

Etsuji Morii, a Community Leader and an Underworld Boss

Takashi Ohki

May 2026

1. Introduction

Etsuji Morii was a man of striking contradictions—so contradictory, in fact, that understanding him is essential to understanding the wartime Japanese Canadian community itself. To some, he appeared as a polished, cooperative leader, the kind of figure authorities trusted and relied upon. To others, he was a ruthless enforcer whose shadow loomed over Powell Street. These two versions of Morii did not exist in separate worlds; they operated side by side, shaping every decision he made and every reaction he provoked.

On the surface, Morii looked like the ideal intermediary. He had long been respected in Vancouver's prewar Japanese community and was well-known to Canadian officials. The RCMP had once praised him as "honourable and cooperative in the extreme," and this reputation earned him repeated appointments: first to the 1941 registration committee, then as chairman of the Japanese Liaison Committee during the chaotic early months of the evacuation. He cultivated an image of calm politeness, even humility, and he appealed to traditional virtues—duty, sacrifice, loyalty—when urging Japanese Canadians to volunteer for road camps or contribute supplies for soldiers overseas. In this role, he seemed almost indispensable.

But beneath that carefully maintained exterior lay a very different Morii. Within the Japanese district, he was known as the *Oyabun*—the boss—of a network tied to gambling houses, social clubs, and informal power brokers. When persuasion failed, he did not hesitate to use force. His lieutenants, many trained in judo, enforced his will with intimidation and physical pressure, especially during the evacuation. Residents who approached him for deferments often encountered not sympathy but arrogance, shouting, and humiliation. Rumours of bribery and corruption followed him everywhere, and accusations of abuse at Hastings Park only deepened the fear. For many Nisei, his authoritarian style and insistence on "Japanese" obedience felt not only oppressive but fundamentally un-Canadian.

Ultimately, Morii's power collapsed not because he was defeated, but because the world that sustained him vanished. His authority had depended on the dense social networks of Powell Street—its businesses, labour ties, and underground economy. When the government uprooted the entire community in 1942, scattering families across camps and work sites, that foundation disintegrated overnight. The forced liquidation of homes, boats, and businesses erased the economic leverage he once held. And once the BC Security Commission no longer needed a single liaison figure, his official role evaporated as well.

At the same time, Japanese Canadians themselves increasingly rejected him. Nisei leaders like Tommy Shoyama and labour organizers such as Takaichi Umezaki openly challenged the idea that he represented them. Government investigations dismissed rumours of Japanese Canadian "disloyalty," undermining the very justification for Morii's wartime authority. After the war, dispersal across the Prairies and Eastern Canada—and the ban on returning to the coast until 1949—made it impossible to rebuild the old Vancouver community. With no territory, no institutions, and no concentrated population, there was simply no community left for Morii to command.

In the end, even Morii seemed to recognize this. He supported the Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association, spoke of cooperation with Canada, and showed no desire to reclaim his prewar role. His power did not fade because he changed; it faded because the world around him did.

This essay brings together the many facets of Etsuji Morii—leader and enforcer, patriot and opportunist, respected figure and feared boss—to illuminate the complexity of a man who shaped, and was shaped by, one of the most turbulent chapters in Japanese Canadian history.



Etsuji Mori (Before 1942)

2. The Timeline of Etsuji Morii

Here is a comprehensive timeline of the life of Etsuji Morii, drawn from the provided sources:

- **1883 or July 27, 1888:** Etsuji Morii was born in Hiroshima, Japan. (*Note: Sources conflict on his exact birth year, providing both 1883 and 1888*). He lived there until his late teens, earning a black belt in judo.
- **1910s–1920s:** He established his home at 639 East Cordova Street in Vancouver and operated the Morii Brokerage at 366 Powell Street. Over time, he became widely recognized as the powerful *éminence grise* (shadow ruler) of the Powell Street underworld.
- **1926:** Morii and his partner Rikimatsu opened the Showa Club, a private gambling hall on Powell Street. He later opened the Raku Raku, which was renamed the Nippon Club.
- **1928:** Morii consolidated his prestige by establishing the Nihon Jinkai (Japanese Businessmen's Association), an organization that represented more than 20 percent of Japanese businesses in the area.
- **1931:** Despite his underworld ties, Morii collaborated with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) during their investigation of a Japanese smuggling ring.
- **1932:** Seeking social respectability, Morii became the primary financial benefactor and president of Vancouver's first major martial arts academy, the Tai-Iku Dojo.

- **1936:** Morii helped host the legendary founder of Judo, Kano Jigoro, during his visit to Vancouver. Impressed by the facility, Kano renamed the academy the Kidokan.
- **Late 1930s:** Morii allegedly guided the Vancouver *Jikyoku linkai* (Emergency Committee), which quietly collected funds, medical supplies, and "comfort bags" for Japanese soldiers fighting in the Sino-Japanese war. Around this time, he was also allegedly involved in issuing fake passports, though these charges were never proven.
- **Early to Mid-1941:** Due to his prominent and feared status, Canadian authorities selected Morii as one of three *Issei* (first-generation) members of a Japanese sub-committee to assist the RCMP with the mandatory re-registration of Japanese Canadians.
- **Early 1942:** Following the attack on Pearl Harbour, the Canadian government mandated the evacuation of Japanese Canadians. Because Morii commanded absolute authority in the community, the RCMP and the British Columbia Security Commission (BCSC) appointed him chairman of the Japanese Liaison Committee to manage the process.
- **February 22, 1942:** Tasked with producing volunteers for government road camps, Morii called a meeting where he appealed to the Japanese virtue of self-sacrifice and threatened to commit *harakiri* if he failed. When appeals did not work, he resorted to force, using his Judo Club "lieutenants" to physically intimidate residents into complying.
- **March 1942:** The RCMP empowered Morii to police the Hastings Park internment holding pool, and on March 9, his group was formally recognized as the "Wartime Security Committee". However, widespread resentment grew over his authoritarian tactics and allegations that he was extracting bribes for evacuation deferments.
- **March 29 – April 9, 1942:** Opposition groups, including *Nisei* leaders and the Naturalized Canadian Japanese Society (*Kikajin-kai*), publicly declared that Morii did not represent the community due to his awful character and violent past. Pressured by this backlash, the BCSC demoted Morii on April 9, stripping him of his exclusive status by recognizing other bona fide groups as equals.
- **May 28, 1942:** Fearing that the intense community hatred toward Morii's committee would delay the evacuation process, the BCSC abruptly banished Morii and his group out of Vancouver to the remote ghost town of Minto (Minto City).
- **Autumn 1942:** A formal Royal Commission public inquiry investigated allegations that Morii was a Japanese fascist running an extortion "racket" at the expense of evacuees. He was ultimately exonerated of subversive wartime activities and criminal extortion due to lack of evidence, but his reputation was ruined, and he resigned from the Liaison Committee in late 1942.
- **c. 1970:** Etsuji Morii died in Japan.



