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Glenn McPherson Fonds

The Fifth Estate: "Lost Property" Transcript, Oct 15, 1985

FOLDER NO.

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Eric Malling

Good evening. I'm Eric Malling. Tonight we'll be looking at one of those issues that won't go away. Should Japanese-Canadians be compensated for the land that was seized from them during the Second World War?

Marika Omatsu

I personally cannot see how my grandfather's farm in the Fraser Valley, the sale of that property, helped Canada win the war against Japan.

Ray MacLeod

These Canadians were still being viewed as Japs, as the enemy. So how can you expect to get a fair appraisal from somebody, dealing with Jap property?

"Lost Property"

Eric Malling

After the bombing of Pearl Harbour in 1941, both Canada and the United States banished everyone of Japanese ancestry away from the western coast line back behind the mountains. There were certainly explanations for it. The fear of sabotage that never happened, but a real fear nevertheless. The fear of race riots—they might well have happened in cities such as Vancouver, and San Francisco. In Canada, those of Japanese ancestry lost not only their freedom, temporarily, they lost their land—forever.

Whether compensation should be paid to the Japanese-Canadians is still an issue that's unsettled. But lurking within this broader issue is another one. It may have been necessary to banish the Japanese. Necessary, too, to sell their rusting cars and rotting fish boats. But why was it necessary to sell their farms? A solution, if one is ever found, will be neither simple nor universally popular. And even to this day, the forced removal of some 21,000 Japanese-Canadians is a story full of ironies.

Stanley Park, Vancouver. Local members of the Royal Canadian Legion have turned out for a memorial service. At the centre of the ceremony is Sergeant Masumi Mitsui, age 98--the last living Japanese-Canadian veteran of the battle for Vimy Ridge in the First World War. Mitsui has come from Ontario to take his place at the rededication of the monument commemorating the nearly 200 Japanese-Canadians who fought for Canada in World War One.

But despite the proud names of the battlefields, and the fallen soldiers, for over 40 years the Vancouver monument to Japanese-Canadian veterans has been neglected. Today, the flame will be lit once more.

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Mitsui Family Member

Our father's proud to be asked to represent all his comrades who are gone before him, but they're not forgotten. This is a memorable event for him. And he says thank you everyone. Thanks, and God bless you all.

Eric Malling

Like other veterans, Mitsui wore his decorations, including the military medal for bravery won at Vimy Ridge. But despite the solemn occasion, there was a slight to the old soldier. Many of those present noticed that Fred Winn—president of the Pacific Command of the Royal Canadian Legion—chose to wear a business suit instead of his uniform—a sign of something.

Fred Winn

I say let the dead past bury its dead, and let us look forward to the great opportunities of the future.

Eric Malling

For Mitsui, the past is not so easily dismissed. As he laid a wreath honouring the 54 Japanese-Canadians who died for Canada in the first war, it was a moment of honour. Honour that had long been owed these loyal soldiers. This house in Port Coquitlam on the outskirts of Vancouver was once Mitsui's. And he came with his daughters to see it again.

Masumi Mitsui, born in Japan, the son of a Samurai. He came to Canada as a young man, and after his war-time service got a veteran's loan to buy seventeen acres here for a chicken farm.

Mitsui Family Member

You see the chicken houses down there? That's all gone. The brooder house is all gone. The well is all gone. It doesn't look like the same place. You'd never know it, would you, now?

Eric Malling

On Christmas Day, 1941 the RCMP had arrived.

Mitsui Family Member

They told dad to make a room downstairs. They told us to put all your private... all your good possessions, everything, in that room and lock it up. After the war, you'll be able to come back. And this is what we did. One week after we did it, they... everything was taken away. It was... somebody broke in and stole everything.

Mitsui Family Member

We didn't realize it was going to be sold. We thought that we were all coming back. We were just, you know, just going away just for the time being. We didn't think it was being confiscated.

