

Japanese-Canadian Road Camps 1942-1944

On July 20, 1996, a provincial plaque was unveiled in Cenotaph Square in Schreiber to commemorate the entry of Japanese-Canadians in Ontario. This is one in a series of plaques erected throughout the province by the Ontario Heritage Trust, an agency of the Government of Ontario.

The bilingual text reads:

JAPANESE-CANADIAN ROAD CAMPS 1942-1944

During the Second World War, the federal government forcibly evacuated Canadians of Japanese ancestry from the coast of British Columbia. In the spring of 1942, several hundred young men were sent to Ontario to help build the Trans-Canada Highway. They were accommodated in four camps between Schreiber and Jackfish. Most soon left the road camps for work on farms or in lumber and pulp mills. Others, interned in prisoner-of-war camps for resisting separation from their families, accepted similar employment. Once established in jobs, the men encouraged relatives and friends to migrate east. Thousands settled permanently, establishing the basis of a significant Japanese-Canadian community in Ontario.

CAMPS ROUTIERS POUR LES JAPONO-CANADIENS 1942-1944

Au cours de la Seconde Guerre mondiale, le gouvernement fédéral évacue de force les Canadiens d'origine japonaise de la côte de la Colombie-Britannique. Au printemps 1942, plusieurs centaines de jeunes hommes sont envoyés en Ontario pour aider à construire la route transcanadienne. Ils sont logés dans quatre camps entre Schreiber et Jackfish. La plupart d'entre eux ne tardent pas à quitter les camps routiers pour travailler dans les fermes, les scieries et les fabriques de pâte. D'autres, internés dans les camps pour prisonniers de guerre pour avoir refusé de se séparer de leur famille, acceptent des emplois semblables. Une fois établis, ces hommes encouragent leurs parents et amis à venir dans l'Est. Des milliers s'y établissent, formant ainsi la base d'une importante communauté japono-canadienne en Ontario.

Historical background

On December 7, 1941, Japan attacked American air and naval bases at Pearl Harbour in the Hawaiian Islands. This action reversed the balance of power in the war in the Pacific and appeared to put the west coast of North America at risk of attack or invasion. Canada immediately declared war on Japan and the Royal Canadian Mounted Police began to arrest persons suspected of serving the interests of Imperial Japan.

As the military situation in the Pacific deteriorated during January 1942, long-standing anti-oriental prejudices exploded in the popular press and in public demonstrations, particularly in British Columbia where Canada's Japanese population (then numbering some 23,000) was concentrated almost exclusively in communities along the coastline. In February, fearing riots and mob violence, the federal government began "the mass removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry from the coastal defence zone," a program that brought needless suffering to thousands of Canadian citizens. The evacuation program is a dramatic illustration of how prejudices, racism and wartime hysteria can combine to dictate public policies that deny basic rights to citizens. It remains a shameful chapter in Canadian history.

The British Columbia Security Commission (BCSC) was established to "plan, supervise and direct" the evacuation of citizens to hastily organized relocation centres. A year later, the BCSC's responsibilities were transferred directly to the federal Department of Labour. By October, some 20,881 individuals had been forced to leave their coastal homes for relocation elsewhere. Of this number, close to 80 per cent were Issei and Nisei – first- and second-generation Canadian citizens respectively. The remainder were Japanese nationals, most of whom had been living in Canada for 30 to 40 years. Most evacuees ended up in six large camps situated in the interior of British Columbia. Men of military age were sent to work in construction camps along a road being built through Jasper National Park. Those who resisted this forced separation from their families were interned in prisoner-of-war camps at Petawawa and Angler in Ontario. In an attempt to disperse the Japanese-Canadian population across the country, officials sent some families to work on farms in Alberta and Manitoba.

The movement of Japanese-Canadians to Ontario began slowly in the spring of 1942 with the arrival of several hundred young men to work on the Schreiber-Jackfish Highway Project along the north shore of Lake Superior. Four construction camps were set up along the unfinished stretch of the Trans-Canada Highway between Jackfish and Schreiber – Schreiber Camp, Camp Black, Empress Camp and Jackfish Camp, each with the capacity to house 150 men. Along with three similar highway projects in British Columbia, the Schreiber project was organized by the federal Department of Labour and operated by the Survey and Engineering Branch of the Department of Mines and Resources.

