JAPANESE CANADIAN SELF-SUPPORTING INTERNMENT SITES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR (1942–49)

Self-Supporting Internment Camps

While it may have seemed that relocation to a self-supporting site was a step above work camps or internment camps, life in these places wasn't without its challenges.

During the internment years, the East Lillooet area was remote and difficult to get to. Internees were sent here via steamship from Vancouver to Squamish, then by Pacific Great Eastern Railway (PGE) to Lillooet. For those sent to Bridge River and Minto, the road was rough and winding, and access to McGillivray Falls was by boat. The sense of disconnection from the homes and communities they had known on the Coast was often overwhelming.

At times, other Japanese Canadians referred to the self-supporting internees as 'Okanemochi', meaning people with lots of money. While some wealthier families were relocated to these camps, other families had meager savings that were barely enough to sustain them from year to year. In 1942, internee Fukujiro Koyama said "As the summer wore on, the food supplies that were brought with us dwindled to nothing. Sugar was rationed, soy sauce was diluted five to six times to make it last as long as possible. There wasn't a soul who was wearing a decent pair of shoes anymore. Every person scrimped and saved as no one knew when this would end."

Taylor Lake

Internment population: 180

Children of Taylor Lake Internment camp, 1944
NNM 2013-72-1-1-38

Taylor Lake, located in the Cariboo, was the largest of the 'industrial projects' authorized by the BCSC. Japanese Canadian families wishing to stay together and could choose Taylor Lake were able to work at the Sorg Pulp and Paper Company. The logging camp had bunkhouses, a cookhouse and a railway siding on the PGE line. George Uyehara was appointed supervisor, to look after the interests of the community and act as liaison to the BCSC. He lobbied for education for the children, and as a result the community built a two room schoolhouse. Fred Okimura helped Chitose Uchida, principal of the school.

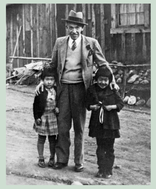
Katsumi Morikawa and friend logging, Taylor Lake BC, 1943 NNM 1994-83-2

Originally the site had no name, but because the nearby Taylor Lake railway siding was built by a nisei (second generation Japanese Canadian) construction gang, it soon became known as Taylor Lake siding. The weekly train stopped to unload mail and provisions on its way to Quesnel. The Haya family lived in the log house; Mrs. Haya was the cook for the camp, Mr. Haya was the mechanical engineer, and the children stripped wood of bark for piecemeal funds. Other families in the camp lived in tarpaper shacks. Taylor lake camp closed in 1945, and many families moved to East Lillooet camp.

Nagai families, Taylor Lake, 1944 NNM 2001-5-1-9-33

East Lillooet

Internment population: 309



Spanish Consul with children in East Lillooet camp, ca. 1943 NNM 1994-52-7

The self-supporting camp in East Lillooet was situated on 40 acres of land on the banks of the Fraser River. As with other internment sites, the BC Security Commission (BCSC) leased the land from local landowners. In this case, the Palmer family entered into an agreement allowing their land to ultimately become the location for 309 persons of Japanese descent to be held during the war years.

The first internees arrived in East Lillooet in 1942. Most were from the communities of Haney, Hammond, and Vancouver in the Lower Mainland. It was the responsibility of the early arrivals to construct 62 standard tarpaper shacks, a series of flumes to carry water from the Fraser River, and a fence around the perimeter of the camp. The camp was organized into two sections, with internees from Vancouver to the south, and the farmers from Haney and Hammond to the north.

The Kariatsumari family East Lillooet, 1943 NNM 1995-134-1-5

Conditions in the camp were often harsh and barely tolerable. As in other camps around the province, the tarpaper shacks where the internees were forced to live had no insulation, electricity, or indoor plumbing. In East Lillooet, firewood for heating was often scarce, and in the winter of 1942 temperatures dropped to record lows. Icicles formed inside the shacks, and snow and icy winds came through the cracks and gaps in the green wood that had been used to build them.

