

Japanese Workers at the North Pacific Cannery (NPC) 1918-1923

History 493: Selina Gammie and Sarah Utz



Figure 1: Site of Japanese net loft, NPC
August 2017, Sarah Utz

Brief Overview: Japanese workers, men, women and children are an important part of the North Pacific Cannery's history. They had many roles from, fishing and carpentry, to working in the cannery itself. The Japanese workers were a valuable part of the cannery lifestyle. From 1918-1923 many workers often came early before the salmon run to prepare the cannery for the fishing season, they often then stayed hiring themselves out as fishermen, investing their time into the cannery. The questions of why the Japanese workers came to the Pacific Northwest, what their roles were in the industry, how much they were paid, where they lived and who they were, provide a narrative about the lives of these workers. There are other questions to be asked, such as how the First World War impacted the fishing industry and Japanese fishermen and shore workers, and also the question of the reception they received on North American soil.



Figure 2: North Pacific Cannery, August 2017, Sarah Utz

Japanese Immigration to the Pacific Northwest

Beginning in 1900, there was an influx of Japanese immigration to the Northwest Coast, making fishing and cannery industries the recipients of Japanese labour. Japanese immigration to British Columbia occurred first because of overpopulation in Japan. Due to overpopulation, the value of labour was reduced while the standard of living and labour competition continued to rise. To address this problem, Japanese government agencies encouraged men to immigrate elsewhere for work, leading to the second reason for immigration. British Columbia, as well as the nation as a whole, was advertised as having prosperous conditions for making a good living for oneself. Japanese companies and government agencies further induced immigration to countries like Canada to take part in prosperous labour opportunities by providing assistance in the immigration process. The fishing industry and cannery work, including boat construction, thus experienced an increase in Japanese labour with the influx of immigration opportunities.

Labour at the North Pacific Cannery



Figure 3: Net Loft at NPC, August 2017, Sarah Utz



Figure 4: BC Archives. Item E-05041 - "Richmond canneries; Japanese women with babies on their backs; filling cans."

Japanese labour:

At the North Pacific Cannery, Japanese men performed a number of jobs. While largely listed as "general labourers," men did not just work along the cannery production line. Japanese men were carpenters, boat builders, and net watchers. Oiling the fishing nets is another type of job as is boat painting. Working in the Messhouse was another occupation where Japanese men found labour. There is also evidence of Japanese men working as technicians within the North Pacific Cannery. Labour as fishermen for the cannery was also a major draw for Japanese men.



Figure 5: BC Archives. Item D-08913 - "Canned fish from BC."



Figure 6: BC Archives. Item E-05068 - "Richmond canneries, Japanese repairing nets."



Figure 7: BC Archives. Item E-05040 - "BC canneries, Jap boys filling cans"; Japanese boys hand packing tin cans in plant

Labour Dynamics:

In the years 1919 to 1923, it is evident that of those who worked as general labourers and carpenters in the months of April and May in the cannery, some of those men then transitioned to work as fishermen in the months of June to August. Work for Japanese labourers was therefore, not static throughout the summer season to the extent that men were able to transition out of cannery labour to work as fishermen for the cannery. This shows that there was no strict divide between Japanese men who did cannery labour and those who worked for the cannery as fishermen. Japanese labourers thus demonstrated that they were willing, or had the incentive, to continue working for the cannery as the labour shifted from a demand in cannery labour to fishing labour; illustrating the fluidity in Japanese work at the North Pacific Cannery. Furthermore, within the records of Japanese employment, labourers are divided among separate 'houses' and men typically stayed associated with that house for their duration of employment and returning employment in following years. Interestingly enough, the men that progress from cannery labour to fishing labour stayed associated with the house that they were originally assigned while performing cannery tasks.

Japanese Housing and Wages at the North Pacific Cannery



Figure 9: Japanese Houses NPC, August 2017, Sarah Utz

Wages

Wages for Japanese shore workers were often listed under house name. The majority of the workers were given the title of general labour, although some jobs such as nets, and carpenters helpers and carpenters were specified. The wages were paid for hourly work, and unlike many European workers room and board was not included. The hourly wage is depicted in the chart, and shows that over most years from 1918-1923 the wage for general labour was \$0.30. Carpenters received higher wages.



