

At 18 years of age, Yon Shimizu was one of the youngest men to work on the Ontario farm camps during WWII.

The Nisei farm camps of Southwestern Ontario:

An Essex County connection to the wartime experience of Japanese-Canadians

By Art Rhyno

Yon Shimizu smiles when asked about a photo of a young man peering out over rows of sugar beets. He remembers the feeling he was trying to convey when the photograph was taken on a hot day in 1942. "You would look at an endless field and you would wonder if the work would ever end."

The journey to the farm fields of Ontario, for Shimizu and for several hundred other young Japanese-Canadian men, would begin on February 24, 1942 when the government of William Lyon Mackenzie King approved a measure to evacuate persons of Japanese ancestry from the coastal areas of British Columbia. Pressure had been building for this action against the Japanese community in B.C. since the bombing of Pearl Harbour on December 7, 1941. There had been a history of discrimination against immigrants from many communities up to that point in Canada, but the Japanese were viewed with heightened suspicion. Wartime portrayals of the Japanese often evoked images of sinister combatants with unsavoury tendencies, which would feed a fear that the Japanese-Canadian community might be a source of anti-war activity.



NOTICE TO ALL JAPANESE PERSONS AND PERSONS OF JAPANESE RACIAL ORIGIN

TAKE NOTICE that under Order Nos. 21, 22, 23 and 24 of the British Columbia Security Commission, the following areas were made prohibited areas to all persons of the Japanese race:

LULU ISLAND (including Stevenston)
SEA ISLAND
EBURNE
MARPOLE
DISTRICT OF QUEENSBOROUGH
CITY OF NEW WESTMINSTER
SAPPERTON
BURQUITLAM
PORT MOODY
IOCO
PORT COQUITLAM
MAILLARDVILLE
FRASER MILLS

AND FURTHER TAKE NOTICE that any person of the Japanese race found within any of the said prohibited areas without a written permit from the British Columbia Security Commission of the Royal canadian Mounted police shalll be liable to the penalties provided under Order in Council P.C. 1665.

AUSTIN C. TAYLOR,
Chairman,
British Columbia Security Commission

After the bombing of Pearl Harbour, restrictions soon multiplied for Japanese-Canadians in British Columbia.

As a result of Mackenzie Kings's War Measures Act, Shimizu and an older brother boarded a train on May 11, 1942, traveling with a group of young men from B.C. to Schreiber, a small community in northern Ontario. The family was already acquainted with hard times. Shimizu's father had died in 1941 after struggling to operate the family's rice goods and specialty food business. One of Shimizu's brothers had shifted the family business into a trucking distribution operation but the van for the new venture was confiscated when the government took possession of Japanese-Canadian property. "Going to Ontario seemed like a good idea at the time," remembers Shimizu. "There were no opportunities left on the West Coast for young Japanese men." His mother and younger siblings stayed behind in an internment camp in the B.C. interior.

From British Columbia to Ontario

There was still snow on the ground when Shimizu arrived in Schreiber, a location purposely selected as remote enough to keep second-generation Japanese Canadians away from "Nationals", who it was felt might unduly influence their opinion against the war effort. The Japanese term for the second generation of a family is Nisei (pronounced nee-say), and Schreiber was to be the dispersion point for Nisei in Ontario. The physical labour of young men was also needed for the construction through the area of the Trans-Canada highway.

With an acute shortage of farm labour in 1942, Mackenzie King's government granted Ontario $100,000 to assist in recruiting and placing farmer labourers. This effort led to an arrangement where Nisei males between 18 and 25 years of age were offered the prevailing rate of 25 cents an hour. Living costs were to be deducted from their earnings, and the placement was to be for the duration of the war. All levels of government were particularly interested in supporting the sugar beet harvest that supplied badly needed sugar for the war effort. The sugar beet, a labour-intensive crop, would determine the flow of Nisei towards Southwestern Ontario where sugar beet operations were concentrated.

Farmers were generally far more eager to encourage Nisei participation in the harvest than most other residents of Southwestern Ontario. Motions were passed at town councils in Chatham and Essex objecting to the plan, but the harvest schedule was far too pressing for any extensive consultations and education efforts to take

Petition Presented by Essex Branch of Canadian Legion

Monday, September 14, 1942

" It was a military necessity to remove the Japanese from coastal areas. It is also a military necessity that they be confined to their domicile on the farms to which they were allocated and cease to be a menace to our war effort.

