

Nikkei Journey

Japanese Canadians in Southern Alberta

N. Rochelle Sato, PhD

Preface by Wendy Aitkens

Nikkei Cultural Society of Lethbridge & Area
Galt Museum and Archives

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Second printing

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Cover: The cover was designed by Rochelle Sato, using a background photo by Karyn Yamagishi (of the high level train bridge in Lethbridge, AB, the highest and longest of its kind in the world that evacuees crossed over, when entering this city.) The main photo collage has been changed from the 2005 edition, but was originally compiled and designed by Brad Brown, exhibit designer, of the Galt Museum in Lethbridge, AB (consisting of file photos from the archives, some of which are included at the back of this book).

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PREFACE TO NEW EDITION

Japanese Canadian immersion in the community of southern Alberta goes back to the days of early immigration in the early 1900s, more were evacuated to this area during the Second World War, and another significant number of new comers arrived in the 1960s and 70s. Their contributions to their new community have been celebrated in print, in museum exhibits and programs, and in a virtual exhibit.

In 2003, many members of the Japanese Canadian community worked in partnership with the Galt staff to develop an exhibition that ran for seven months. Rochelle was the Guest Curator who guided the exhibit to reflect the challenges and successes of the Issei, Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei and Hapa generations through immigration, settlement, and inclusion. The first edition of *Nikkei Journey: Japanese Canadians in Southern Alberta* grew as an extension of that exhibit.

During the years since, the Galt has been the recipient of continuing support from the Japanese Canadian community. Volunteers serve on a regular basis, movies about Japanese Canadian experiences have been hosted in the museum, significant artifacts have been donated to the Archives and Cultural History Collections, and a virtual exhibit was created.

With the financial assistance of the Department of Canadian Heritage, the Galt Museum & Archives created a virtual exhibit called *Nikkei Tapestry: Japanese Canadians in Southern Alberta*. Generously, members of the Nikkei Cultural Society, Momiji Dancer Society, students and professors from the University of Lethbridge Faculty of Fine Arts [Music and New Media], students and teachers from École Agnes Davidson School, French language translators, film maker Jeff Chiba Stearns, animator Kunal Sen, and many other individuals made the project a true community initiative. These people and organizations supported and guided the Galt staff in the

development the virtual exhibit which continued to explore the stories, events, and people from various generations of Japanese Canadians living in Southern Alberta. Their history was shared through personal stories, photographs, animated visuals, and artifacts.

Jeff Chiba Stearns generously granted permission to include his animation for 'One Big Hapa Family' called *Uncle Suey*. Kunal Sen created a new animation called *Relocation* for which local family members provided the voices and university staff and students provided the music, sound effects, and credit and title design. <http://www.virtualmuseum.ca/virtual-exhibits/exhibit/nikkei-tapestry-japanese-canadians-in-southern-alberta/>

The Galt Museum & Archives values the interest and support provided to the museum by Rochelle Sato, the Nikkei Cultural Society, and many individuals of all ages. In turn, we celebrate this book which offers a personal perspective to many of the captivating experiences of Japanese Canadians in Southern Alberta.

Wendy Aitkens, Curator
Galt Museum & Archives
Lethbridge, AB 2016

INTRODUCTION

In addition to changing my surname for this new edition of the book, as well as replacing the preface with one by a successive curator of the Galt Museum, and restyling the cover, there are no changes to the manuscript as printed in 2005, since the stories were all based on research, family stories, and memories. Nothing from history has arisen requiring changes.

However, many important events have happened since the first edition, and are continuing to occur on today's landscape in Canada, concerning anti-racism.

After reading the book, many people remarked to me that they had not known the story about Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, or that they just “took for granted” that the Canadian government was doing the “right” things. Since the Japanese Canadian Redress, however, other racist events in history have been brought to the attention of the public.

On June 23, 2006, in Toronto's *Globe and Mail*, it was reported that: Prime Minister Stephen Harper delivered a nation's regrets for "the racist actions of our past...as he formally apologized for the imposition of a punitive head tax on Chinese-Canadian immigrants between 1885 and 1923.”¹

In the early 1900s, the Japanese, Chinese, and also people from India, were collectively considered the “Yellow Peril” by White people on the West coast of Canada. Thousands of “Orientals” had been brought into the country with the express purpose of exploitation:

...to perform the maximum of labour on the minimum of sustenance...[the Oriental] lives in a hovel where a white man would sicken and die—and with it all performs...unskilled laborious tasks quite as efficiently as a white man...²

¹ <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/news/national/pm-offers-apology-symbolic-payments-for-chinese-head-tax/article711245/>. Retrieved on August 23, 2017.

² *Victoria Colonist*, June 18, 1905, cited in Ken Adachi, *The Enemy that Never Was: A history of the Japanese Canadians* (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1976), p. 65.

