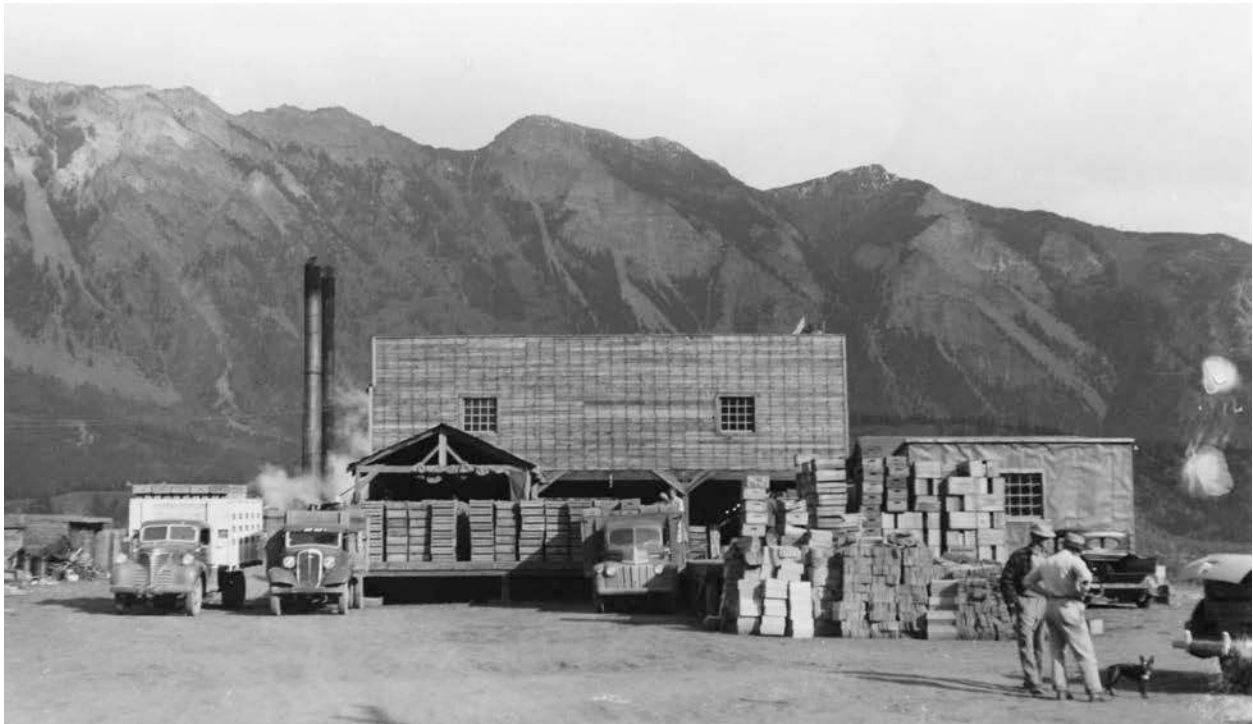


Lillooet Tomato Cannery & Industry



Newly built and operating Lillooet Tomato Cannery, Lillooet, 1943. Formerly located on the east side of Main Street in Lillooet town across from current Reynold's Hotel, near Lillooet Train Station. Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre 1992-28-1.



East Lillooet Internment Camp 1942, Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre 1994-52-22.



Crates and crates of luscious sweet tomatoes grown in the hot Lillooet sunshine. iStock photo

Historic context: East Lillooet Self-Supporting Internment Camp 1942 -1949

The East Lillooet Internment Site was one of 10 Internment camps and 7 official self-supporting sites Japanese Canadians were forcibly relocated to in 1942 after the outbreak of World War II. Deemed a national security threat, over 22,000 Japanese Canadians were forcibly uprooted by the federal government to 100 miles east of the coast. Their homes, boats, cars, businesses and properties were confiscated by the government and sold in order to finance the Internment. Women and children in government sponsored camps were separated from their husbands and fathers who were forcibly sent to work in road camps to build BC's highways. However, if a family could prove they had enough savings, they could keep the family together and self-fund their relocation to self-supporting camps, which East Lillooet was.¹

The self-supporting camp in East Lillooet was situated on 40 acres of land on the banks of the Fraser River. As with other internment sites, the BC Security Commission (BCSC) leased the land from local landowners. In this case, the Palmer family entered into an agreement allowing their land to ultimately become the location for 309 persons of Japanese descent to be held during the war years.

