Internment, racism and baseball in southwestern Ontario: Japanese-Canadian farm labourers during World War II.

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On February 24, 1942, the Canadian Government under Mackenzie King approved a measure to evacuate persons of Japanese ancestry from the coastal areas of British Columbia, an action that would lead to the resettlement of over 22,000 people. Pressure had been building for this action against the Japanese community in B.C. since the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. There had been a history of discrimination against immigrants of many communities up to that point in Canada, but the Japanese were viewed with heightened suspicion.

By the time of Pearl Harbor, Japanese Canadians were registered with the government and excluded from the draft, while wartime portrayals of the Japanese often evoked the image of sinister combatants with unsavoury tendencies. There was also a widespread fear at the highest levels of government that the Japanese-Canadian community was a source of sabotage and other anti-war activity.
In order to finance the internment of Japanese Canadians and permanently discourage the community from returning to the West Coast, the federal government confiscated agricultural property and personal possessions. Many would be held in squalid conditions at the Pacific National...
Exhibition (PNE) grounds at Hastings Park in Vancouver before being sent to internment sites in the BC interior or road labour camps. Able-bodied men often went directly from their homes to labour sites.

The wooden frame double bunks constructed for the estimated 8,000 people detained at Hastings Park.

The federal government was interested in moving the Japanese community as far away from populated areas as possible and reached out to other provinces for assistance. In addition to transporting men to road camps in British Columbia, large numbers of men were to be transferred to sugar beet farms in Alberta and Manitoba. By April, the Ontario provincial government had agreed to take 3000 Japanese workmen and place them into existing locations for the Schreiber-Jackfish Highway Project already underway for construction of the Trans-Canada Highway. With an acute shortage of farm labour in 1942, the federal government also granted Ontario $100,000 to assist in recruiting and placing farmer labourers, and this effort
led to an arrangement where Nisei (2nd generation Japanese males) between eighteen and twenty-five years of age were offered the option of assisting with the summer harvest. As in Alberta and Manitoba, all levels of government were particularly interested in supporting the sugar beet harvest. The sugar beet was a labour-intensive crop that supplied badly needed sugar for the war effort. It was this crop that would determine the flow of Nisei (2nd generation) towards Southwestern Ontario where sugar beet operations in the province were concentrated.

The farm camp initiative was coordinated by the Ontario Farm Services Force (OFSF), an organization created in 1941 to supply farmers with volunteers. By 1942 it had registered about 26,000 individuals, mostly women, young adults and children. The OFSF helped identify nine locations (see map below), and the OFSF’s Director, Angus McLaren, would be active in defending the use of Nisei labourers to the local community.

The farm camps were concentrated in Chatham and Kent County for the 1942 harvest, where five of the nine camps were established. Essex, the most southerly camp, would be the last camp operating by 1944.

For example, at a May 7, 1942 meeting of Town Council, the Essex Free Press reported that McLaren praised the Nisei as “good, law-abiding citizens and real
workers” and emphasized that the “farmers need the help and the country and Empire need the food products.” As would happen in several other communities, McLaren was responding to a petition that was trying to stop the establishment of a farm camp with Nisei labourers near the community.

There was particularly strong opposition to a Nisei farm camp in Chatham. On the day after McLaren was in Essex defending the camp there, the Chatham Daily News ran a headline that read “Citizens Object to Japanese Labor Site in the City”, quoting residents concerned that “property values” would be affected, and that the presence of the Nisei would “frighten children.” Chatham would be the only site where the original location of the farm camp would be moved as a result of citizen objections, but all of the sites would otherwise proceed with housing Nisei volunteers.

Perhaps the most serious single incident occurred in Essex. The Windsor Star headline on June 7, 1943 blared that “Police rush to Essex, disperse anti-Jap crowd.” The Star related the story of a convoluted confrontation involving two local men, one a sailor, that had played pool with a group of Nisei labourers, and later determined that the Nisei had not paid their share for the games. Days later, the local men confused them with an entirely different group of Nisei who were sitting at a local restaurant in downtown Essex, and demanded that the men in the restaurant reimburse them for the pool game that had happened earlier in the week. The restaurant owner expelled the local men for causing a disturbance, and for some unspecified reason, one of the locals spread a false rumour that his sailor friend has been mistreated by the Nisei. Over a hundred locals gathered in front of the
restaurant wanting to confront the labourers and extra police were called in from Windsor to defuse the situation. The outcome of this sequence of events was that further restrictions were placed on the Nisei, with limitations on how many labourers could be present in town at once and a stipulation that none could be in Essex on Saturday evenings. Despite the restaurant incident, the Essex camp would see the longest operation of any of the Ontario farm sites. The New Canadian, the only publication allowed during the war that was specific to the Japanese community in Canada, reported in 1944 that Essex was the only camp still being maintained, running “for the last three years with Japanese labour”.