Being considered subhuman and “inferior peoples,” people from Asia were believed to “pose a threat to the future of the white race,” since the province of British Columbia was considered to be “a white man’s country.... an outpost of the Empire, and that outpost we have to hold against all comers.”³

Another little-known story in Canadian history is that of the ill-fated steamship, the Komagata Maru:

It is an apology more than a century in the making. Nearly 102 years after the Komagata Maru sailed into Vancouver, Prime Minister Justin Trudeau has offered a full apology in the House of Commons for the government of the day's decision to turn away the ship, which was carrying hundreds of South Asian immigrants, most of whom were Sikhs.

The Komagata Maru arrived on Canada's West Coast on May 23, 1914, anchoring in Vancouver's Coal Harbour. Nearly all of the 376 passengers were denied entry and the ship sat in the harbour for two months. It was ultimately forced to return to India and was met by British soldiers. Twenty passengers were killed and others jailed following an ensuing riot.

The Komagata Maru was a Japanese steamship chartered by wealthy Sikh businessman, Gurdit Singh, who was then living in Hong Kong. Its passage was a direct challenge to Canada's immigration rules, which had grown increasingly strict — and discriminatory — at the turn of the century.

Canada needed immigrants to cultivate western farmland but preferred those from the U.S, Britain or northern Europe. India had been a British colony for almost 200 years at this point, and Singh believed British citizens should be able to freely visit any country in the Commonwealth.⁴

Possibly one of the most salient issues today in Canada today, however, is that of the Aboriginal or First Nations peoples of what is now called Canada. The Indian Residential Schools Truth and Reconciliation

³ Vancouver *Daily Province*, September 9, 1907, cited in Adachi, p. 63.

⁴ <http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/komagata-maru-justin-trudeau-to-apologize-for-1914-incident-1.3530362>
<http://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/komagata-maru-backgrounder-apology-1.3584372>

Commission (TRC) was established on June 1, 2008, with a mandate of five years.

As a component of the Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement, the TRC was an independent body that was developed to oversee a process to provide former students and anyone who has been affected by the Indian Residential Schools legacy, with an opportunity to share their individual experiences in a safe and culturally appropriate manner.

Canada's TRC was unique from other commissions around the world in that its scope is primarily focused on the experiences of children. Its focus of research spans more than 100 years, one of the longest durations ever examined. It was also the first court-ordered truth commission to be established. As such, the court plays an ongoing role in the implementation and supervision of the commission.

Indian Residential Schools date back to the 1870's. The policy behind the government funded, church-run schools was an attempt to "kill the Indian in the child". Over 130 residential schools were located across the country, with the last one closing in 1996.

More than 150,000 First Nations, Métis and Inuit children were taken from their families and placed in these schools. Many were forbidden to speak their language and practice their own culture. Today, there are an estimated 80,000 former students still living.

While some former students had positive experiences at residential schools, many suffered emotional, physical and sexual abuse, and others died while attending these schools. The unresolved trauma suffered by former students has been passed on from generation to generation.

On June 11, 2008, the Prime Minister, on behalf of the Government of Canada, issued an apology in the House of Commons to former students, their families and communities. The apology is considered by many as a step towards reconciliation.⁵

⁵ <http://www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/index.php?p=39>

In recent writings,⁶ I have made a comparison between the “intergenerational trauma” suffered by First Nations people and Japanese Canadians, as they were both bodily victimized by blatant racist governmental edicts, the former by the residential school policies of the Indian Act, and the latter by the War Measures Act of the Second World War.

The cultural traditions of both these groups, especially concerning parenting, were significantly altered--ravaged or exacerbated--by these racist living conditions. For Aboriginal children, being ripped away from their families and communities, they were denied the normal family interactions from which they would have learned effective parenting skills, and in the vacuum thus created, once they became parents, they often perpetuated the abusive behaviours that they themselves had experienced in residential schools. For Japanese Canadians, in comparison, their families were kept together, but cultural prescriptions for humility, unpretentiousness, and self-effacement were exacerbated by the feelings of shame at being identified as Canadian “enemy aliens.”⁷ Parenting became even more severe—perhaps not physically, but emotionally and mentally--in terms of “following rules” and “keeping your head down.” In this way, Japanese Canadians have indeed become a “model minority,” however, one wonders: “At what expense?” Both cultural groups have been assaulted by the decisions of outsiders to control them, both human rights issues with long-lasting results.

In this sesquicentennial year celebrating Canada’s 150th anniversary of Confederation, I hope that my work on this book, *Nikkei Journey*, will itself be a building block in the current and future concerted efforts of all good Canadians to make right all those wrongs—no matter how well-intentioned at the time—by kindness, consideration and compassion toward any human beings in this country we call home.

"Our future, and the well-being of all our children rests with the kind of relationships we build today." - Chief Dr. Robert Joseph

N. Rochelle Sato, PhD
Devon, AB
August, 23, 2017

⁶ Moise, Mitchell & N. Rochelle Sato, *Letter to Cody: The longest journey* (Edmonton, AB: Mugo Pine Press, 2017).

