

Chemainus Walking Tour: Oak Street Neighbourhood

Guided Storyteller Audio Script

INTRO

Welcome to the Chemainus Museum's walking tour of the historic Japanese Canadian Oak Street neighbourhood.

Japanese Canadians lived in other neighbourhoods in Chemainus as well. Okada Camp was an enclave of homes at the head of the bay beside the lumber mill. It was named for Mr. Okada who managed men working on the booming grounds. The workers lived in homes they built on mill land at Okada Camp, paying ground rent to the lumber company.

Others lived in Chinatown, once located above the mill and beside Bare Point Road. There were also 3 farm properties along River Road once owned by Japanese Canadians.

Today we tour the Oak Street Neighbourhood.

Before we begin walking... let me share something important.

By the 1930s, one in every five people living in Chemainus was Japanese Canadian.

By April of 1942, every one of those residents was forcibly removed and sent to internment camps for the duration of the Second World War.

Not one family returned.

Still... we remember them.

Today, we're going to step back in time — to about 1940 — and walk through what was once a vibrant Japanese Canadian neighbourhood, right in the heart of this town.

Our walk begins at the Chemainus Museum, next to Waterwheel Park.

From here, follow the path down through the park to Alder Street.

Before you cross, pause for a moment.

In 1940, towering piles of lumber would have blocked your way. The Victoria Lumber and Manufacturing Company's yard stretched from here all the way north to Oak Street — and westward to the left as far as Cedar Street.

Now cross into Maple Lane and continue to the corner of Oak Street and Maple Street.

In this neighbourhood Japanese Canadian families built homes, ran businesses, and raised children. Their lives were full, yet isolated -- a community within a community.

Today, we'll walk together through their neighbourhood... retracing streets where this remarkable community once flourished.

Pause Recording until you reach Oak and Maple

SITE 1: The Crystal Fish Market

You're standing at the corner of Oak and Maple. Today, it's home to the Thrift Store.

In 1940, this corner belonged to Noboru and Sumano Kawahara, the proprietors of the Crystal Fish Market.

At the corner they had a commercial laundry and a rooming house.

The Crystal Fish Market was behind, facing Maple Street.

It was a tidy, well-kept clapboard building painted white with a large, mullioned picture window next to the front entrance on Maple Street. The name Crystal Fish Market was stylishly painted across the window.

The Kawahara family lived upstairs, above the shop.

This corner was busy... and alive.

People chatted in English and Japanese. Children played nearby. Trucks rumbled toward the harbour.

One of those trucks was often driven by Noboru Kawahara himself. Along with running the store, he leased fishing boats to Japanese Canadian fishers — and delivered fresh fish throughout Chemainus.

Now, continue walking east toward the water, heading for Oak and Croft Street.

As you go, imagine gardens filling the space beside you — fruits, vegetables, and flowers growing between this store and the store at the next corner.

Pause Recording until you reach Oak and Croft Streets

SITE 2: The Taniwa Store

The corner store at Oak and Croft stood on land owned by Kijiro Nakahara, a fisherman. The building itself belonged to Mr. Taniwa, who paid ground rent to Mr. Nakahara.

Behind the store was Mr. Nakahara's home... more gardens... outbuildings... a tofu-making operation... and several small rental homes for workers and families.

The Taniwa Store wasn't just a place to shop.

It was a gathering place.

There was candy here. Pool tables. Slot machines. Ping-pong.

Oak Street hummed with activity.

The people who lived here moved to the rhythm of this street — long days of work at the mill or on the water... balanced with moments of connection and ease.

Now continue east along Oak Street. Cross Croft, and walk toward Oak and Esplanade.

This entire stretch once belonged to Gihei Kawahara — Noboru's older brother.

He owned six city lots here. As you walk, picture rustic cabins lining the street... gardens... and an orchard. Many families — and single workers — lived along this block.

Pause Recording until you reach Oak and Esplanade Streets

SITE 3: Kawahara Store

Stop here at Oak and Esplanade. Take a look around.

On this corner once stood Gihei Kawahara's store — a solid two-storey wooden building, with living quarters upstairs. It was later rented to Fureya and Co. as a general store and Gihei Kawahara had his living quarters above the store.

Imagine glass-topped gas pumps gleaming by the curb. The smell of salt air drifting in. People came to shop for food and daily needs... and sometimes to linger.

Inside, you might hear billiard balls clacking. Or voices from the barber shop tucked into the back of the store.

When you're ready, turn down Esplanade and walk a short distance to the parking lot behind the dental office.

Pause Recording until you reach the alleyway at the parking lot

SITE 4: The Alleyway Through the Kawahara Properties

You're now looking at a narrow alleyway stretching between Esplanade and Croft Streets.

In 1940, this was no ordinary alley.