Etsuji and Kiyo Silver Anniversary photograph (1935)

3. Summaries of the Episodes of Etsuji Morii in the Major Books of the History of Japanese Canadians

3.1 Ann Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism*, Chapter 3 “Expulsion” [1]

In Ann Sunahara’s book, Etsuji Morii emerged as a central, highly polarizing figure during the initial phases of the forced uprooting of Japanese Canadians from the Pacific coast in 1942. Operating as a prominent “shadow leader” in Vancouver’s Powell Street ghetto, Morii managed two social clubs and wielded significant informal authority in the community. It was this localized power and his ability to command results that drew the attention of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP), specifically Assistant Commissioner Frederick J. Mead. Mead, tasking himself with navigating the volatile and racially charged climate of early 1942, sought a mechanism to ensure absolute calm and total cooperation from the Japanese minority to prevent potential outbreaks of violence from hostile white extremists. Despite possessing knowledge of Morii’s complex and somewhat unsavoury past, Mead dismissed these concerns as irrelevant because Morii had proven himself to be exceptionally honourable and cooperative in past civic efforts, such as leading a highly successful Victory Bond campaign. Consequently, in January 1942, the federal government officially appointed Morii as the Chairman of the Japanese Liaison Committee—a three-man body comprising Arthur Nishiguchi and Ippei Nishio—tasked with serving as the primary intermediary between the British Columbia Security Commission (BCSC) and the displaced population.

In the execution of the evacuation, Morii initially operated under the widely shared assumption that the Canadian government would only enforce a token removal of a few hundred individuals—mostly single, alien men—to appease West Coast political agitators and spare the broader community from mass family separation. Under his direction, the Japanese Liaison Committee worked closely with local Japanese Associations to coordinate the systematic uprooting of coastal settlements, manage funds for the Japanese Welfare Association, and process applications for deferrals from immediate removal. However, the landscape shifted dramatically in mid-February 1942 when plans for private industrial employment failed to materialize, prompting Ottawa to demand the immediate deployment of adult male Japanese aliens to isolated road construction camps. Morii was abruptly called upon by the BCSC to recruit a large number of volunteers before the official April 1 deadline.

Faced with a community deeply unwilling to volunteer due to a total lack of government guarantees regarding the financial security and physical welfare of their left-behind families, Morii convened a critical community meeting on February 22, 1942. At this gathering, he relied heavily on traditional Japanese values, imploring the men to exhibit self-sacrifice for the greater good of protecting the Nisei and their broader families. When met with intense skepticism and direct questioning from community members about family support, an embattled Morii went so far as to declare that he would commit *harakiri* (ritual suicide) if his leadership failed them. Through sheer force of personality and authoritative leverage, he managed to secure enough men to fill a voluntary shipment to Rainbow, British Columbia, on February 23. Yet, his control fractured the very next day when only half of the designated men reported for the subsequent train deployment to Red Pass. The entire foundation of Morii's cooperative strategy evaporated on February 25, 1942, when Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced the total, absolute uprooting of all Japanese Canadians regardless of citizenship, completely invalidating Morii's core argument that sacrificing a few single men would safeguard the rest of the community.

Simultaneously, Morii was granted immense authority over the day-to-day administration and policing of the Hastings Park Manning Pool in Vancouver. Opened in March 1942 as a crude, retrofitted holding facility inside livestock barns and exhibition buildings, Hastings Park became a site of profound psychological and physical trauma for incoming families. Assistant Commissioner Mead explicitly empowered Morii and his subordinates to maintain internal order and police the swelling population within the pool. However, the reality of Morii's management style inside the camp exacerbated an already agonizing situation. While grassroots inmate initiatives eventually formed their own separate liaison groups to secure physical adjustments like toilet partitions and dietary changes, Morii's handpicked subordinates frequently stood accused of systemic corruption and severe abuses of power. Inmates confined to the stench-ridden, crowded concrete structures reported that Morii's team made no authentic effort to improve the degrading living conditions. Instead, whispered allegations circulated rapidly through the barracks that Morii and his close inner circle were actively taking bribes from wealthier individuals to illicitly arrange for temporary deferments from the gruelling road camp drafts.

This administrative conduct drastically warped the way Morii was regarded by the broader Japanese Canadian community, transforming his standing from a traditional community broker to a widely reviled collaborator. The younger generation of Canadian-born Nisei, spearheaded by figures such as Kunio Shimizu (secretary of the Japanese Canadian Citizens' League) and Thomas Shoyama (editor of the *New Canadian*), harboured deep ideological distrust toward Morii long before the mass expulsions. They viewed his authoritarian methods and his reliance on imperial Japanese values as fundamentally un-

Canadian, sharply contrasting with the democratic, British civic ideals the Nisei had absorbed through the public school system. When Shimizu attempted to advocate for Nisei input during community decision-making meetings, Morii flatly rebuffed him. As the grim realities of family separation took hold throughout March, the historical tolerance the community extended toward Morii collapsed entirely. He was viewed as a government "stool pigeon" who had sold out his own people to appease white politicians, using his position not to defend the civil rights of Canadian citizens, but to enforce their subjugation.

The structural collapse of Morii's control over the Japanese Canadian population occurred through an organized, multi-generational political revolt that culminated in the spring of 1942. Recognizing that Morii could not be reasoned with or reformed from within, Shoyama and Shimizu joined forces with a deeply dissatisfied coalition of naturalized Issei elders who equally resented his dictatorial grasp. In mid-March, these anti-Morii factions mobilized thirty-eight distinct community groups—including the Canadian Japanese Association and the Japanese Camp and Mill Workers Union—to establish the Naturalized Japanese Canadian Association, known colloquially as the *Kikajin-kai*. Concurrently, fifty-three Nisei organizations banded together under the umbrella of the Japanese Canadian Citizens' Council (JCCC) to build an alternative framework for organizing social services and managing the logistics of the evacuation. On March 29, 1942, this united front brought the community's internal feud to light by issuing a formal letter to the British Columbia Security Commission. They explicitly declared that Morii did not represent the Japanese community of British Columbia and demanded that the government immediately dismantle his monopoly on leadership in favour of a democratically elected representative committee.

