



Nikkei Images

Volume 1 Number 3

ISSN #1203-9047

July 1996

Newsletter of the Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society, Vancouver, British Columbia

Exhibition Projects Take Shape



Sewing school in Vancouver, circa 1920. As Midge Ayukawa discusses in this issue, Western Sewing (Yōsai) was an important cultural tradition in the Japanese Canadian community. The JCNMAS has a display about sewing schools at this year's Powell Street Festival. We have little information at present about the people in this photograph, and would welcome input from readers. *Ken and Rose Kutsukake Collection; JCNMAS 94/70.006.*

In our first issue, we introduced readers to the new Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society and its plans for a permanent facility dedicated to the history and culture of all Japanese Canadians. The museum and archives will be located within the National Nikkei Heritage Centre, soon to be built in Burnaby, B.C., as part of the Nikkei Place development.

Although construction of the

NNHC has yet to begin, it is already time to start the process of exhibit planning and design. A considerable amount of lead time is required before a major exhibition can become a reality. The JCNMAS has recently taken several strong steps in that direction. The archives facility is already operating at our temporary offices on Broadway in Vancouver, and we are in the final stages of arranging for off-site museum storage and preparation space. We have already established certain themes as

particularly important for early exhibitions, as well as others that will guide our collections development and research. We have brought in additional staff as well as volunteers to take charge of specific projects. Susan Michi Sirovyak has joined our staff as Curator of Collections, and Naomi Sawada has joined us as Curator of Programs.

The "Unearthed from the Silence" project, conducted together

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Nikkei Images is published
quarterly by the Japanese Canadian
National Museum & Archives Society

Volume 1, No. 3
July, 1996

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From the editor

The JCNMAS is approaching its first annual meeting, as awareness of the society spreads through the community. In *Nikkei Images* we have been able to describe for readers the background of Japanese Canadian history, the potential for exciting research projects, and our plans for exhibition projects.

The Board and committees are working on policies concerning collections management, conservation practices, relationships with other institutions, and so on. At times the process seems endless, but the planning will save countless hours in the future. Although the permanent facility is not yet built, our museum and archives are a reality here and now. Researchers are regularly visiting the archives, museum collections are growing, and temporary displays are being created for meetings and festivals. In coming issues of *Nikkei Images* we will explain our policies and procedures to readers, to show how a new institution comes into being.

We offer special thanks to Midge Ayukawa for her interesting article, written while she was also working hard on her doctoral dissertation. We welcome submissions — articles, responses, or news items!

The Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society gratefully acknowledges the support and financial assistance of members, donors, volunteers, the Japanese Canadian Redress Foundation, the National Association of Japanese Canadians, the Japanese Canadian Citizens Association of Greater Vancouver, the British Columbia Community Archives Assistance Program, the B.C. Heritage Trust, the B.C. Gaming Commission, the Young Canada Works program, and Human Resources Development Canada, Summer Career Placements program.

The Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society is a non-profit society dedicated to the creation and direction of the Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives. The Society has a board of directors (see page 7) and four working committees. The committee membership is as follows:

- (1) **Advocacy:** Yosh Kariatsumari and Suzi Nitta Petersen (co-chairs), Minnie Hattori, Eric Sokugawa, Mary Seki, Norm Tsuyuki, and Frank Kamiya;
- (2) **Program:** Eric Sokugawa (chair), Frank Kamiya, Lana Panko, Minnie Hattori, Bev Inouye, Naomi Sawada, Judy Inouye, Susan Sirovyak, and Pearl Williams;
- (3) **Human Resources:** Wes Fujiwara and Norm Tsuyuki (co-chairs), Naomi Sawada, Mary Seki, Pearl Williams, Minnie Hattori, David Yamaura, and Frank Kamiya;
- (4) **Finance:** Ray Ota (chair), Norm Tsuyuki, Judy Inouye, Suzi Nitta Petersen, and Frank Kamiya.

The Society has seven employees:

Michael C. Wilson, Project Director
Shane A. Foster, Archivist and Archives Program Coordinator
Susan Michi Sirovyak, Curator of Collections
Naomi Sawada, Curator of Programs
Minnie Hattori, Office Assistant
Wilf Lim and Tracy LaRose, Summer Project Assistants

Yōsai (Western Sewing)

by

Midge Ayukawa

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University of Victoria,
Victoria, B.C. V8W 3P4*

The coming Powell Street Festival JCNMAS display has aroused an interest in Yōsai (Western Sewing). Many of us "older" Nikkei women who recall some of the vibrant life around pre-war Powell Street are well aware of the vital part that Yōsai played in that era. There were a number of sewing schools that taught pattern drafting, fitting and sewing, as well as tailoring. One name especially comes to mind — the Kita School. It was located on the corner of Jackson and Cordova Streets, across from Powell Grounds (Oppenheimer Park).