Figure 10: Inside of Japanese House NPC, August 2017, Sarah Utz

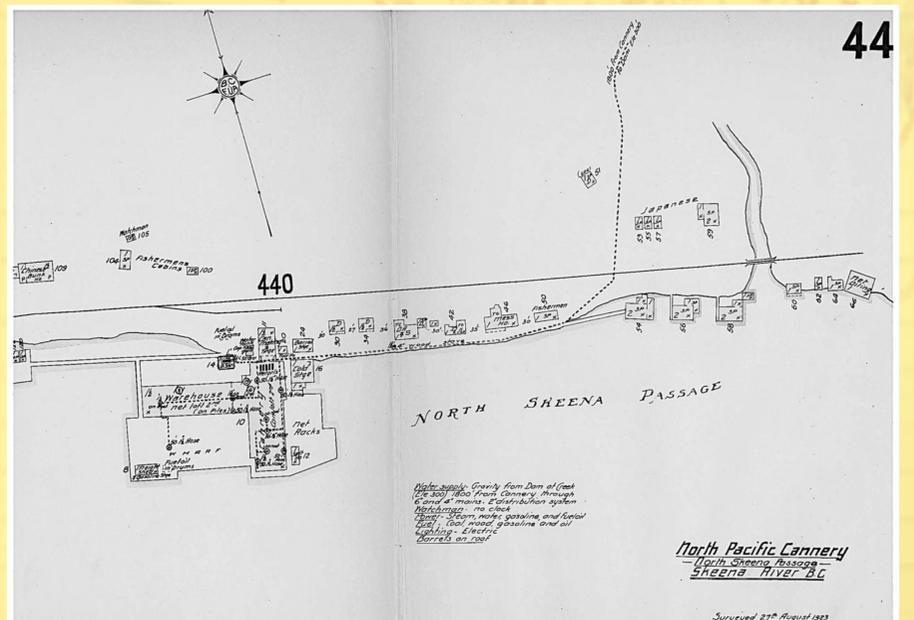
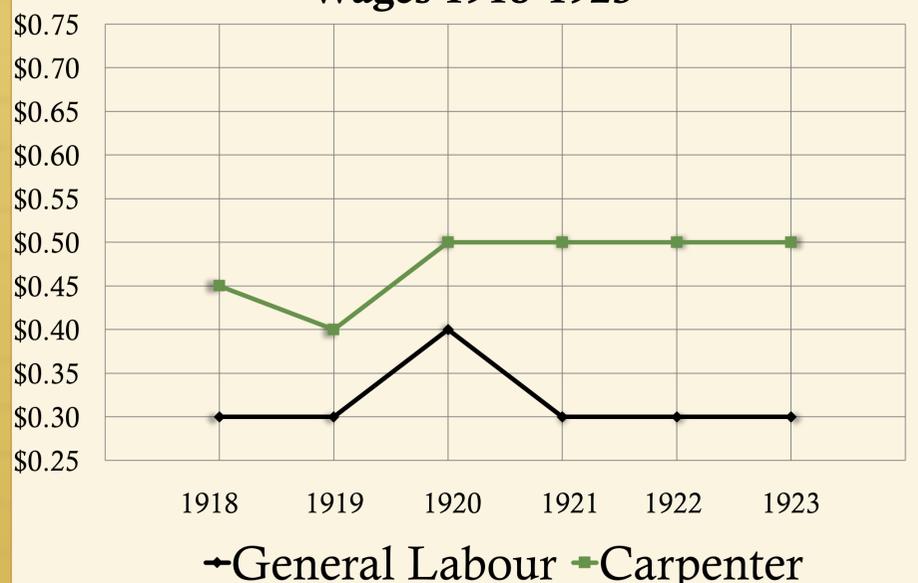


Figure 8: Featured Place at IKBLC: Skeena River (fire record image) Sheet 44, North Pacific Cannery, RBSC-ARC-1272:F9-8

Housing

Housing at the North Pacific Cannery was segregated depending upon a person's ethnicity. The image above (Figure 8) shows how the buildings of the North Pacific Cannery in 1923, the Japanese housing are located on the left of the image. The workers at the canneries largely consisted of men, this led to bunkhouse style housing for the Japanese workers, although there were some houses built for families. From the period of 1918 until 1923 the Japanese workers were divided into houses, these houses varied in name over this time period, and varied from three to four distinct houses. Tanaka House, Matsumoto House, Tanino House, Kurita House and Hayashi House, were the different names of these houses, although not all existed at the same time. These house names often came from the family who started each house. Some of the Japanese houses still remain at the North Pacific Cannery, the Shikatani House and the Miki House and show a part of the life that was present at the cannery. Once the families of Japanese fishermen began arriving individual residences were built. The wives of the fishermen and shore workers often worked in the cannery cleaning salmon in slimming tanks.

Figure 11: Japanese Shore Worker Wages 1918-1923



Impacts of the First World War

The First World War had a huge impact around the world, it affected the men serving in the war, the families they left behind and the industries and jobs these men may have left. The war period was a difficult time for many Canadian industries, however the canned salmon industry remained strong. Food, with a stable shelf life and food that could be easily prepared was desired, and canned salmon fit these requirements along with being a good substitute for other meats.

