

Lethbridge Committee
-report on activities
1976

NEA
302 - 1371 Blackwood Street,
White Rock, B.C., V4B 3V2
12th September 1977.

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Mark Hopkins, Esq., Archivist,
Public Archives Canada,
395 Wellington,
Ottawa, Ontario. K1A ON3

Your File:
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Dear Mr. Hopkins:

"The Lethbridge Consultative Committee
for Canadians of Japanese Origin."

With reference to your letter of 23rd August I shall attempt to enumerate in proper sequence the origin and development of the above named committee to the best of my recollection. At the outset I must warn you that while brevity may be the soul of wit it has never been one of my strong points, moreover now that I am a junior septuagarian my memory is not what it was. For example, with no files for reference I am unable to remember the exact years during which these events transpired other than that they were post-war and the committee operated for some eighteen or more months prior to the Justice Bird hearings. My interest has continued, however, since I made a number of friends from within the Japanese community, in fact I still follow their very successful integration into the Lethbridge social fabric, business and professional life.

Perhaps at this juncture I should explain the manner in which my interest was aroused in the beginning. I had been seconded from the Canadian to the U. S. Army and put through a strenuous and intensive course of study in the history, culture and language of Japan. When Ottawa in its wisdom decided there would be no Canadian participation in the occupation of that country I returned in March of 1946 to civilian life and to my insurance and real estate business in Lethbridge. I was surprised to find that during my absence of six years some thirty-five hundred or more West Coast Japanese had been "relocated" in the rural areas surrounding the city and were employed in the sugar beet fields in the most backbreaking type of manual labour. I was anxious to retain my fluency in the Japanese language, acquired through months of hard work and concentration and at some considerable cost to the Canadian taxpayer, so made contact with the Buddhist priest who resided in Picture Butte, Alberta, some ten miles distant from Lethbridge. Through the good offices of this gentleman I became acquainted with a number of the younger people of Japanese ancestry and was able to carry on with them conversations in their parental tongue. I might add that the English of these young men and women was flawless.

At this point I think it should be explained that the "red neck" Lethbridge city council of the day had promulgated an ordinance, never tested in the courts, which in effect prevented any person of Japanese origin from accepting employment of any description within the confines of the city. Moreover the very presence of these people on the city streets was discouraged, they were made to feel unwelcome in every sense of the word. I was highly incensed at such discriminatory treatment and did what little I could to counter this type of bigotry on the part of city council and of many of the citizens but met with little or no success. As the war hysteria died down with the passage of time and the demand for domestic help grew permits were given for the Japanese girls to enter the city and engage in such employment after completion of seasonal work in the beet fields. In the course of time more and more occupations became open and were filled with Japanese, male and female, and the despicable ordinance died a natural death.

In my contacts with the younger Japanese (Nisei) I was disturbed to learn of the means by which these people had been torn from their homes on the west Coast and of the alleged sales by the Official Receiver of their goods, chattels and real property at ridiculously low prices bearing no relation to actual value. I learned also that a certain Lethbridge attorney, Mr. A. Gladstone Virtue, was representing the entire Japanese community in the surrounding area in its dealings with the Caucasian neighbors. It appeared that the elders (Issei) had no particular cause for dissatisfaction with this arrangement but the younger element with whom I associated felt altogether differently and for reasons of their own wished to have no part of this gentleman and his services. I was told of the formation of a committee in Toronto, the so-called "Andrew Brewin Committee", and of their desire that a similar group should be organized in Lethbridge. I discussed this matter with my friend and legal adviser, Mr. Walter E. Huckvale, whose offices adjoined my own, and it was decided we should take such steps as would lead to the formation of a committee to liaise with the Toronto group.

A certain Miss Bartling, lay-preacher with United Church of Canada, had been in touch with the Toronto committee and provided names, addresses and so forth as well as giving assistance in the organizing process. I made contact with a number of prominent citizens, representative of church, business, professions, labour, etc. and at our first meeting, held in the local Y.M.C.A., there was a goodly turnout, fifteen or more if my memory serves. Mr. Virtue was in attendance, at my invitation, and most vigorously denied the need for any organization of this nature, it was

redundant and quite unnecessary since the Japanese were being well looked after. Should we proceed to form this organization we should do so without his support. Despite this harangue it was decided, with one dissenting vote, that of Mr. Virtue, to go ahead with the organization and Mr. Huckvale was asked to act as chairman and I as secretary. There were a few meetings as time passed but attendance dropped off and the point was reached when Mr. Huckvale and I constituted the committee to all intents and purposes.

From this point on it was pretty much routine with a rapidly growing file, almost daily calls from the younger Japanese envoys and a voluminous correspondence with the Toronto committee. The secretary in the East was a Mrs. McMillan (MacMillan?) whose husband, a United Church missionary, was on long leave from his China posting. Sometime prior to the appointment of the Bird Commission this couple left Canada and I regret that I cannot recall the name of Mrs. McMillan's successor. To the best of my recollection we had no contact whatsoever with the Winnipeg committee. I recall one incident of interest at this time. After we had been in existence for many months one of the young Japanese, it could well have been Mr. Min Takada although my mind is not clear on that point, asked me just how the costs of stationery, postage and the like were being financed. When I told him that Mr. Huckvale and I were absorbing that expense he was most vehement in declaring that we could not be expected to donate more than our time and effort and something would be done about out-of-pocket expenses. He forthwith took up a collection amongst his fellows and presented me with a small sum, the amount of which I cannot recall other than to say it was adequate to defray expenses from that time on. It is unfortunate that the names of those young Japanese who were active in the movement must go unrecorded.

