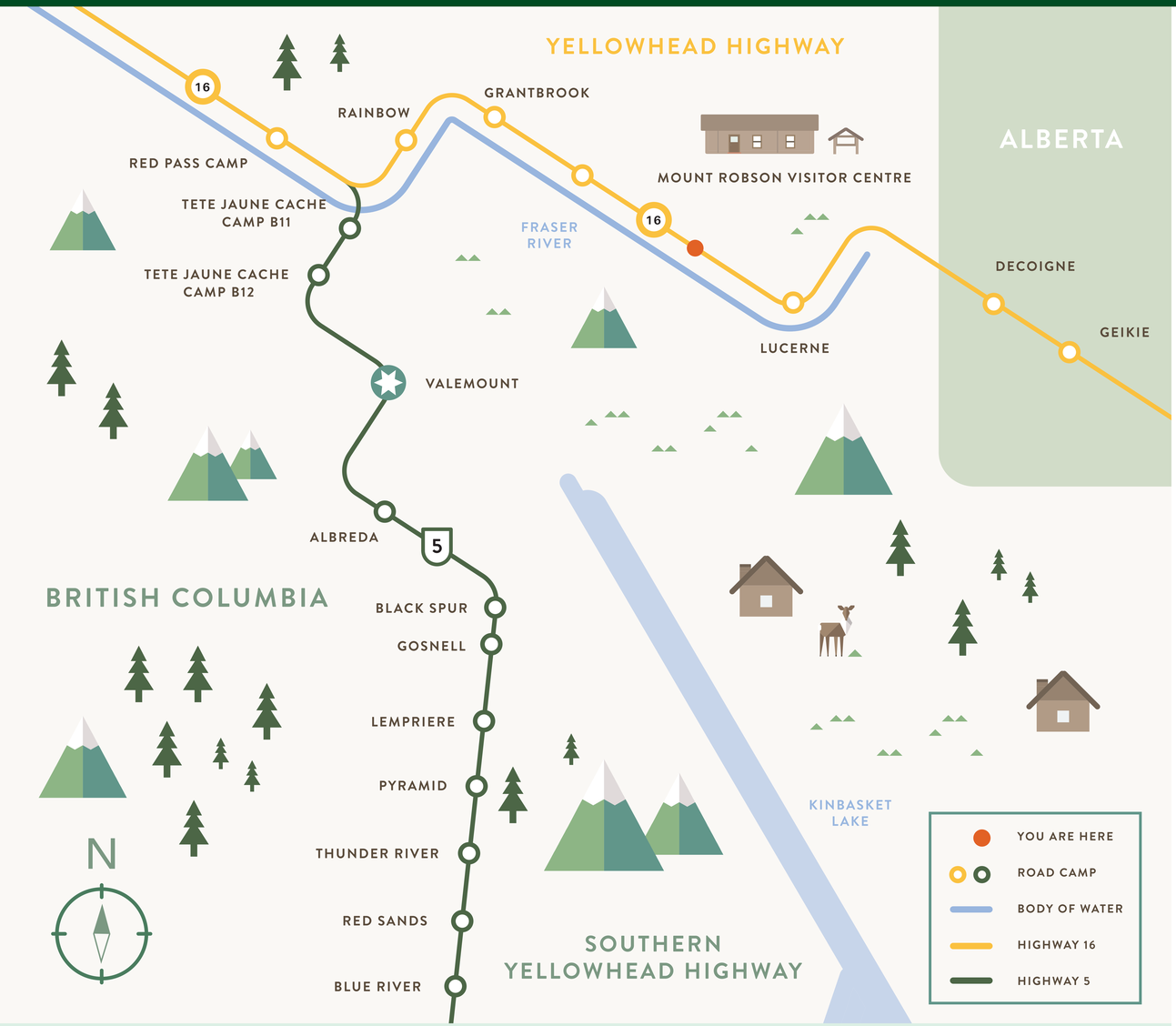
YELLOWHEAD-BLUE RIVER HIGHWAY ROAD CAMPS



> "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 the 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. And on January 16, it was announced that able-bodied males ages 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 and men over the age of 60.