The first internees arrived in East Lillooet in 1942. Most were from the communities of Haney, Hammond, and Vancouver in the Lower Mainland. It was the responsibility of the early arrivals to construct 62 standard tarpaper shacks, a series of flumes to carry water from the Fraser River, and a fence around the perimeter of the camp. The camp was organized into two sections, with internees from Vancouver to the south, and the farmers from Haney and Hammond to the north.

Conditions in the camp were often harsh and barely tolerable. As in other camps around the province, the tarpaper shacks where the internees were forced to live had no insulation, electricity, or indoor plumbing. In East Lillooet, firewood for heating was often scarce, and in the winter of 1942 temperatures dropped to record lows. Icicles formed inside the shacks, and snow and icy winds came through the cracks and gaps in the green wood that had been used to build them.

Internees experienced a sense of hopelessness and discrimination due to the isolation and physical conditions of the East Lillooet camp. They were not allowed to cross the bridge into the town of Lillooet without a permit from the RCMP, which limited their ability to do even simple activities like shopping and banking. As a result, internees sought to create a sense of community within the camp itself and a community group called the "Lillooet Japanese Self Supporting Community" was formed. They built a school and community garden, and worked to look after the general welfare of the camp's population.

While most of the internment camps throughout the province closed in 1945-46, East Lillooet remained intact until 1949 (until the end of the Internment), receiving internees from other camps who needed a home while awaiting permanent places to live.²

¹ East Lillooet Memorial Garden Historic Places text, National Trust's Historic Places Days web-site: <https://historicplacesdays.ca/places/east-lillooet-memorial-garden-japanese-canadian-internment-site/>

² East Lillooet and self-supporting Internment sites' Highway Legacy Sign, East Lillooet Memorial Garden, Lillooet, BC. Heritage Branch and Ministry of Transportation and Infrastructure, May 2018 in partnership with the Japanese Canadian Legacy Committee.

How can we earn income to feed our families?

Due to the forced relocation and dispossession, one of the key issues for Japanese Canadians living in self-supporting Internment Camps was how to support and feed their often large families without a job or income. In self-supporting camps, internees paid for their own internment on their own dime. While Internees brought their savings with them, this was not going to last very long. In the early years, even fishing in the Fraser River was legally prohibited and enforced for Japanese Canadians in East Lillooet by officials.³

Introduction of Tomato Farming to Lillooet led by Tokutaro Tsuyuki

As mentioned earlier, there was a large contingent of farmers from Haney and Hammond who lived in the Haney section of the camp. One of them was Tokutaro Tsuyuki. Tsuyuki had been an extremely successful farmer and large-scale greenhouse producer in Haney prior to the war. He owned one of the largest greenhouse operations of tomatoes and cucumbers in Maple Ridge.⁴



View of the Tsuyuki Greenhouses from the south in 1942. Taka Tsuyuki (son of Tokutaro) climbed up Mattson's tree to get this shot, which was taken just prior to the relocation.

Tsuyuki Greenhouses operation in Haney in 1942 prior to relocation. Photo: courtesy of the Maple Ridge Museum, P03380.

³ In-person oral interview with Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, June 11, 2023.

⁴ "Tokutaro Tsuyuki Family", Maple Ridge Museum and Archives webpage, <http://mapleridgemuseum.org/tokutaro-tsuyuki-family/>



From left to right: Itani, Tateishi, Mizuyabu, Horii, Ishii, Tsuyuki hoeing at Fountain Ranch, 1943. Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre 1995-140-3.

Under Tsuyuki's leadership and tutelage with his abundant expertise, experience and motivation, Tsuyuki and his fellow farmers recognized the hot dry climate of East Lillooet was well-suited for tomato production. Hence, making arrangements with local landowners, the menfolk in the camp organized and very early on introduced tomato farming to East Lillooet. However, "One third of East Lillooet families came from fishing families (Vancouver section). They had no idea about farming. So Mr. Tsuyuki taught them how to farm."⁵ Given the discriminatory climate of the time where no Japanese Canadian could cross the bridge into the 'white' town, this kind of organizing to secure land was no small feat by any Japanese Canadian.