When these resolutions and alternative evacuation plans were brought to BCSC Chairman Austin Taylor on April 1, 1942, Taylor initially rejected the alternative logistical proposals due to budgetary limitations and land constraints. However, the political damage to Morii was already irreversible. While the BCSC commissioners publicly dismissed the mounting accusations of corruption against Morii as a mere "campaign of vilification," they privately recognized the stark administrative reality by early April: Morii had completely lost the consent of the governed, and his actual influence had shrunk to a small, insular faction of urban Issei supporters. Recognizing that tethering the entire evacuation policy to a universally distrusted figure would provoke widespread civil disobedience, the Commission issued a decisive policy shift on April 9, 1942. They announced that the BCSC would henceforth receive representations from any bona fide group of Japanese Canadians, refusing to recognize any single entity as the community's exclusive voice.

This decree effectively stripped Morii of his absolute authority. While his committee was permitted to continue handling minor bureaucratic aspects of the uprooting and the eventual labour logistics for building the Tashme detention camp, he was stripped of his overarching political leverage and placed on an equal, diminished footing alongside the JCCC and the *Kikajin-kai*. Though a subsequent official inquiry into the allegations against Morii largely cleared him of actionable wrongdoing—ruling that most of the bribery and abuse charges were based on unsubstantiated hearsay and fueled by a sensationalist wartime press—the verdict was entirely irrelevant to the displaced population. By late April 1942, Morii's influence within the fabric of the Japanese Canadian community was officially dead. The population had completely bypassed his broken leadership, choosing instead to navigate the trauma of their impending

exile through alternative organizations, localized resistance groups like the Nisei Mass Evacuation Group, or total self-reliance.

3.2 Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*, Chapter Eight, "A Low, Dishonest Decade" [2]

In Ken Adachi's book, Etsuji Morii emerged as a prominent, highly influential, and controversial figure within the pre-war Japanese Canadian community in British Columbia. Described as the *eminence grise*—a powerful behind-the-scenes decision-maker—of the business and gambling world centred around Vancouver's Powell Street, Morii wielded an exceptional amount of power over the local community structure. His reputation was deeply polarizing; among the resident Japanese population, he was simultaneously hated, feared, and respected.

Morii's involvement with Canadian law enforcement and formal community leadership spanned at least a decade prior to the outbreak of the Pacific War. His initial notable intersection with federal authorities occurred in 1931, a year when the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) uncovered a significant ring that had been smuggling Japanese immigrants into Canada. During this intensive 1931 investigation, Morii offered his cooperation to the RCMP. This connection established a long-standing history of interaction between him and federal police forces.

By the late 1930s, as Japan's military aggressions in China escalated and sparked widespread public revulsion across Canada, the local Japanese community faced intensifying hostility and an informal boycott of their businesses. In the fall of 1937, the Vancouver *Jikyoku linkai* (translated as the Emergency Committee) was organized specifically to combat this localized anti-Japanese sentiment and counter the economic boycott. Etsuji Morii was identified as the alleged guide and leader behind this Emergency Committee. Under his guidance, the group did not merely work to arrest the growth of local racial hostility; it was also quietly engaged in gathering resources to support the Japanese military. Under Morii's direction, the committee collected funds, tin foil, medical supplies, and "comfort bags" intended directly for Japanese soldiers. This behaviour reflected a broader trend among first-generation Japanese immigrants (*Issei*) at the time, who maintained an unquestioned belief that Japan's militaristic foreign policy was both correct and necessary.

Morii's influence was formalized further in February 1941, during a period of extreme geopolitical tension just months before the attack on Pearl Harbour. Following recommendations from a federal special investigating committee, the Canadian government instituted a compulsory registration program for all persons of Japanese origin. To facilitate this massive administrative undertaking, a government-appointed Standing Committee met with Japanese community leaders to form a five-member "liaison" subcommittee to actively cooperate with the RCMP in executing the registration. Morii was selected as one of the three *Issei* representatives to serve on this Japanese subcommittee, alongside Arthur Nishiguchi and Mitsujiro Noguchi, and two second-generation (*Nisei*) leaders, Kunio Shimizu and Thomas Shoyama.

Morii's presence on this liaison body immediately aggravated an existing, deep-seated generational fracture within the Japanese Canadian community. The *Nisei* members harboured intense resentment and serious doubts regarding the integrity of Morii and another *Issei* representative. This resentment triggered sharp conflicts of personality and viewpoint within the sub-committee. While the Canadian government's Standing Committee failed to fully comprehend this shifting community dynamic, a fierce

struggle for independence from traditional, conservative *Issei* control was brewing among the native-born *Nisei* generation.

This internal friction was fundamentally rooted in differing views on national loyalty. With a Pacific war looming, *Nisei* leaders strongly believed that, for the community's collective survival, they had to openly declare and stand by an unyielding loyalty to Canada, regardless of what Japan did. Conversely, Morii and the older *Issei* generation were entirely unwilling to make such a definitive commitment to Canada at that time. This profound ideological conflict between the *Nisei* and the *Issei* leadership—exemplified by distrust of Morii's integrity and his traditionalist stance—ultimately presaged the community's complete inability to form a unified, organized policy when facing the threat of forced evacuation later that year.

3.3 Mituru Shimpo (translated into English by Takashi Ohki), *As If Chased by Stones*, Chapter 6, Section III (Relocation) [3]

Prior to the formal outbreak of hostilities between Canada and Japan, the Canadian federal government began establishing specialized administrative apparatuses to manage the resident Japanese Canadian population. Following recommendations from the "Sparling Committee" in late 1940, a specialized governing body, the "Standing Committee on Oriental Residents of British Columbia," was appointed on January 7, 1941, to compile precise data on the ethnic minority. On January 8, 1941, Prime Minister Mackenzie King announced a mandatory "Special New Registration of Japanese Canadian Residents in British Columbia".