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Eric Malling

Confiscated, and sold. Today it's a suburb. Mitsui's 17-acre chicken farm is now divided into some 70 lots. The assessed value of the lots today is over \$2.5-million. During the Second War, Mitsui was forced by the government of Canada to sell for just over \$2,000. Everything was confiscated, and it began with 1,200 fishing boats owned by the Japanese-Canadians. There were fears, never substantiated, that they were armed with 16-inch guns, and equipped with lights to guide attacking aircraft.

In the panic of the war, that was enough to send not only fishermen, but 21,000 Japanese away to work camps, despite the fact that three-quarters of them were Canadian citizens. A custodian was appointed to look after the property left behind, but as the boats began to rot, the Cabinet in Ottawa decided to sell them all. Cars that had belonged to the Japanese-Canadians were seized and stored in Vancouver's Hastings Park. Their owners believed everything was being guarded for them, held in trust by the custodian of enemy property.

The man who set up the custodian's office in Vancouver was lawyer Glen MacPherson.

Glenn MacPherson

If you had a thousand cars rusting away in Hastings Park, would you keep them until the war ended, not knowing when the war was going to end?

Eric Malling

Cars that had belonged to the Japanese.

Glenn MacPherson

That belonged to the Jap... or would you sell them?

Eric Malling

I mean I can understand cars, boats, businesses. But the land was always going to be there. If you wanted to get it back into farming, surely you could have just leased it out.

Glenn MacPherson

Well, I don't think in those days you would have got many farm... many people who would have rented Japanese-owned land. I don't think that you would have found the white people here--the people who wanted to go farming--were going to go farming as a tenant of the Japanese.

Eric Malling

Much of B.C.'s Fraser Valley had been settled by the Japanese-Canadians. They owned over 700 farms. About an hour's drive from Vancouver, this land near Whonnock was once owned by a Japanese-Canadian farmer. Today the land

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has been subdivided, and is used mostly for pasture. During the war, many of these farms were taken over under the Veterans Land Act for returning soldiers, and now the owners' names are decidedly non-Japanese.

This land had belonged to George Yazuso Shoji. He came to Canada at 19, and worked in the Alberta Hotel in Calgary until the First War broke out, when he enlisted. He fought in France, and Belgium with the 13th Canadian Mounted Rifles. Wounded twice, a trusted soldier. Discharged as a sergeant in 1919, he bought his 20 acres through the Soldiers Settlement Board. Shoji died in 1958 in Chatham, Ontario where his children still live--Kyo and Martha Shoji.

When they sold his land and deducted everything owing, Shoji was initially left with just \$39.32.

Martha Shoji

Could they not understand that we were Canadians? Dad had fought for Canada, and then this... they do this to us, or to my dad? I don't understand that. It's just that he looked different because he had Japanese blood in him?

Eric Malling

What does that letter tell you about what your father felt? Can you read some of it?

Martha Shoji

"At the age of 60 years, I have only the sum of \$39.32", thirty-nine dollars and thirty-two cents, "to show as the fruit of my thirty year's work. My four years on the battlefield, as well as the backbreaking toil of 22 years on my land has brought me nothing but despondence, disappointment, fear, and a sense of insecurity, loneliness and tragedy in facing the last years of my life. I myself believe that no matter how small the number of people concerned, an unjust treatment of Canadian veteran citizens can only bring shame and regret to Canada in the years to come."

Eric Malling

Has it, in your mind? The treatment of people like your father?

Kyo Shoji

Sure.

Martha Shoji

Yes. Absolutely.

Eric Malling

In 1947 Mr. Justice Henry Bird's Royal Commission looked into the property sales--many of them to the Veterans Land Act authorities. There were all kinds of complaints like Shoji's, and the Bird Commission found that the Veterans Land people had paid little more than half what the Fraser Valley farms were worth.

