In recent years a number of publications and television documentaries have recounted the story of Topaz from the perspective of the Japanese Americans interned there. Here is yet another account of that internment, one that tells the tale from the point of view of Utah educator Wanda Robertson, who voluntarily went to live and work in that isolated desert compound. Her story begins in late fall 1942. World War II is raging and America still recovering from the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor of December 7, 1941. Anti-Japanese sentiment is running high. Some 110,000 Japanese Americans have been forcibly removed from the West Coast and relocated in hastily constructed detention camps scattered inland across the country. Topaz, officially known as the Central Utah Relocation Center, is one such place.¹

Marian Robertson Wilson is a linguist and musician retired from Utah State University and widely known for her studies of Coptic music. She has written a prize-winning biography about her father, Leroy Robertson, and is currently writing a biography about her aunt, Wanda Robertson.

Fresh from Columbia University’s Teachers College and a well-liked instructor at the University of Utah’s Stewart Teacher Training School, Miss Robertson has just been asked to become supervisor of elementary education at Topaz, a position she would very much like to accept. Accordingly, she meets to discuss the situation with her administrative superior, the dean of the College of Education. After a few minutes, the dean—reflecting the current attitude—avers, “Wanda, I am not sure the University of Utah would approve of any faculty member going out to help those people,” to which Wanda replies, “I am not sure I want to be affiliated with any university that would object.” She did succeed in securing a leave of absence from the university, set to begin in mid-December at the end of fall quarter. Very soon thereafter, off she drove to Topaz.

Why would this thirty-nine-year-old woman so staunchly oppose the prevailing mood of the country, face ridicule from her family, and risk a promising university career at this point in her life? Her answer was that she found all war very ugly, and going to Topaz was her way to ease troubles. But there were other commanding reasons as well. From her earliest years, Wanda had by nature been very independent and extremely curious to know about the diverse folk who lived both within and beyond the mountain-rimmed valleys of her native Utah. Even before Topaz, her adventurous ways had taken her to teach in many schools far and wide.

According to family records, Wanda Melissa Robertson was born May 10, 1903, to Jasper Heber and Alice Almyra Adams Robertson in Fountain Green, a thriving Mormon community nestled at the base of Mount Nebo in northern Sanpete County. She once described her childhood as “just an old-fashioned country life...a very simple life, good, but very simple.” As a youngster she did the chores and played the games common to most little girls growing up in rural Utah, with but one exception. She loved to help her sheep-raising father, especially at lambing time when, among other duties, she tenderly cared for the newborn “starvy lambs” that Jasper placed in her arms to keep alive and bleating when their mothers rejected them.

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2 The Stewart Teacher Training School, named for University of Utah professor William M. Stewart, was founded in 1891 in order to give student teachers the experience of teaching under the supervision of professionals. During Wanda’s tenure, it served kindergarten through sixth grades. The building it occupied, southwest of the present Utah Museum of Natural History, was demolished after the school closed in 1965.

3 Wanda Robertson, conversation with author, Salt Lake City, early 1950s. At this time the dean of the College of Education was John Wahlquist.

4 Renee Robertson Whitesides, interview with author, Kaysville, Utah, August 30, 1998. Whitesides is Wanda’s niece and also took teacher-training classes from her. Unless otherwise indicated, all notes of interviews are in possession of the author.

5 “Family Records” in possession of Renee R. Whitesides, Kaysville, Utah. Wanda Robertson, interview with Brenda Anderson Daines, Salt Lake City, c. 1985, 9–10 (hereafter Daines interview), transcript in scrapbook about Wanda Robertson compiled by Brenda’s mother, Nancy O. Anderson, Nephi, Utah. I thank Brenda’s parents for kindly lending me this scrapbook. Wanda was the fourth of seven children, six of whom grew to maturity.

6 Oral History, 2.
She was also intrigued by the colorful gypsies who came to Fountain Green hawking their wares; and she envied the family of mixed ethnicity living at the west end of town, whose long and lusty parties heard throughout the valley often kept her awake. Wanda wistfully felt that those celebrating westerners “always seemed to have the most fun.” She loved music, could play by ear any tune she heard, and spent hours listening to the recordings of classical music brought home by her older brother Leroy.7

She attended school first at Fountain Green Elementary, then Moroni High School, and finally Snow College in Ephraim, where she earned a Normal Degree (then the equivalent of a five-year teaching certificate). Already she had decided to spend her life teaching children. The title of her valedictory address at Snow typifies her lifelong thinking: “Where there is no vision, the people perish.” Descriptions by classmates also characterize her well: “Full of pep, talking is her chief occupation…. [She] loves street meetings.”8

After graduating from Snow, Robertson eagerly began teaching at age nineteen, and she would prove to be a “natural.” Very tall, very thin, and always impeccably dressed with nary a strand of her thick black hair out of place, she presented quite an imposing figure to her students. Nonetheless, from the outset she easily related to each child. As one of her former fourth-graders would later reminisce:

[At last] I had a teacher who liked me! No matter that she seemed to like all the other kids as well…. How did she know my name before I knew hers?… And how did she make me feel right from the start that I was going to like…school?… If it had been her style, she could have been the envy of any disciplinary schoolmarm, but in her classroom discipline was not imposed—it just seemed to happen…. I cannot picture her seated. Much of the time, almost imperceptibly, she moved around the room in a way that allowed her to engage every student…[of which] the primary effect was to form a bond with each student and with the class…. We didn’t need to be told, as we often were…that Miss Robertson was a vital, caring person and a truly exceptional teacher. We knew that almost from day one.9

7 Wanda Robertson, interview with author, Salt Lake City, December 1980, tape in Addenda to the Leroy J. Robertson Collection, Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah. Wanda’s brother, Leroy Robertson, would go on to gain international recognition as a composer. For more information about Wanda’s childhood and the Robertson family’s early years in Fountain Green, see Marian Robertson Wilson, Leroy Robertson: Music Giant from the Rockies (Salt Lake City: Blue Ribbon Publications, 1996), 7–29.

