



National Association of Japanese Canadians

HERITAGE COMMITTEE REPORT

By: Lisa Uyeda

Heritage Committee Members

Lisa Uyeda (Chair) – Vancouver, BC; Lillian Nakamura Maguire – Whitehorse, YT; Kevin Okabe – Calgary, AB; Sachiko Okuda – Ottawa, ON; and Leanne Sumiko Riding – Toronto, ON. Thank you to our committee members and researcher Mika Fukuma!

Yellowhead-Blue River Signage Unveiled at Mount Robson

By Mika Fukuma & Lisa Uyeda



Photograph caption: Yellowhead Blue River Highway Sign Unveiling June 23, 2018, courtesy of Mika Fukuma. Pictured from left to right: Ben (Mount Robson Ranger), Hugo Mulyk (retired Mount Robson Area Supervisor), Kevin Okabe (Executive Director, NAJC), Honourable Shirley Bond (MLA Prince George-Valemount), Lisa Uyeda (National Executive Board Director and Chair of Heritage, NAJC), Mika Fukuma (NAJC Heritage Committee), Leanne Riding (NAJC Heritage Committee), and Elliott Ingles (BC Parks Area Supervisor, Mount Robson, Omineca Section).



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The signage unveiling ceremony for the Yellowhead-Blue River highway project, took place at Mount Robson Provincial Park's Visitor Centre on a beautiful Saturday afternoon of June 23, 2018. This highway project was where Japanese National males were sent during the Second World War to work in road camps. These men were the first large group forced to leave the west coast, often leaving behind their families, friends, community, businesses, and careers. The first group arrived on February 23, 1942 and following a series of strike and unrest, most married men were moved out to the Tashme and Slocan area to help build the family internment camps for those being forcibly removed; while others were sent to the Prisoner of War camps.

In 1991, Frank Kiyooka wrote to the Province of B.C. requesting that a sign be erected to recognize the hard work Japanese Canadians were involved with in opening up the Yellowhead Highway during the internment years. As a result, a sign was mounted at a highway road stop near the Lucerne area and dedicated with a ceremony attended by surviving Japanese Canadians in 1995. Twenty years later, the original sign is weathered and ready to come down and in 2015, B.C. Parks approached the NAJC to create a new sign to be erected at the Mount Robson Visitor Centre. Three years in the making, the project is complete and the new sign is ready to engage and educate the Mount Robson visitors.

The ceremony was attended by over 50 people and included descendants of the Japanese Canadian road camp workers, a judo friend of possibly the last surviving person who went to these road camps, locals interested in learning about the Japanese Canadian road camps, B.C. Parks staff including Hugo Mulyk who was instrumental in mounting the 1995 sign, and those who simply dropped by in the area at the time.

Elliot Ingles, BC Parks Area Supervisor, Mount Robson, Omineca Section, started off by acknowledging that they were one the traditional territory of the Simpcw First Nation and the Lheidli T'enneh First Nation. He then thanked the National Association of Japanese Canadians (NAJC) for the knowledge that was brought together for the signage project.

Lisa Uyeda, a Director on the NAJC's National Executive Board and Chair of the Heritage Committee, then took over as MC. It was interesting to note that she has a connection to the road camps that were here. She explained, "My great grandfather Uyeda was here, as one of the labourers. He was separated from his family who was in Vancouver in the Powell Street neighbourhood before the war and came over in the early 1900s and laid a foundation for his family." She then continued to tell that his family was torn apart and his wife and children were sent to Lemon Creek. The eldest son Tak, born in Canada, was sent to Griffin Lake of



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the Revelstoke-Sicamous road camps, and later through negotiation was able to join his father at the Yellowhead-Blue River road camps.

Honourable Shirley Bond, MLA Prince George-Valemount, then gave a few words.

She said, "I am a very proud Canadian and a very proud British Columbian, and it's almost hard to imagine that in our country and in our province there was legislation, there were legislators who believed that it was necessary to separate families and to intern Japanese Canadians. It's hard to imagine that happened in a place we call home. And I know we can't change that, we can't fix the past." She continued to explain that acts of injustice like these are actually relevant today and the signage is important to remind people that it shouldn't happen again.