During these days we were active in a campaign to force the federal government into taking a second look at the settlements made at the time of the upheaval on the West Coast. Citizens were encouraged to write to their Member of Parliament, the local newspaper donated space, the radio station was helpful and clergymen read our material from their pulpits. There must have been a veritable flood of letters decending upon the authorities in Ottawa. It was surprising and most certainly gratifying to see such a radical about face on the part of the local populace when not too many months before the city council had a majority support in its discriminatory attitude. Perhaps there was more apathy than active support, I prefer to think of it in that way. At any rate when in course of time the appointment of Mr. Justice Bird to head a commission of enquiry was announced

We felt that our efforts had finally met with a measure of success. Much work remained to be done but we had passed a significant milestone.

Presently the Toronto committee sent us in bulk the forms to be used in presenting each individual case before the Commissioner. These I passed out to my young people with the request that a nominal retainer fee should be included when completed forms were returned to my office. The amount suggested by Mr. Huckvale was nominal, more of a token than anything else, the figure of fifteen dollars sticks in my mind but I could be wrong. For those who could not afford to pay no fee was demanded. As the volume of completed forms increased Mr. Huckvale reached the conclusion that he could not handle it all himself so called upon Mr. L. S. Turcotte for assistance. I believe I am correct in stating that Mr. Turcotte had not been a member of the committee. At any rate these two gentlemen handled all applications, except for those presented by Mr. Virtue, and reported a sympathetic hearing from the commissioner. If I knew the numbers at the time I have now forgotten but no doubt the files of the commission will disclose this information.

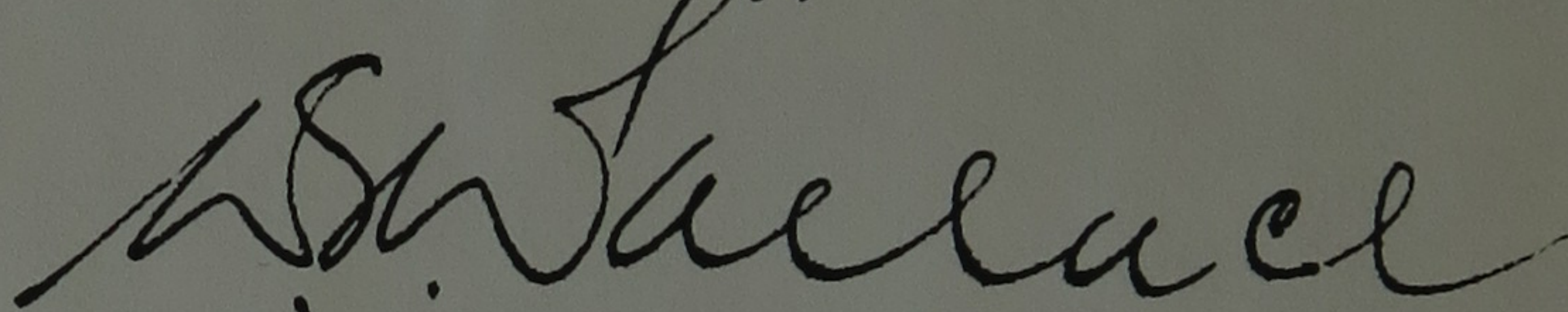
I never did know the details of the settlements recommended to the government by the commissioner but, as was to be expected, there was some evidence of dissatisfaction at the meagre amounts to be paid but little outspoken criticism. I believe the Japanese as a whole considered they had won a moral victory and any cash settlement was money they had not expected to receive. Such, at least, was the impression I gained at the time. At the conclusion of the hearings the need for our committee was over and its activities were gradually wound down. For years after, however, I had contact with those of the Japanese community who worked with me and it has been an association which I treasure greatly.

It is a far cry today from the immediate post-war years when the Japanese were persona non grata on the streets of Lethbridge. These people are included in virtually every profession, they are successful businessmen, have inter-married on numerous occasions and are desirable citizens in every sense of the word. In fact the move from West Coast to the Lethbridge area has been a blessing to that city as the Japanese have rendered a signal service in the life of the community, have added to its culture and on all counts the city is a better place for their presence. To me this is the very essence of the phenomenon we know as "The Canadian Mosaic".

I think I may be excused if I have some little feeling of satisfaction in that I had a small part to play in the overall picture. I am sure that the other members of the committee, largely if not entirely deceased, would have shared this with me as will those others, who must remain unnamed, who helped in so many ways.

I trust these comments of mine will assist you in your efforts to trace historical records in this connection and I wish you every success. I am available for further reminiscence at your call.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, reading "W. S. Wallace". The signature is written in dark ink and is positioned above the printed name.

William S. Wallace.