According to records from the publication *Tairiku Jihou*, the Canadian federal government unilaterally selected a group of key Japanese Canadian negotiators to act as intermediaries and facilitate this registration process. Etsuji Morii was designated as one of these primary negotiators, serving alongside Mikizo Nishiguchi, Kojiro Noguchi, and Kunio Shimizu. Under this framework, all residents of Japanese ancestry in British Columbia—regardless of individual legal status, birth country, or naturalization status—were forced to appear before the Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) between March and August of 1941 to have their comprehensive life histories, physical traits, and fingerprints recorded.

This early registration allowed federal authorities to build an extensive intelligence library on the community, enabling them to respond with extreme speed when the Pacific War officially commenced. The Canadian state's selection of Morii as a community representative brought underlying social fractures to the surface. The traditional pre-war community structure had long operated under the rigid control of the *Issei* (first-generation immigrants). However, the native-born *Nisei* (second-generation Japanese Canadians) were rapidly maturing, were entirely fluent in English, and maintained a distinct consciousness of their own "Canadianness".

A highly symbolic moment of generational independence occurred precisely when the state sought to utilize Morii's leadership. In organizing his administrative network, Morii approached a prominent *Nisei*, Ei Ishihara, to accompany him and his associates to the British Columbia Security Commission (BCSC) headquarters. When BCSC executive Austin Taylor directly asked Ishihara if Morii and his faction truly represented the entire Japanese Canadian community, Ishihara responded with an explicit "no" and formally refused to participate in or endorse Morii's state-aligned operations.

Following the structural devastation of the Japanese Canadian community's economic base immediately after the declaration of war, social unrest and financial instability gripped the population. Traditional leadership structures rapidly disintegrated as businesses closed, fishing vessels were seized, and workers faced mass layoffs. In the wake of this collapse, Etsuji Morii and his loyal faction launched a distinct internal movement to preserve what they believed were the best interests of their fellow compatriots. Morii intended to actively leverage his long-standing, close-knit relationship with the RCMP to navigate the crisis. Concurrently, the RCMP sought to utilize Morii's established community authority for their own administrative purposes.

Morii was acutely aware of the compounding societal sacrifices, cultural uprooting, and financial ruin that a total, forced relocation would inflict upon the ethnic minority. Operating under the belief that a total evacuation could be averted if the community demonstrated compliance, Morii became determined to halt the state's sweeping relocation orders by any means necessary. He calculated that the only logical pathway to satisfying the federal government's demands was to supply a dedicated group of volunteers to labour in the state's newly mandated highway-construction camps. Morii surmised that a proactive display of community compliance would pacify anti-Japanese political currents.

However, given the hostile climate and the forced separation of families, individual volunteers were virtually nonexistent. To overcome this lack of voluntary participation, Morii turned to his formidable domestic network. While Morii was known to maintain a highly polite and mild-mannered external demeanour, he sat at the apex of an organization backed by the local Judo Club, which featured a contingent of physically imposing young men who regularly walked the streets, displaying their strength. Morii effectively deployed this institutional influence to selectively target 150 Japanese residents whom he deemed suitable candidates for heavy labour. He explicitly requested that these individuals sacrifice their immediate personal liberty for the broader protection of the ethnic enclave. Because of the intense social pressure and the underlying physical coercion inherent to Morii's network, the individuals targeted found it virtually impossible to refuse the directive, and they were successfully dispatched to the road camps by the Japanese Canadians' own internal leadership.

Despite Morii's efforts to stall a sweeping relocation through targeted labour compliance, the British Columbia Security Commission was established to execute a massive, comprehensive evacuation of over 20,000 Japanese Canadians. The BCSC faced the monumental logistical challenge of constructing the Hastings Park internment camp, managing transport, and preventing widespread rebellion. Realizing that they could not manage the population if a total resistance materialized, federal authorities were forced to establish an official liaison committee to bridge communications with the Japanese Canadian population.

Mead, an official representing the BCSC, formally requested that Etsuji Morii enter into an exclusive liaison agreement, citing his extensive history of close cooperation with the RCMP. Morii accepted the state's request and formed a body he officially designated as the "Wartime Security Committee". However, official Canadian government documentation bypassed Morii's naming convention, explicitly referencing the group as the "Morii Committee". Formed on March 9, 1942—exactly three days after the institutional birth of the BCSC—the Morii Committee included Mikizo Nishiguchi and Ippei Nishio alongside Morii.

According to BCSC administrative records, the committee was granted the right to negotiate directly with state executives. Crucially, the BCSC did not formally hire the committee, nor did the state grant Morii any legal or official executive authority over his fellow Japanese Canadians. The committee's structural role was strictly limited to communicating the population's collective grievances and desires to the BCSC. Despite this total lack of official statutory power, Morii's subordinates and enforcers acted as though the committee possessed immense governing authority over the community.

As the realities of the forced evacuation intensified, frantic compatriots regularly swamped the Morii Committee's offices to petition for basic administrative relief or travel extensions. When individuals attempted to secure audiences, Morii's aggressive subordinates routinely insulated their leader, shouting that the "Boss" was far too occupied to meet with ordinary community members. If desperate citizens persisted, the enforcers would scream at them, labelling them as overly annoying.

A specific instance of this mistreatment was captured in Chiyokichi Ariga's historical account, *Rocky's Temptation*, which documented a compatriot pleading with Morii's committee to grant a temporary evacuation postponement because his wife had entered the final month of a high-risk pregnancy and was on the verge of giving birth. One of Morii's aggressive subordinates completely rejected the medical plea out of hand, callously stating to the husband, "You are not going to give birth, are you?" While such incidents did not stem from Morii's direct personal interaction, the population's overarching panic led to the collective blame for these structural indignities falling squarely upon Morii himself.

The systemic unpopularity of the Morii Committee within the broader Japanese Canadian community was exacerbated by deep geopolitical confusion and intense emotional frustration. The Japanese Canadian population grew profoundly frustrated with their circumstances, yet they possessed no direct, viable means to physically fight the BCSC or the vast, amorphous white majority. Consequently, when the Morii Committee emerged as a highly visible, tangible entity operating within physical reach, the community redirected their collective anger and attacked the group. Because the traditional economic and social pillars that had protected Morii's authority in the pre-war era had completely dissolved, internal community attacks against his leadership became significantly easier and more effective than ever before.