In 1917 Japanese fishermen were in high demand in the fishing industry, an in other industries on the Pacific coast. This high demand, lead Japanese fishermen to ask for an increase in salmon prices. The First World War however, allowed the Dominion Food Controller and the Canned Food Board to set fixed prices for canned salmon. Japanese

labourers in the processing center came to an all time high in 1917 when they contributed nearly half of those workers. The First World War effected the salmon canning industry in other ways. The war caused greater demand for canned salmon, not only sockeye but other species as well. This increase of different species of canned salmon was not only due to the effects of the war, but also related to the devastation caused by the Hell's Gate landslide of 1913. This increase in canned salmon of sockeye, chum and pink combined with the demand from the wartime effort also lead to a great expansion in the industry. This expansion helped break some on the monopolization occurring in the industry, the chart above shows how in Puget Sound during the war period the amount of operating salmon canneries skyrocketed. For example the BC Packers Association once produced nearly forty five percent of the British Columbia Pack, slipped to only producing sixteen percent by 1929. The First World War increased the demands for labour and also the demands for products and the canned salmon industry in British Columbia was able to provide canned goods and employment for many people including the Japanese labour force.

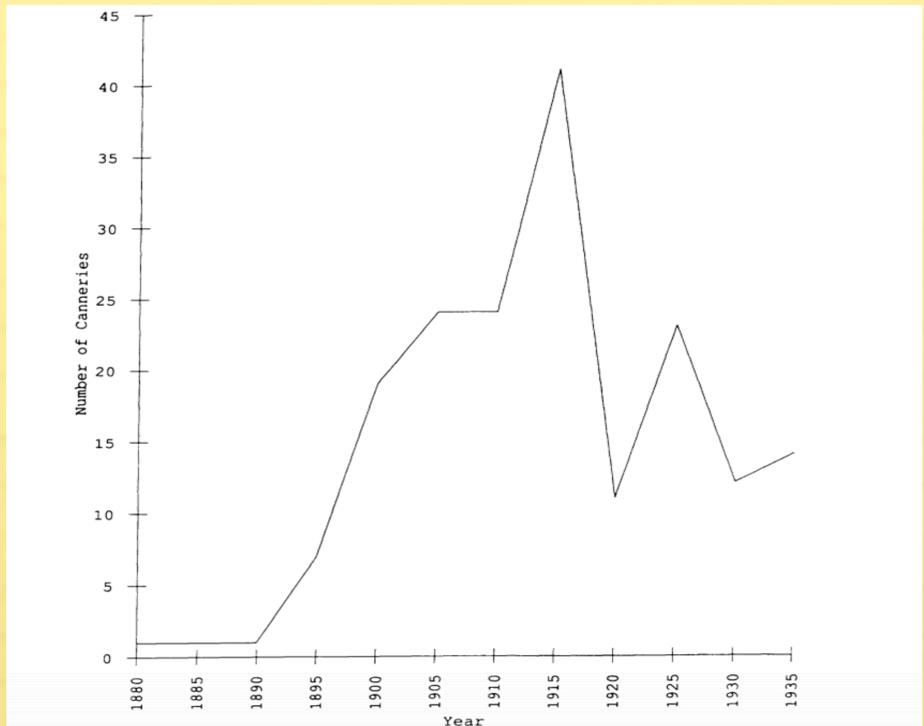


Figure 12: Canneries Operating on Puget Sound, 1880-1935 from, Boxberger, D.L. "Ethnicity and Labor in the Puget Sound Fishing Industry, 1880-1935." *Ethnology*, 33, no. 2, (1994): 182.



Figure 13: BC Archives. Item C-08022 - North Pacific Cannery, Port Edward, Skeena River.

Response to Japanese Labour in British Columbian Canneries



Figure 14: BC Archives. Item E-05076 - Richmond canneries, two little Japanese girls play on the wharf.

For European settlers and the descendants of these settlers the influx of the Japanese to the Pacific Northwest was not always seen as a beneficial, or even a safe thing. The canning industry often divided labour based on ethnicity and which ethnicity was seen as suitable for certain job types. Despite the fact that people of certain ethnicities were only deemed suitable for certain jobs, when communities faced unemployment prejudice and blame was often directed at the workers of Japanese ethnicity. Wages were often an important factor in the continuation of hiring Japanese and other Asian workers, companies wanted to get the most work done for the least amount of money and that was something that they could accomplish by hiring people of a non European ethnicity.

Citations

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