Kevin Okabe, Executive Director of the NAJC, thanked the Heritage Committee members who helped create the signage along with organizations such as the Nikkei National Museum, the Japanese Canadian Legacy Project, the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto, B.C. Ministries of Environment and Transportation, Parks Canada, the Columbia Basin Institute and the Mount Robson Visitor Centre.

A message from Laura Saimoto, Chair of the Japanese Canadian Legacy Project, was read by Lisa Uyeda. The group consisting of multiple Nikkei organizations has been responsible for the interpretive signages for other locations across B.C. to commemorate the 75th anniversary of the Japanese Canadian internment. She said, "These signs are permanent markers to tell the story of the Japanese Canadian internment and teach us a sense of the hardship, the injustice, the emotional trauma of the forced relocation to nowhere. At the same time, it teaches us about the resilience, creativity, resourcefulness, and compassion of Japanese Canadian families who were forced to relocate 100 miles east of the coast to these ghost towns or open farm fields. Having lost everything, with their property confiscated and sold under their noses, their men sent to road camps as forced labour to build B.C.'s highways, how these families persevered through and rose above the tough climate and the unknown to rebuild their lives, reunite their families, and rebuild their communities to a sense of normalcy until 1949 when they were finally allowed freedom of movement and their civil rights restored."

After the ceremony, two presentations took place in the beautiful amphitheatre down the road. Presenters were Leanne Riding, who has done extensive research on the Yellowhead-Blue River road camps, and Mika Fukuma, who put together the text for the signage at Mount Robson. Leanne gave an overview of Japanese Canadian history during the Second World War and information on the Yellowhead-Blue River road camps. Mika presented and read from letters that were written by Kinzie Tanaka during March and September 1942 addressed to his mother, to-be-wife, brother, and friends. The letters are a wealth of information about his road camp experience and are preserved at the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in



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Toronto. Both presenters flew in from Toronto and have been doing research in the area while in B.C.

Next time you visit the Mount Robson Visitor Centre, make sure you check out the new signage to the right of the parking lot. To learn more about the Japanese Canadian road camps, stay tuned for the completion of the NAJC Heritage Committee's website project www.najc.ca/roadcamps1942 late this summer.

Commemorative Message from Legacy Project Committee Chair, Laura Saimoto June 23, 2018

Thank you to everyone for coming, and I regret that I can't be there with you today to unveil the Yellowhead Blue River interpretive sign as well as a new Stop of Interest sign, commemorating the 75th anniversary of the Japanese Canadian internment. Legacy Committee members have just returned from unveiling the third, fourth and fifth MOTI Interpretative Sign at the provincially recognized Internment site clusters and Road camps in the West Kootenays - Slocan Extension, New Denver and Kaslo on June 15.

The Yellowhead Sign Project by Parks Canada and the NAJC was the genesis of the Highway Legacy Signage Project, as it gave birth to the idea to propose to the provincial government putting up Legacy Signs at all of the actual physical locations of the Internment Sites and Road camps that were recognized on the provincial online heritage registry on April 1, 2017. This had been the community dream for many decades. In Sept of 2017, we received a commitment from Honourable Claire Trevena, Minister of Transportation and Infrastructure, to create and install a total of 8 interpretative signs at 5 internment site clusters and 2 road camps and a new Stop of Interest sign at Yellowhead-Blue River to achieve this goal.

These signs are permanent markers to tell the story of the Japanese Canadian internment and teach us a sense of the hardship, the injustice, the emotional trauma of the forced relocation to nowhere. At the same time, it teaches us about the resilience, creativity, resourcefulness and compassion of Japanese Canadian families who were forced to relocate 100 miles east of the coast to these ghost towns or open farm fields. Having lost everything, with their property confiscated and sold under their noses, their men sent to road camps as forced labour to build BC's highways, how these families persevered through and rose above the tough climate and the unknown to rebuild their lives, reunite their families, and rebuild their communities to a sense of normalcy until 1949 when they were finally allowed freedom of movement and their civil rights restored. These signs educate and share our history and give us pause to reflect upon our past so that we can learn the value of its lessons in order not to make the same mistakes again.

On behalf of the Japanese Canadian Legacy Committee, I thank you for being here today to honour and share our history together.



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Sincerely,
Laura Saimoto
Legacy Project Committee Chair