Vocal critics of Morii's state-aligned methods rapidly organized an entirely separate domestic resistance movement, successfully securing the right to negotiate independently with the BCSC. The BCSC maintained no genuine personal loyalty to Morii; the commission's singular operational objective was the rapid, peaceful completion of the total evacuation. State authorities were perfectly willing to utilize any cooperative internal faction to accomplish their logistical goals, effectively employing a "divide and rule" methodology that fractured the ethnic minority.

By late May of 1942, the internal community criticism levelled against the Morii Committee had grown so volatile that the BCSC feared that Morii's continued presence on the coast would trigger major internal delays and jeopardize the national evacuation schedule. To neutralize this risk, the BCSC forcibly relocated Morii and his immediate group of organizers from the coastal defence zone on May 28, 1942, exiling them to the remote, abandoned mining town of Minto in the interior of British Columbia.

Following his physical removal from the primary theatre of operations, Morii formally entrusted his administrative intentions to the prominent enforcers and figures remaining under his command. Under

this delegated structure, the remnants of his organization continued to operate under the title of the "Security Committee" until the total evacuation of the coastal Japanese Canadian population was officially finalized in October 1942.

3.4 Similarities and Differences in the Descriptions of Etsuji Morii

All three authors describe how Etsuji Morii became a liaison between the Japanese Canadian community and the Canadian government, and how Morii's vision of minimizing the impact of the forced evacuation failed in part due to limited support from the Japanese Canadian community and in part due to changes in Canadian government policy. Underlying these changes was the widening gap between the Issei and Nisei over how to cope with the Canadian government's anti-Japanese policy. It is interesting to note that Etsuji Morii, a conspicuous figure in the Japanese Canadian community before and in the early stages of the forced evacuation, had almost completely disappeared from it after he moved to Minto City.

The similarities and differences in how these three authors describe Etsuji Morii are summarized in the following table.

**Similarities and Differences in the Description
of Etsuji Morii in the Three Books of the History of Japanese Canadians**

Source	Similarities with Other Sources	Unique Details & Differences
Ann Sunahara Chapter 3	Highlights his appointment to the Japanese Liaison Committee to work with the BCSC. Confirms his close relationship with the RCMP and his background as a Powell Street boss. Details his authoritarian tactics, the use of subordinates for enforcement, and accusations of taking bribes for road camp deferments. Notes the severe community backlash and his eventual demotion in early 1942.	Specifically identifies his opposition: Nisei leaders Kunio Shimizu and Thomas Shoyama, and the Naturalized Japanese Canadian Association (Kikajin-kai). Uniquely mentions his threat to commit harakiri if he failed to get volunteers, and notes that an October 1942 inquiry into his actions lacked supporting evidence.
Shimpo Chapter 6	Mentions his role as a 1941 registration negotiator and his formation of the Wartime Security Committee for the BCSC and RCMP. Corroborates his coercive tactics to secure road camp volunteers using martial artists (Judo Club members) for physical intimidation. Agrees on the arrogant abuse of power by his subordinates regarding deferment petitions and the resulting intense community hatred	Uniquely specifies the cruelty of his subordinates, such as screaming at a man with a heavily pregnant wife. Provides the specific outcome of his community backlash: the BCSC banished his group to the remote ghost town of Minto in May 1942 to prevent the unrest from delaying evacuations.
Ken Adachi 10	Confirms his status as an underworld figure (the eminence grise of Powell Street gambling) and his history of collaboration with the RCMP. Notes his inclusion on a government sub-committee for the 1941 registration of Japanese Canadians due to his prominent and feared status.	Focuses heavily on his pre-internment political influence, uniquely detailing his guidance of the Vancouver Jikyoku linkai to collect "comfort bags" and medical supplies for Japanese soldiers fighting in the Sino-Japanese War. Specific mention of his RCMP cooperation during a 1931 Japanese smuggling ring investigation.

4. Cameron Inquiry [4]

In 1942, the Vancouver News-Herald frequently carried articles accusing Etsuji Morii of such titles as [4]:

- "Japanese Couple Claim Morii Exacted Tribute for Release"

- “Mori Gang Terrorized Japanese School Children”
- “Japanese in Vancouver Feared Fifth Column Activity Risky”

But the Vancouver New-Herald published two front-page stories:

- 26 September 1942 — “Nippon Black Dragon Operates within B.C.”
- 9 October 1942 — Follow-up article alleging Japanese Canadians were “loath to go to Hope Camp”

These articles claimed that:

- A “Japanese Fascist-like group” was active in BC
- The group was “directly affiliated” with Japan’s Black Dragon Society
- Etsuji Morii was connected to this organization

Because these accusations touched national security and the administration of the Defence of Canada Regulations, the Minister of Justice ordered a full, impartial inquiry. This was called the Cameron Inquiry. It was the federal government’s formal investigation into the two Vancouver News-Herald articles. The structure of the inquiry was composed of:

- His Honour Judge J. C. A. Cameron as Commissioner
- *News-Herald*: Senator J.L. de B. Farris, K.C., and C.L. McAlpine, K.C.
- BC Security Commission and RCMP
- Etsuji Morii, represented by counsel A. Bull, K.C.
- Members of the Japanese Canadian Consultative Council attended but were not represented by counsel, including Jitaro Tanaka.

The inquiry opened on October 3, 1942, and concluded on November 21, 1942, and found the following:

(1) No evidence of Black Dragon Society activity

Cameron found that the newspaper’s claims were unsupported. Witnesses did not provide credible evidence that:

- A Black Dragon Society branch operated in BC
- Morii was a member or agent
- Any organized Japanese ultranationalist activity existed in the community

The inquiry concluded that the allegations were unfounded.

(2) Morii’s reputation influenced suspicion

Although the inquiry did not deny that Morii had a controversial reputation—linked to gambling, underworld influence, and community power—none of this substantiated the espionage claims. (This contextual detail comes from broader historical research, not the inquiry itself.)

(3) Newspaper reporting was irresponsible

Cameron criticized the *News-Herald* for publishing sensational allegations without evidence, especially during wartime when such claims could inflame public fear and prejudice.

The Cameron Inquiry is important because:

- It shows the gap between rumour and evidence during wartime hysteria.
- It demonstrates that even at the height of anti-Japanese sentiment, the federal government recognized the need for due process.
- It provides a rare official record that explicitly rejected the Black Dragon conspiracy narrative surrounding Japanese Canadians.