East Lillooet Camp NNM 1994-52-22

Internees experienced a sense of hopelessness and discrimination due to the isolation and physical conditions of the East Lillooet camp. They were not allowed to cross the bridge into the town of Lillooet without a permit from the RCMP, which limited their ability to do even simple activities like shopping and banking. As a result, internees sought to create a sense of community within the camp itself and a community group called the "Lillooet Japanese Self Supporting Community" was formed. They built a school and community garden, and worked to look after the general welfare of the camp's population.

While most of the internment camps throughout the province closed in 1945-46, East Lillooet remained intact until 1949, receiving internees from other camps who needed a home while awaiting permanent places to live.

Tomato Cannery, East Lillooet, 1943 NNM 1992-28-1

Itani, Tateishi, Mizuyabu, Horii, Ishii, Tsuyuki hoeing at Fountain Ranch, 1943 NNM 1995-140-3

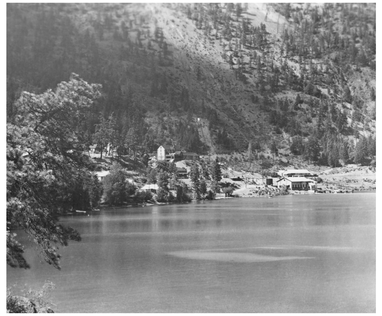
McGillivray Falls

Internment population: 70

McGillivray Falls April 4, 1943
JCCC 2001-5-70

McGillivray Falls was an anomaly in the group of self-supporting internment camps located in this region. In 1942, the BC Security Commission ordered the evacuation of 22,000 Japanese Canadians from the 100-mile (approximately 160 km) Restricted Zone along the coast of the province. McGillivray Falls was located just inside the Restricted Zone, but because of its isolation and the lack of road access, it was not considered a security risk.

Formerly a railway resort, McGillivray Falls had a lodge and cabins that were deemed suitable for internees. A nearby sawmill, owned by Frank Devine, provided employment for internees, who sought to supplement their savings in order to sustain their families through internment. Life in this site was restricted; internees were not allowed to have fishing rods or lines of any kind, but some people were able to make fishing lures out of old jam cans to catch fish to add to their diets. Some people, like the Nishimura family who lived in the lodge, learned how to run the generator for electricity, which was considered a luxury for most internees across the province. At McGillivray Falls, much like at other internment locations, internees found innovative ways to turn hardships into opportunities, and retain a sense of normalcy in their lives which had been torn apart by the forced relocation of the Second World War.



Bridge River Self Supporting Internment Camp, 1942 NNM 2018-6-2-2-1

Bridge River

Internment population: 269

The community of Shalalth was formerly known as Bridge River. During the war it was the location of a self-supporting internment site for Japanese Canadians. This site is a key example of how governments of the day used the imprisonment of Japanese Canadians to revitalize depressed or underutilized towns and infrastructure throughout the province. A thriving model company town established by the B.C. Electric Company in the 1920s, Bridge River was essentially a ghost town by the 1930s when the hydroelectric project there was abandoned. The former town site had cottages, a hotel, a hospital, a community hall, and sporting facilities that were deemed ideal to house self-supporting Japanese Canadian internees during the war.

Unlike other sites, Bridge River's internment housing had electricity and indoor plumbing, making it one of the more comfortable internment locations. However, this did not mean that the Bridge River internees enjoyed luxuries or benefits that were denied to internees at other sites. There was no sense of social, political, or personal freedom for the people living in any of these places. Internees were not permitted to travel to Lillooet without a permit from the BCSC and a stamp from the BC Police in Lillooet. Japanese Nationals also had to report to the BCSC supervisor once a month to have their parole papers stamped.

The continuity of education, social groups, and cultural activities was important to the Japanese Canadians living in the camps, so community organizers brought these activities into camp life. In particular, the Bridge River and Minto sites were managed by a committee of three men: Etsuji Morii from Minto, and Ippei Nishio and Asajiro Nishiguchi from Bridge River, who were instrumental in helping to bring as many social, medical, and educational services to the camps as possible.

Bridge River Internees at train station, 1942 NNM 2018-6-2-2-24

Camp residents even had to provide schooling for their own children, as Japanese Canadian children were not permitted to attend local schools.