The Jap may be an innocent and loyal Canadian, but remember that our men in uniform are staking their lives to defeat Japan.

It is not in harmony to have our citizens and Japanese associating with one another.

We don' t want any of our boys getting into trouble. We don' t want innocent people to suffer and we don' t want to give the Japanese reasons for reprisals against the Canadians they hold.

The Canadian Legion which has over 200,000 members passed a resolution at the Dominion Convention in Winnipeg, 1942, that all Japanese should be put in concentration camps.

We, Ex-Service Men of Essex, strongly protest against their coming into the Town of Essex."

Source: Essex Free Press, Sept. 25, 1942

Clippings from The Essex Free Press, 1942

300 JAPS ARE SELECTED

Three hundred Japanese-Canadians at Schreiber, Ont., have been selected as suitable for work in Southwestern Ontario sugar beet fields and will be brought to the nine labour camps about June 1st, as blocking of beets becomes general.

At a conference between field men of the Canada and Dominion Sugar Company and officials of the Ontario Sugar Beet Producers Association Saturday, it was anticipated that enough labour is available at present to block the occasional crops of early beets late this week and early next week.

Bulk of the work will be done from May 26th to the first week in June and it is expected the Japanese will be here about the end of the month.

As soon as the beet work is through the Japs will be available to farmers by the day for other work such as picking fruit, tomatoes, haying, harvesting and general farm work.

JAP FARM WORKERS ARRIVE

Twenty Japanese farm laborers arrived at Tilbury on Friday, and were immediately taken to the Workman farm (the Wm. Switzer farm) at North Ridge.

Like others brought into Kent County recently from road camps at Schreiber, Ont., the young men will be employed on beet farms until the hoeing and thinning, after which they will be available to farmers for other types of work, until beets are ready to harvest.

Constable J.H. Baxter, R.C.M.P. Windsor, is on duty at the camp, and will be assisted by John Fridd and D.A. Rupert, Great War veterans and residents of Gosfield North.

place. Nevertheless, the Director of the Ontario Farm Services Force (OFSF), Angus McLaren, made some efforts to address the concerns of the selected areas, appearing in front of Essex town council on May 7, 1942.

The OFSF would have been well known to town council. The organization had been created in 1941 to supply farmers with volunteers, and it had by that point registered about 26,000 individuals, mostly women, young adults and children. The OFSF appealed to patriotism and, according to *The Essex Free Press* account of the meeting, Mr. McLaren emphasized that the Nisei were "good, law-abiding citizens and real workers." He told council that the "farmers need the help and the country and Empire need the food products."

Wartime sentiments would turn out to be a double-edged sword for the camp that was established at North Ridge, at the point where the Cameron Sideroad now meets Highway 3. The June 12, 1942 edition of *The Essex Free Press* described the arrival of the first 20 Nisei labourers, along with a report from Gosfield North Council, which passed a motion protesting the Japanese presence. A constable from the RCMP was assigned to the camp, and two Great War veterans from Gosfield North were given the task of assisting with security. By September, a petition had been circulated by the Essex branch of the Canadian Legion objecting to the camp and it was presented to Essex Town Council at a special session, where it was approved and sent on to the Commissioner of the RCMP and the OFSF.

The objections were unsuccessful, and Essex would become one of the locations where many of the Nisei experienced farming and small-town Ontario for the first time. Mary Taylor of Gosfield North saw the new arrivals through young eyes. "I remember driving by the large house as a young girl of 11, and being afraid because of all the stories and fear in the area during the war."

Dr. Stephanie Bangarth, a historian who has researched and written extensively on the treatment of Japanese-Canadians during WWII, describes how attitudes began to change as small town Ontario started to learn more about the Nisei. "Many people were surprised that the workers spoke English, were polite, and were typically well educated," she says.

Church groups and farmers were supportive of the newly arrived labour. Although the Nisei had been rarely exposed to field-work in the past, the farmers were impressed by their work ethic. Writing in *The New Canadian*, the only Japanese-Canadian newspaper allowed to publish at the time, one of the Essex workers described how "the ability and efficiency of the 41 boys stationed at this Ontario farm service force camp has been tested and recognized to such an extent that many private farmers and agricultural concerns are vying with one another to secure our help."