8 Wanda took this title from Proverbs 29:8. For the valedictory address, see Oral History, 8. For the classmate descriptions, see Robertson’s copy of the Snow College Snowonian, 1921–22, where these comments are found under her class picture and autographed on the back flyleaf. This copy was kindly lent to me by the Development Office of Snow College.

9 Gordon E. Porter, Utah State University professor emeritus, to author, November 17, 1998. Copies of all letters cited are in the author’s possession.
During these early teaching years Wanda managed to earn a bachelor’s degree from Brigham Young University and a master’s from Columbia University in New York, mostly by going to summer school and taking correspondence courses.\(^\text{10}\)

Before Topaz, Wanda taught both in Utah’s Mormon farming communities and in the mining towns of Park City and Bingham Canyon, where the children’s immigrant families came from more than twenty countries, spoke different languages, and were often in conflict with each other. How Wanda herself learned from these diverse children, and in turn helped them listen to and learn about each other, makes a tale to be told elsewhere.\(^\text{11}\) She met another challenge at Logan’s Whittier School, which was then connected to the Utah State Agricultural College as a teacher-training institution similar to Stewart School. Here she not only had to teach the children but also arrange programs for the student teachers (trainees).\(^\text{12}\) The mid-1930s would find her in New York City teaching at the prestigious Lincoln School, then associated with Columbia University’s Teachers College and recognized for its innovative teaching programs. At Lincoln she worked with the children of some of the nation’s “most rich and famous,” many of whose parents had also emigrated from several countries. According to Wanda, these youngsters, too, had their problems.\(^\text{13}\)

Wanda may well have remained in New York City the rest of her life, for she loved the diversity of its people and the offerings of its many museums, theaters, and concert halls. But as time wore on she came to feel ever more isolated from her loved ones in Utah, and at the outset of World War II in 1939 she decided to return home. By 1940 she was teaching at Stewart School, and in late 1942 she moved on to Topaz.\(^\text{14}\)

Although Wanda was not due to begin work at Topaz until December 31, she arrived a couple of weeks early in order to settle in, assay conditions

\(^{10}\) While taking her M.A. from Columbia University (September 1935–June 1936), Robertson had the luxury of attending school full-time. Due to her delay in getting all the BYU credits properly organized, she received her master’s degree from Columbia one week before officially obtaining her B.S. from BYU; Oral History, 14, and Wanda Robertson, Transcript of Credits from Brigham Young University, 1927–36, and Transcript of Credits from Teachers College, Columbia University, 1935–36 and 1944–49 (copies in author’s possession).

\(^{11}\) Oral History, 11–12.

\(^{12}\) Whittier School was built in 1908 as part of the Logan City School District. In 1927 USAC arranged to incorporate Whittier into its Department of Education as an elementary teacher-training school. As such, it first opened its doors to students in 1928. Robertson was one of the first teachers on the staff. The Whittier Building, still standing on its original site at 290 North 400 East, now serves Logan as the Whittier Community Center.

\(^{13}\) Oral History, 12–13, 15. Operating under the aegis of Teachers College, Lincoln School was founded in 1917 and closed its doors at the end of the 1947–48 school year; David Ment, Special Collections, Milbank Memorial Library, Teachers College, Columbia University, telephone interview with author, November 20, 1999.

\(^{14}\) Oral History, 15–16. Here is a synopsis of Robertson’s pre-Topaz teaching career: Willard Elementary School (Willard, Utah: 1922–23); Fountain Green Primary School (Fountain Green, Utah: 1923–26); Washington School (Park City, Utah: 1926–27); Upper Bingham Canyon School (Bingham Canyon, Utah: January–June, 1928); Whittier Teacher Training School (Logan Utah: 1928–35); Lincoln School (New York City: 1936–40); Stewart Teacher Training School (Salt Lake City: 1940 mid-December 1942).
at close range, and prepare for the winter ahead. She did go forewarned, for she had previously visited the camp on two occasions and had met Topaz project director Charles F. Ernst. She also knew the superintendent of schools, Dr. John C. Carlisle, a longtime friend with whom she had worked during her years at Whittier School in Logan. Both men had proved to be sympathetic and concerned about the welfare of the internees. However, the whole situation was chaotic, to say the least.

Because school had already begun in October before the buildings were finished, operations had been largely dependent on the weather. After some four weeks of fitful scheduling, with teachers and students demoralized due to a series of dust storms, heavy thundershowers, and a severe snowstorm, Dr. Carlisle suspended all school activities until the interior walls and stoves could be installed and the roofing completed. With the help of volunteers from the compound working alongside the regular builders (a workforce described November 28, 1942, by the Topaz Times as a “small but colorful conglomeration of humanity”), winterization was completed, and schools reopened the last day of November with a full-day schedule for the first time.

However, Dr. Carlisle himself was slated to depart Topaz on New Year's Day, so upon the November reopening of schools, everyone realized that significant changes in the administration were inevitable. His announcement of Wanda’s imminent arrival came as welcome news to all involved.
She herself recognized that she would face many challenges. Drayton B. Nuttal, who had immediately and very briefly preceded her as elementary school supervisor, had provisionally staffed the classes and placed preliminary orders for some textbooks and teaching supplies, but little else had been done. Life in this desert compound would not be easy.

