

World War II

The Japanese-Canadian Internment Years in Sandon

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For over a century, the Japanese have had a long and proud history in Canada. Beginning in 1877, many emigrated to the West Coast to work, and they soon came to dominate the fishing industry, with their great skill in their traditional occupation, their industrious work habits and their great determination. Before long, they also found niches in boat building, fishing canneries, logging and millwork, small fruit and vegetable farms and in a wide variety of businesses, such as restaurants, grocery stores, tailoring and dry-cleaning.

By the 1920s, there were about 15,000 people in BC of Japanese origin. At that point, about eight per cent of British Columbians were on "relief", but the Japanese seldom became public charges, and their unemployment rate stood at less than two per cent. Often, this was because they were willing to take work that others would not, but resentment of their success, as well as blatant racism, made them targets of discrimination and unfair treatment. As international tensions intensified and war with Japan loomed, rumors ran rampant, and many questioned the loyalties of Japanese-Canadians who had settled along the coast. With no proof whatsoever, some even suggested Japanese-Canadian fishermen might act as guides for submarines, or as spies for the Imperial Japanese government. Under the provisions of the War Measures Act, a law was passed requiring that all Japanese-Canadians register with the government, and receive a number and a file.

On December 7, 1941, the Imperial Japanese Navy launched a surprise attack on the US Navy base at Pearl Harbour, Hawaii. Almost immediately, panic and fear began to spread. In one of the most shameful periods of Canada's recent history, almost 22,000 Japanese-Canadian were stripped of their rights, property and possessions, and branded "enemy aliens", despite the fact that over 60 per cent of them were born in this country and were Canadian citizens.

At first, Ottawa decreed that all males of Japanese origin would be moved out of the Coastal Defense Zone and relocated to the interior "for their own protection". These men were separated from their families and sent to remote work camps to build roads. Those who protested or resisted were sent by train to a concentration camp at Angler, in Northern Ontario. This separation of families caused a great deal of suffering and hardship, and resulted in non-violent "sit down strikes" by the men. Soon, the federal government realized that these camps were not working, and the decision was made to reunite the men with their families into communities.

Approximately 12,000 Japanese-Canadians were shipped to the Slocan Valley, and were interned in a number of communities, including Greenwood, Salmo, Rosebery, New Denver, Lemon Creek, Slocan City, Kaslo and Sandon. In most of the other communities many small internment shacks were built; Sandon was chosen partly because the number of abandoned buildings that already existed meant less work to prepare the site for the internees.

At that time, Sandon had a resident population of less than 50. Many people had moved away to find work during the "Hungry Thirties", but had intended to eventually return. Because of this, many had left their homes intact and even furnished, and as a result many vacant buildings were useable with minimal work. Much of the original "wild west" flavour of the community was destroyed during these renovations, with little thought for the damage done to historic buildings.

According to a Vancouver newspaper's account at the time, "Long bars, with expensive plate-glass mirrors and scenes of Sandon's more glorious past are still intact. In the hospital, surgical instruments, sterilizers, beds and all the impedimenta of the medical profession had been untouched for years. Relics of the past in the lower and more disreputable part of town were abundant until the work gangs took over." No doubt many of these valuable heritage artifacts made their way into private collections as the work crews ranged through the old city.

The wartime BC Security Commission segregated internees along religious lines, and Sandon was designated as a Buddhist community, where 953 men, women and children were to be held. For the first time in years, the aging J.M. Harris found his city once more bustling with hundreds of people, but he soon found his 45-year-old power plant taxed to the limit. Under the direction of the Security commission, the internees completed extensive repair work on the old wood-stave penstock that carried water to the Silversmith Powerhouse, prolonging its life and indirectly ensuring its survival to the present day.

As well, a large crew of Japanese-Canadian carpenters was kept busy helping renovate the old buildings, while others were employed collecting scrap metal for the war effort. Unfortunately, the internees performed this work so industriously that a great deal of old machinery and metal artifacts were hauled away to be melted down.

Because of its remote location, no security guards were considered necessary, and only one provincial policeman was provided to keep the peace. As the internees largely regulated themselves, this Irish-Canadian officer led a quiet life in Sandon. In later years he used to joke that the nearly 1,000 Japanese-Canadians were so well behaved that he had nothing to do. "Now, if you'd locked up a thousand Irishmen up there, you'd need 2,000 cops to ride herd on them!" he would laugh.

J.M. Harris' old office block, the Virginia Block, held the Sandon offices of the BC Security Commission, as well as a 20-bed hospital with clinic, surgery and isolation ward, under the supervision of a Japanese-Canadian doctor. The top floor of the building was converted into a residence for the hospital staff, and a Japanese-Canadian dentist was brought in once a week.

Schooling for the children was provided by Catholic nuns from the Sisters of Christ the King convent. High school classes were held in the top floor of the CPR train station, and younger children were accommodated as well, including a kindergarten class of over 30 students. When not in school, the younger set kept busy on the ski jump hill, at judo and kendo clubs, or with music lessons.

Employment was scarce, but many of the adults occupied their time with wood-cutting, snow-clearing, road work, and dressmaking. Several were even employed by Harris in the Hotel Reco, as cooks, waiters and chambermaids. For many of the internees, gardening also provided a release, and stories are sometimes told of the intricate beauty of their small plots of ground. Sadly, no trace of these gardens now remain. In addition to their own gardens, the internees were aided by local Doukhobor communities, who brought in plenty of good fresh vegetables for them.

A Buddhist temple was set up in the old Methodist church next to City Hall and was used throughout the internees' time in Sandon. Several years later the abandoned building collapsed under a heavy snowload in the winter of 1946. When salvagers entered the building to investigate, they were surprised to see a statue of the Buddha still sitting there, untouched among the wreckage of the old church.

Because of its severe winters, Sandon was the first of the internment centres to close, and most of the internees were relocated to New Denver. Accustomed to coastal climates, most of the Japanese-Canadians were unprepared for the cold temperatures and heavy snowfall high in the mountains, and Sandon became known to many of them as "Camp Hell-Hole". No evidence of subversive activity by these peaceful people was ever demonstrated, and when the internees were eventually released at the end of the war, many of them remained angry and bitter about their wartime experiences. Some returned to Japan, or to the BC coast to rebuild their shattered lives. However, some stayed in the area, and there are still several Japanese-Canadian families living in New Denver and other centres in Slokan Valley.

Today, this sad chapter of Canada's past is remembered with the Nikkei Internment Memorial Centre in the old "orchard" area of New Denver. The only interpretive centre in Canada to focus exclusively on Japanese-Canadian internment history, it features a community hall, three restored original shacks, and a beautiful traditional Japanese garden created by one of the former internees. As well, the picturesque Kohan Reflection Garden facing onto Slokan Lake in New Denver honors the memory of these internees. Both sites are well worth a stop for any visitors seeking further information about this period of Canada's wartime past.