"We were greeted with some suspicion and antipathy upon our arrival," the writer acknowledged. "It was not long before this attitude was corrected and all the boys are now working in good health and good spirits."

Yon Shimizu echoes this account with his own experience. Shimizu and his brother were placed in a camp in Glencoe and found that "there were never any problems after people got to know us." In fact, Essex would be the scene of the only confrontation involving the Nisei, a confusing incident where a sailor in uniform started an argument with a group of Japanese-Canadians in a local restaurant. The sailor and his friend accused the men of not paying for a game of pool a few nights before. The men, in fact, were not the ones who had played pool on the evening in question, but somehow a report was circulated around town that a man "in uniform" had been abused by the camp workers after the sailor and his friend left the scene.

A large crowd gathered in front of the restaurant and three provincial constables and seven mounties were called in to assist the local police. The law enforcement officials were able to find the sailor who told the assembled group that the tales of abuse were rumours and had nothing to do with the incident over the pool game. The crowd dispersed when the president of the Legion promised to call a special meeting to investigate the incident. The meeting was held the next night and the RCMP representative promised to station an officer in town on any evenings when the Nisei would be present. The number of Nisei allowed in town at any one time was to be limited, and they were not to be allowed in town at all on Saturday evenings.

Sugar Beet Farmers Deserve Praise

Essex Free Press, November 3, 1944

Chatham, November 2nd – During the period in which the South Western Ontario farmer has been hard pressed for labour, besieged with demands to produce more butter, more pork, more oil-bearing foods – more of most everything he can grow – it is to his great credit that he has not entirely by-passed sugar beets in favour of other crops of lower labour requirements.

For the sugar beet is a crop of high labour demands – no one can dispute that. Experiments are nearly perfected and plans are complete for mechanization of the sugar beet crop – after war priorities ends – but up to now much labour has been needed to grow sugar beets successfully. This labour was not available – the much-needed workers had gone to war – or into war industries. So – more power to the farmer who carried on, growing sugar beets in the face of difficulties – real difficulties they were too.

True, the price of beets has risen from a basis of $6.85 per ton (for the average beet of 16%) in 1939 to $11.00 in 1944. But so, also have the prices risen of the three great competing crops grown in the sugar beet country of South Western Ontario. These crops are corn, soya beans and white beans and, of these – the mightiest is corn! And while the net returns per acre of any of these crops has not been as high as the net return from sugar beets of average yeidl, every farmer could handle greater acreage of them on his farm without having to worry so much about labour.

Now the turn is in sight! At last the field labour problem is easing off! More farm labour is available in 1944 to harvest the 15,000 acre sugar beet crop than was on hand to barely suffice for harvesting the much smaller crop of 1944 – only 9,200 acres.

Sugar is rationed and even under rationing there is only enough to go round. The scarcity will be with us until the conquered and occupied countries get into full swing production again. This will take years, so Ontario grown beet sugar is surely going to have its inning from now on.

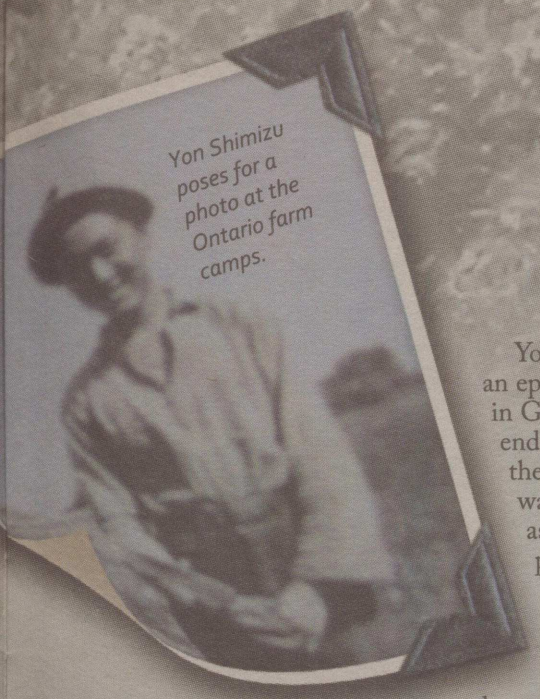
Suppose, for example, that enough beets are grown to keep all Canada' s beet sugar refineries going full blast for 1945 – we will still have to import 75% of our sugar requirements – even under current rationing restrictions. So there will be no surplus sugar crop in Canada to glut the markets and knock the price down. We are all assured of that. So full steam ahead for a full acreage of sugar beets in 1945!