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Bird said more than \$1-million was still owing, but the Veterans authorities drew the line at \$600,000. So across the board, the Japanese farmers in the Fraser Valley had to settle for about three-quarters of what their farms were worth—even then. And today there is no comparison.

Shoreline on Saltspring Island between Victoria and Vancouver is gold. None of the shoreline is any more spectacular than this—a single 600-acre tract of land. A hundred of those acres are along the coast, deep enough for prime building lots. The land was acquired just before the war ended by a company associated with Norman Mouat's father. Japanese-Canadian land bought for \$5,250. There was no dream house then. Norman Mouat spent years building all this up. And today the Mouat family has no apologies for the way the land, worth millions today, was acquired.

Norman's cousin, Tom Toynbee:

Tom Toynbee

There were thousands of pieces of property sold throughout British Columbia. And whether they should have been sold, this is another issue. We're now searching our souls forty years after. I was very young at the time, but we were instantly put on a war footing after Pearl Harbour. You were taught to be suspicious of Japanese. You were taught to... you had to have blackout curtains on at night. We were worried about Japanese troops attacking Saltspring Island, as ridiculous as that may seem. But that's the way it was.

Norman Mouat

But what really upsets me...

Eric Malling

Norman Mouat:

Norman Mouat

...is that during all this hysteria and whatnot, one of the people who was out in front helping the Japanese was my father, Gavin Mouat.

Eric Malling

He stood up for them.

Norman Mouat

He stood up for them. He was known around here as the Japanese lawyer, which was not a compliment.

Eric Malling

Gavin Mouat was known as Mr. Saltspring. Starting with this store, Mouat expanded into real estate, and eventually became the biggest businessman on Saltspring Island. It seemed quite logical then that during the war, Gavin Mouat would on his island become the agent for the custodian of enemy property.

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People on this island looked up to Gavin Mouat, and many of the Japanese felt a lot better that he as the agent for the the custodian would be looking after their property. But then when under orders from Ottawa all that property was sold, who ended up with his hands on a huge piece of Japanese land? None other than Gavin Mouat.

This is what it looked like in the late 1950s when the Mouats moved onto the land. A rundown house, and acres of bush which the Mouats insist was only worth \$5,000 at the end of the war. What's more, they had the highest bid, and paid more than the appraised value. But for Torazo Iwasaki, it wasn't enough. In his mind, no one had the right to sell his land, and he even sent back the cheque.

Iwasaki's son, Ray:

Ray Iwasaki

His property meant something. It is... it's a matter of principle. It is something that he thought was his. And it was objectionable that the government would do something like this. If a person gets ripped off, then you know how they feel. And he... his feeling was that he was just ripped off.

Eric Malling

He felt that way for 20 years, and so did Ray MacLeod, a Vancouver lawyer who in 1967 took the case all the way to the Supreme Court of Canada. By then, MacLeod claimed the land was worth \$1.5-million. MacLeod was harassed for just taking the case. The false rumours spread that he was married to Iwasaki's daughter. And there was more.

Ray MacLeod

I must have been a Jap lover during the war. And the war was over now--why can't we leave it alone? And the other main thing was, well, the Japs treated our prisoners of war badly, so what's so wrong with the way we treated the Japs? Losing, of course, sight of the fact that we are talking about Canadians here. The Iwasakis were Canadians.

Eric Malling

One might disagree with the decision to sell, but once that was taken, these properties were appraised, bids were sought. It seems as fair as it might be at the time.

Ray MacLeod

Well, I wouldn't suggest for a moment that the procedures weren't followed. I simply say that there was no justification for selling the property. There was no reason to sell the property. There might have been lots of reasons to buy the property, but I can tell you right now there was no reason to sell the property, and Iwasaki wasn't interested in selling that property ever. If he had have held the property, he would have died on the property. He loved the property. He wanted to develop it, and leave it to his children.