Tsuyuki led the organizing of the business and production end of tomato production amongst the camp residents. Dr. Akira Horii (92 years) was a young elementary student when he was first interned with his family in East Lillooet. He describes how Tsuyuki led the organizing:

"First of all, it was Taka's father, Tokutaro Tsuyuki who started and organized tomato farming in Lillooet. Small co-ops were organized in different farms such as Fountain Ranch where my dad and Yosh's dad, Mr. Kariatsumari, Mr. Itani, Mr. Mizuyabu, Mr. Tateishi, and Mr. Ishii. The farm was located about 8 miles northeast from Lillooet. I worked there ploughing the field behind a horse and later with a tractor. I picked tomatoes, helped hauling the tomatoes in heavy boxes onto the truck to a nearby

⁵ Louis Horii, East Lillooet 86 year old East Lillooet Internee, telephone interview, June 13, 2023.

P.G.E. railway sidetrack to load the boxcar. Other farms included the “Pugh Ranch” where Mr. Tsuyuki, Mr. Kato. and their relatives worked, the Mercer Ranch near Seton Creek, Russell’s Ranch in the town and a smaller farm operated by Mr. Y. Nakashima right in front of our village. Eventually, a tomato cannery was built almost across the street from where the Reynold’s Hotel is.”⁶

Steps to grow tomatoes on a large scale



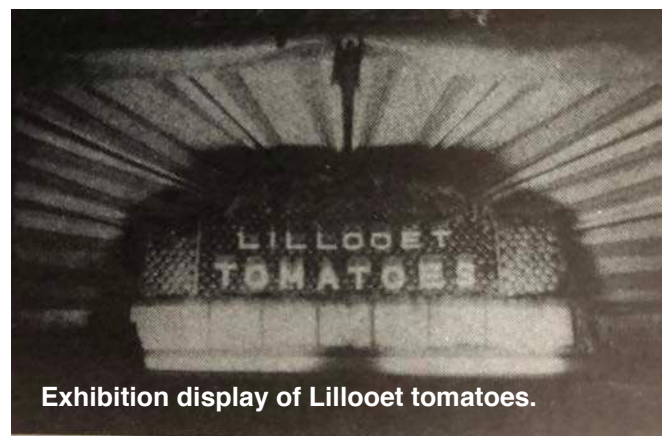
1
Pugh Ranch, east of Lillooet town. Planting tomatoes (in greenhouses).



2
Tending tomato plants (before planting in fields)



3
Hot tent (hot cap) on tomato plant, Fountain Ranch



Exhibition display of Lillooet tomatoes.

Above four photos depict the tomato production process in East Lillooet. They are reproductions from the “51 Year East Lillooet Reunion Booklet”, Oct. 2, 1993.

Using his farming skills and experience from his Haney operations, Tsuyuki set-up the steps involved in the tomato growing process to produce large scale and high yield crops intended to stretch the growing season for as long as possible. It was a sophisticated and laborious process implemented very quickly in the neighbouring farms/ranches. “First (step #1), tomato seedlings were grown from seed in the greenhouses, which were shared by all the farmers. Secondly (step #2), once the seedlings grew to a certain size, they got transferred outside beside the siding which was covered to protect it from frost. Thirdly (step #3), once the plants were about 5-6” high, they were planted in the fields and hot tents or hot caps were placed over the young plants to protect it from a late frost. The hotcaps were thin white paper in an igloo shape to keep the little tomato plant warm. They are like a ‘miniature’ hothouse for each

⁶ Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 14, 2023 e-mail. The five farm co-ops organized were: Fountain Ranch; Pugh Ranch; Mercer Ranch; Russel’s Ranch; small plot in front of Internment camp.

plant. As they grow, the plant hits the top of the hotcap, so you make a little hole at the top. You make the hole bigger as it grows and until there's no more frost.”⁷