Some of the letters written by evacuees managed to survive the ravages of wartime censorship and of time itself. They provide at least a partial view of camp life:

Accommodation is OK, and so is grub. In fact, it's better than what we had in Hastings Park [British Columbia]. There's no electric light at camp yet, but it's under consideration. The water system is another problem. At present we are bringing our water supply from the lake, but they are figuring on connecting a pipe into camp.

– Frank Nagano, Schreiber Camp, 10 April 1942

We reached here Friday noon, and at first were rather taken aback by the apparent isolation of the camp ... Our camp consists of a bunk-house, mess-house, office, recreation room, and several other small shacks. The bath-house is in the final stages of construction ... The bunk-house is heated by five stove heaters, and the beds are arranged similar to those in Hastings Park – two tiers high.

– Tad [or Tod], Jackfish Camp, 29 April 1942

Our camp has improved a lot since we came here. Roadwork has not yet started except for a small gang filling in the small ruts with cinders from the Canadian Pacific Railway yards in Schreiber. All the others are busily engaged in fixing up the buildings, chopping wood, clearing the grounds, making the bath-house, extending the mess-hall and a dozen other jobs.

– David Watanabe, Schreiber Camp, 21 April 1942

Residents in the Schreiber area seem to have accepted the Japanese-Canadians with little animosity, unlike communities elsewhere. Watanabe wrote to his family in British Columbia: "... been given a great reception in Schreiber. We are welcome in all the churches, at dances in the YMCA, in sports of all kind." Nagano wrote of the people in Schreiber: "They are very sympathetic towards us, and needless to say, they are glad to have us." During his brief three-week stay at Camp Black, Yoshio "Yon" Shimizu remembers travelling into Schreiber and going to the Blue Moon Cafe where he would drink a milkshake and play his favourite tunes on the jukebox.

Not all camp residents were so positive about their new surroundings. One disgruntled evacuee complained: "We can't fish, can't hunt, can't go out, can't own a short wave radio, gotta turn lights out at ten o'clock ... Schreiber ... it's a concentration camp." The government clearly stated that the evacuees were not classified as internees. On the other hand, they were definitely denied full rights of citizenship: restrictions were placed on their travel, mail was censored and they were not allowed to acquire property or lease land.

After a few weeks in the road camps, many evacuees left the north to work as farm labourers in southwestern Ontario. In an interview reported in the Nisei newspaper the *New Canadian* on April

21, 1942, Premier Mitchell Hepburn assured Japanese-Canadians evacuated to Ontario that they would be placed in productive jobs as soon as possible – particularly in lumber mills and on farms – and paid prevailing wages. Government officials were anxious to deploy the available manpower in work of more urgency than domestic road construction during wartime; they were also keen to relieve the public purse by offering evacuees opportunities for gainful employment.

Early in May 1942, the Ontario Department of Agriculture secured an agreement with the federal government to bring 500 Japanese-Canadians from the Schreiber road camps to work on sugar beet farms in the southwest. On May 29, the first contingent of 154 men left Schreiber for the south. This departure effectively marked the movement of Japanese-Canadians into southern Ontario and the start of their integration into and contribution to Ontario society. Throughout the summer of 1942, men left Schreiber to work on farms near Glencoe, Dresden, Wallaceburg, Petrolia, Chatham and other communities. Others worked in lumber mills and logging camps near the lakehead. When the harvest was completed late in the fall, most of those employed on southern farms preferred to volunteer for more lucrative work like cutting wood for the pulp mills at Kapuskasing rather than return to the road camps. Workers still at the road camps, as well as some internees from the prisoner-of-war camps at Petawawa and Angler, also accepted employment in the forest industry. Yet others were relocated to private employment in various communities. In June 1944, after two years of operation, the Schreiber road camps were closed. By then, more than 2,000 Japanese-Canadians had resettled in Ontario. By January 1945, the number was close to 4,000.

Once the men were able to establish themselves as self-supporting, they began to encourage relatives and friends to migrate east as well. Thus the Schreiber road camps can be seen to have functioned as the gateway into Ontario for Japanese-Canadians during their wartime exile from British Columbia. This marked the beginning of what has become a significant and respected community within the cultural mosaic that comprises Ontario society.



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