Where did Yōsai originate? These schools in Vancouver existed even in the 1910s. Since the teachers had come from Japan, it can be concluded that the method had been learned in Japan. Thus, some enterprising person had likely studied it in Europe or North America and adapted it in Japan. I recently consulted a friend who had been born in Kobe in the late 1920s to see if she could provide some information. Her mother was Japanese, and her father German. In 1900 her father had introduced the first Singer sewing machine (she believed it was a New York company) for sale in Japan. Her mother had been his demonstrator and had also studied Yōsai during that period. In the pre-war period in Japan, my friend said Yōsai and flower arrangement were considered necessary marriage preparations for young women.



The late Mrs. Haruko Kobayakawa at her sewing machine. Mrs. Kobayakawa was accomplished in sewing and trained many other women. She went to Japan in 1940 and, forced to stay because of the war, established a successful sewing school in Itami. She returned to Canada in 1947 and worked as a designer for a fur company. *JCNMAS, Kobayakawa Fonds; 95/146.8.*

The method of pattern drafting involved specially designed wooden squares, rulers and curves. With a few basic body measurements, a pattern was drawn up and laid out, the pieces cut out, and a well-fitted garment could be sewn. A few years ago I interviewed an

Issei woman who had studied sewing and tailoring for two years, in 1926 and 1927, from a Mrs. Nagata on Jackson Street. She and her husband later operated a drycleaning and alterations business in the West End. Another young woman studied sewing before

she was married in 1916, so clearly such schools existed even as early as the 1910s.

For centuries, in Japan, one of the basic skills that a young woman had to have before marriage, no matter how humble the home, was the ability to sew a kimono. In the rural areas, many started with the raw silk or cotton, made the thread, and dyed and wove the cloth also. With the Meiji Restoration and the introduction of Western style clothes, Yōsai often also became a necessary preparation for marriage.

In Canada, too, this tradition was continued. The ability to draft patterns and to sew was considered by many to be a necessary skill for a bride. The many successful drycleaning and pressing businesses that Nikkei ran in urban areas depended also on the alterations, repairs and dressmaking that were a significant part of these enterprises. Young women who could participate in this end of the service were desirable brides.

Many Nisei girls in the 1920s and 1930s attended sewing schools rather than high schools. Because Japanese girls were rarely hired by white businesses, this was considered to be much more practical. Economy, and the difficulty of obtaining a proper fit from purchased clothing, necessitated sewing one's own clothes. I recall an Issei woman in my neighbourhood whose dresses were all of the same style. She just varied the fabrics. My mother had an ingenious way of sewing my dresses so that the waist-line as well as the hem could be let down as I grew!

In the ghost-towns during the war, everyone sewed, it seemed. Otherwise, with only Eaton's and Simpson's catalogues from which to purchase dresses, everyone would have been dressed alike! Every centre had a number of sewing schools. Some husbands became the cooks and child-care givers while their wives taught

sewing. As before, many young women attended sewing school rather than high schools in these camps.

With the closure of the camps and dispersal of the Japanese Canadians across Canada, there were a few sewing schools that started up again. The Marietta School of Costume Design in Toronto comes to mind. A number of young women made good use of their expertise by becoming dress-designers and pattern drafters in clothing manufacturing establishments.

In that immediate post-war period, the years of training required to learn Yōsai made it impractical, and its popularity waned. Instead, even young teenagers learned to use McCall, Butterick and Simplicity patterns to sew their own clothes. Issei mothers who had sewing skills were most helpful in making sure that the clothes fit! As these girls became wives and mothers, driven by economic necessity and

creative impulses, they continued to sew shirts, trousers, dresses, and even coats and jackets for their family members. I recall buying yards of material at the \$1.00 per yard fabric sales at O'Gilvy's in Ottawa and sewing identical dresses for myself and my three daughters, and even matching shirts and shorts for all my children. (Some of my children have since then dared to tell me that those identical outfits were not *really* appreciated!) I am sure that many Sansei and Yonsei also sew using commercial patterns, but I wonder how many can draft their own?

Michiko (Midge) Ayukawa is a Nisei who experienced the Internment. After a career as a chemist, she returned to university and is working on her doctorate in History at the University of Victoria. She has written several articles about Japanese Canadian history and particularly about women's issues.



Japanese Canadian internees at newly constructed home, Slocan area, B.C., ca. 1942. Life in the internment camps was austere and careful attention was paid to the sewing and mending of clothing. In this environment, the sewing schools continued to flourish. JCNMAS, Alec Eastwood Collection; 94/69.4.16.

Exhibition Projects Take Shape

(Continued from page 1)

with the Richmond Museum and Britannia Heritage Shipyard, was introduced in the second issue of *Nikkei Images*. The project will interpret excavated Japanese Canadian artifacts from the Shipyard area, in Steveston (Richmond), B.C. The artifacts illustrate the themes of community development and wartime displacement, with Steveston serving as a "case history" for events that affected the entire west coast Japanese Canadian community. This project will produce a travelling exhibition that will be available to interested museums across Canada and in other countries, with the Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives as home base.

