

Where Did Manzanar's Water Come From?

One of the reasons Manzanar was selected as the site of a WWII incarceration camp was the availability of water: Shepherd Creek, just north of the site, flows year-round, fed by melting snows from the high Sierra. At first the camp intended to use the water system that had been developed in 1910 for the town of Manzanar; water was supplied to the center via a pipeline connected to the old town dam. But the water system that had been adequate for the small farming community was not enough for a dense concentration of people.

The Reservoir

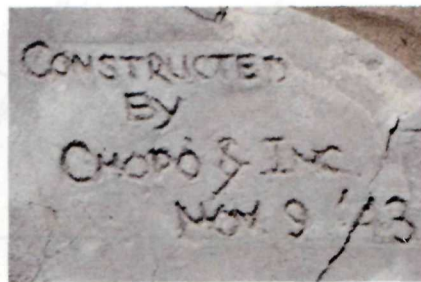
Designed to provide water for up to 10,000 Japanese Americans and a few hundred WRA employees, the reservoir bears witness to the vast scale of the Manzanar War Relocation Center. In May 1942, Los Angeles contractor Vinson and Pringle built a concrete reservoir that held 540,000 gallons. Blueprints depict a settling basin, sand trap, chlorine house, and store house at the reservoir. In the winter of 1943, water consumption was 953,745 gallons in a single month, which averages less than 4 gallons per person per day. Consumption in July 1944 was 1,849,587 gallons or 7 gallons per person per day, the increase due to the watering of gardens and lawns. In comparison, today the average Inyo County resident uses over 300 gallons of water per day.

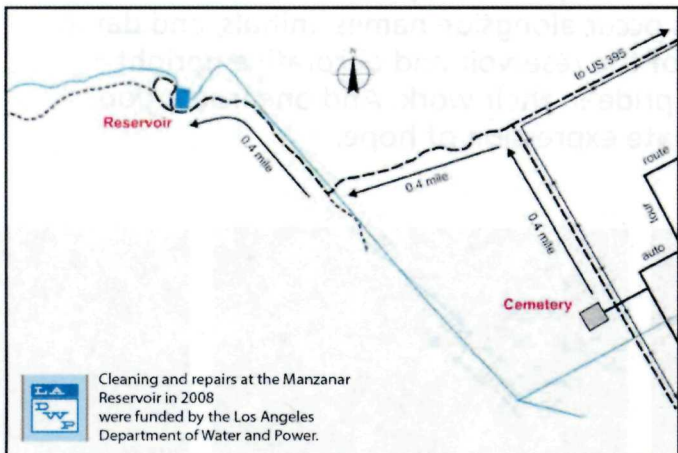
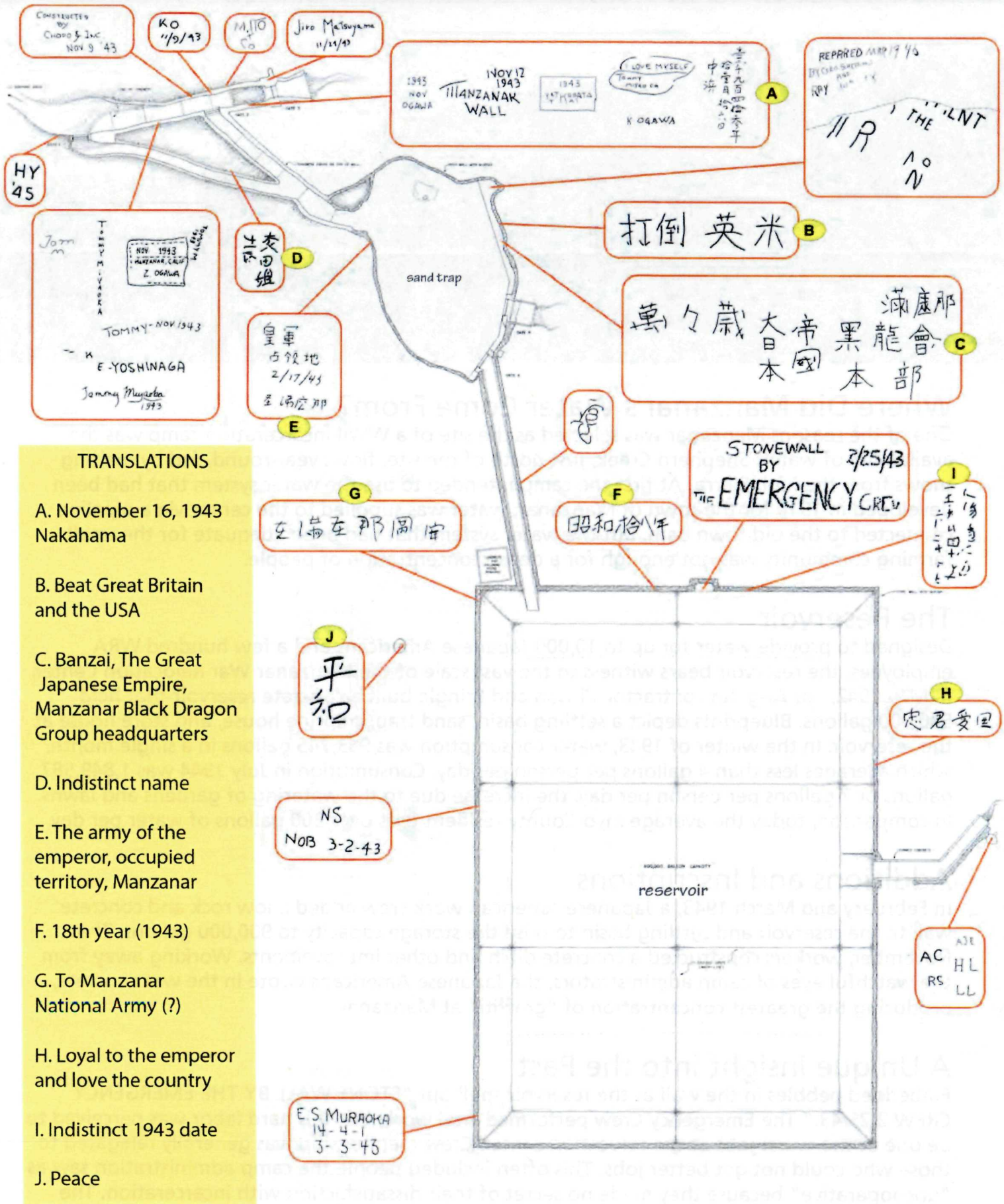
Additions and Inscriptions