Bridge River was also the centre for medical care for internees in this area. The once-abandoned hospital became the home of Dr. Masajiro Miyazaki and dentist Dr. Fujiwara and their families. Together they looked after the medical needs of the internees, and their practices soon expanded to include the care of the First Nations community at the nearby Bridge River reserve. Both men were admired as leaders in their community. Dr. Miyazaki eventually moved his practice to Lillooet, and lived there until 1983.

A miniature concrete and glass castle that still stands near the Bridge River Public Library is a reminder of the sense of community that people living in this camp had, despite their hardships. Built during the internment by Dr. Fujiwara and his son Alan, this castle remains as a symbol that equality among the races needs continuous advocacy and safeguarding.

Bridge River Internees, 1942 NNM 2018-6-2-2-21

Minto Mine

Internment population: 325

Emiko and Matsu Furukawa in their garden in Minto, 1943 NNM 2012-10-1-2-16

The former township of Minto Mine was once a thriving mining town that yielded one million dollars worth of gold at its peak operation in the late 1930s. Unfortunately, by 1940 the mine was no longer producing, and the effects of war caused the former population of almost 800 to dwindle to next to nothing. Originally designed as a model mining townsite, Minto had neat rows of houses, a hotel, a post office and stores, rodeo grounds, and a baseball diamond. This ghost town had the ideal infrastructure to become a self-supporting internment site when the government imposed internment on the Japanese Canadians of British Columbia in 1942.

About 25 Japanese Canadian families were relocated to Minto Mine, and ordered to live in the empty miners' houses. Most internees came from urban and fishing communities in the Lower Mainland and on Vancouver Island, such as the Powell Street, Kitsilano, Grandview, and Marpole neighbourhoods in Vancouver, and Steveston, Prince Rupert, Chemainus, and Cumberland. Although the internees at Minto Mine had electricity and indoor plumbing, unlike their counterparts at most other internment locations around the province, they still experienced challenging conditions. Minto was perhaps the most isolated and remote internment location, and the cultural and climatic shocks of being forced to relocate from an urban area to the almost deserted ghost town in the mountains were traumatic.

Tosh Yoshinaku driving tractor in Minto, 1945 NNM 2010-23-2-4-116

Mr. Sakamoto's home in Minto, 1944 NNM 2010-23-2-4-564

Internees at this self-supporting site were allowed to work in local industries such as logging, sawmilling and trucking to supplement their savings from their pre-war lives. Internees also looked for ways to make their lives as normal as possible. People tended flower and vegetable gardens around the former miners' homes they occupied, and sold their produce at markets in the nearby towns of Gold Bridge, Pioneer, and Bralorne.

In 1945, after the war ended, the sawmill in Minto burned down, and some internee families moved to Devine where they worked in a sawmill cookhouse and store for many years. By the 1950s, the future of the town of Minto was threatened by flooding related to the completion of the nearby Bridge River Power Project. In 1958 the waters of the Carpenter Lake reservoir swallowed Bridge River Valley and the township of Minto vanished into history. Whatever remained of the former mining town and internment site now lies at the bottom of the lake.

JAPANESE CANADIAN SELF-SUPPORTING INTERNMENT SITES OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR (1942–49)

Historical Overview

In 1942, after Canada declared war with Japan, over 22,000 Canadians of Japanese ancestry were treated as "enemy aliens" purely due to their race and a long history of Asian exclusion by governments and society. Most of these people lived in British Columbia. At that time, all Japanese Canadians over the age of 16 living in British Columbia were forced to register with the B.C. Security Commission (BCSC), despite the fact that more than half were naturalized Canadians or were born in Canada.

The government created a 100-mile (160-kilometre) Restricted Zone along the West Coast of B.C. and it was deemed to be a matter of national security that all persons of Japanese ancestry be removed from that area. Orders in Council under the War Measures Act legislated that men between the ages of 18 and 45 would be the first to be relocated. They were sent to forced-labour road building camps in the interior of the province. When men protested being separated from their families, they were arrested and sent to Prisoner of War camps. Women and children were left to fend for themselves as they were processed for transfer to internment camps in the interior of B.C. and other locations east of the Rocky Mountains.

