

Acts of Ownership Interview

Moving into a House left by Japanese Canadians

Eileen (b. 1936) describes renting a home in the 1940s that was formerly owned by Japanese Canadians. She recalls the belongings the owners left behind and finding hidden belongings in the walls. She also recalls government officials taking belongings from homes in Steveston and her brothers taking a sewing machine from another house for her mother.

Excerpt from Landscapes of Injustice oral history interview with Eileen Carefoot.

PAMELA SUGIMAN

You have so much to share. Maybe we can start with information about your own childhood, your own past. Did you grow up in this area?

EILEEN CAREFOOT

Yes, I did. We came with a lot of other people. In the depression, in 1941 I believe, we left Saskatchewan. The crops had failed and we were starving, we were, because mom cooked everything up that we had and I don't know if you've ever had them but the beef bones, it's got marrow inside, and it tasted okay to me. I can't remember, but we ate it. My father, I guess he's got enough money to take the train to Vancouver because that was where the jobs were with the war on. He stayed with my aunt who lived in Vancouver. It seemed like everyone was moving west at that time. So my mother had to have an auction of everything we owned. I still have the papers at home. Even my doll cradle, that little doll cradle, and uh, the cow, pots and pans, everything. She got enough money, I guess, for the train trip. There were five of us. My little brother was only, I guess I was five and he was three, then my sister was four years older than my two older brothers. So we got the train to Vancouver and I asked my brother "what train ... where did we stop because I don't remember going?" Maybe we stopped in Jasper because we had our first ice cream cone.

My mom said, "hurry up, we have to get on the train." I tripped and fell and my ice cream went flying so they had to share it. We got on the train and some nice lady gave me some candy. I remember that and she took her finger like this and I had no idea what that meant, when you wiggle your finger to come here. My mother said, "she wants to see you" and we were all very shy being from the prairies and not seeing many people but there was a school.

So we got to Vancouver and my dad met us and he said, “I’m sorry, but we don’t have a home, yet.” He said he had a room above a building in Chinatown above a restaurant. I laugh because, I say that’s probably why I like Chinese food, but I don’t remember. So, we got there for a few weeks, probably, and then we rented a house on Main and 33rd in Vancouver, in the back of an old store. Well, that was really great because we had a bathtub and running water, a toilet, and electricity, and we did in Vancouver but none of my family knew anything about flushing the toilet, “wow, a switch,” because of course on the prairies you didn’t have anything like that. So we lived there for about a year and I remember them bringing the horse and buggy delivering milk and bread. We were quite close to that graveyard, uh, Fraser? There’s a big ...

ALANA

Across from the school?

EILEEN CAREFOOT

Yeah. There’s a big yeah. The hearse would go by a lot and my mom would always tell us that somebody had died. So we really didn’t know much. There was a Japanese little store across the street on Main and he left. My mother tried to explain, I guess. Then my dad found a house in Steveston, it’s gone now, but it was up on the dyke and we moved here.

There were lots of empty houses. That one was pretty good because we had electricity and we even had a toilet and the Japanese bathtub. So, I was only six then and my sister was ten and my little brother was three. Mum went to work right here in the cannery in the Gulf of Georgia on the herring. I remember mum saying, “Don’t leave the yard. Don’t ever leave the yard” because of the river. A lot of children were drowned in the river. My dad got a job; I do have a photo of him here. He was a guard at Boeing Aircraft. They were building fighter planes on Sea Island. The Boeing Company which, of course, is stationed in Seattle. He was pretty happy to get a job and he was issued a gun. He, of course, said “I would never shoot anybody.” But he was told if anybody came in a boat to ... I guess they had a code or something to halt them and inspect them.

Anyways, in the house that we rented we were pretty happy because upstairs the people had left, well they left almost everything. The beds, they were homemade wooden beds with a mattress so, we didn’t have anything, so we slept in the beds. Downstairs there was kindling, my mom was very sad, I remember she said “isn’t this terrible?” The people even had to leave their kindling, they left their spices in the cupboards because, of course, they could only bring a few clothes. My brothers, who were very curious went upstairs and they were banging on the walls and, of course, they heard something or they could tell it was hollow. They pulled the boards off and oh, they stored their belongings, their pictures, and those lovely Japanese dolls in the cases and, being children, we played with them. My aunt came out and she said that was a shame so she took one home, but we didn’t have any idea what they were.

The custodians, they were given the job of looking after, supposedly, the belongings of the Japanese people. I don't know if they were allowed to sell them or what but my mum needed a sewing machine and there was one in a house down the street and, of course, we couldn't take anything but later, at night, you could hear the trucks coming up [and] down the road from Vancouver and they were taking everything of value from the houses and nothing was being done. So my brothers went over and they said "well, we might as well take the sewing machine." It was a pedal sewing machine for mum. There were a lot, a lot, of nice furniture. In the house we rented, there was a homemade trunk so we kept that when we moved.