**Relief Camps**  
**Jobless men become militant when the government shuffles them off to work in the Canadian wilderness**

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At the height of the Great Depression, thousands of jobless men were shunted off to federal relief camps in the Canadian wilderness. The camps became a focal point for a generations anger and a lasting legacy of a government's ineffectiveness during the era.

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| In 1932, the federal government set relief camps for unemployed men. The workers cleared bush, built roads, planted trees, erected public buildings in return for room, board, medical care and 20 cents a day. Pictured here, relief camp road construction at   |  | | --- | | In 1932, the federal government set relief camps for unemployed men. The workers cleared bush, built roads, planted trees, erected public buildings in return for room, board, medical care and 20 cents a day. Pictured here, relief camp road construction at Kimberly-Wasa, British Columbia. (National Archives, PA-036089) | |
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Ron Liversedge ended up in a labour camp in northern British Columbia.

"The Tory government of R.B. Bennett had decided a role for the single unemployed. They were to be hidden away to become forgotten men, the forgotten generation. How naïve of Mr. Bennett."

Like Liversedge, thousands of young, single men had few options during the economic crisis of the 1930s. Many of them criss-crossed the country by train looking for work or a decent meal.

By 1932, there were an estimated 70,000 unemployed transients. Many of the men congregated in cities and frustration was growing among their ranks.

As the number of jobless transients grew, the federal government feared they could threaten public order. Bennett's military chief, General Andy McNaughton, warned that the unemployed could launch a Communist revolt.

"In their ragged platoons, here are the prospective members of what Marx called the 'industrial reserve army, the storm troopers of the revolution.'"

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| |  | | --- | | Unemployment relief camps were located in remote areas such as northern Ontario and interior B.C. Pictured here, camp huts in Barriefield, Ontario, 1934. (National Archives of Canada, PA-035576) | |
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McNaughton suggested that the men be sent to rural relief camps where they could neither vote nor organize. The camps were voluntary, but those who resisted could be arrested for vagrancy.

Run by the Department of Defence, the camps were located in remote areas such as northern Ontario and interior B.C. The men cleared bush, built roads, planted trees, erected public buildings in return for room, board, medical care and 20 cents a day. They were paid one-tenth of what an employed labourer would make doing the same work.

While the Bennett government hoped the camps would ease the unrest, they became a focal point for the men's anger. The young men were frustrated that the government could not provide them with meaningful work.

Militancy increased in the camps.

"In those bunkhouses," Liversedge wrote, "There were more men reading Marx, Lenin and Stalin than there were reading girlie magazines."

Bennett had unwittingly provided basic training camps for the army of unemployed.

In April 1935, the men's unhappiness boiled over. Fifteen hundred men from the British Columbia relief camps went on strike and congregated in Vancouver. The move launched months of cross-country protests, which culminated in a riot in the streets of Regina.

A year later, with a change of government, the unpopular relief camps were shut down. Some of the men found temporary work but most returned to their wasted lives in the cities.

In all, 170,248 men had stayed in the camps.