Topaz, nicknamed “Jewel of the Desert,” took its name from a mountain some nine miles distant upon which topaz crystals could be found. Built under the direction of the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers in the broad Sevier Valley and located sixteen miles northwest of Delta, the camp sat at the edge of the Sevier Desert on the bed of ancient Lake Bonneville. In constructing it, the crews had removed all ground cover, leaving only a thick layer of loose, white alkali sand. As a result, the slightest breeze or footstep could stir up fine powder that would inevitably creep into and over anything about. Blinding dust storms could unpredictably and suddenly blow in from the desert to penetrate everything and cover everybody with choking grit. Should it rain or snow, as it sometimes did, one slogged through ankle-deep, sticky clay mud, and after a storm the saturated soil could become an ideal breeding ground for mosquitoes. At an altitude of about 4,650 feet, temperatures at Topaz ranged from 106 degrees Fahrenheit in the summer to 20 degrees below zero in the winter. No trees, no flowers, no grass could grow inside the camp, and in the land surrounding it only salt grass and stunted greasewood shrubs clung fast to the soil.

Though the center itself covered but one square mile, it housed nearly nine thousand internees (whom Wanda, in accordance with administration policy, always called “residents”), thus making Topaz the fifth-largest

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15 Oral History, 21. For information about Robertson’s earlier visits to Topaz and her scheduled arrival, see the Topaz Times, December 19, 1942; for the activities of Mr. Ernst at the camp, see ibid., August 1942–August 1944, passim; for information about Dr. Carlisle at Topaz, see ibid., October 29, 1942–January 1, 1943, passim. The Topaz Times was the newspaper published by the residents of Topaz. Copies are on microfilm at the Marriott Library, University of Utah.

Carlisle had been on leave of absence from USAC, where he was then associate professor of education and assistant to USAC president E. G. Peterson. Drayton B. Nuttal became Topaz elementary school head in mid-November 1942, following the brief stint of Dr. Reese Maughan as acting head. Upon Carlisle’s departure, changes in the school administration seemed to resemble a game of “musical chairs.” LeGrand Noble, who had been the first principal of the high school, replaced Carlisle as superintendent of schools; Nuttal then became high school principal for a short time, to be followed by Dr. Golden L. Woolf, who served in this position during the winter and spring of 1943; Nuttal returned as high school principal the next year; see Topaz Times, November 17, 1942–August 16, 1944 passim; and Ramblings, Topaz High School yearbook, 1942–43 and 1943–44. All these administrators had Utah backgrounds. Lorne Bell, who came from California, was project administrator for the entire Topaz school system.

For the elementary schools, the full-day schedule lasted from mid-September into June; then after a small vacation, school would hold forth throughout the summer for half a day. For an eloquent portrayal of the early problems for schools at Topaz, see Uchida, Desert Exile, 115, 117–18, and 124. For other information about this early period, see the Topaz Times, October 29, November 28, and December 19, 1942.

16 Oral History, 17; Arrington, Price of Prejudice, 22; Uchida, Desert Exile, 109, 119; and Wanda Robertson, conversation with the family of Leroy Robertson, Provo, Utah, 1943, hereafter “Conversation with Leroy’s family.”
In addition to this square mile, the government had acquired some seventeen thousand acres of land surrounding the camp; the land contained a poultry farm, a turkey farm, a hog farm, and a nursery. There was also a cattle ranch at the northernmost boundary and a fifteen-acre community garden plot just outside the city.\(^1\)

The compound was completely ringed by a six-foot-high barbed-wire fence guarded by soldiers who constantly patrolled outside and manned guard towers located every quarter-mile along the camp's perimeter. Big floodlights, placed at regular intervals atop buildings throughout the camp, played over everything all night long.\(^2\) In Wanda's eyes, such controls were both insulting and unnecessary, for she regarded the residents as "some of the most orderly people" she knew—thrifty, hard-working, well-educated, and anxious for good schools.\(^3\) To her they were not "enemy aliens," as the government labeled them, but rather refugees driven from comfortable homes, who, moreover, had been allowed to take with them no more than what they could carry in their arms. Wanda told of a man who chose to bring his phonograph and some phonograph records. "And that was all that he could bring," she would later recall. She would vehemently continue, "And here they were...in these stark, dry, dusty, wintery winters and hot, hot summers."\(^4\)

Inside the compound, the buildings were grouped onto a grid of forty-two blocks, of which thirty-three were residential. Meant to house from 250 to 300 people, each block contained twelve small, one-story barracks, which stood around a mess hall where everyone ate in common, and another building, of which one-half was used for bathroom facilities and the other half for laundry. (All laundry had to be done by hand with only old-fashioned washtubs and washboards as appliances and a few outdoor clotheslines for drying.) One other structure, smaller than the others, served as a recreation hall.\(^5\)

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\(^{17}\) Oral History, 17, and Daines interview, 7. At this time, Utah cities larger than Topaz were Salt Lake City, Ogden, Provo, and Logan. Due to the constant arrivals and departures of inhabitants, the population of Topaz was never static. According to Taylor, Jewel, 222, at its height Topaz had 8,316 people. The term "resident" was but one of many euphemisms all Topaz inhabitants were instructed to use; see Uchida, Desert Exile, 109.

\(^{18}\) For the location of these farms and the cattle ranch in relation to the center, see the map in Roscoe E. Bell, "Relocation Center Life, Topaz, Utah, 1942-1945, n.d., typescript manuscript in Special Collections, Marriott Library, University of Utah.

