

HOW CANADA SEIZED JAPANESE BOATS

The war report chronicles a sad fishing tale

By BARRY BROADFOOT

It was a long time ago, only two generations ago, and what happened to about 1,200 Japanese fishermen and their families from the Fraser River to the Skeena River is history.

Their story is finished — and done. Those wishing to do so may still make judgment on Canada's conduct, and the conduct of West Coast Canadians, in the ten months after Pearl Harbor. It will profit Canada little.

And if you wonder how long ago that was, let your teeth ache over the preceding paragraph and if the sick, "What was Pearl Harbor as well as the matter, then you will know.

But it's a war and a tiny fragment of the vast mosaic of the West Coast Japanese fishermen—turned up recently with the uncovering of a secret document, called "Report on Japanese Fishing Vessels Disposal Committee."

As far as can be determined, the document is public, and perhaps is still on the secret list.

Ships seized

The opening paragraph of the report, filed with the federal ministry of fisheries in December, states:

"Immediately following the declaration of war on Japan in December, 1941, steps were taken by naval services to intercept and seize Japanese fishing vessels owned by persons of Japanese nationality."

Over 1,200 vessels of the various types were in British Columbia waters at the time. Located along the entire length of the British Columbia coast.

"At the same time all the belongings, homes, farms, unimproved land, were also taken over by the Japanese under the War Measures Act. And about 23,000 Japanese—whether born in Japan or in Canada—were being processed and tagged and shipped to camps near the interior, or farmed out to sugar beet growers and other projects of the Fraser."

"No Japanese were to be left on the coast, and that order was scrupulously carried out. As a postscript, many Japanese were never returned."

When the ban on Japanese fishing was lifted, they found a new way of life in the interior. In the 1940s, they were in orchards, small farming, in trades and professions. Some returned to the coast and decided it wasn't like the old days—that their new life was back East. Some decided to stay in Japan and they were Canadian attitude towards them still hostile.

Came back

But most fishermen returned from the inland camps and prairie farms beginning in 1945. When the ban on Japanese fishermen was finally lifted, they secured boats, gear, lean, rolling, and gill netting again. And they again became a dominant factor on the coast's fishing economy.

"A further footnote. In 1945, Frank Kawauchi, a fisherman, who had operated a big seine boat before the war, returned to Lulu Island with his wife and child after years work among the fisheries. He was a top fisherman and quickly arranged to get a new matter from Canadian Fishing Company.

On November 27, he chugged into the Strait of Georgia for his first night's fishing. He did not return. His boat was finally spotted by his glimmer, drifting half out, salmon in the half, and salmon in the net. He was not on the boat and the anchor was missing.

"As a reporter, I went out to check around Steveston. Door after door was closed in my face. I never got to see his wife."

"As I prepared to return to town, I heard boots coming down the stairs and three or four white men came up to me. One, the spokesman, was dressed in a red mackinaw and rubber boots.

"He said, 'We hear you're looking for something about the 'massacre'?' Who you want to find him, He's gonna be an example to the rest of the fishers. We had him out in the dark and bumped him and he won't be back. He's got the book around his neck."

"They turned and left, and it was dark so I couldn't identify them. It might have been sheer bravado, or whisky talking. Or it might have been murder.

"As far as I know, Frank Kawauchi's body was never found. His death was listed as 'death by drowning' or 'miscellaneous cause.' I like to illustrate the human element among some white fishermen even four years after the war ended. But Canada's Japanese were on their way to being accepted as Canadian citizens instead of being third class status as they had before the war.



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in an old area of Vancouver, a tiny man sits. His wife is dead, his sons gone. He is blind in one eye, which restricts his reading, he is past 70, and he remembers those days.

"No, I can't remember the name. I don't think I know him, and I can't remember the incident. It was a long time ago."

"Mr. Nara—that is not his real name—was a leader in the Japanese community before the war. He built a thriving business, and he kept files and documents relating to the forced evacuation of the Japanese."

