The Japanese-Canadian Community in Pre-World War II Kitsilano

Yoko Urata

Japanese Language School
photo credit: BC Heritage Japanese Canadian Map

There was a Japanese-Canadian community in Kitsilano between 1904 and 1942. In 1941 about 1,000 Japanese-Canadians were in Kitsilano, which made it the second-largest Japanese-Canadian community in the City of Vancouver. The community included Japanese-operated grocery stores, barber shops, bath houses, a tofu maker, a shoemaker, a Buddhist temple, and a Christian church. Frank Moritsugu, a journalist born in 1922, recalls his childhood in Kitsilano: he attended kindergarten at the Church of the Ascension Japanese Anglican Church, and then Henry Hudson School, followed by Kitsilano High School. In addition, he attended Japanese language school daily, played baseball, and practiced judo.

The community grew as lumber and mill workers moved to Kitsilano. In the early 20th century there were several mills along False Creek, the largest being the Rat Portage Sawmill close to Kitsilano. Groups of men who had lived in the same prefecture in Japan worked together, and lived in boarding houses near the

KI - CHI - RANO
1941
(pre war JC community)

Kobayashi 1519
Yamamura 1529
Tsuji 1533
Sato, K 1537
Kadonagu 1547
Imperial sign — Cabins 1593

1520 Sarada
1540 Shujinodaira Sato, K
1548 Masuda

1589 Okada

Fir Street

1600 Empire Metal Works
Singh 1627
Tatsumi 1627½
1630 Christie Truck & Car Parts — (Grocery) Tsuji 1633
Adachi 1635
Grindley 1641
Canada Ice 1641
(Conf) Kimura M 1649
1650 Birch & Co
Bombay Trading 1657
Rear Cabins 1661
(Barber) Obayashi T 1661
Rear Cabins 1661
Obayashi F 1661
1668 Tahara K.
1672 Japanese Language School — Nishizaki B 1673
1672 Tasaka K — Akada S (rear) 1673
Kuromi M 1677
1684 Kitsilano Buddhist Church — Masaki 1677, Terada Y 1677½
Ebata Mrs E 1687

1606 Sumi Y (built by JC)
1616 Tanaka
1616 Kurahara
1616 Kitasaka
1616 Kawata
1616 Saga
1616 Umemoto
1618 Tsuji
1618 Yagi K (built by JC)
1618 Kashima
1618 Kimura
1622 Omoto
1632 Sakaguchi S
1638 Orientals
1642 Watanabe (rear grocers)
1642 Sumi H
1646 Orientals
1652 Omoto T
1652 Mura (rear)
1658 Nishimura H (built by JC)
1658 Takenoke, S
1658 Adachi Y
1662 Murakami H
1668 Orientals
1672 Yoshida K
1674 Orientals
1684 Katchi, R
1692 Orientals
Third Ave Service Stn 1603
Tsuji T 1613
Saito S 1618
Ohashi S 1617
Takahashi K 1621
Triangle Parts 1635
Buchanan 1657
Triangle Eqpt & Truck Parts 1669
Jacksan 1679
Isherwood 1695

Hamada 1935
1600 Paul
1610 Dempster
Kadonga 1602
Adachi 1612
1618 Nakamura E
1624 Insecticide Shop
1638 Assic Drycleaners
1650 Case
1662 Inglis
1668 Cain / Whittaker
1672 Taylor / Cook / Coupon
Omoto 1674
1676 Peerless lunchroom
Nagani, K 1684
OK Taxi
Matsushita 1694
Sakata
Pine dressmaker
1698 Peerless lady lunchroom

1607 Holta
1607 Oriental

1600

Lumber Yard for wood and chips

Kobayashi
Omura, K 1720
Maeda, T

Pine Street

Wakabayashi 1805
Yamada 1815

Umeda Towel & Linen 1919
Peerless Laundry 1955

W 1st Avenue

1700
1706 National Biscuit
Woo, J 1703
Wells 1707
Sando 1711
1718 Omura, K
1720 Maeda, T
E. Indian Mission 1717
Takashima T 1723
1732 Dutch Painting
Yabuki, S 1733
Yakura 1737
1738 Bennett
Saga S 1737
1742 Yamamoto T
Hayakawa M 1743
1748 Nakashiba K
Imata S 1747
1752 Barber
1758 Moritsugu M
Singh 1763
Adachi, Y 1767
1772 Sinker
1776 Murphy
Dryland Wood Yard 1786
1780 Dempster
NW Wood 1785

1700

Armot

W 2nd Avenue

1701 Japanese Church Pt Ascension (Rev Nakayama)
H Hayashi 1701
1718 Yamada Mrs K
1720 Murata Y
1722 Singh
Cooper 1723
1726 Murata T
Singh 1733
1742 Orientals
1746 Fujita I
Kobai 1747
1752 Nagami T
Kohara 1751
Tsuji T 1755
Orientals 1755
1762 Perth Drycleaning
Boston (G.P.) 1763
Copeland 1767
1774 Yasui Mrs K
Dewyn 1775
Martin 1777
1782 Nakamura S
1784 Greenwood Canoe Co
Waters 1785
1798 Ito Mrs K

W 3rd Avenue

1712 Tokaira, U
1718 Yamada Mrs K
1720 Day, D
Master cleaners 1758
1760 Kitsilano lady
1760 Orientals
1762 Orientals
1776 Singh, P
1776 Big Chief Woodyard
Orientals 1772
1780 Waters

W 4th Avenue

Kitsilano map credit: Nikkei National Museum

mills. Prefectural associations (membership clubs) were very important to Issei;[1] Japanese immigrants from the same prefecture (or village) spoke the same dialect, provided emotional support to one another, and helped newcomers find work.