WORK CAMPS FOR MALE JAPANESE NATIONALS

There were four major road projects located in BC, 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.

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 a total of 17 camps. The others were located in Geikie, Yellowhead, Fitzwilliam, Grantbrook, Rainbow, Red Pass (first project headquarters, office and living quarters for clerical and supervisory staff, hospital and warehouse), Tete Jaune East, Tete Jaune West, Albreda, Blackspur, Gosnell, Lempriere, Pyramid, Thunder River, Red Sands, and Blue River (project head-quarters from late 1942, warehouse and hospital).

Men had 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.

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 you were 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, it was reported that there were 2,122 men working at road camps with 1,237 on the Yellow-head-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.

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

Japanese Canadians contributed their labour for the following work on the Yellowhead-Blue River high-way project (as given in a report in 1947 by 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.

www.najc.ca/roadcamps1942

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1 Geikie 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 news-paper business manager. Matsunosuke and Hana Hamade Collection. Nikkei National Museum. 2017.1.1.2.1.

2 Geikie 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.

3 Geikie road camp, circa 1943. Yasutaro Sakamoto with Doukhobor workers. Sakamoto Family Collection. Nikkei National Museum. 1994.46.2.

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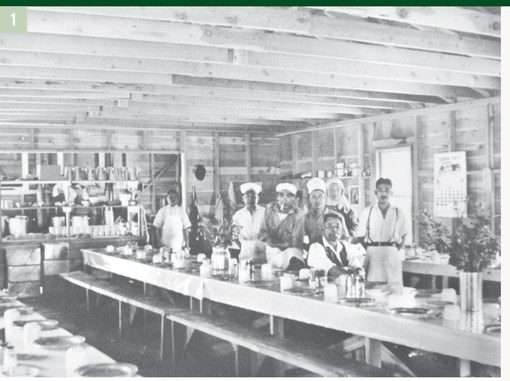

STRIKES AND UNREST IN CAMPS

In May 1942, Kinzie Tanaka, who was working at the Lempriere camp, wrote a letter to the B.C. Security Commission stating that if something was not done to address the low spirit of workers, trouble would break out in the near future. He indicated that the low spirit was due to the discontent of the men, especially because married men had been separated from their families. Consideration was then made to reunite the families.

Several strikes and cases of unrest followed at other camps. In June 1942, 275 men from Grantbrook camp marched to Rainbow, 3.5 miles away. They were angry about the stoppage of visiting privileges to other camps. A strike at Geikie the same month was in protest against the separation of families and the late delivery of pay cheques due to postal delays. Also in June, a labour strike at Gosnell lasted more than a week. The agitator was removed and no acts of violence occurred.

In some cases, the Japanese Nationals asked for the removal of the Caucasian foremen who were unwilling to listen to their grievances. Occasionally, foremen had problems with what they called "troublemakers" and felt the Japanese Nationals had no ground for their strikes. Despite all the troubles, Kinzie Tanaka noted that W.J. Wishart, Superintendent of Camps and Warehouses, Department of Public Works, at Red Pass Junction, did all he could to control the encountered problems.

WHAT HAPPENED TO OTHER JAPANESE CANADIANS?

A few days after the departure of Japanese Nationals to the Yellowhead-Blue River project on February 26, Ottawa announced the mass removal of all Japanese Canadians regardless of their citizenship, from a 100-mile "protected zone" along the B.C. coast. The BC Security Commission was established to manage and carry out this plan. Those removed from their homes included First World War veterans.