\(^{19}\) Oral History, 17, and Daines interview, 8. All military police were quartered outside the fence and were permitted to come inside the gate only for special business with the administration. The sentries sometimes seemed more like lonely homesick young boys than enemy soldiers. While the administration and staff interacted with them by playing an occasional baseball game, the Japanese Americans were not friendly for obvious reasons; see Uchida, Desert Exile, 112.

\(^{20}\) Daines interview, 7. The Japanese Americans had a longstanding and well-known tradition of respecting education and recognizing the need for quality schools on all levels; see Taylor, Jewel, 8-9, 19, and 27-28, and James, Exile Within, 12-22, and passim thereafter.

\(^{21}\) Oral History, 18. For the citations, see Daines interview, 7.

\(^{22}\) Oral History, 17-18; Daines interview, 7; Kenneth Farrer, interview with author, October 12, 1999. Along with providing a place for the inhabitants to spend time outside their cramped lodgings, certain recreation halls were used for the preschools and various adult education classes. Recreation halls were also
Although these residential barracks were each divided into six rooms, an entire family had to crowd into one room. And what a drab, bare room it was, lit by a single electric bulb and heated by a coal- and wood-burning potbelly stove that had to be stoked by hand. Each family did have a hot plate for warming water and making snacks, but because electricity was in short, erratic supply, use of it had to be made sparingly. Any needed water had to be hand-carried from the building that housed the bathroom and laundry facilities, since no other place on the block had water. (The story is told of a mother who daily carried a small bucket of water to a scraggly little plant growing outside her family’s room, just to keep a bit of greenery nearby.) Sheets hung between the beds (actually army cots), and the “living area” around the stove offered the only privacy to be had, and this was only visual, since every sound could be heard. Moreover, because the barracks were entirely devoid of insulation—constructed merely of one-inch board siding covered with tarpaper and lined with flimsy sheetrock, they were so drafty that dust was always seeping or blowing in. It became almost pointless to try to keep things clean.

At the beginning of her tenure, Wanda also lived in similar barracks and, like the other staff members, had the same eating and laundry facilities as used for the church services of the various denominations. Topaz had active communities of Buddhists, Catholics, Protestants, and Seventh-day Adventists; the Christians and Buddhists also formed an Interfaith Council. See Sandra C. Taylor, “Internment at Topaz,” 390; Topaz Times, November 21, 1942, January 1, 1943, and passim thereafter. The few staff members who were Latter-day Saints held two hours of meetings each Sunday; see Farrer interview.

23 Tunnell and Chilcoat, Children, 16–17. The barracks were only 120 feet long and twenty feet wide. The rooms varied in size, with a four-person room generally being twenty by twenty feet. For more information on the construction of these facilities, see Taylor, Jewel, 92–96.

24 Daines interview, 7; Uchida, Desert Exile, 77, 109, 115, 123; and Farrer interview.
the residents. But, unlike the residents, she enjoyed a room all to herself, one made slightly more liveable by the old drapes and pieces of carpet she had been able to transport by car from the attic of the family home in Fountain Green. She felt fortunate to have such luxury and would actually feel guilty a year later when she was told to move into a small apartment, one of a few built for the staff when their barracks became needed for administrative use. Because the residents lived in such crowded conditions, Wanda at first felt it unfair that she should have so much space, but like everyone else she had to live where she was assigned. As time went on, however, she was happy to have the apartment since the resident teachers frequently asked if they could come to her place for an evening of socializing without the whole family being present. Many years afterward she would remark, “I hadn’t realized before how important privacy is in one’s life, especially when there is no place to be alone.”

The camp also contained larger barracks that housed the military quarters, administration buildings, and a canteen. In addition, there was a hospital staffed largely by residents, some of whom were specialists much better trained and more highly skilled than local physicians in the area. And physicians were badly needed, for Topaz seemed to have more than its share of illness.

Sadly, because all the blocks and barracks were so much alike, it was not uncommon for the inhabitants—especially the children—to lose their way. Even after the “streets” and “avenues” were named and signs posted, one could get lost. A poignant entry in a diary kept by a class of third graders tells the tale: “David, our new pupil, was absent this afternoon because he could not find his way to school.”

Guards checked the credentials of everyone entering or leaving the compound, and residents were permitted to go beyond the barbed-wire fence only if they had official business, such as to labor on the nearby farms or go shopping in Delta. “But,” as Wanda averred, “if you went to Delta, you had to shop for the 300 people in your block, so you wouldn’t have very much fun.” Now and again the residents could also leave the compound to go hiking, hunting for arrowheads (a popular pastime), and

25 Oral History, 17–18. John W. Carlisle, a seventh grader at Topaz and son of the first school superintendent, John C. Carlisle, remembers that he and his parents lived in barracks, but that they occupied two or three rooms. He further recalls that his mother hosted afternoon “teas” in an effort to provide a bit of social life for Topaz inhabitants. Like Wanda and many others, he speaks of the omnipresent dust filtering through everything; John W. Carlisle, telephone interview with author, August 2, 1999.

26 Ibid., 17–19; citation on 19.

27 Ibid., 18.

28 “Our Daily Diary,” March 16, 1943. The diary was compiled by the children of the Mountain View high third grade class under the guidance of their teacher, Mrs. Lillian Yamauchi Hori, and dates from March 8 through August 12, 1943. Since Wanda was Hori’s supervisor at Topaz, this diary reflects many of Wanda’s own teaching ideas and therefore may be considered a reliable secondary source about Wanda herself as a teacher. The original manuscript is in the archives of the Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City. The “streets” and “avenues” were named in November 1942 (Topaz Times, November 12, 1942), but apparently the signs were not all posted until the following May; see “Daily Diary,” May 17, 1943.
fishing on a nearby reservoir or the Sevier River.  