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Eric Malling

No chance of that for Torazo Iwasaki. The Supreme Court found that there had been no breach of trust, and the forced sale had been legal. That was that. And the Mouats felt relieved, and vindicated.

Tom Toynbee

This is something that happened in 1942, and if we tried to redress all the wrongs that have taken place in the world, or in Canada over the period of the past few centuries, it's impossible to do it. You know, it's... nobody's very pleased about it.

Eric Malling

Do you think they have any claim at all?

Tom Toynbee

I think that the Japanese who were moved from here have a grievance, certainly. And that grievance is against all of Canada. Whether or not the nation would act differently today than it would then, I don't know.

Eric Malling

For the custodian's man in Vancouver, Glen MacPherson, the case is closed.

Glenn MacPherson

I think it's easy to second guess and say, well, now we should re-evaluate it and give them the difference. Well, to me that's a ridiculous suggestion. I wouldn't agree with it for a minute. I think that in war time, things were done, there was other property sold that belonged to other Canadians who were put in concentration camps. And to suggest that we go back and revalue property at today's value, and you're suggesting that you then compensate them to that value?

Eric Malling

I'm not suggesting. I'm saying the suggestion has certainly been put.

Glenn MacPherson

Well, I think it would... I wouldn't think it would sit very well with the other Canadians who made great sacrifices during the war, too.

Eric Malling

When they were let out of the camps, but still forbidden until 1949 to return to the coast, most of the Japanese-Canadians spread out across the country, and tried to begin again. But here on Saltspring Island, one family eventually came back.

Kimiko Morikami had been born in Canada 81 years ago. She and her family toiled years to clear a farm, mostly by hand, but during the war lost it all. Later

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they tried to buy it back, but instead had to start from scratch with a smaller place down the road, and settle for an occasional visit to what was once their home.

Kimiko Morikami

This is my land, you see.

Eric Malling

After all these years, you think of it that way.

Kimiko Morikami

Yeah.

Eric Malling

What was it like when you had it? How was it different than it is now?

Kimiko Morikami

Oh, it's all different. This field was a real nice, you know, garden. Strawberry, asparagus... nothing. This is nothing but a hay field.

Eric Malling

She'll never get the old place back, but her children and most of the other children want something for their parents. Land worth many millions today will not be returned. The years of work are lost. And the case for full compensation is dead. But a new generation--people like Marika Omatsu, within the Association of Japanese-Canadians--have turned down an offer of a parliamentary apology, and a \$6-million fund to fight racism. They want something more, and it's as much to do with honour as money.

Marika Omatsu

We're not saying to the people who in good faith bought property from the federal government that we want it back. We're not... we've never ever said give us back the Fraser Valley. We're talking about compensation that is just as an honourable settlement of what happened.

Eric Malling

So you're not after cash. You're not after the million dollars that some of those properties might be worth today? You're after, what, a principle?

Marika Omatsu

I think we're after primarily principle. Ours is a tiny minority community. And in many ways we're disappearing. We're not even a community anymore. We don't have a cultural heart. We're all intermarried, and our community in a sense is going to disappear. But we want to leave a legacy. We want what happened not to be forgotten. Many people believe that what happened to our community was justified, and we want to clean the slate of that. We want to clear our names.

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Iwasaki's lawyer, Ray MacLeod:

Ray MacLeod

Probably the best way of handling it would be to set up another commission to deal with these, at least with the real estate claims, and deal with them fairly. And find some value in between present day value, and the value at the date that they were sold. Find some value...

Eric Malling

You're talking about some kind of damages.

Ray MacLeod

Yeah. And assess damages as fairly as can be handled.

Eric Malling

Will that happen?

Ray MacLeod

No, it won't happen.

Eric Malling

Why not?

Ray MacLeod

I think it's very, very unlikely to happen. Because, you know, there's still not enough Japanese-Canadians in Canada to make it worthwhile for the government in power to pass legislation, and set up a commission, and make it happen. There are simply are not enough votes involved.

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