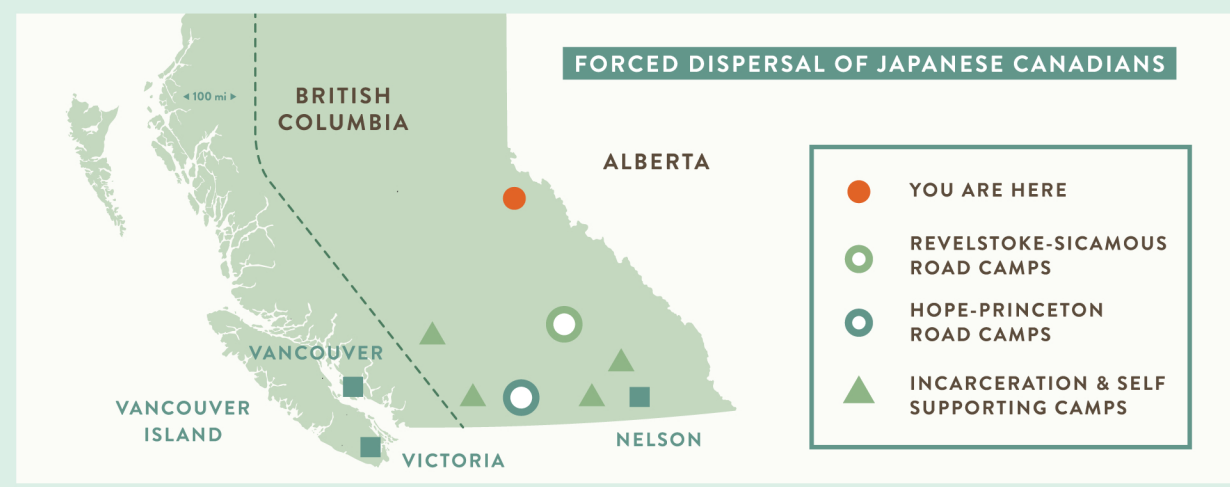


YELLOWHEAD-BLUE RIVER HIGHWAY ROAD CAMPS



“The greatest worry of the men is the future of their families...or if they will ever see them again for the duration of the war.”
— Kinzie Tanaka

JAPANESE CANADIANS DURING THE SECOND WORLD WAR

In 1941, of the 23,149 people of Japanese descent in Canada, 22,096 were living in British Columbia, with the majority located in the coastal areas. After the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941, Canada declared war on Japan. With this, restrictions were imposed on Japanese Canadians and anti-Japanese sentiment increased, especially by some members of the Canadian government. With the creation of the War Measures Act, fishing boats were rounded up, all Japanese language schools were closed, and Japanese language newspapers were shut down.

By Federal Order-in-Council PC 117, all Japanese Canadians were registered as “Enemy Aliens”, fingerprinted and photographed, and were required to carry registration cards. By February 1942, a dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed, and radios, cameras, cars and trucks were confiscated. On January 16, it was announced that able-bodied males aged 18-45 were to work on road-building projects. In fact, the groups of Japanese Canadians sent to the road camps included some men not physically fit for hard labour as well as men over the age of 70.



WORK CAMPS FOR MALE JAPANESE NATIONALS

There were four major road projects located in B.C., Alberta, and Ontario: the Yellowhead-Blue River Highway, the Revelstoke-Sicamous Highway, the Hope-Princeton Highway, and the Schreiber-Jackfish project. Those who resisted being sent to these work camps were sent to Prisoner-of-War camps in Petawawa and Angler, Ontario. By November 1942, 699 people had been sent to POW camps. These men were not reunited with their families until 1946.

After the camps were closed, most were destroyed but some of them became rest areas enjoyed by locals and travellers.

The men were required to construct their own camps and until then slept in railway bunk cars. At some locations cabins were built while at other places the men lived in canvas tents. Bathhouses, rock gardens and vegetable gardens were also built by the men. Four armed Royal Canadian Mounted Police guards (including First World War veterans) were present at each camp, and the Japanese Nationals were not allowed to leave without permission.



On February 23, the first group of Japanese Nationals arrived in Lucerne, in the northeast of B.C. near the Canadian Rockies, to work on the Yellowhead-Blue River project. The proposed highway was a project of the Surveys and Engineering Branch of the Federal Department of Mines and Resources, and extended from B.C. into Alberta. There were 19 road camps in total along the route (see map). The project headquarters were located first in Jasper, next in Red Pass (office and living quarters for clerical and supervisory staff, hospital and warehouse), and from late 1942 in Blue River (warehouse and

hospital). After the camps were closed, most were destroyed but some of them became rest areas enjoyed by locals and travellers. While general labourers in the B.C. interior usually earned about 60 cents per hour, those sent to road camps were paid 25 cents per hour. From that wage, \$22.50 a month was taken for room and board. If a man was married another \$20 was taken out for family support, leaving very little money for necessities such as the replacement of worn-out work clothes.



THE SCOPE OF THE HIGHWAY PROJECT

In July there were 2,122 men working at road camps with 1,237 on the Yellowhead-Blue River project. At its peak in April 1942, there were 1,561 Japanese Canadians employed in the project, along with 85 Caucasian men. Following a change in policy, by October 31, married men had been removed from the project, leaving 294 men left in five camps. By the end of the year, only the Lempriere, Thunder River and Pyramid camps remained. At the end of 1943, there were 104 men, and in October 1944, 85 men.

On May 31, 1946, when the project was halted and closed, there were only 35 Japanese Canadians employed. In total, Japanese Canadians provided 290,238 man-days of work.

When the project opened the objective was to construct a proper highway between Jasper and Blue River. Ultimately the project scope was reduced to building a passable truck road.

Japanese Canadians contributed their labour for the following work on the Yellowhead-Blue River highway project (as stated in a report in 1947 by E.A. Gurney, Assistant Engineer): 18.5 miles of abandoned railway grade cleaned up and made suitable for truck travel; 32 miles of pioneer road constructed; 1.5 miles of standard highway grade constructed; 1 3-span king truss bridge; 2 single-span king truss bridges; 4 permanent stringer bridges; and 12 temporary stringer bridges.

- Decoigne road camp, circa 1942. This group of Japanese Nationals included people of various occupations such as shoemaker, mill worker, cannery worker, dry cleaner, CPR red cap, and newspaper business manager. Matsunosuke and Hana Hamade Collection. Nikkei National Museum. 2017.1.1.2.1.
- Decoigne road camp, circa 1942. During floods, men transported luggage and supplies using a raft. Matsunosuke and Hana Hamade Collection. Nikkei National Museum. 2017.1.1.2.2.
- Geikie road camp, circa 1942. Yasutaro Sakamoto with Doukhobor workers. Sakamoto Family Collection. Nikkei National Museum. 1994.46.2.

www.najc.ca/roadcamps1942