You would have been walking on a wooden boardwalk — the main thoroughfare through the Kawahara properties.

Near the entrance was a well-kept garden. Nearby stood a communal kitchen... a bathhouse... a tool house... a garage and a woodshed.

As you walk along the alley back toward Croft Street, imagine the smell of meals cooking... drifting from the homes along the boardwalk.

Across the way stood the Athletic Hall. Wrestling, judo, and kendo were practiced here. Did you know that kendo is a martial art using bamboo swords and based on traditional samurai swordsmanship?

Sixteen homes... a bunkhouse... gardens and orchards filled this space.
Listen closely.

You might hear laughter... raised voices... the sounds of everyday life.

At Croft Street, turn right and walk north toward the water. Stop in front of 9875 Croft Street.

Pause Recording until you reach 9875 Croft Street

SITE 5: The Community Hall

(9875 Croft Street)

This building was built by the Japanese Canadian community in 1927 to be the Community Hall and Japanese language school. It quickly became the heart of the neighbourhood.

Now it is a private home, so please be respectful of the homeowners' privacy.

The exterior entrance of the house has been changed. Originally, the front door faced the street.

Inside, you would have heard Japanese language classes... the thump of judo practice... and the music of weddings, plays, meetings, and celebrations.

Groups like the Japanese Women's Association, the Parents' Association, the Buddhist congregation and many other associations met here — weaving together the social and spiritual life of the community.

Now continue north toward the water.

Turn left at Pine Street and walk to Maple Street.

Turn right and proceed to number 9909 Maple Street

Pause Recording until you reach 9909 Maple Street.

SITE 6: The Kawabe Home

(9909 Maple Street)

This property has been modified over the years, but this was once the 10 room home of Tomoki Kawabe, his wife Sue and his three children. There was a glassed in porch and tidy garden fronting the property. Attached to the home was a steam bath described in the records as “usual to Japanese premises”. — Mr. Kawabe was a respected employer who hired dozens of Japanese Canadian men to stack lumber for the mill.

Behind his attractive bungalow stood a large two-storey rooming house... and a small rental home. Families, boarders, and visitors came and went throughout the day.

SITE 7: Everyday Life & Leisure

We will turn now from the Kawabe home to retrace our steps along Maple to Pine Street. Turn left and walk toward Esplanade.

As you walk, think about everyday life here.

This was an industrious community. People worked at the mill, in logging camps, in fishing and agriculture. Others ran taxi services, barber shops, tailor shops, laundries, tofu businesses, and small stores.

But life wasn't only about work.

Families dug clams at the beach. Picked wildflowers. Swam in the harbour.

One resident remembered collecting windfall apples — a full bag for twenty-five cents — and her mother baking fresh pies.

Children walked to school together, joining their white classmates along the way. After school, many attended Japanese language classes back at the Community Hall.

Sports were a source of pride. Baseball teams like the Nippons played visiting teams from the mainland and the United States. Others practiced wrestling, judo, and kendo — staying strong in body and spirit.

Pause Recording until you reach the corner of Pine and Esplanade

SITE 8: The Yoshida House

(Pine & Esplanade)

Stop here at Pine and Esplanade.

This is now the Chemainus Medical Clinic. But once, it was the site of a 9 room, 2 story house, with a covered front porch and attractive gardens.... -- home to Shigeuki Yoshida — a renowned scoutmaster.

He lived here with his mother, wife, and three daughters. Mr. Yoshida worked as a truck driver for the mill... as well as an insurance agent.

After being barred as a child from the all-white First Chemainus Scout troop, Mr. Yoshida studied on his own for five years to become a scoutmaster and founded the all-Japanese Canadian Second Chemainus troop in 1930.

It was a highly trained troop, widely respected, and deeply committed to community service — a powerful story of determination in the face of discrimination.

Now continue along Esplanade back toward Oak Street.

SITE 9: Reflections

As we finish our walk, take a moment.

Imagine this neighbourhood as it once was.

By the early 1930s, dozens of families lived here. Streets filled with laundry in the breeze... fish trucks making deliveries... and the smell of home-cooked meals.

People worked in the mill, in shops, and on the water — contributing to every part of Chemainus life.

Yet alongside success came injustice. Japanese Canadians were denied the right to vote and barred from many professions.

Still, they built businesses, friendships, and community — a strength that endured even after wartime internment.

This neighbourhood — from Oak and Maple to Esplanade — was a place of cooperation, creativity, and care.

On April 21, 1942, everything changed.

Today, these streets remind us of a loss of what might have been --- of injustices and failure to speak out against those injustices.

And it also reminds us of resilience... and hope... and the power of community.

As you leave, carry with you the memory of those who lived, worked, and celebrated here — families whose stories still whisper through these streets.