This is published in the interests of greater wartime sugar production in Ontario to help win the war. Sugar is needed on our fighting fronts.

After the War

Despite the restaurant incident, the Essex camp would see the longest operation of any of the Ontario farm sites. In 1944, *The New Canadian* reported that Essex was the only camp still being maintained, running "for the last three years with Japanese labour."

When the war ended, many of the Nisei would stay in Ontario. Some of the family names from the Essex camp would be present when the Essex Niseis Organization was voted into existence on August 8, 1947, just weeks after a picnic of all Japanese families in Essex County was held in Leamington. A Mennonite Recreational Association team was badly trounced in a game of softball, yielding to the Nisei team by a score of 34-4.



Yon Shimizu recalls an epic baseball game in Glencoe near the end of his stay on the camp, but he wasn't as fortunate as his counterparts in Essex County. "Our star pitcher lost the power of his good arm, and we were not able to win." Shimizu would be reunited with his family in Toronto in 1943 and continue his routine of working long hours in order to support his education in chemical engineering at the University of Toronto.

Upon graduating in 1948, Shimizu found that discrimination was still part of being a Japanese-Canadian. He was eventually able to find work in Wallaceburg, where he continues to reside. In addition to working as a chemical engineer and business executive, Shimizu earned a Masters of Business Administration at the University of Windsor by attending night classes. He also received Citizen of the Year awards from both the Wallaceburg and District Chamber of Commerce and the Wallaceburg Junior Chamber of Commerce during his long career. "It took about 10 years for the discrimination to fade away, but I am not bitter," he says.

Shimizu wrote a book entitled *The Exiles* in 1993. It includes stories from the Nisei who left British Columbia during the war years and found themselves on trains heading east. The book documents the perseverance of many of the Nisei who eventually found success throughout Canada. Shimizu was also instrumental in getting an historical plaque installed at Schreiber. The plaque describes how several hundred young men came to arrive there in 1942 and were the beginnings of a substantial Japanese-Canadian community in Ontario.

On September 22, 1988, Prime Minister Brian Mulroney announced a Redress Settlement negotiated between the National Association of Japanese Canadians and the federal government. The settlement acknowledged injustices against Japanese-Canadians during and after World War II. It provided a payment of $21,000 to all Japanese-Canadians affected by the provisions of the War Measures Act and cleared the criminal records of all those charged with offenses stemming from violations of the Act. It also reinstated the citizenship of those who were exiled to Japan.

The experience of the Nisei who were sent to Southwestern Ontario is one of both misconceptions and understanding in a time of war. "You can look at the history as a dark period, but also as a time when people who didn't know much about each other found common ground," says Dr. Bangarth.

Today, the site of the Essex farm camp is covered by a highway, with no evidence that it was once a busy farming outpost in a national war effort and the temporary living quarters of a disenfranchised community, a community that would have a long, difficult, but ultimately successful journey towards re-establishing their home in Canada.



OFSF Ad from 1942

To Learn More

The Exiles: an archival history of the World War II Japanese road camps in British Columbia and Ontario / [compiled] by Yon Shimizu. Wallaceburg, Ont. : Shimizu Consulting and Pub., c1993.

Bangarth, Stephanie. "The Long, Wet Summer of 1942: The Ontario Farm Service Force, Small-Town Ontario and the Nisei." Canadian Ethnic Studies 37, no. 1 (2005): 40-62. Available through Knowledge Ontario at ***http://www.accessmylibrary.com/article-1G1-137919909/long-wet-summer-1942.html***.

Voices raised in protest : defending citizens of Japanese ancestry in North America, 1942-49 / Stephanie Bangarth. Vancouver : UBC Press, c2008.