For Morii specifically, the inquiry did not rehabilitate his reputation as a boss of the Japanese Canadian community in Vancouver, but it did clear him of the most serious political/espionage accusations.

5. Etsuji Morii managed Japanese workers in a sawmill near D’Arcy, B.C., in the fall of 1947

This is the only statement about Etsuji Morii in the post-war period that I could find so far.

5.1 Morii was forced to move to Minto City in May 1942

According to Ann Sunahara, by late May of 1942, internal community criticism levelled against the Morii Committee had grown so volatile that the BCSC feared that Morii's continued presence on the coast would trigger major internal delays and jeopardize the national evacuation schedule. To neutralize this risk, the BCSC forcibly relocated Morii and his immediate group of organizers from the coastal defence zone on May 28, 1942, exiling them to the remote, abandoned mining town of Minto City in the interior of British Columbia.

5.2 A self-supporting camp at Minto City [5]

Minto City was an abandoned gold-mining town in the Lillooet region of British Columbia. By 1942, the mines had closed, and the townsite was empty. When Japanese Canadians were ordered removed from the coast, about 25 families with some savings negotiated to relocate there rather than be sent to government camps. In this region, there were other self-supporting camps, including East Lillooet, Bridge River, and McGillvray Falls. Minto City was more livable than other camps because it still had electricity, indoor plumbing, and existing houses.

At the peak, Minto City housed about 325 Japanese Canadians. Those families came from Vancouver’s Powell Street district, Kitsilano, Grandview, Marpole, Steveston, Prince Rupert, Chemainus, and Cumberland. Some residents were relatively affluent—business owners, sawmill operators, doctors, and fishing-industry leaders—while others were working-class families who nonetheless met the financial threshold for self-supporting status.

The Bridge River–Lillooet region became a small economic hub during the war because self-supporting families needed income, and the area had existing industries that could hire them. The Bridge River region was heavily forested, and logging was the primary source of paid work for Japanese Canadians in Minto and nearby self-supporting camps.

Logging work was available to Japanese Canadians because:

- The area was remote and short on labour.
- Japanese Canadians brought strong prewar experience in logging and millwork.
- Self-supporting families needed income and were allowed to work for private employers.

Logging wages were often the primary source of cash income for the families in those self-supporting camps.

5.3 A New Canadian reporter interviewed Etsuji Morii in the fall of 1947.

In the fall of 1947, Kasey Oyama, a reporter of the *New Canadian*, went to D'Arcy and interviewed Etsuji Morii. He reported this interview in the New Canadian, January 10, 1948 [8], as follows:

I took a trip up the Pacific Great Eastern Railway line for two reasons: I wanted to pay a call on Mr. Etsuji Morii, whom I had heard was operating a sawmill near D'Arcy, 83 miles up the line from Squamish. The second reason was to visit Lillooet.

I had never known Mr. Mori before, but, like everybody else, had heard much about him.

I knew he had been the most influential man in the pre-evacuation Japanese community. He was feared and respected at the same time. Many were indebted to him for different reasons. And many used to whisper about his hidden activities and his alleged connections with the RCMP.

At evacuation time, when the Japanese community disintegrated, Morii was accused of being a member of Japan's Black Dragon Society, and some Japanese appeared at the hearings to testify against Morii. But nothing was proved, and the investigations fizzled out.

I was curious about the man. I wanted to know what his plans were for the future, and what he thought of the past.

Mr. Morii is a short, slight man, about 59 or 60.

He received me cordially with perfect courtesy when I called on him and introduced myself. He is completely unassuming, and his Japanese-like humility made me feel a little awkward.

He poses in a quiet way of dignity and obstinacy. I thought I sometimes detected a steely glint in his eyes, making it easier for me to imagine him as a one-time boss and a master of the 'velvet glove' method.

I asked him point-blank what he thought about the Black Dragon investigations. He did not make any direct effort to justify himself. He described his thoughts on the matter in some detail and

concluded that he had remained in Canada since he was about 14, so he could hardly be considered eligible for membership in an exclusively oriental organization like the Black Dragon Society.

He said he intended to retain the 63-mile camp for some time.

He was training under a special contract for a large lumber mill named Devine [6]

He enjoyed Devine's confidence, and he was having a house built for him. He was getting on in years, too.

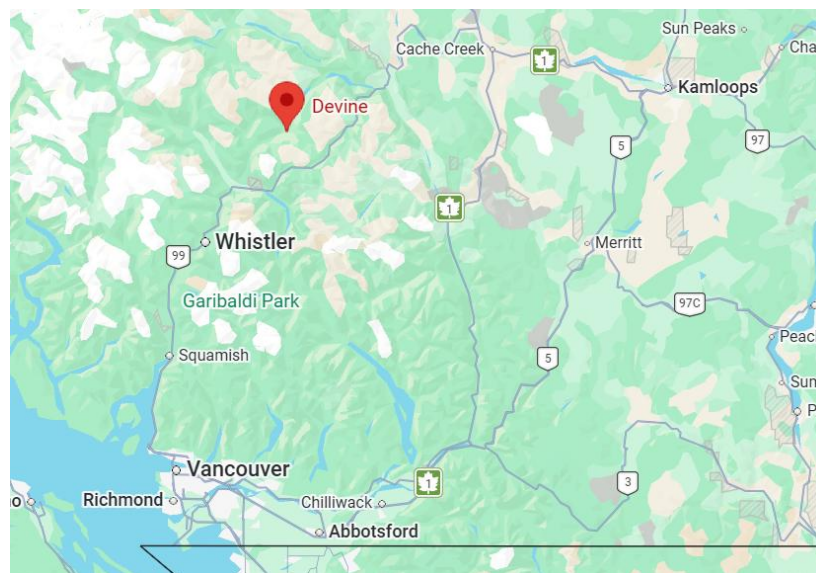
The mill, which employs about 30 Japanese in addition to local help, is efficiently operated, and there is said to be enough timber in this region to supply the mill at the present rate of operations for at least 10 years.