One of the youngest arrivals to the farm camps, then 18-year-old Yon Shimizu, would recall residents in Glencoe coming to the fence at the location of the farm camp and being surprised that the arrivals were mostly young and educated Canadians with a perfect grasp of English. As Shimizu would note, the locals liked to watch them play softball and “there were never any problems after people got to know us.”

In fact, baseball would become a crucial bridging activity between the farm camp workers and the local community. From the beginning, the OFSF had provided baseball equipment and encouraged teams to form at the camps, with the hope that it would break up the long days of monotonous farm work. The Nisei were also avid baseball fans, with the London Free Press reporting soon after their arrival that the 58 workers were “to a man” at Glencoe “baseball and softball enthusiasts”.

At the end of the harvest season in 1942, local baseball teams would start challenging Nisei farm camp teams to exhibition games, with the proceeds of the games going to support the war effort. These games would often be
highly anticipated and attended, with genuine enthusiasm being exhibited for the efforts of the Nisei teams. The New Canadian would also comment on the positive impact of these baseball games. In an article entitled “Nisei Making Contacts on the Ball Field”, the Canadian observed an “atmosphere of great cordality and keen fun”, and a similar situation was reported in the Chatham Daily News where a “fair-minded crowd” cheered both sides.

The Nisei teams would often sometimes play with disadvantages. Games might occur at the end of a long workday, and sometimes the readiness of the Nisei team would be greatly overstated. For example, the London Free Press reported that the Chatham farm camp team had never been beaten, conveniently overlooking that the team had never actually played anyone at that point. Despite at least two major losses at Northridge and Chatham, the Nisei teams sometimes prevailed, winning games in Petrolia, Florence, and one against an all black team at North Buxton. Essex was also the site of baseball activities, capping an event that saw Nisei families in Essex County gathering together for a picnic in nearby Leamington shortly after the war. In this game, the Nisei team achieved a stunning 33-4 win against a team from the Mennonite Recreational Association.

These games provide a much welcome respite in the Japanese-Canadian story during World War II. Although the actions of the American government impacted far more people by virtue of its greater population – over 120,000 Japanese-Americans were displaced in World War II – Canada was, in many ways, much harsher in its treatment of the Japanese community. Unlike the United States, no provision was made in Canada for clothing or food in most of the internment camps, and government-provided schooling was limited to the elementary level. As the war
was coming to an end in 1945, the US government camps saw large numbers of citizens return to the West Coast while Mackenzie King’s government issued a new order-in-council that required Japanese Canadians to either settle outside of British Columbia or sign up for voluntary repatriation to Japan once the war ended.

Once the war was over in August 1945, Ottawa deemed the 10,000 people who had refused to move from coastal BC as having assented to repatriation, and nearly 4,000 people were shipped to Japan before public outrage forced Mackenzie King’s government to back down. Many of these citizens arrived in a war torn country, often without language skills, and were viewed with a hostility reminiscent of their time in Canada. It would not be until April 1949 that Japanese Canadians could freely return to the West Coast, half a decade behind their counterparts in the United States, and not until September 1988 would the Canadian government announce a Redress Settlement for injustices against Japanese Canadians during and after the war, which included reinstating the citizenship of those who were exiled to Japan.

In February 2016, the last remaining building which housed Nisei farm workers, located in Eatonville, was given the go-ahead by Chatham-Kent city council to allow for demolition by the owner. There seemed to be a broad consensus that the building was too far gone for refurbishing, but in August 2018, interpretive panels and Japanese cherry trees were announced for this site and the four others that were located in the area. This initiative was made possible by funding from Japanese-Canadian heritage groups and includes contributions from the municipality.

It is hoped that the other four farm camp locations will receive similar recognition in tribute to the Nisei who
would spend a large amount of time separated from their families in what was often a hostile environment. The names of some of the farm workers can still be found today near a few of these locations, and their contributions to the community are made even more remarkable given the negative impact of World War II on Japanese-Canadians. Despite the dark side of Ontario’s role in the treatment of the Japanese community in B.C., the power of baseball and the egalitarian spirit of sport found on scattered ball fields throughout southwestern Ontario may provide some rare but welcome examples of empathy and understanding in the Nisei farm camp experience.

The author wishes to express gratitude to Dr. Stephanie Bangarth for graciously helping with an article on the Nisei farm camps for the magazine Spotlight on Essex County in 2010, and also to Yoshio (Yon) Shimizu (1924-2016), who opened up his home and his memories to recount the events of the time. Yon was instrumental in documenting the journey from B.C. to Ontario for future generations and worked on the Redress settlement in 1988, as well as establishing memorial plaques to Japanese Canadians in Schreiber, ON and Victoria, BC.