⁷ <http://www.warmuseum.ca/firstworldwar/history/life-at-home-during-the-war/enemy-aliens/>.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

All the stories in this book are true, taken from books and conversations with people who have had these experiences. The stories have been put together to make composite characters, representing the generations or groups of people who make up the *Nikkei* group (people of Japanese Canadian descent) in Southern Alberta. Each story is told from the first-person perspective and reflects the style of speech that the person would use.

These are fictionalized first-person accounts, based on research and personal interviews, about actual experiences of immigrants and later generations of groups, including Redress work on behalf of Japanese Canadians. (All the names that have been used are fictional names. Any naming of an actual person has been strictly accidental and I apologize if I have named a real person, living or deceased.)

DEDICATION

This book is dedicated to my parents, Faith and Frank Sato, Niseis who were evacuated to sugar beet farms near Taber, Alberta. It is also dedicated to all the Nikkei who have connections to southern Alberta.

1

ISSEI PIONEER

Koshiro Shimazaki

I was born, Koshiro Shimazaki, in 1887 in a small village in Oshima-gun, Yamaguchi Prefecture, which is a big island off the mainland of Japan. We lived far away from any city, so people called us “hillbillies.” I was a sickly child and when I was about four years old I nearly died from diphtheria. In those days, there was no doctor nearby, but my mother was desperate to save her second son, so she took me to a neighbouring village to a lady who used to help people with sickness. This lady told my mother to take me home, give me a bath and make me drink some bathwater. Somehow I became better and from then on, my mother did her best to keep me from harm and from infection.

Even though I had been a small child, I grew very tall, and as an adult, I had large hands and feet. I had to get my sandals specially made. I was sent to school and completed high school. In those days, hardly anyone went to high school, but my parents said that I should be educated because I would have to “use my brain and not my brawn,” to make a living. Another problem came when the Russo-Japanese War started in 1905. My parents wanted to protect me and made plans to send me to Canada at age eighteen, so that I would not get conscripted.

Around that time, the village mayor had a friend who had come back from Raymond, Alberta. He was a Japanese businessman who was trying to get people to work on the railroads and farms in Canada. This man said that a wealthy man from Utah had built the Knight Sugar Factory in Raymond and he needed workers for the sugar beets. He warned us to be prepared for the bitter coldness of Canada and the terrible drinking water of Raymond. I thought I could endure what other people could. So it was settled that I would go to Canada.

I left with a hundred other men on the ship, *Mexico*, in January 1906 and we reached Victoria after three weeks. We stayed one night in Victoria and then moved on to Vancouver, where we disembarked and took the train for Alberta. The vast snow-covered prairies overwhelmed me. I had never seen so much land or so much snow. We transferred to another train in Calgary and arrived in Lethbridge, after crossing a high metal bridge. Then we went to Raymond by wagon.

When we arrived in Raymond, all of us men stopped at the McCarty Hotel boarding house where we were fed in shifts. We ate food that seemed very strange at the time, roast beef with mashed potatoes and homemade bread. Then we were divided into three groups and housed in three large tents, where we spent a very cold winter. I had been warned about the cold in the winter, but nobody mentioned the terrible heat in the summer. There were no trees to shade us and as we worked in the fields, the sun was almost unbearable as it beat down on us. But I gained valuable experience in farming methods and when the Raymond sugar factory closed at the beginning of World War I in 1914, we had the option of staying and working the land, or leaving to find something else to do. So I decided to strike out on my own in farming.

I couldn't borrow money from the bank because I had no collateral and no witness. But I was able to borrow some grain seeds from the local storekeeper, Mr. Green, with the understanding that I would return the seeds with my new crop. It took many long hours of hard work, and all done by hand, but somehow I was able to save a small amount of money and rent more land. Then one year, the price of grain went up and I was able to buy some land south of Raymond on the Milk River Ridge, where I grew mainly wheat, oats, and barley.

Some time later, I decided that it was time for me to have a wife and family to help with my new farm. I sent a letter back to my village in Japan to see if my parents could find anyone who would want to come to Canada to join me. In a few months, I got a letter back with a picture of the woman I was to marry. Hiro Komatsu was plain-looking, but she looked like she could be a hard worker, so I sent word back that we should be married and it became official when her name was entered into my family register in Japan.

Some months later in the springtime, I got word that I could pick up my new wife in Victoria, B.C. It was a long trip. I had to take a train from Lethbridge to Calgary, and from Calgary to Vancouver, and then take a ferry to Victoria. I had to wait six hours in Vancouver before getting the ferry. I was staying in the New World Hotel on Powell Street and there was a movie theatre on the same street. I had never been to a movie before, so I decided to use up my time at the movie house. I paid the admission and could not take my eyes off the screen. I had never seen moving pictures of people before. When the show was over, I thought there was enough time, so I decided to stay longer and see it again. But when I finally came out of the dark theatre, it was past six o'clock and I

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