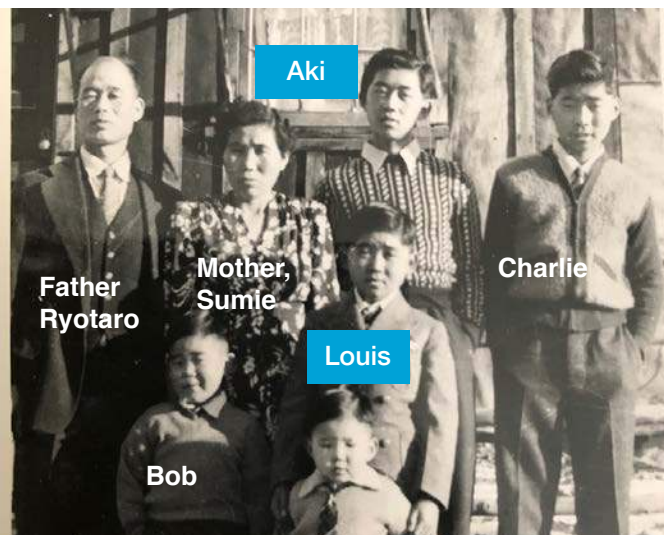
At first, tomato harvests were picked, packed in wooden boxes/crates, loaded onto a truck, then loaded onto boxcars at the PGE Lillooet Train Station. At first, these boxes and boxes of sweet Lillooet tomatoes were shipped to a cannery in the “Royal City” in New Westminster or sold as fresh produce in Vancouver. Dr. Akira Horii, who was about eleven or twelve years old when he first started picking, proudly spoke about what he learned when picking tomatoes to ship to the city to sell in the store: “When the tomato is green, you look at the bottom. If there's a pinkish spot, then it will start to ripen by the time it gets to Vancouver.”⁸

Building the tomato cannery and the fruit-packing plant

With the immediate and abundant success of tomato growing, the camp resident farmers decided to build an added-value tomato cannery to can the tomatoes in metal cans before shipping to Vancouver. The ownership structure is unclear in regards to the cannery, however, according to Dr. Akira Horii, “Japanese Canadian issei farmers had shares in the cannery.”⁹ And soon after, a fruit packing plant was constructed just west of the cannery (adjacent to the train station).

“Tomato farming kept us going financially”¹⁰

Tomato production, both for sale fresh and canned to the city, became the main industry and economic engine of the camp. Many of the adults and most older children worked in some form to contribute to their family income in the new ‘industry’.



Typical East Lillooet family: Horii family, father, mother, and five sons in front of their shack in East Lillooet, early 1940s. Photo: Horii Family



Two Horii brothers Louis (left), Dr. Horii (right), almost 80 years later in May 2022, Renewal Opening of East Lillooet Memorial Garden. Photo: Lydia Nagai Photography.

⁷ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 26, 2023.

⁸ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 26, 2023.

⁹ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 18, 2023.

¹⁰ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 18, 2023

Dr. Horii recalls, *“Many of the menfolk worked on the farm, a few in logging. My mother went picking tomatoes. (as a young teenager), I first ploughed tomato fields behind a horse. Then the farmers were able to buy a tractor. When the plants started growing, I did the hoeing, I would keep the beds clean, and then start gin picking tomatoes. The menfolk would load the tomato boxes which were about 40 lbs into the truck. Then the boxes would be loaded onto the boxcars at the PGE (train station). We worked late into the night and I rode my bike home.*

When I offloaded tomatoes from the factory onto the boxcars, we put 6 boxes of tomatoes onto a 2 wheel cart, then load them onto boxcars. I worked outside the cannery as well to make the boxes for the tomatoes and apples. I would hold 8 nails with my thumb and index finger and bang each nail with one swing of a hammer (with a special box hammer). I made these wooden boxes (for apples, pears, peaches) for packing the fruit outside in the hot sun. I worked at the cannery and in the fields when I was in grades 10, 11, 12.