Ever since her years at Logan's Whittier School, Wanda had proved to be a diplomatic and cooperative team player, but rarely, if ever, would she sacrifice her strong beliefs about how best to teach children. At Topaz these same qualities elicited respect from her colleagues, some of whom held her in a regard almost "verging on awe" due to her experience and training. In staff meetings she firmly stood her ground with "crisp professionalism," and to the amusement of the other female staff members (of whom there were very few), she could, if need be, "deftly put her male colleagues...in their places." Several co-workers have described her as generous, helpful, outgoing, and courteous. And they report that, even in harsh Topaz, she still dressed in her customary meticulous fashion. "I don't know how Wanda always managed to look trim and well-groomed despite the desert dust and sand," recalled colleague Eleanor G. Sekerak.

Through it all, Wanda's prime concern was for the children, and clearly, the children of Topaz did require much special understanding. All of them, having been abruptly torn from familiar friends and surroundings, were confused and upset. Although most were of Japanese origin, a very few who had come with their staff-member parents were Caucasian, and this inevitably gave rise to some racial tension. Whereas these youngsters would for the most part learn to work together, some reverse discrimination did develop. Even in the elementary schools a few Japanese Americans took sport in bullying their Caucasian classmates. Incidentally, each elementary child was assigned to attend the school nearest his/her living quarters. These assignments were based strictly on location, not race, and all schools had both Japanese American and Caucasian teachers.

As elementary school head, Wanda was responsible for the operations of Topaz's two nursery schools and its two elementary schools, which had been christened "Mountain View" and "Desert View" in a camp-wide contest. These were situated at opposite ends of the compound while Topaz High School sat more or less in the middle. Mountain View and Desert View, which served grades one through six plus kindergarten, each

29 Citation in Daines interview, 7. For the residents' recreation, see "Daily Diary," May 20, 1943, and passim.

30 For Wanda as a team player at Whittier and thereafter, see Oral History, 12–13,15; for the other descriptions of and comments about Wanda, see Farrer interview and Eleanor Gerard Sekerak to author, November 28, 1999. For the citations, see Sekerak letter. Sekerak (then "Miss Gerard") was a popular teacher and administrator at the high school.

31 As of December 5, 1942, the Topaz Times reported that there were but twelve Caucasian students in the entire school system. However, this number would vary through the years as staff members came and went with their families. Information about reverse discrimination comes from Jean Sanford Lundstedt (whose father, Ray Sanford, Sr., was the assistant project director at Topaz) in a telephone interview with author, December 9, 1999. Lundstedt reports that, although she herself suffered little overt discrimination, her two younger brothers were constantly tormented, and the youngest was even beaten on at least one occasion. For the assigning of children to school see Grace Fujimoto Oshita, interview with author, November 15, 1999. Oshita was one of Robertson's secretaries and remembers her as being kind, patient, and understanding, all while being a meticulous perfectionist.
occupied one complete block; the two nursery schools had one barracks each. Topaz High, which served grades seven through twelve, was also allotted an entire block and, in addition, had the use of a larger building that contained a much needed gymnasium-auditorium.

The elementary schools had two levels ("low and high") in every grade, to make a total of twelve classes plus a kindergarten at each school. "We had lots of children," Wanda would later recall. All the schools were housed in barracks, but unlike those of the residents, these barracks were divided into two rather than six rooms. Nonetheless, the resulting classrooms were not really very large and tended to be dark because the windows were small and few. The children sat on wooden straight-backed chairs placed around tables large enough to accommodate about four. Every class also had a big table covered with all kinds of picture- and story-books for the youngsters to peruse at will. Most of the furniture was made by resident volunteers from scrap lumber left over from the original barracks construction. As in all other barracks, each room was heated by a single hand-stoked potbellied stove, and in cold weather this could be quite uncomfortable, for, depending on where one was, the room was either too hot or too cold. In the summertime these rooms would become unbearably hot since they were, after all, completely uninsulated and without air conditioning. In order to brighten their drab surroundings and reinforce their studies, the children drew pictures, made posters, and designed colorful friezes, which they tacked on the walls as decoration. In at least one class the girls even made curtains for the windows and happily hung them one day in June.

Because she had to watch over both Mountain View and Desert View, Wanda maintained a small office at each school, making do with only a typewriter and primitive mimeograph machine as office equipment. To assist with the extensive record-keeping, she did have the help of two young Japanese American girls who had just graduated from Topaz High. One of her chief tasks was to set up the entire course of study for the elementary school children. Like all relocation-center schools, Topaz was required to be affiliated with and meet the standards of the state where it was located, as well as conform to federal government regulations. As a means of affiliating with the local school system, Wanda invited teachers from the surrounding communities to visit classes at Topaz, and in order to

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32 Oral History, 19. Children were assigned to class by age and at midyear were promoted to the next level; Kaye (Keiko) Aoki, telephone interview with author, November 21, 1999. Aoki was one of Wanda's cadet teachers.

33 Exact population figures of Topaz school children are difficult to establish because staff and resident families were always on the move, either departing or arriving due to the ongoing relocation. According to Taylor (Jewel, 121), at the end of the 1942–43 school year there were 182 children in the preschools, 675 in the two elementary schools, and 1,037 in the high school, making a total of 1,894 pupils.

