
The Red Coat

Daisy Uyeda Satoda spent her entire high school years during World War II, 1942 to 1945, imprisoned in the Central Utah War Relocation Authority concentration camp at Topaz, Utah. Upon their release from camp, her family returned to San Francisco.

The eerie wail of foghorns welcomed us as we disembarked from the ferry. We stepped into the soft, swirling fog of a typical summer evening in the City by the Bay: windy, bone-chilling, and misty. The strange foghorns intensified my loneliness and fear, and I buttoned up my bright red, all-wool overcoat, the fabric enveloping my body in a cocoon.

We had been released from the Topaz, Utah, concentration camp—our home during World War II—two days earlier, on August 29, 1945. I had recently graduated from Topaz High School after spending my entire three years of high school in this desert town in Central Utah. Topaz was a self-contained and self-governed city where we had lived in isolation and had no contact with the world beyond the barbed wire fence that had imprisoned us.

When Topaz was going to close, my parents had to remain behind to clear out our barrack rooms. Papa asked me, “Can you please take Nancee and Elsie with you to San Francisco? That way they will be on time for you to register them for the fall semester.” School was scheduled to start the following week, and I nodded “yes” as I continued with my packing. Inside my open suitcase, I folded my coat and placed it carefully over my other meager personal belongings—clothing, toilet kit, diary, album with photos of my schoolmates, Topaz High ’45 yearbook, address book, precious letters and postcards from friends who had left camp earlier. Then I closed my suitcase, both scared and excited about the prospect of freedom. Where would we live? Could I take care of my sisters?

Now hundreds of miles away from Topaz and frightened by the cacophony of myriad noises in this bustling city, my little sisters, Elsie and Nancee, ages 11 and 13, clung to my arms, their grip softened by the sleeves of my new coat. I pulled them along while feeling the weight of their shock: we did not have streets, sidewalks, cars, traffic, or outdoor lighting of any kind in Topaz. This chaos was uncomfortably new to us.

Elsie began to hyperventilate as she peered nervously into the street, hoping to catch a glimpse of my sister Kaye, who was scheduled to pick us up and deliver us to the hostel at the San Francisco Buddhist Church. The church was a temporary haven for those of us resettling in San Francisco after our incarceration in various camps. “Where is Kaye?” she whimpered. Tears trickled down her face, and she pleaded, “Can’t we go back home to Topaz?”

To distract her younger sister, Nancee put her arm around Elsie and gently said, “Just look around you and take in the sights.” We stood in awe at the passing parade of sleek automobiles, streetcars, buses, motorcycles, and taxicabs that whizzed by us at alarming speeds.

For the last three years, we had not seen any type of vehicles except for Army trucks that delivered food and coal to the mess halls in Topaz. Since we had no transportation of any kind, we had to walk to get anywhere within the one-mile square boundary of our camp. We traveled on dirt roads past open ditches and nary a street sign. On our walks, we did not pass stores, movie theaters, hotels, or restaurants, because Topaz had none.

It almost seemed surreal here in San Francisco: our footsteps on pavement, the bright lights of matinee shows on movie billboards, the vivid colored dresses displayed on

shining steel racks in shop windows, the smell of grease wafting from skillets where eggs and bacon were being fried in a nearby café.

As we took it all in, we grew more comfortable and forgot about our long wait for Kaye. Soon we were mesmerized by the electric traffic lights that alternately changed from green to amber to red. The towering heights of the skyscraper office buildings overwhelmed us. Our necks swerved in huge arcs as the street lights turned on, almost blinding us with their brightness. We covered our ears with our hands to blunt the deafening noises of a bustling metropolis, the constant honking from seemingly every vehicle on the street.

We must have resembled displaced persons from a war-torn country, self-conscious as we fingered our unfashionable homemade dresses, gawking at every incredible sight: the towering office buildings, the variegated exotic flowers in storefront planters, the white boats in the bay.

In contrast, Topaz was one-dimensional: everything was flat, drab, dry, and colorless. There was very little greenery—no trees and some scattered vegetable gardens. Our house was a bare Army barrack shared by several other families, furnished only with cots and a cast iron potbelly stove. Black tarpaper covered it all—the barracks, communal bathrooms, latrines, laundry rooms, and mess halls.

Our routine, like the landscape, was monotonously the same: get up, eat breakfast at the mess hall, go to school, return for lunch at the mess hall, back to school, play a bit, have dinner, and then go to bed. Mundane matters like how we dressed ceased to matter as much because we all dressed the same—G.I. (Government-issued) black mackinaws which were surplus items from World War I. These short, heavy coats weighed about five pounds and were distributed campwide. Since we had been uprooted from our homes in the moderate climate of the West Coast, we did not have warm clothing to withstand the minus-zero-degree winters of Utah. We couldn't fully express ourselves and our individuality. What we wore was extremely limited because so many of us ordered similar clothing from the Montgomery Ward mail-order catalogs, which served as our fashion bibles. Placed under so many restrictions, we had become numbed by life in Topaz.

Here, the world stood in vivid contrast to Topaz. As we looked around the Ferry Building area, we noted that the majority population was no longer us, but white people who were stylishly dressed in whatever they wanted: the men in suits and hats, carrying briefcases, and women who were so chic in dresses, suits, coats, hats, and gloves.

Suddenly, I wanted to look like them and be a part of the city's scene. I wanted to claim the streets as my own without the stares or hushed whispers of each passerby who must have heard that we Japanese Americans had been released from the camps and were resettling in the coastal western states. Just then, I turned around and saw the enormous floor-to-ceiling windows of the Ferry Building; in the center of the middle window, I saw my full-length reflection. I was crestfallen. My beautiful red coat, the one I cherished as my most prized article of clothing, now looked like a bargain basement "hot sale item."

I don't think anyone had a floor-length mirror in Topaz. There, just a few months earlier, I had pored through the Montgomery Ward catalog to select this coat as my graduation present from Papa. I had proudly worn my red coat to the senior prom even though it was about 110 degrees that evening. I had felt so grown up and elegant. I treasured that coat, especially since it cost more than one-half of my father's monthly pay of \$16 as a dishwasher in our mess hall.

I glanced at myself in the next window, and to my disappointment the mirror image remained the same. I unfastened the top button of my coat, turned up the collar around my

ears, threw my head back, and struck a model-like-pose. The sounds and sights of the city receded as I stared at myself in the window, my reflection blurred by passing cars and the lights at the foot of Market Street.

I was startled from my trance by Nancee excitedly shouting, “Look, look! Kaye is finally here.” Kaye was honking the horn and signaling for us to rush into the car since she was double-parked.

Only as we were pulling away from the curb did it dawn on me that my red coat really was not a fashion statement. No, it looked exactly like what it was: an inexpensive \$8.98 coat from a mail-order catalog. Beautiful when I wore it in Topaz, here in San Francisco, the coat looked like a cheaply made piece of clothing that no one even noticed.