Working on the farm, I probably got paid about 25 cents an hour so I decided to cycle to the town to work in the cannery where the wages were about 45 cents an hour. Inside the cannery, I moved stacks of loaded boxes of tomatoes, and then just outside the cannery, I was busy making tomato and apple boxes under the hot Lillooet sun. I also worked in the fruit packing plant where Min Tanaka (Miyoshi’s husband eventually) showed me how to wrap each fruit with a special paper and then packed them into the boxes. We worked very late into the night loading the boxcar on a nearby railway boxcar.”¹¹

Teenagers in the camp worked after school and most children also worked in the fields during the summer holidays. Rosalie Nakashima McCallister, recalls as young teenager how she and her best friend picked tomatoes in the hot Lillooet sun.¹²

“Ritsu (Enjo) and I (Rosalie) spent our summers picking tomatoes as summer work. We got paid 25 cents an hour. Some places paid by bucket. Because it was so hot in the sun picking tomatoes in the hot Lillooet summers, Ritsu and I used to dump our straw hats in water to keep us cool (in the 40 degree centigrade hot sun). We had to carry the heavy buckets of tomatoes for each row we picked. It seemed though we were always talking a lot while we picked, so we must not have worked that hard!”¹³

From one of Dr. Horii’s stories when he was in grade 11 (~1947) at Lillooet Highschool, tomato production was recognized as a big part of the children’s lives:

“When I was in grade 11, the tomatoes (the size of man’s closed fist) were ripening so quickly and would rot unless they were harvested right away. So our High School principal, Mr. Ernie Hayes, closed the school for a couple of days and organized a “chershay la tomates” (meaning search for the tomatoes in French) so we all could go pick the tomatoes.”¹⁴

¹¹ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 18, 2023.

¹² Telephone interview of Rosalie Nakashima McCallister, East Lillooet senior Internee 92 years old, April 25, 2023.

¹³ Telephone interview of Rosalie Nakashima McCallister, East Lillooet senior Internee 92 years old, April 25, 2023.

¹⁴ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 18, 2023.



The Kariatsumari family East Lillooet, 1943. Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre 1995-134-1-5.

Yosh Kariatsumari was a little five year old boy. With five kids in the family, he recalls his whole family working in the tomato industry:

“I was quite young at the time but I recall that my Dad, Ichisuke Kariatsumari, was in charge of the Russell Ranch tomato farm in the years 1949 - 1951. I also remember well that I and my entire family worked in the fields planting, weeding, hoeing, irrigating and harvesting the tomatoes.”¹⁵

“The Japanese were very happy - cause we got paid in cash.”



101 year old Kaye Kaminishi interview at his daughter’s home in Burnaby, June 16, 2023.

101 year old Kaye Kaminishi, the famous pre-war Asahi Baseball Team’s third baseman, was in his early twenties when his family went to East Lillooet in 1942. He at first started working in the fields picking tomatoes for 25 cents per hour, working from 8:00 am to 5:00 pm daily with no breaks except lunch, Monday to Saturday. About ten workers rode the back of a truck of the co-op farmers to get to and from the farm to work every day. Sunday was the day for softball games. His mother also worked in the fields picking tomatoes. During peak harvest time, a few of them got ‘double-time’, so 50 cents per hour to work the extra long hours to load the boxes of tomatoes on boxcars on the train to Vancouver. He also worked as an assistant carpenter to Mr. Yasuda, the foreman who led the building of the cannery.

“They made the tomato sauce in huge tanks from ripe tomatoes, like ketchup. I still remember, it smelled so good!”¹⁶

¹⁵ Yosh Kariatsumari, 85 year old East Lillooet Internee, June 14, 2023 e-mail.

¹⁶ In-person interview with 101 year old East Lillooet internee, Kaye Kaminishi, June 16, 2023.

According to the centenarian, who said this with great gravity:

*“A hakujin (Caucasion) fellow from Oliver I think put in the money for the cannery cause of all the tomatoes (because he could make money). But it was built by the Japanese. They had some big cans, some regular cans. When we finished (building) the cannery, it was good. The village (term residents called the camp) was very happy that it opened . . . We were very happy about the tomato industry because we got paid in cash. When I got paid, I was very happy. . . Lots of hakujin (Caucasions) and some Japanese worked there. Hakujin got the same wage as Japanese. Native people got half wage. . . I gave every cent I earned to mom. Tomato farming, it was the only jobs for all the people (in the camp)”.*¹⁷