"Yes, he knew about the report and Japanese Fishing Vessels Disposal Committee. No, he did not think it had ever been released."

"I assured him it was about as dangerous as a tame pussycat and he laughed. 'But it still may be secret. So please don't use my name. You know, it was a long time ago, but maybe . . .'"

"So we talked, and I told him he was seen down by Mr. Justice Sidney Smith, chairman, and I told him the remainder of the report. Mr. B. L. Johnson, later warden of the Port of Vancouver, and the ex-minister of Fisheries, A. E. McMaster.

"All gone," said Nara. "All passed away. I know them all. Good men. They worked hard."

The report made no attempt to explain why the Japanese fishing boats had been seized and their owners and families removed. It merely stated the emergency measure. Nor did it explain how certain decisions were reached.

Perhaps it was written just to be filed away, forever. The human element, more than 1,200 fishboats and packers and the livelihood of over a million people, not a factor in this report.

The report's second paragraph reads: "The method was to assemble vessels at specific mooring areas, principally near the Fraser River near New Westminster, where approximately 1,000 vessels were moved. Some 200 vessels were stored in Tuck's Inlet at Prince Rupert and the remainder at other outposts. Vessels were immobilized when seized or after assembly at mooring areas and vital engine parts and certain navigating instruments."

Followed order

Nara remembered: "The Japanese were told to bring in their boats. And they did. There was only one escort by the navy. I think. All the rest came in by themselves. There was no trouble, they remember, they were told. We were obeying a law, whether it was right or wrong."

The report's next paragraph mentioned that severe weather conditions prevailing in December and January, caused considerable damage."

Nara said, "I remember, yes. A very bad winter. The Fraser River over. It was not a trouble, they remember, they were told. We were obeying a law, whether it was right or wrong."

Most vessels were sunk, and mostly to the big fishing companies which had the available money. They needed the money to keep their companies afloat.

It was a straight economic measure, but it was also a major war effort. As a footnote, the loss of the Japanese fisherman was built in 1927, registered in New Westminster and permitted to operate for hauling between Nanaimo and the most reliable workers obtainable. When they were shipped to the interior, they were manned by whites and Indians.



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hought by companies, broken down into 42 seiners, 18 trollers, gillnetters, 57 packers, 74, and coadboats, 19.

Individual fishermen took 27 boats, or 2.5 per cent of the total sold.

These individuals bought 11 seiners, 20 trollers, 118 gillnetters, 20 packers and 33 coadboats.

The report, noting the high purchases by the companies, said: "The large companies were concerned in seeing to it that vessels of the gillnetter, seiner, and packer types were never furnished to individual fishermen at the same purchase price."

The report assumed—although no conclusive figures are available—about 10 per cent of all small vessels purchased by the fishing companies were actually owned by individual fishermen, and that, therefore, 80 per cent of the vessels sold through the committee will be so owned."

In addition, the Royal Canadian Navy, the RCMP and the Canadian Army also requisitioned 48 of the best boats including nine seiners. Most of the seiners were re-allocated for patrol work, and have died by what was known as "The Cumbon Navy," fishermen who knew the coast.

Tough job

The job of the disposal committee was a tough one. It had 1,237 Japanese boats, 120 trollers, 660 gillnetters, 148 packers and 141 coad boats, and hundreds in all various states of seasonableness, and hundreds in various states of disrepair.

In other words, there were 1,237 boats with 1,237 values. And there still persists today, the belief that most of these boats were worth 10 or 20 cents on the dollar.

If the secret report is to be believed, it was the case. The case is that the Japanese owners never had any say, but when the boat was worth. He could quote any price, but that was about as far as it went.

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Here is the result of that arbitration, brought by one Japanese representative, with the other fishermen in the sale of their five purse seine boats.

The owners asked a total of \$38,600.

The Canadian Fishing Company's total bid was \$24,600.

The government's official marine surveyor, an expert from San Francisco, set the price at \$33,450.

Canneries hurt

An independent appraiser set the price at \$33,125. The arbitration board then decided the sale price at \$33,065.