Frank Moritsugu's father emigrated from Tottori Prefecture. Recruited by another man from Tottori, Frank's father worked in the pulp mill on Vancouver Island before coming to Vancouver with his family. Then Frank's father was hired as a gardener and moved to Kitsilano, where he was closer to his customers as well as to other families from Tottori.

The Vancouver Japanese National School, founded in 1906, is the oldest in Canada; the Kitsilano Japanese Language School was founded in 1916. It functioned as a school and also as a community centre. People gathered at the school for meetings, to practice the language, and for entertainment. There was a judo hall, which Issei fathers built, in the basement. Every day after public school, children went to the Japanese language school for an hour and a half. In 1940 there were 240 students at the school.

The education of Nisei[2] was always an important matter for Japanese parents. Most of those who had immigrated were not fluent in English, so children needed Japanese language skills to communicate with their parents, and to help their parents communicate with the larger society. Moreover, parents also valued the ethics and manners taught in Japanese school. From the early 1900s to the early 1920s, children were taught the full Japanese curriculum, by qualified teachers from Japan. As more and more people decided to stay in Canada, curriculum became a major issue. Some parents pointed out that finishing Japanese school did not prepare children for Canadian high school: children lacked English skills. Because discrimination against the Japanese was prevalent in BC, parents also felt that children needed an education in Japanese language and ethics to feel a sense of pride in their heritage, and to overcome the hardships they would face.

In 1919 the Vancouver Japanese National School principal announced a new policy: children should attend their local public school, before attending Japanese language school after public school hours. Along with the policy, the school also changed its name to the Vancouver Japanese Language School (as it is still known). In a few years, all the students of the Vancouver Japanese Language School were also attending public school. Other smaller Japanese schools followed suit.

As language schools were not required to fulfill the standards set by the Japanese Ministry of Education (regarding teacher qualification), it became easier to found these schools: now children in small towns could also take

1 Japanese-born first generation immigrants.

2 The second generation born in the new country to Japanese-born immigrant parents.

Japanese language lessons. In 1941 in British Columbia, there were 51 Japanese language schools, with a total of 3,966 students (up from seven Japanese language schools, and 506 students, in 1920).

Children were Canadianized through public school education: they were taught principles of democracy and fair play. Nisei were told to assimilate to become Canadians; however, when they did, they were not accepted by the larger society.

Discriminatory laws in pre-war BC deprived Nisei of civil rights and job opportunities. Even well-educated Nisei had difficulty finding jobs. Thomas Shoyama, who later became a prominent public servant, graduated from UBC with degrees in economics and commerce with honours. He could not, however, find a job. Shoyama worked at a saw mill and then became the editor of the Japanese-Canadian English newspaper *The New Canadian* in 1939. The newspaper targeted a Nisei readership, and disseminated knowledge of issues relating to their civil rights as Canadians.

On December 7, 1941, as Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, Canada declared war against Japan. The first Japanese-Canadians to be arrested were community leaders, Japanese language teachers, and martial arts specialists. All the Japanese language schools were closed. With the exercise of the War Measures Act, all persons of Japanese origin, regardless of citizenship, were treated as enemy aliens. In 1941 roughly 75% of Japanese-Canadians were Canadian citizens, born or naturalized in Canada. In 1942, about 21,000 people of Japanese origin living in the 100-mile coastal zone were uprooted from their homes.

Frank Moritsugu's father was sent to the Yellowhead work camp in early 1942. In March 1942, Frank's mother and his six younger siblings were sent to Tashme detention camp to join his father, who had been moved there from the work camp. Frank was sent to Yard Creek work camp in April 1942 and worked there for 16 months, until August 1943. One of Frank's brothers was also sent to Yard Creek. In August 1943 Frank moved to Kaslo, as he had been invited to work for *The New Canadian*. Frank worked there for seven months until around March 1944, when he moved to St. Thomas, Ontario—where the rest of his family had moved—and started working on a farm. The federal dispersal policy was gradually pushing Japanese-Canadians to resettle east of the Rockies. Frank volunteered for the Canadian Army in early 1945, when Japanese-Canadians became eligible to enlist. He was sent to India to train as a Japanese-language interpreter for the British counter-intelligence forces.

The federal government continued its dispersal policy even after the war. In 1946, 4,000 people were deported to Japan. It was 1949 when BC enfranchised Japanese-Canadians, and they regained freedom of movement. Some people came back to BC; others started a new life outside BC. Some could not come

back even if they wanted to: the federal government had sold their property without the owners' consent.

In 1977, a celebration was held for the 100th anniversary of the beginnings of Japanese-Canadian immigration to Canada. As Japanese-Canadians gathered on Powell Street, where Japantown used to be, many of those who had been scattered, and had remained silent, came out and met one another.

Through the tireless efforts of the leaders of the Japanese-Canadian community, a redress agreement with the federal government was achieved in 1988. The redress, which included an apology and compensation for the Japanese-Canadians who suffered injustices in war time, reflected Canada's overall commitment to human rights.

Though today there is no Japantown in Vancouver, the Japanese-Canadian networks and cultural activities remain. In July 2016, Heritage BC launched the Japanese-Canadian Historic Places Recognition Project, and in April 2017 fifty-six historic sites were officially recognized by the province. Included in the sites were the Japanese Church of the Ascension and the Kitsilano Japanese Language School. Today, the Nikkei National Museum & Cultural Centre offers a walking tour of Kitsilano. No Japanese buildings or artefacts from the pre-WWII era remain, but stories, photos, and the map of "Ki-chi-rano" (see page 38) recall the days of the vibrant Japanese community that once lived there.

Church of the Ascension photo credit: BC Heritage Japanese Canadian Map