On March 16, the first Japanese Canadians from the coastal areas, who were allowed to bring only one suitcase each, arrived at Hastings Park on Pacific National Exhibition grounds in East Vancouver. This location temporarily housed women and children in the livestock buildings and men in the forum building, until the long-term family incarceration camps in the interior of B.C. were ready for them. In the meantime, families that wanted to stay together moved to work on sugar beet farms in Southern Alberta and Manitoba. In total, 5,564 Japanese Nationals, 13,309 Canadia born, and 3,223 naturalized Canadians were expelled from the B.C. coast.

After the forced removal of Japanese Canadians from their homes was completed, their properties were sold, at low prices, by the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property, without the knowledge or consent of the owners. It was through these forced sales the government paid to keep Japanese Canadians in the camps.

At the end of the Second World War, Japanese Canadians were given the choice to "repatriate" to Japan or to move east of the Rockies. Half of the approximate 4,000 who went to Japan were Canadian-born. Many had never been to Japan. Japanese Canadians were prohibited from returning to the west coast until April 1, 1949.

On September 22, 1988, the Japanese Canadian Redress Agreement was signed by the National Association of Japanese Canadians and Prime Minister Brian Mulroney, acknowledging the injustices suffered by Japanese Canadians during the Second World War.

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We acknowledge the Yellowhead - Blue River Highway Project takes place on the traditional and ancestral territories of the Simpcw First Nation and the Fort George Carrier (Lheidli T'enneh) First Nation.

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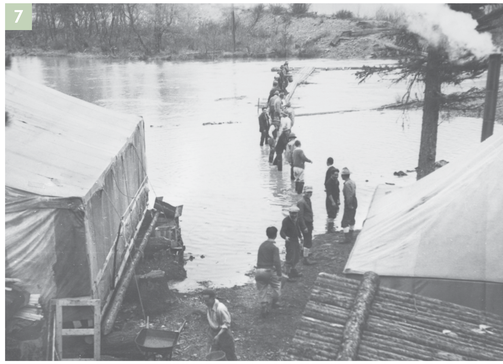

1 Albreda road camp mess hall and cook shack, 1942. The camp was half a mile away from the railroad station, and the kitchen staff lived in a 20'×2' log house. Masao Yoshitake collection. Nikkei National Museum. 1993.40.26.

2 Grantbrook road camp, 1942. Bears were quite often seen in the camp areas and the men became used to them. Canadian Centennial Project fonds. Nikkei National Museum. 2010.23.2.4.107.

3 Lucerne road camp, circa 1942. Baseball was a popular pastime and most camps built baseball fields. Even men over 50 years old practiced vigorously. Camps played against each other or played other local teams. Toshihiro Uyeda fonds.

4 Thunder River road camp, circa 1943. Japanese Nationals had to build their own bunkhouses, mess halls, bathhouses and other permanent buildings and bridges. Fumiko Yamada (nee Kawata). Nikkei National Museum. 2010.20.1.1.3.

5 Red Pass road camp workers, circa 1942. Japanese Nationals had to clear bush manually, with pick-axes and shovels. Only the Caucasians were allowed to use heavy machinery. Masao Yoshitake collection. Nikkei National Museum. 1993.40.1.

6 Yellowhead road camp, circa 1942. Ex-gardeners built gardens at many of the road camp locations. A typical garden included a bridge, a body of water, a rock garden and a tea house structure with a table and benches. The men also created vegetable gardens. Toshihiro Uyeda fonds.

7 Yellowhead road camp, circa 1942. Men lined up to pass full buckets of water to each other in order to bring water up to the camp. Toshihiro Uyeda fonds.

8 Thunder River road camp, circa 1943. Japanese Nationals were removed from the Town of Cumberland on Vancouver Island. Men taken from their homes to work at road camps were supposed to be of military age, but in reality they ranged to about 70 years of age. In some cases, after special requests were made, sons were able to join their fathers at the road camps. Fumiko Yamada (nee Kawata) collection. Nikkei National Museum. 2014.20.1.1.6.