to buy a bicycle. VE day—I can remember that pretty distinctly. We were living here back in Salt Lake City at the time and I took a bus downtown and boy it was wild! If I remember right I was 15 and the service men that were stationed in Kearns and Hill Field what have you... a lot of them were downtown. I mean it was one big party! There were a whole bunch of drunken service people downtown having a great time. There were a lot of girl's downtown with them that were having a great time. I remember that distinctly. There was nothing terribly bad but everybody was so happy. There was a conga line,

yes, right down Main Street right from the Brigham Young monument. Ya I remember that. I mean they were all dancing down Main Street from the monument down to... I don't know how far they went. They must have got at least to 4th South. It was a real party. I don't think you could have driven a car through there. You might have, but the people were out in the streets just having a great time. A whole lot of people just congregated downtown. It was a big party and everybody was happy because that was the first step. As far as the atomic bomb was concerned, I'm sure it was a tough decision for President Truman but I think it was the right one because I'm afraid if we had invaded Japan it would have been really bad. I don't think the Japanese people would have given up and it would have cost a whole bunch of people's lives if we'd gone in there. I was in Nagasaki last year and I didn't go on the tour to the ground zero. I got on the trolley from the ship and took it to downtown standing there looking stupid wondering where I should transfer and things. The Japanese people were very friendly. You know, you would have wondered if Nagasaki would be very happy with American people, but they were very fine, polite people. I very much enjoyed that trip. I think that it was the right decision. It was a tough one but nonetheless it was the right one. I think it saved lives.

Rick Randle: What were your thoughts as a 15 year old when that atomic bomb was dropped?

Gayle Greetham: I was happy because I figured that this is going to end the war. You know I thought, o.k. this is it, they better surrender now. That was Hiroshima, the first one and of course when Nagasaki went off they surrendered immediately after that and VJ was really wild because everybody just went nuts for that. I didn't go downtown for VJ day if I recall right. I think I stayed home that night. I don't remember why, but I remember on VE day I went downtown. VJ I wasn't downtown.

Rick Randle: So you felt that VJ was even a bigger celebration.

Gayle Greetham: Ya, I think it was. I think downtown they went absolutely wild, but for the life of me I can't remember why I didn't go because I did go down VE day. But VJ day was a big celebration too. I recall that. I unfortunately didn't go.

Rick Randle: Well, Gayle thank you so much for coming.