I am told the Japanese seiner boat owners were happy—presumably apart from the fact that their livelihood had been taken away from them as well as their freedom for the next three years.

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000. The owner had it insured for \$11,800, and asked about \$10,000 for it, but a pencilled note on the application said he was willing to take \$3,000 cash. So his price was \$3,000.

This would appear to be a fair market, with supply and demand factors in evidence. But was it really a fair market?

The report makes no mention of how a sale was completed, but Nara said, "Three reliable, trustworthy Japanese from the fishermen's association were appointed as contacts. Their job was to sell the boats. They would get an offer, and phone or write the boat owner in Fourteen-Mile Ranch, or Sandon, or Leitchfield, wherever he was, and most sales were that way."

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Saw war duty

The British government also requisitioned and later bought 27 vessels, and a few served on mine sweeping operations as far away as the Indian Ocean.

Total sales reached \$1,406,000, plus about \$12,000 for least 50 per cent of administrative expenses had been paid, the Japanese fishermen received \$1,384,000.

Any liens, gas, repair or net charges against the vessel had to be cleared off before there was a transfer of ownership, vandalism.

Cost of repairing damaged vessels while in custody was \$42,000.

Damage to the vessels was extensive. A total of 679 gillnetters claimed for repairs, valued at \$104,513. Of these, only 338 were of that cost of \$80,295.

Today, a 45-foot drum seiner (not built much row) would cost perhaps \$100,000 with full electronic gear.

A 36-foot trawler with full electronic equipment could cost up to \$50,000. And a 32-foot gillnetter fully equipped might cost an eye-opening \$20,000.

In 1942, the public prices paid for 33 seiners averaged \$3,064.

Fifty-seven trollers were for an average \$1,321.

The 25 gillnetters sold for an average \$60 each.

The 94 packers were for \$2,224. The 58 coad boats sold for \$1,151, average.

A far cry from today's prices, but it is pointed out that perhaps the figures were not out of proportion. Today's boats, built in an age of inflation and high-cost labor and materials, plus extremely sophisticated electronic gear, can hardly be a fairer comparison.



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The old man shook his head and smiled.

Some Japanese refused to sell in the words of the report. . . in the latter part of May it became evident that certain Japanese groups were determined to retain ownership of their vessels and leave it to the government agency to continue their care and upkeep indefinitely."

So, a little bomb of a resolution was adopted.

Forced sales

"When a bona fide offer to purchase a vessel is made by an eligible applicant and the price is deemed fair, but not less than the suggested negotiating price, and the Japanese continues to refuse to sell or places an unduly high price on his vessel and sell."

"Was it the best way?"



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A check of similar types from the federal department of fisheries showed about four still operating, two in the north and two out of Vancouver.

And what of the Japanese? The death of Frank Kawauchi that dark night in 1940 obviously had no effect on their return.

More than ever

"They are back on the coast more numerous than ever, fishing more efficiently than ever. It is likely to be a son, who left as a child for the interior."

What were the thoughts of the Japanese fishing community when the order came? Nara emphasizes he speaks only for himself, but he said, "There was a loss, of course, and it was suffered by the Japanese fisherman."

"But anti-Japanese and Chinese feeling was extremely high, and the Japanese fisherman was the object of discrimination, and the mood was getting lighter every year."

"We were a close community, through our fishing association, our farmer's associations, our schools, our churches, our clubs. We had to help each other. There was no other way. Our standard of living was so low. If a man didn't fish, or farm, then the only jobs he could get were in mills and the railway section gang."

"And how is it now?"

"After the suffering, the matter is now clarified. There is no discrimination now in Vancouver against the Japanese," he said.

And he firmly believes that all those long years were a turning point for the Japanese.

He pointed out that Japanese are now in every province—over 7,000 in Toronto alone where once there were none—and they are in every line of business, and in the professions and universities.

There is some bitterness among the Japanese, but very little, he believes.

"It will be good here for the generations to come," he said.

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