



Research Links

A Forum for Natural, Cultural and Social Studies

Park Prisoners

Historical Account of internment camps is more than a documentary



Photo: Glenbow Archives, Carothers Collection

Men leaving the stockade at the Castle Mountain camp, 1915



Park Prisoners: The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks, 1915-1946. by Bill Waiser

Graham MacDonald

The use of national parks as settings for internment and relief camps is a fact not well known by Canadians, even those with keen interest in park matters. Bill Waiser, Chair of the Department of History at the University of Saskatchewan, Saskatoon, is in a good position to write about the controversial topic, having worked as a public historian for Parks Canada, Winnipeg. Waiser, author of "Park Prisoners: The Untold Story of Western Canada's National Parks, 1915-1946," recalls that the idea for the book came about during a days trek around Prince Albert National Park with a group of friends in 1989. Looking for remains of the old internment camps, one of the party kept asking: "Who were these guys, Bill?" This book gives a good number of answers to that question by tracing the rise and fall of the types of camps which came under

national park administration. While there were many other internment camps spread across the country, those in the national parks of Manitoba, Saskatchewan, Alberta and British Columbia are the focal points of Waiser's book.

Waiser describes four categories of camps. Camps which fall into the first category housed so-called enemy "aliens" and were established during the First World War. The second category consists of unemployment and relief camps set up in the mid-1930s as a response to the great depression. Camps of a third kind were put in place during World War II and were called "alternate service camps" oriented towards "conscientious objectors," and the fourth type of camp housed formal prisoners of war.

The outbreak of war in 1914 became the occasion for the passage of the Aliens Registration Act, designed to identify landed immigrants working in Canada, who retained their European citizenship. Of particular concern were citizens of countries engaged in battle against Canada and the British Empire. The act most notably affected central and east European "aliens" in Canada: people of Austrian, Hungarian, German, Polish and Ukrainian background. National parks became in-

involved after General Sir William Otter approached the Commissioner of Dominion Parks, J.B. Harkin, requesting the use of parks as settings for detention camps. The two men met in 1915 in Rocky Mountain National Park (now, Banff) to make the necessary arrangements. Waiser takes us through the workings of Castle Mountain Camp and others in Yoho, Jasper and Revelstoke. The photos, many drawn from the Webster Collection of the Banff Engineering Service, indicate that much of the work on familiar sites, such as the Cave and Basin Hot Pools and the Banff-Lake Louise road, was completed by internees.

The author also addresses the depression years, when relief worker camps became familiar sites in national parks across the west, including Mount Revelstoke, Yoho, Elk Island, Prince Albert and Riding Mountain. These camps were quite different from "enemy alien" camps in origin and context. Nobody knew, in 1930, that the depression would be long and severe, but it indirectly provided the solution to Harkin's dilemma of decreasing park funds (in part, the result of the dissolving relationship between parks and the railways), — continued on page 7 —