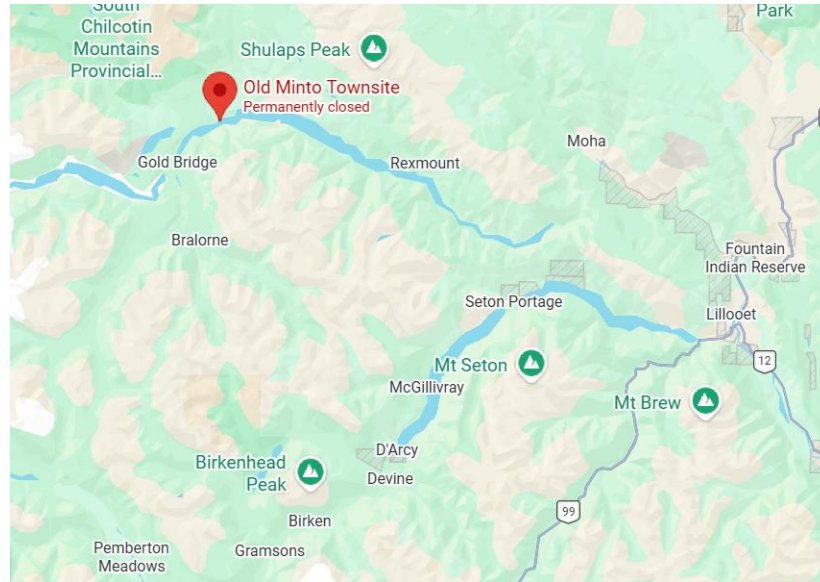
I asked Mr. Mori whether he thought someone would assume the boss's role in the postwar Japanese communities.

Mr. Mori did not think so. The important thing was that the conservative basis upon which most of the prewar Japanese community had been built was gone. It was so in Mr. Morii's case. The welfare of Japanese Canadians did not lie in the direction of maintaining a tie with Japan, but in the direction of co-operating with other Canadians, he said.

Mr. Morii said he was in favour of the Japanese Canadian Citizens' Association's (JCCA) activities.

As I took leave of Mr. Morii, I wished him well in his new venture and his new world. I believe he is not unhappy in his present work, and that he has no desire to make a comeback on the pre-war pattern. Even if he did, it would be futile since the old pattern no longer exists





5.4 Etsuji Morii and the development of judo in Vancouver

Etsuji Morii played an important but often understated role in the early development of Judo in Vancouver. Although he was neither an instructor nor a technical leader, his influence was felt through the financial and social support he provided to Shigetaka (Steve) Sasaki during the formative years of Judo in Canada. When Sasaki opened the first Canadian dojo, the Tai Iku Dojo, in 1924, the operation was modest and financially fragile, relying heavily on Sasaki's personal resources. As interest in Judo grew and the need for a larger, more sustainable training space became clear, Morii emerged as the chief benefactor who made this expansion possible. Drawing on the considerable income generated through his business ventures, including the well-known Showa Club on Powell Street, Morii provided the financial backing that allowed Sasaki to establish a second dojo in the heart of the Japanese Canadian community. His support covered essential expenses such as rent, equipment, and operational costs that would otherwise have been difficult for Sasaki to shoulder alone.

Morii was not merely a distant patron; he participated in the Judo community and appeared at public events alongside Sasaki and other community leaders, reinforcing his visibility and influence within the Powell Street district. His endorsement helped raise the profile of Judo among young Japanese Canadian men, many of whom were already within his social network. Through this combination of financial assistance and personal involvement, Morii contributed to the stabilization and growth of Judo at a time when most dojos struggled to survive. His support indirectly enabled the later spread of Judo to Steveston and other parts of British Columbia, forming part of the foundation on which the national Judo movement would eventually be built.

At the same time, Morii's involvement carried complexities. His reputation as a community strongman with ties to gambling and other underworld activities created tension among more conservative members of the Japanese Canadian community, some of whom were uneasy about Judo being associated—however indirectly—with his enterprises. These concerns were compounded by his later wartime role as head of the Japanese Canadian Liaison Committee, which further complicated his legacy. Nevertheless, in the specific context of Judo's early development in Vancouver, Morii's

contributions were significant. While Sasaki provided the vision, leadership, and technical expertise that introduced Judo to Canada, Morii supplied the material support that allowed that vision to take root and grow during its most vulnerable years.

5.5 Showa Club

The Showa Club, owned and operated by Etsuji Morii, was one of the most notorious establishments in pre-war Vancouver's Powell Street neighbourhood, functioning as an illegal gambling parlour and a central hub of Morii's influence within the Japanese Canadian community. Located in the 300 block of Powell Street, the club was widely known to authorities and residents alike as a Japanese gambling house, and it formed a major part of Morii's reputation as the "powerful leader of the Japanese underworld" in Vancouver. The Showa Club generated substantial revenue, which Morii used to consolidate his authority in the community and to support various activities, both legitimate and illicit. One example of its broader impact is that Morii used funds from the Showa Club to act as the chief benefactor of Shigetaka (Steve) Sasaki's second Judo dojo on Powell Street, providing financial stability for the early development of Judo in Canada.

The Showa Club's operations contributed to Morii's mixed and often controversial standing. While many Japanese Canadians viewed him with suspicion due to his gambling operations, alleged criminal connections, and involvement in past violent incidents, others recognized that he wielded real power and influence in the Powell Street district. Police and government reports of the era described him as a figure with connections to underground networks and as someone who exercised considerable control over community affairs. His position was further strengthened by his role in community organizations, such as the Japanese Association, where he helped establish an "emergency committee" that collected supplies and care packages for Japanese soldiers overseas—activities that were politically sensitive and sometimes conducted in defiance of export restrictions.

Within the social fabric of Powell Street, the Showa Club was part of a larger ecosystem of cafés, rooming houses, shops, and entertainment venues that made the neighbourhood a vibrant centre of Japanese Canadian life before 1942. Oral histories describe the 300 block of Powell Street as containing several gambling parlours, including the one associated with Morii, which were frequented by labourers, fishermen, and community members seeking recreation or escape from difficult economic conditions. Although the Showa Club was illegal, it was not unusual in the era; gambling houses operated semi-openly in the neighbourhood and were woven into the rhythms of daily life.

In summary, the Showa Club was more than just a gambling house—it was a key institution through which Etsuji Morii exercised economic power, social influence, and political leverage in pre-war Vancouver. Its profits helped fund community initiatives such as the expansion of Judo, while its notoriety contributed to Morii's reputation as both a benefactor and a feared underworld figure. The club's presence reflects the complexity of Powell Street's pre-war Japanese Canadian community, where legitimate cultural institutions and illicit enterprises coexisted, shaping the neighbourhood's character until the forced uprooting of 1942.