34 Descriptions of the classrooms and Wanda's offices come from "Daily Diary," June 10, 1943, and pas-sim; Oshita interview; Aoki interview; and Ted Nagata, telephone interview with author, November 29, 1999. Mr. Nagata was a pupil at Desert View.
involve the Topaz children she suggested that they exchange letters with their peers in Delta. She also arranged for their teachers to take them on field trips and personal visits to schools in that nearby city. (The Topaz youngsters had become so accustomed to being surrounded by black-haired, dark-eyed people that they were quite intrigued to see the blond, blue-eyed schoolchildren of Delta.)

Regarding their studies, Wanda emphasized the basics (reading, writing, and arithmetic), but she was obliged to work these subjects into a rather idealistic curriculum imposed by the government upon all the relocation centers. This curriculum would soon prove impractical for Topaz.

Another of Wanda's responsibilities was to keep track of supplies, and this posed a perpetual problem. The scrap-summer furniture broke so easily that she was constantly having to write it off her inventory, not knowing when it would be replaced. The same could be said for other items as well. Although she was able to keep the pupils well supplied with paper, notebooks, pencils, and other such equipment, the quality was usually inferior, largely due to the war. "Our paper folders tear so easily that we have decided to pay 8¢ each for some material to make new folders," wrote the Mountain View high third graders.

The need for books was never ending. Although she had an adequate budget for texts and a few maps for classwork, Wanda also had to stock the two elementary school libraries. At first, she sought "hand-me-down" books from other schools and even from family members. She also collected samples sent by publishers, which she and the teachers reviewed together. Wanda further learned that by buying needed texts in smaller sets she would have extra money for purchasing library books. Thanks to her ongoing efforts, Topaz eventually had two of the best children's libraries in the state of Utah. This was important, for these libraries served a double function. Because there were few opportunities for outside recreation, parents would bring their younger children to these school libraries to read at all hours of the day.

Of course, where there are schools there must be teachers, and one of Wanda's greatest challenges would prove to be the constant recruiting and

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34 Aoki interview. For teachers visiting Topaz schools and for children exchanging letters, see “Daily Diary,” May 12 and May 14, 1943, respectively. For a brief outline of Wanda’s responsibilities, see the Topaz Times, December 19, 1942.

35 The curriculum had been designed by a graduate class in curriculum at Stanford University, under the direction of Paul R. Hanna. For more information, see James, Exile Within, 38-42, and Eleanor Gerard Sekerak, “A Teacher at Topaz,” in Roger Daniels, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano, eds., Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986), 40-41.

36 Oral History, 19; Aoki interview. For the citation, see “Daily Diary,” May 18, 1943.

37 R. R. Whitesides interview; Oral History, 19–20. The school libraries supplemented the offerings of the two community libraries organized and operated by the residents. For more information about these libraries, one of which was devoted exclusively to materials in Japanese, see the Topaz Times, November 24, 1942; Tunnell and Chilcoat, Children, 56–57; and Toyo Suyemoto Kawakami, “Camp Memories: Rough and Broken Shards,” in Daniels, et al., Japanese Americans, 29. After a visit to Topaz, the Dies Committee reported that Topaz had the best library system among the camps; see Taylor, Jewel, 224.
training of them due to the ongoing relocation. To help bring some stability to her staff, she succeeded in recruiting seven or eight very experienced “outsiders” who, along with one or two women who had come to Topaz with their husbands, became a strong unifying force.\(^38\) However, most of the teachers came from the residents. Though extremely willing and dedicated, they were largely inexperienced, untrained for teaching, and often on the move with their relocating relatives.\(^39\) This steady relocation intensified when, in early 1943, the War Department began recruiting Japanese Americans for the Armed Services. Wanda could not hide her bitter feelings about the ironic injustice of it all as she walked along the rows of barracks and saw displayed in many windows the small banners that bore one or more stars to indicate the number of people from a given family who were fighting for the very country that was imprisoning them.\(^40\)

In this constant relocation, the better-educated residents were the first to leave, and as a result, Wanda finally had to recruit and train graduates of Topaz High. Though completely new on the job, these young women were sincerely devoted, and their hard work made up for their lack of experience. As for the nursery school teachers, all were young resident women, many of whom were mothers.\(^41\)

To help these cadet teachers master their craft, Wanda organized many activities for them. As their supervisor-teacher, she felt that her main purpose was to have free, open dialogue and learn their problems so that she was assisting, not just checking up on them. To this end, she prepared class outlines and met with the cadet teachers every Saturday to review the

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\(^38\) Oral History, 22–23. After more than forty years, Wanda recalled a few names: Laverne C. (Lora) Bane, whose husband was Topaz director of adult education; Jessie Harroun, a retired principal from the Salt Lake City school system; Josephine Wycoff, and Martha Chastain, who had worked in the Indian schools. She also mentioned a “Mr. Barrus” (Thayer C. Barrus, who came to Topaz from Fairview, Wyoming).

The student-teacher ratio of 48:1 cited by James (Exile Within, 43), and reiterated by Taylor (Jewel, 122), does not really apply to the Topaz elementary schools during Wanda’s tenure. For example, in June 1943, the 675 pupils (see note 32) had at least thirty-six teachers (thirty-one named in the Topaz Times, December 5, 1942, plus the “outsiders” imported by Wanda), which makes for a ratio of about 19:1. Kaye (Keiko) Aoki, first a third grade then a sixth grade teacher at Desert View, remembers that her classes numbered from twenty-one to twenty-three pupils; Aoki interview.