By September 30th, 1942, all remaining persons of Japanese ancestry living in the Restricted Zone were forcibly removed from their homes. Most were temporarily imprisoned in Hastings Park in Vancouver to await transport to one of the many internment sites outside of the Restricted Zone. People were required to surrender their property to the Custodian of Enemy Property. Their possessions, jobs, livelihoods, and access to education were taken away from them. Although people were initially promised that their homes, possessions, businesses, and communities would be returned to them after the war, in 1943, the Office of the Custodian of Enemy Property sold everything in order to finance the internment.

People were sent to different types of internment camps depending on their particular circumstances. Many men were sent to forced-labour camps to build new highways, and the majority remaining were interned in camps set up by the BCSC. Internment camps were set up in the Kootenays, at Greenwood, and at Tashme (near Hope). Others, who could prove that they had enough money and provisions (approximately $1,800) to sustain them for a year were cleared by the BCSC and received a permit from the RCMP to live at one of four "self-supporting" camps established in this area: East Lillooet, Bridge River, Minto and McGillivray Falls. There were other self-supporting sites in the Kootenays at Grand Forks, Midway, and Christina Lake. As well, some internees were sent to work camps, like those at Taylor Lake in the Cariboo and Westwold near Kamloops, where internees had to work to support themselves.

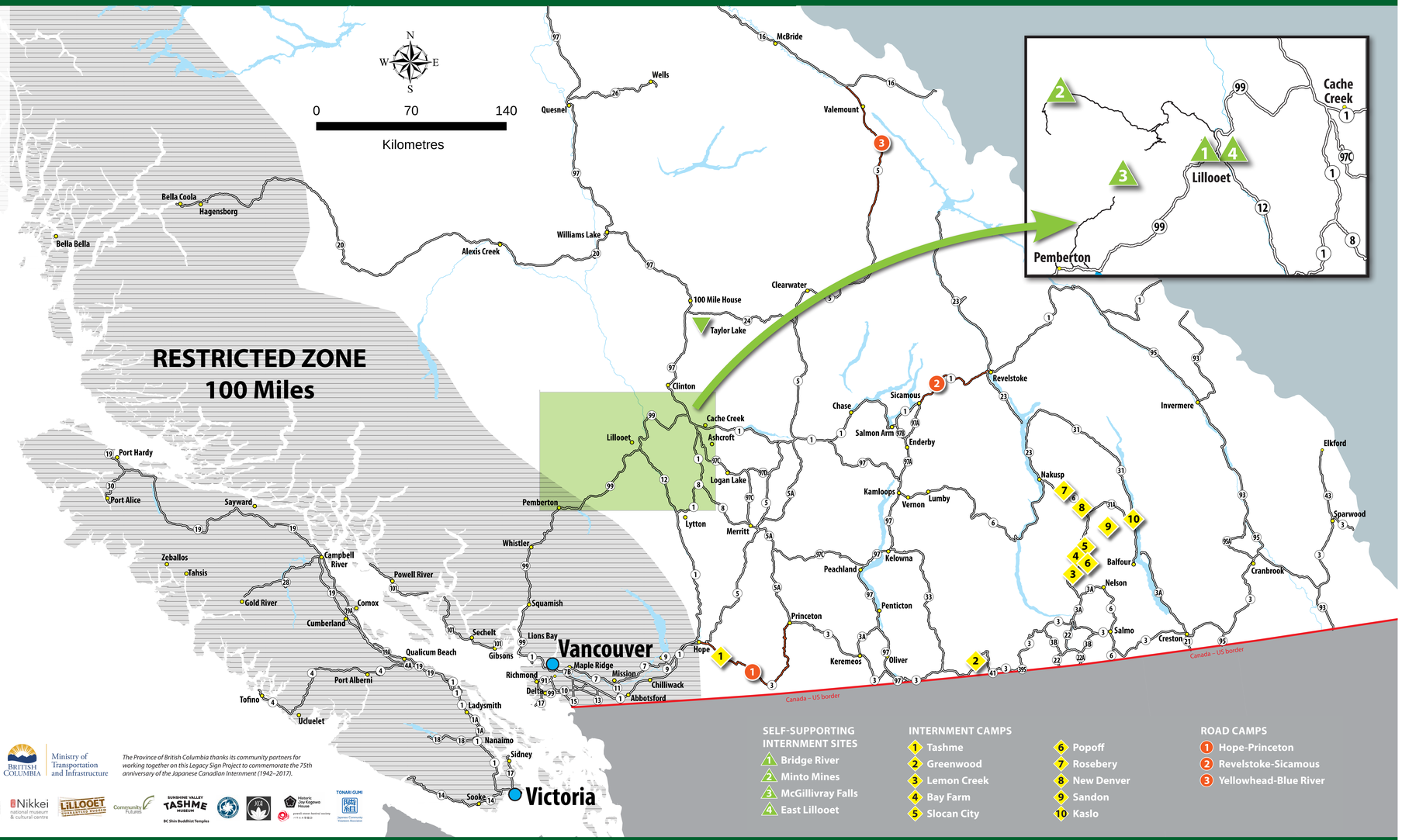
After the War – Ongoing Exclusion and Displacement