6. Letters concerning Etsuji Morii at the Nikkei National Museum

The Nikkei National Museum keeps several letters concerning Etsuji Mori. Here are some examples.

6.1 A letter from Etsuji Morii to Sutekichi Miyagawa dated February 20, 1942

February 2, 1942.

Mr. Miyagawa Sutekichi

As you know, a legal notice to evacuate the Japanese residents from the Canadian defence area is urgent.

Would like to ask the trouble to come to the Nippon Club, 382 Alexander Street, for a detailed consultation. As soon as this letter reaches you.

Sincerely yours

Masai Etsuji

Notes by Takashi Ohki

This is the only letter Etsuji Morii wrote that I could find so far. Sutekichi Miyagawa owned a confectionery/grocery store at 614 Davis Street, Vancouver.

6.2 A letter from Assistant Commissioner F.J. Mead to the Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police dated August 21, 1940 (only the first page. The second and third pages are missing.)

SECRET

S. 49.

40D 10U7-J-1.

For Personal perusal of
The Commissioner, please.

Vancouver, B.C. August 21st,
1940.

The Commissioner,
R.C.M.P. police,
Ottawa, Canada.

Here is a clean, line-by-line **OCR transcription in English** of all visible text in the uploaded image, preserving original spelling, punctuation, capitalization, and line breaks:

Sir:

Re: Japanese Situation in British Columbia.

1. Referring to our conversation on the above-noted subject: Since my arrival in Vancouver, I have thoroughly discussed this whole matter with D/Insp. Fripps and S/Cst. Henry has had three long conversations on different days with Mr. Etsuji Morii.
2. I conveyed your compliments to Mr. Morii, and he was very pleased to hear of you. He at once advised me that his services were at our disposal, assuring me that no untoward incident would happen in Canada on the part of the Japanese should hostilities develop

as a result of the strained relations now existing between Great Britain and the Japanese Empire. I should have been glad if you could have been present during these conversations as I feel sure you would have felt as both D/Inspector Fripps and I felt — that here was something tangible in the way of assurance that no trouble need be expected from the Japanese in Canada. I realize that this is a broad statement to make, at the same time I know it to be true.

3. Mr. Morii, as you know from past experience, wields a great influence in all sections of Japanese life in Canada. From what I hear, I believe this influence has increased during the years since we left British Columbia. His assurance, which he asked me to convey to you, can be set out as follows:—

(a) The Japanese of British Columbia believe that the future of themselves and their children are bound up with the fortunes of the Canadian people, and for that reason Canadian interests are their interests.

(b) Of the 23,000 Japanese resident in Canada, 12,714 are Canadian-born; 2,158 are naturalised; the remainder having been born in Japan. Note: (These figures are the result of a survey made by the Canadian-Japanese association of Canada and, although they are not as high as some figures quoted as to the population of people of Japanese blood in Canada, it is believed...

6.3 A letter from S.T. Wood, Commissioner of the Royal Canadian Mounted Police, to A. MacNamara, Associate Deputy Minister of the Department of Labour, dated June 2, 1942

Dear Mr. MacNamara,

1. The Japanese, Etsuji Morii, referred to in the correspondence forwarded with your letter of the 23rd ultimo, is not and has never been employed by this Force. His services, however, were utilized by the British Columbia Security Commission in connection with the evacuation of Japanese from the Pacific Coast.
2. During the early part of this evacuation, Morii was chairman of a small committee of elder Japanese, who acted as liaison between the Commission and the Japanese people. He was found reliable, conscientious and loyal. Some time ago, however, the Nisei (British subjects) decided to oppose his reign in the Japanese community, and to this end sought the support of the White Missionary group who have been active among the Japanese, and such other persons, including politicians, as could be used in a campaign of vilification against Morii to the point where he is now almost discredited in the Japanese community. We were warned well in advance that such a campaign would take place. Anonymous letters were written to the British Columbia Security Commission regarding him. Allegations were made that he was a gambler, that he was not a Christian, and that he was disloyal.
3. Morii is well aware of the campaign against him, and the matter has been discussed with him on many occasions. There is no evidence to support the allegations made against Morii, although it is, of course, true that he was at one time a gambler, and in this respect his past is somewhat unsavoury. The fact, however, remains that in all dealings with him by the Commission and the Police, he has been honourable and co-operative to the extreme. The

campaign includes arrangements whereby letters of an intimate nature will be addressed to Morii and posted from various points outside the protected area, so that they would not need to be examined by the Censor. These letters would indicate that the writer, who, of course, would be some fictitious person, is engaged in some subversive activities with Morii. The Commission is fully advised in this connection, and requested that the Censor be communicated with in this respect. This action has been taken. Your communication, together with enclosures, therefore, does not come as a surprise to us.

Yours very truly,

S.T.Wood

Commissioner

Footnotes

[1] Ann Sunahara, *The Politics of Racism: The Uprooting of Japanese Canadians During the Second World War*, Chapter 3 "Expulsion" (Toronto, Lames Lorimer and Company, 1981)

[2] Ken Adachi, *The Enemy That Never Was*, Chapter Eight, "A Low, Dishonest Decade" (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976)

[3] Mitsuru Shimpo (translated into English by Takashi Ohki), *As If Chased by Stones*, Chapter 6, Section III. A digital version is available on the website of the Edmonton Japanese Canadian Association. The original Japanese version was published by Tairiku Jiho Sha in Toronto in 1975.

[4] Cameron Inquiry Report by J.C. Tanaka, See Jitaro Tanaka, "Black Dragon Inquiry Report," on Takashi Ohki's website, japanesecanadians.ca

[5] A self-supporting camp at Minto City, the website of Canada's Historic Places, Mino Mine

[6] Devine, B.C. Wikipedia, "Devine, British Columbia"

Devine gets its name from a lumber mill run by Andy Devine, which employed Japanese Canadians who had been relocated from the Japanese Canadian internment to McGillivray Falls (now McGillivray), just inside the 100-mile "quarantine zone" from the British Columbia Coast. Devine was able to hire the Japanese, who were experienced loggers and millworkers from the Coast, because the area was accessible only by rail, as no road to the Coast was open until the 1960s. The post office at Devine opened in 1951 and closed in 1964. Remains of the old mill can still be found in the woods around Devine, and until recently, the old burner from Andy Devine's mill was the tallest man-made structure in the area. Devine today is a recreational community with a few year-round residents.