While it seems such an automatic thing to have a job and to be paid in cash, it was a big deal in light of the context of the times. Japanese Canadian families had brought their savings with them to East Lillooet from the coast, but because they were initially prohibited from crossing the ‘Forbidden Bridge’ across the Fraser River (four miles down the road from the camp) to go into the ‘white’ town, initially there were no jobs and no banking as the bank was in town. For shopping, there were three grocery stores in town, so a young teenager, Ritsu Saimoto (Enjo) used to gather the list of orders for groceries from the ‘villagers’ in the camp as a part-time job. The stores would then deliver on Monday.¹⁸ After starting tomato farming, now working and earning cash, ‘villagers’ could go into town and do banking, shopping, and for high school students, to attend Lillooet Highschool. Eventually, there was a Japanese girl working in the bank.¹⁹

Dr. Horii recalls there were three brothers from the Tanaka family who worked in the cannery: Bill, Min, and Sam. One problem was that just a few people owned cars and therefore going to work 4 miles into town was a problem.²⁰

The Significance of Tomatoes and the Tomato Cannery

In 1949, the Internment officially ended, with the suspension of civil rights for Japanese Canadians lifted, freedom of movement once again granted together with the right to vote. Families, if they had enough money, began moving out of Lillooet gradually, either back to Vancouver or to where there was more opportunity. This of course meant that the heyday of tomato farming and the cannery was to decline with Japanese Canadians leaving the Internment camp, which was burned down in the early 1950s. The cannery burned to the ground in 1962.²¹

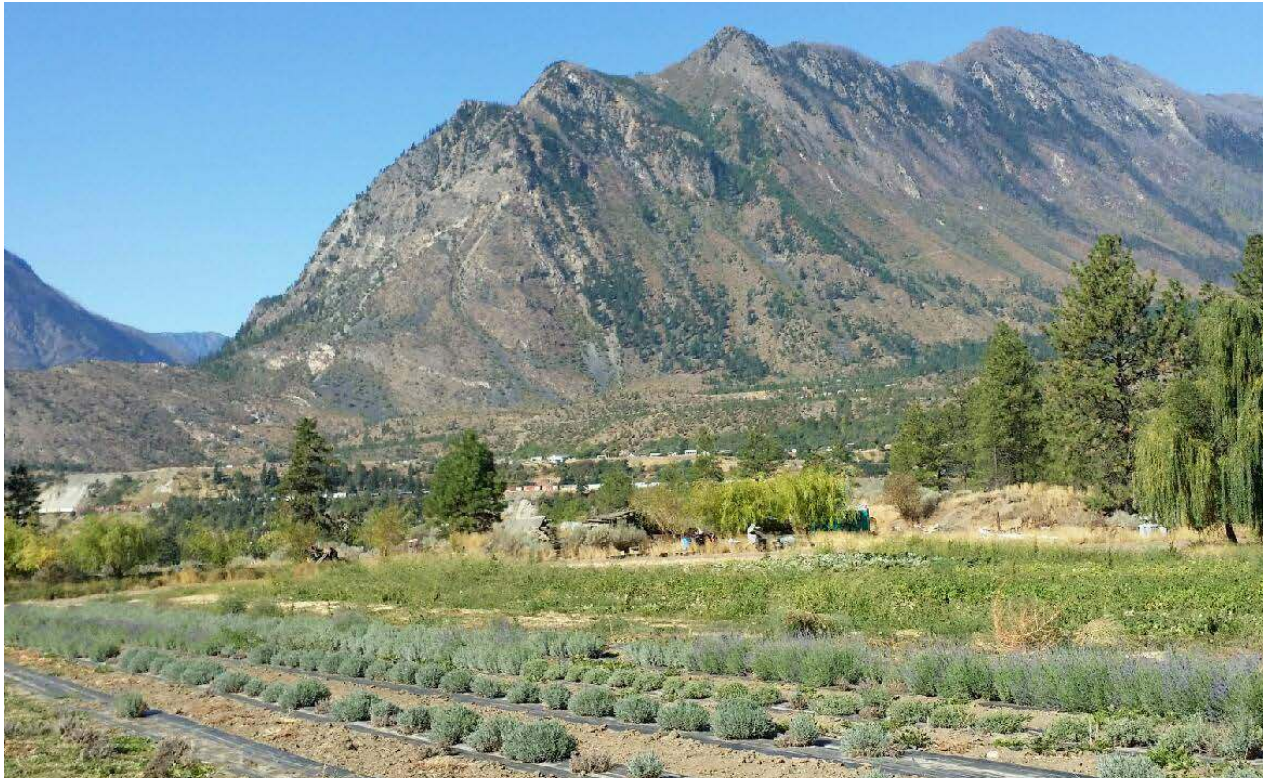
¹⁷ In-person interview with 101 year old East Lillooet internee, Kaye Kaminishi, June 16, 2023.