Although many internment camps were emptying in late 1945 and into 1946, this did not result in true freedom for many Japanese Canadians who had been imprisoned for years. Many people were not permitted nor wanted to return to their former communities on B.C.'s coast because of ongoing exclusionist policies implemented by the provincial and federal governments.

A key political slogan in B.C. after the war was "Go East or Go Home" – directed at Japanese Canadians who had been interned. It implied that the general sentiment in the province was that Japanese Canadians who had been sent beyond the Rocky Mountains to work on the sugar beet fields of the Prairies should stay there. Or, those who had been interned in the Interior should move east, out of B.C. There was also a movement to push Japanese Canadians to "go back" to Japan, even though the majority of them were Canadian citizens and had never been to Japan before. Still willing to cooperate, much as they did during the initial years of internment, many Japanese Canadians took up the offer of a free ticket to other provinces and cities that would accept them. Approximately 4,000 Japanese Canadians chose to go to Japan, and were deported in 1946.

In 1947, as a result of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the Canadian Government rescinded the deportation order. In the same year, the Canadian Citizenship Act came into effect, allowing all Canadians to become citizens of Canada rather than British subjects. However, influenced by racist sentiment in B.C., the other restrictive powers of the War Measures Act were extended under the National Transitional Emergency Powers Act until 1949. It was only then, after seven years of internment, that Japanese Canadians were free to vote, to live wherever they desired, and to come and go as they wished. Some returned to the Coast, and many returned to fishing in communities such as Steveston in Richmond to rebuild the lives and livelihoods that had been so forcefully and traumatically taken away in 1942.

In the decades following the war, the former community of Japanese Canadians in British Columbia, once numbering over 22,000, was spread across Canada and as far away as Japan. Rebuilding a sense of trust and acceptance took years, but by 1977 there was a renaissance of Japanese culture and ethnic pride taking place across the country. The effects of this renewed sense of community strongly influenced the 1988 redress and formal apology by the federal government for all wrongs committed against Japanese Canadians during the Second World War.



SELF-SUPPORTING INTERNMENT SITES

1. Bridge River
2. Minto Mines
3. McGillivray Falls
4. East Lillooet

INTERNMENT CAMPS

1. Tashme
2. Greenwood
3. Lemon Creek
4. Bay Farm
5. Slocan City
6. Popoff
7. Rosebery
8. New Denver
9. Sandon
10. Kaslo

ROAD CAMPS

1. Hope-Princeton
2. Revelstoke-Sicamous
3. Yellowhead-Blue River

British Columbia | Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure

The Province of British Columbia thanks its community partners for working together on this Legacy Sign Project to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Japanese Canadian Internment (1942–2017).

Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre · Lillooet Museum & Archives · Community Futures · Sunshine Valley Tashme Museum · BC Shin Buddhist Temples · Historic Joy Kogawa House · Tonari Gumi