\(^39\) According to Wanda, this lack of trained teachers among the residents was due to the fact that most had not considered teaching as a profession because California had consistently discouraged persons of Japanese origin from teaching. In fact, according to James, in the 1930s teaching as a vocation was closed to them (Oral History, 22, and James, Exile Within, 21). As exceptions, three well-trained Japanese American teachers of whom we have record at Topaz, and for whom Wanda was truly grateful, were young Lillian Yamauchi Hori, Keiko Uchida, and Grace Fujii. Trained as nursery school teachers, the latter two had organized the nursery schools before Wanda’s arrival and would do excellent work in training other young women before their own relocation within a few months (Oral History, 22). Hori also relocated in less than a year; see “Daily Diary,” August 10, 1943.

\(^40\) Conversation with Leroy’s family, 1943. In late 1942 military personnel had come to Topaz seeking Japanese-speaking men for service in Military Intelligence (Topaz Times, December 4, 1942). Then, on January 28, 1943, Secretary of War Stimson announced that the Army had decided to accept Japanese American recruits. This recruitment began in February in all the relocation centers. For an eloquent description of the conflicting attitudes in Topaz, see Uchida, Desert Exile, 135–37.

\(^41\) Oral History, 22–23.
materials to be taught during the coming week. She often visited classes to
observe the cadets at work; and in order to show her young teachers “how
it is done,” she often taught the children herself. When working with the
little ones, Wanda was “caring and gentle—an ideal teacher.” However, one
of Wanda’s secretaries, who knew her schedule in advance, has wryly
observed that the cadets, under pressure from these visits, were relieved to
learn when Wanda would not be visiting their school.42

As further incentive, Wanda occasionally took the trainees to visit ele­
mentary schools in Delta, where they had more opportunity to observe
professional teachers at work. As one second-grade instructor at Desert
View would subsequently write, “I marveled at the skill of the professional
teacher and went back to camp determined to improve my own teaching
methods. But the delicious lunch at the Southern Hotel and the ice cream
soda later in the day were just as important to me as the visit to the school,
and lingered as a pleasant memory for several days.” Occasionally, Wanda also
drove a cadet to Salt Lake City when she went to transact official business.43

As Wanda helped the cadets improve their teaching, she hoped to instill
in them some of her own love for the profession. However, though she
may have felt deep-seated sympathy for them, outwardly she showed the
young internees little pity. She consistently required a great deal from
them—sometimes more than they felt prepared to give. Nevertheless,
although the hard-working cadets did at times get discouraged, they soon
came to realize that Wanda’s paramount goal was to help them master skills
they could use upon their return to the outside world after Topaz. Her
stern approach must have succeeded, for according to one colleague, the
cadets themselves ultimately reflected Wanda’s “let’s get down to business
and not waste precious time” philosophy, and after Topaz a number of them
did go into teaching. Indeed, one of these young cadets has observed in
retrospect that “Miss Wanda” did give them purpose, held them together,
and kept them from falling to pieces under the strain of their apparently
hopeless and endless incarceration. It should be noted that Wanda was likely
more demanding upon herself than upon the trainees. According to col­
leagues, her barracks light frequently burned at odd hours of the night as
she sat correcting papers and otherwise preparing for the day ahead;44 and
she often came late to meals because she had been working “over and

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42 For the citation, see Sekerak letter. For the other comments, see Oshita and Aoki interviews.
43 For Wanda’s ideas about supervision, see Oral History, 33, and WR, general letter to Robertson fami­
ly, December 1962, in Anderson scrapbook; for the citation, see Uchida, Desert Exile, 130–31; for Wanda’s
driving cadets to Salt Lake City, see Ruth Allen Robertson, telephone interview with author, June 12,
2000. Mrs. Robertson, a sister-in-law to Wanda, recounts that in the fall of 1943, while on one of these
business trips to Salt Lake City, Wanda took the cadet to have Sunday dinner at the Robertson home
before their return to Topaz. As dessert Mrs. Robertson served pumpkin pie, a family favorite. The kindly
gesture backfired, however, for to everyone’s surprise the bewildered cadet could not eat even a bite of this
traditional American delicacy; it was too strange and different from her own family’s Japanese fare.
44 For the comments about Wanda and her work with the cadet teachers, see Aoki interview and Oshita
interview; for Wanda’s demands upon herself, see Farrer interview and Sekerak letter; for the citations, see
Sekerak, ibid.
above the call of duty.”

To supplement her regular teaching staff, Wanda became acquainted with and enlisted the help of the many highly skilled professionals among the residents. An outstanding climatologist showed the children how to understand the weather station and do their own forecasting. An artist taught them stick-painting. Two noted astronomers would accompany groups of children on night excursions within the camp to teach them about the moon, planets, and stars that shone so brightly in those desert skies. One can imagine the children’s excitement when a schoolmate brought a telescope to class: “Everyone wanted to look through it. Even boys and girls from other classes formed a line for their turn to peek through Harry’s telescope.”45 From time to time, Wanda herself would take three or four sixth graders in her car to the Sevier River, where they would fill containers with clay, which they then brought back for “curing” so it could be used for modeling purposes. Children throughout both schools used this clay to fashion dishes and figurines, and on special occasions a class would proudly present a homemade clay pot as a gift to some special person.46 As for the very young children, they delighted in being allowed to go “over the fence” to watch newborn baby lambs (reminiscent of Wanda’s own childhood) or to climb and play in a few big dead trees—there being very little playground equipment for them inside the compound.47 Most people well acquainted with Wanda will readily surmise that while driving her passengers back and forth on their junkets she had them singing folk songs like “Apple-pandowdy” and “Blue-tail Fly.” When in a car with Wanda, one never had a quiet ride.48

