Japanese Internment Camps Essay, Research Paper

Japanese Internment in Canada

The first recorded Japanese immigration to Canada was in 1877. By 1901 the population grew to 4,138, mostly single men that came to Canada searching for jobs. As the immigration so did the discrimination against the Japanese. In the two following decades following the arrival of the first immigrants, the Japanese in British Columbia who established themselves in mining, railroading, lumbering and fishing faced severe discrimination. Those on railways were allowed to do construction, maintenance and dining car service, but were excluded from higher, better paid positions such as an engineer. Following the Duff Commission of 1922, licences issued to Japanese fishermen were cut by one-third, many Japanese turned to agriculture as the only industry which was opened to them.

In 1938 there was a group formed; the Japanese Canadian Citizens League to secure political and economic rights and to fight discriminatory legislation. Discrimination and prejudice was as harsh in western Canada as it was on the west coast of the United States, especially in California. \*It became worse when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7th 1941, 7:58 A.M., Hawaii time, dive bombers and fighters from six aircraft carriers commanded by Admiral Yamamoto of the Japanese Navy struck without warning and devastated the huge United States Pacific battleship fleet. From the moment that Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, it had such a devastating impact upon more than 22,000 persons of Japanese ancestry that were living in British Columbia. All that they had achieved in the sixty-four years since the first Japanese arrived on Canadian shores, was blasted away to nothing, they had now become ‘enemy aliens’. The fears, fueled by long-standing racism against the Japanese, produced a climate of suspicion and hate ( \*Which has been described as “mass hysteria and prejudice.”) Japan’s only strike against Canada was a submarine shelling of a Vancouver Island lighthouse in June 1942. Meanwhile in Canada on the same day as the Japanese attacked the United States, the first Japanese were arrested by the Royal Canadian Mounted police. The schools and newspapers of the community are shut down. Fishing boats and automobiles are impounded, radios and cameras confiscated, and dusk to dawn curfew imposed. On January 14th, 1942, the federal government ordered the evacuation of all male nationals between the ages of 18 and 45. Many men resisted the evacuation order, hoping to remain with their families. Those who did were sent to a concentration camp in Angler, Ontario. One hundred percent civilians, guilty of no offence against national security, they are put behind barbed wire, subjected to forced labour and required to wear special issue uniforms-the circles on the men’s backs are targets in case of escape attempts. By July 1942, the British Columbia Security Commission decides to allow evacuation by family units and married men are allowed to rejoin their families. Those in Angler, however, remain interned. By October 1942, 22,000 people were displaced from their homes, torn from their livelihood, and stripped of all rights. Some were relocated to eastern Canada others were interned in places like Alger, and 11,694 Japanese had been transported to the interior of British Columbia.

Unlike the American evacuation effort, the Canadian evacuation effort expected the Japanese to pay for their own internment. The British Columbia Security Commission expected the Japanese to support themselves, so all property owned by Japanese was liquidated to supply funds for this purpose. Food and clothing allowances were made available depending on income, but food was expensive and wages were kept low because of public pressure-the Canadian government spent one-fourth as much per evacuee as did the US government during the war years. Like their American cousins the evacuees settled in, improvised and tried to carry on with their lives. They had all of their belongings taken away from them if they didn’t sell them within several days, if that. The Japanese had to sell their houses for two hundred dollars, if they were lucky enough to get that with all of their things inside as a part of the deal. And the government let this happen. On March 27th, 1942, an order-in-council was issued giving the Custodian of Enemy Alien Property the power to liquidate, sell or otherwise dispose of such property, Japanese property (not even the Americans did that to the Japanese). Most Japanese never heard of this happening and were never informed. The Japanese understood that their possessions were in the hands of the Custodian until war’s end for safekeeping.

Safekeeping to the Japanese meant that their homes, businesses, farms, possessions, everything, would be kept safe. And yet looting, theft, and the auction block stripped then of everything they left behind. This misunderstanding was a source of great bitterness among many Japanese, men, women and whose labour of years went for practically nothing.

On August 4th, 1944, Prime Minister Mackenzie King told the House of Commons that no act of subversion or sabotage had been found before or during the war by the Japanese. That was the good news, the bad news was that the government would now institute a voluntary system of deportation to Japan, regardless of citizenship. Every Japanese Canadian over sixteen was asked if he wanted to stay in Canada or be voluntarily deported to Japan. Those under sixteen would automatically follow their parents’ decision. The Japanese in British Columbia were told that refusal to go East of the Rockies if they did not wish to go to Japan could be looked upon in future as an act disloyal to Canada. In the fist step, the signing, 81 percent of the Japanese in British Columbia volunteered to go to Japan. Of course, 40 percent of these were children who had no say in the matter. The figure of 81 percent astonished many Japanese East of the Rockies, where only 15 percent, including children, had signed for voluntary repatriation. A total of 10,632 signed for repatriation, including 3,740 dependent children. The deportation was to be carried out under three order-in-council, issued under the terms of the War Measures Act, that all-embracing piece of legislation with which the government carried out the war.

The Japanese were given homes in the camps, homes meaning the size of a garage. Eight people would be assigned to eat ‘home’; each home would be about twelve feet by fifteen or sixteen feet. It was so cold in the winter that they had to fight over the cardboard boxes that came in the camps for insulation. They weren’t allow to bury the dead in single graves, it depended on the camps, some would put them in mass graves, and others would just be cremated, their was no choice.

Until 1949 it was illegal for the Japanese Canadians to return to British Columbia, despite the end of the war. Also for several years after the war, the Japanese still had to report to the RCMP if they planned of traveling more than 50 miles anywhere. Even Japanese Canadian veterans still had to carry registration cards. Hundreds of the Japanese were very bitter over the small sums they got for the property held for ’safekeeping’, and sold without their consent. By 1949, all of the barriers were gone. British Columbia even granted the Japanese the right to vote. But the pattern of the Japanese Canadian settlement had changed, most of them moved into the growing city of Toronto and after being granted their full citizenship, they did very well in life.