



The War Years

Shortly after Japan's entry into World War II on December 7, 1941, Japanese Canadians were removed from the West Coast. "Military necessity" was used as a justification for their mass removal and incarceration despite the fact that senior members of Canada's military and the RCMP had opposed the action, arguing that Japanese Canadians posed no threat to security. And yet the exclusion from the west coast was to continue for four more years until 1949. The massive injustice was a culmination of the movement to eliminate Asians from the west coast begun decades earlier in British Columbia.



The order in 1942, to leave the "restricted area" and move 100 miles (160km) inland from the west coast was made under the authority of the War Measures Act and affected over 21,000

Japanese Canadians. Most were first held in the livestock barns in Hastings Park (Vancouver's Pacific National Exhibition grounds) and then moved to hastily built camps in the BC interior. At first, many men were separated from their families and sent to road camps in Ontario and on the BC/Alberta border. Small towns in the BC interior such as Greenwood, Sandon, New Denver and Slocan became internment quarters mainly for women, children and the aged. To stay together, some families agreed to work on sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba where there were labour shortages. Those who resisted and challenged the orders of the Canadian government were rounded up by the RCMP and incarcerated in a barbed-wire prisoner-of-war camp in Angler, Ontario.

Despite earlier government promises to the contrary, the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property sold the confiscated property. The proceeds were used to pay auctioneers and realtors, and to



cover storage and handling fees. The remainder paid for the small allowances given to those in internment camps. Unlike prisoners of war of enemy nations who were protected by the Geneva Convention, Japanese Canadians were forced to pay for their own internment. Their movements were restricted and their mail censored.



As World War II was drawing to a close, Japanese Canadians were strongly encouraged to prove their “loyalty” by “moving east of the Rockies” immediately or sign papers agreeing to be “repatriated” to Japan when the

war was over. Many moved to the Prairie provinces, Ontario and Quebec. About 4,000, half of them Canadian-born were exiled in 1946 to Japan. Prime Minister MacKenzie King declared in the House of Commons on August 4, 1944:

It is a fact no person of Japanese race born in Canada has been charged with any act of sabotage or disloyalty during the years of war.

On April 1, 1949, four years after the war was over, all the restrictions were lifted and Japanese Canadians were given full citizenship rights, including the right to vote and the right to return to the west coast. But there was no home to return to. The Japanese Canadian community in British Columbia was virtually destroyed.