Though Topaz could be harsh and stark, and while the children missed countless things a different environment might offer, Wanda found ways to give them many new kinds of experiences afforded only by the desert. As they mastered their reading, writing, and arithmetic, they also studied the native animals firsthand. Numerous are the stories of the children caring for ants, frogs, and “beautiful lizards.” Witness, for example, the sad saga of young Edwin Narahara and his short-lived horned toad: “Edwin brought us a baby horned toad. It is now living with our five lizards.... Edwin’s little horned toad died. Some of the boys made a cross for it and buried it behind the barracks.”49

During her visits to the classes, Wanda complimented the children on their work and gave them practical advice about life in the desert: “Miss Robertson came today and told us how much she liked

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45 Oral History, 20. For the citation, see “Daily Diary,” May 21, 1943.
48 Regarding Wanda and singing in the car, the author vividly remembers that when she was a young teenager traveling cross-country by car with her “Aunt Wanda,” they sang folk songs almost nonstop from the plateaus of Wyoming to the banks of the Hudson River.
49 “Daily Diary,” May 18 and June 4, 1943. For information about these children’s ongoing interest in desert animals, see “Daily Diary,” March 12, 1943, and passim thereafter.
She told us also about a badger at Block 42. We shall go see it very soon.

The older children learned about Native Americans, the fragile ecosystem, and geology. "[We saw movies] about Pueblo Indians, their homes, farms, soil and other interesting things. We also learned that dust storms arose when sheep and other grazing animals ate all the grass." "Yesterday the High Sixth [Grade] went to Mt. [name omitted] and found hundreds and hundreds of trilobite fossils."

The main stimulus propelling such activities was the need for the schools to help these uprooted children cope with their strange new life. In this regard, one important event each day became the informal talks held by the teachers and pupils as a sort of group therapy "show and tell" period, during which they expressed their feelings and discussed matters close to their hearts. They talked about the weather with its extremes of heat and cold and its frightening storms: "Today the mountains seem full of lightning." They told of school activities: "Miss Robertson came to our class to listen to us read. She thought we read very well." They voiced their grief over the sad death of elderly Mr. James Wakasa, shot and killed by a sentry when he walked too close to the fence and did not stop. Another pervasive topic was the sickness constantly plaguing the compound. But most of all, they spoke of their families: fathers and mothers departing Topaz; a little sister getting lost in the maze of look-alike "streets" and "avenues"; a baby brother whose crying all night kept everyone awake in those flimsily constructed, overcrowded barracks. They reviewed both their sad and happy times together. No subject was off limits to these, the youngest and most innocent victims of incarceration.\textsuperscript{52}
Though Wanda, unfortunately, never wrote an account of life in Topaz, throughout her tenure there she often urged others to do so. Thanks to her encouragement, one of the cadets became so interested in children’s literature that after leaving Topaz she began writing of her experiences as a Japanese American and eventually became an outstanding children’s author with many books to her credit.53

Life at Topaz proceeded as usual, with days becoming weeks, weeks turning into months, and months adding up to years. Then came the summer of 1944. Just as Wanda was conducting an intensive twelve-week teacher-training course for the cadet teachers, she received an unexpected letter from the dean of education at Columbia University, her alma mater. He expressed his pleasure at having been able to track her down and invited her to return to New York and complete her doctoral studies.54

The program at Topaz was rapidly phasing out. Residents were relocating in ever-increasing numbers, and even Charles Ernst, the project director who had been there from the beginning, was leaving.55 Furthermore, at that moment, more advanced study at Columbia University was an offer no educator could refuse. “And so,” Wanda recalls, “after two years in Topaz, I went straight to New York.” She left on a hot August day, quietly driving away without fanfare just as she had quietly arrived on that bitter-cold December day of 1942. “There was universal regret when she had to leave,” remembers colleague Eleanor Gerard Sekerak.56

Because Wanda had often worked so unobtrusively behind the scenes, her efforts may have gone unrecognized or perhaps were soon forgotten by many. But her teachers did not forget her, nor did Wanda forget Topaz. For the rest of her life, whenever she spoke of that desert city, tears of compassion welled into her eyes and choked her voice.57

The schools of Topaz closed in June 1945, never to reopen, and the
entire compound officially shut down the following October 31. Ultimately, everything was torn down. Except for a few potsherds and rusty scraps of metal scattered alongside the obscure remains of the “streets” and “avenues,” only a monument now marks the spot where Topaz once stood.58

After leaving Topaz, Wanda continued her active schedule. She finished her doctorate at Columbia then returned to the University of Utah, where she taught, became head of the department of elementary education, and eventually took emeritus retirement in 1971. During these years, she also lived in Ethiopia on two occasions, helping establish a department of education at Haile Selassie I University while developing a teacher-training program there. That, however, is another story. She never married, although as a young woman she was courted by many ardent swains and did fall in love a few times along the way.

Wanda ended her days rather sadly. Pain-ridden and weakened by old age, she—who had always been so active and outgoing—became lonely, depressed, and largely dependent upon friends and family. She died February 28, 1990, in Salt Lake City. Her nieces and nephews remember her many kindnesses and ever-generous spirit. Others around the world remember the help she unstintingly gave to countless children.

58 For the school closing, see Tunnell and Chilcoat, Children, 68. For the closing of Topaz, see Verdoia, Topaz. Ted Nagata, whose family was among the very last to leave Topaz, remembers that during its final weeks the city was a veritable ghost town, “no people, no street lights, only wind”; Nagata interview. The barracks buildings found their way onto farms and lots in the Delta area, and many are currently being used as outbuildings. The Great Basin Museum in Delta displays a replica of one of the barracks.