In February and March 1943, a Japanese American work crew added a low rock and concrete wall to the reservoir and settling basin to raise the storage capacity to 900,000 gallons. That November, workers constructed a concrete ditch and other improvements. Working away from the watchful eyes of camp administrators, the Japanese Americans wrote in the wet concrete, producing the greatest concentration of "graffiti" at Manzanar.

A Unique Insight into the Past

Embedded pebbles in the wall at the reservoir spell out "STONE WALL BY THE EMERGENCY CREW 2/25/43." The Emergency Crew performed vital work, but this hard labor was perceived to be one of the worst jobs at the relocation center. Crew membership was generally relegated to those who could not get better jobs. This often included people the camp administration saw as "uncooperative" because they made no secret of their dissatisfaction with incarceration. The Emergency Crew's alienation is manifest in some of the inscriptions they etched in the wet concrete: pro-Japanese and anti-American sentiments occur alongside names, initials, and dates. Artistic touches, such as perched rocks at the corners of the reservoir and decorative upright rocks, suggest members of the Emergency Crew took pride in their work. And one inscription, the Japanese character for "peace," may be the ultimate expression of hope.





Getting There

The Manzanar Reservoir is located on BLM land about 1 mile northwest of Manzanar National Historic Site. From the Manzanar Cemetery, take the graded road north 0.4 mile. Where the graded road turns right towards US Highway 395, take a left onto a small two-track road. Go west 0.4 mile to a T intersection; there, turn right and proceed another 0.4 mile northwest to the reservoir.

Some Precautions

The road to the reservoir from the National Historic Site boundary can be rough and rocky, so a high-clearance vehicle is recommended. Watch for rattlesnakes, uneven terrain, and other desert hazards. If water is present in the reservoir, use extreme caution. There are no visitor facilities.