

# Hidden Japanese Settlement Found in Forests of British Columbia



More than 1,000 items have been unearthed there, among them rice bowls, sake bottles and Japanese ceramics

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In 2004, archaeology professor Robert Muckle was alerted to a site within the forests of British Columbia's North Shore mountains, where a few old cans and a sawblade had been discovered. He suspected the area was once home to a historic logging camp, but he did not anticipate that he would spend the next 14 years unearthing sign after sign of a forgotten Japanese settlement—one that appears to have been abruptly abandoned.

Brent Richter of the North Shore News reports that Muckle, an instructor at Capilano University in Vancouver, and his rotating teams of archaeology students have since excavated more than 1,000 items from the site. The artifacts include rice bowls, sake bottles, teapots, pocket watches, buttons and hundreds of fragments of Japanese ceramics. Muckle

tells *Smithsonian* that the “locations of 14 small houses ... a garden, a wood-lined water reservoir, and what may have been a shrine,” were also discovered, along with the remnants of a bathhouse—an important fixture of Japanese culture.

The settlement sits within an area now known as the Lower Seymour Conservation Reserve, located around 12 miles northeast of Vancouver. Muckle has in fact uncovered two other sites within the region that can be linked to Japanese inhabitants: one appears to have been part of a “multi-ethnic” logging camp, Muckle says, the second a distinctly Japanese logging camp that was occupied for several years around 1920. But it is the third site, which seems to have transitioned from a logging camp to a thriving village, that fascinates him the most.

“There was very likely a small community of Japanese who were living here on the margins of an urban area,” Muckle tells Richter. “I think they were living here kind of in secret.”

In approximately 1918, a Japanese businessman named Eikichi Kagetsu secured logging rights to a patch of land next to where the village once stood, making it likely that the site was once inhabited by a logging community. The trees would have been largely harvested by around 1924, but Muckle thinks the village’s residents continued to live there past that date.

“The impression that I get, generally speaking, is it would have been a nice life for these people, especially in the context of all the racism in Vancouver in the 1920s and ’30s,” he tells Richter.

The first major wave of Japanese immigration to Canada began in 1877, with many of the new arrivals settling in the coastal province of British Columbia. From the start, they were met with hostility and discrimination; politicians in the province prohibited Asian residents from voting, entering the civil service and working in various other professions, like law, according to the *Canadian Encyclopedia*.

Anti-Japanese prejudices boiled over during the Second World War, in the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Days later, Japanese troops invaded Hong Kong, killing and wounding hundreds of Canadian soldiers who were stationed there. Back in Canada, authorities began arresting suspected Japanese operatives, impounding Japanese-owned fishing boats and shutting down Japanese newspapers and schools. By the winter of 1942, a 100-mile strip of the Pacific Coast had been designated a “protected area,” and people of Japanese descent were told to pack a single suitcase and leave. Families were separated—men sent to work on road gangs, women and children to isolated ghost towns in the wilderness of British Columbia. According to the *Canadian Encyclopedia*, more than 90 percent of Japanese Canadians were uprooted during the war, most of them citizens by birth.

No records survive of the people who lived in the North Shore camp, and Muckle has yet to find an artifact that can be reliably dated to after 1920. But given that the inhabitants of the village seem to have departed in a hurry, leaving precious belongings behind, he

tells *Smithsonian* that he suspects they stayed in their little enclave in the woods until 1942, when “they were incarcerated or sent to road camps.”

Eventually, per the CBC, the Greater Vancouver Water District closed off the valley where the settlement was located, and the forest began to take over. Speaking to Richter of *North Shore News*, Muckle notes that, after nearly 15 years spent excavating at the site, he will likely not return again. But he hopes to share his records and artifacts with several museums and archives— including the Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre in Burnaby, British Columbia, which seeks to preserve Japanese Canadian history and heritage—so the forgotten settlement in the woods will be remembered for years to come.