¹⁸ Laura Saimoto’s second hand account from her mother, Ritsu Saimoto (Enjo). Kaye Kaminishi also confirmed this.

¹⁹ In-person interview with 101 year old East Lillooet internee, Kaye Kaminishi, June 16, 2023.

²⁰ Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, June 16, 2023 e-mail.

²¹ Telephone interview of Dr. Akira Horii, 92 year old East Lillooet Internee, April 18, 2023.



Old Airport Farms, Lillooet. Former site of the East Lillooet Internment camp, now a private farm.
Photo: Laura Saimoto.

What did tomato farming and the cannery mean for the East Lillooet Internees? Given the context of the times, it is an absolutely remarkable symbol of resilience, of industriousness and hard work of Japanese Canadians. Under the guidance of Tokutaro Tsuyuki, the camp community, including men, women and children created a thriving collective economic enterprise that created jobs and family income (in cash) for the entire Internment Camp, for the town of Lillooet and connected the town to the city of New Westminster and to the big city, Vancouver.

As a result of having to work together, the tomato industry also helped to facilitate the melting of the racial segregation between the ‘white’ off-limits town on the west side of the Fraser River, to the East Lillooet Camp on the east side of the river. “tomatoes helped build bridges between the Japanese and the *hakujin* (Caucasians)”, recalls Kaminishi. “together with baseball/softball games, Japanese became friendly with townspeople.”²² This helped allow for Japanese Canadians to integrate and to be allowed to go into town.

²² In-person interview with 101 year old East Lillooet internee, Kaye Kaminishi, June 16, 2023.



East Lillooet Memorial Garden Seniors' Committee, celebrating the Renewal Opening of the East Lillooet Memorial Garden, May 2022. As children with their families, they worked in the tomato 'industry' during the Internment from 1942-49. From left: Kaori Yano (Ichikawa); Yosh Kariatsumari; Louis Horii; Bruce Tasaka & wife Nan Tasaka; Bill Tanaka; Dr. Akira Horii; Kaye Kaminishi. Photo: Lydia Nagai Photography.

All of the East Lillooet senior internees interviewed spoke of the tomato industry and cannery consistently agreeing it was very, very hard physical work to work in the hot sun, to ride their bikes or on the back of trucks five miles or more to go into town or to the farms to get to work, working long hours, to eat tomato sandwiches in their lunch pails. Yet there was no tone of complaint in their voices. There was a quiet pride and strong sense of achievement as they spoke.



iStock photo

In a wise voice, Kaminishi reflected with great weight about the tomato industry:

*"We could make money for ourselves. Otherwise, if no factory, (what would we do?) That's the only industry. It was really important."*²³

²³ In-person interview with 101 year old East Lillooet internee, Kaye Kaminishi, June 16, 2023.

In conclusion, the establishment of the sophistication of tomato farming brought by Japanese Canadians to the Lillooet region in 1942, with the added-value enterprise of the tomato cannery originated the Lillooet tomato brand. Lillooet tomatoes were and are known for its juicy, sweet, big tomatoes. Thus, tomato farming and the cannery can be said to be a source of great achievement by the East Lillooet Internees. Rising above the circumstances they were dealt, they not only managed to survive, but to thrive, leaving behind the legacy of the delicious tomato industry.



Ritsu Saimoto (Enjo) in wheelchair) with two daughters, Laura and Debra, East Lillooet Memorial Garden Renewal Opening, May 2023. Photo: Lydia Nagai Photography.

Author: Laura Saimoto, daughter of Ritsu Saimoto (Enjo), seated beside her mother. Ritsu worked picking tomatoes in the fields as a girl to help out the family while growing up in East Lillooet.

Submission: June 2023

I would like to gratefully acknowledge the East Lillooet Seniors Memorial Garden Committee, composed of wise East Lillooet Internees, who shared their stories of growing up in East Lillooet Internment Camp to educate what happened during the Japanese Canadian Internment.