In this issue of *Nikkei Images*, we introduce the theme of Western Sewing (Yosai) and the story of the sewing schools that were an important community institution for much of the present century. The temporary exhibition, "Our Mothers' Patterns," is being created for the 1996 Powell Street Festival by Susan Michi Sirovyak, Naomi Sawada, Minnie Hattori, Suzi Nitta Petersen and volunteer assistants. This exhibition, which will lead to other related projects, includes a variety of artifacts, historical photographs and text from interviews relating to the sewing schools. There will also be a fashion show using Mary Ohara's collection of fashions from the 1930s to the 1950s. Historian Midge Ayukawa has provided an accompanying article that appears in this issue. "Our Mothers' Patterns" has Powell Street Festival as its immediate goal, but documentation of the role and accomplishments of Japanese Canadian women is a major thematic concern of the JCNMAS. Only in the past few decades have museums begun to acknowledge the extent to which women's history is underrepresented in artifact collections and especially in interpretive exhibits.

Planning an Exhibition Project

An exhibit is a "thing" on show, but an exhibition is an *event*. As such, it requires a great deal of prior planning and research. Consideration in both areas must be paid not only to the knowledge and interest of museum staff and exhibition planners, but also to the interests and concerns of the intended audience. Communication is the essence of exhibition, so the audience is just as important as are the artifacts and documents. Many well-intentioned exhibitions have failed or have been ineffective because they were not communicated properly to their audiences. Audiences may simply miss the point of a poorly scripted exhibit, or sometimes can be offended by an unintended message.

The goals and objectives of the JCNMAS are too broad and complex to be entirely addressed in one display. An effective exhibition must have its own clearly stated, more specific goals and objectives. It will focus on a selected theme for interpretation, such as internment, boat-building, berry farming, sewing schools, military service, or a specific community. But even this requires that we undertake additional focusing, because these themes remain broad. An exhibition will therefore have subsidiary themes selected to catch the viewer's interest and to make best use of available artifacts, documents, and the expertise of the project team. For example, sewing schools were the "accepted" educational path for a large number of Japanese Canadian women as a result of traditional gender-based division of labour, to which was added the limitations placed by Canadian society upon opportunities for minority groups. Dressmaking and alterations were widely accepted, though stereotyped, roles for Japanese Canadian women for several decades. These constraints, then, could become an exhibition sub-theme, documenting the inequality that existed. A second sub-theme might examine how the schools became an

accepted "network" for women in the Japanese Canadian community, to the extent that some older women still trace relationships through the schools. This sub-theme would emphasize the adaptability of the community in the face of unequal opportunities.

Every reader has a slightly different view of a subject such as this, and the overall theme can be interpreted through many sub-themes. Once the main and subordinate themes have been selected, it is still necessary for the exhibition team to develop a series of "story lines." A novel requires not only a subject but also characters and a plot, and for an exhibition the story lines similarly provide "characters and plot." Specific artifacts are available to be used, and a specific anecdote can bring life to a selected theme. An exhibition planning team will often go to the extent of creating cartoon-like "story boards," just as are created in the early development of a movie, to mock up or model their ideas around the available display materials. Attention must always be paid to the intended audience — how, specifically, do we want them to react?

There is constant feedback, of course, between collection and exhibition. The plans that are developed by the team will be shaped by what is available in the collection; in return, the team will be trying to find additional artifacts, documents, and photographs in the community. Material for the exhibition need not always be owned by the museum; artifacts may be borrowed from members of the community or from other museums for the duration of the exhibition and then returned to their owners. The JCNMAS hopes to build a significant and representative collection of artifacts relating to Japanese Canadian history and culture, but will also become involved in a network of cooperating institutions working on joint projects and sharing access to relevant collections.

At about this point in exhibition development, attention must turn from primary research and accumulation of information to the selection of specific exhibit techniques. Ideas can be exciting, but for an exhibition they must be converted into three-dimensional reality. In a large museum, this is where a project is turned over from the research/story team to an exhibit design team. Even if the team remains with the same personnel, as in most smaller museum settings, the questions change. What is actually feasible, given the limitations of the display area? How much space is available, and what is its shape? What kind of lighting will be available? How well controlled is the environment within which the artifacts will be displayed? How much money will we have, and what are the abilities and experience of the project team? A scale model may be made of the planned exhibits, so that some of the logistical problems can be worked out.

Evaluation is an ongoing process in exhibition development. Story lines can be tried out in small-scale trial exhibits, and audiences can be invited to give feedback. Questionnaires can be used, and the project team must meet regularly to compare notes and evaluate progress. It is always instructive to find out how long people will actually pause before a specific exhibit. Time spent at a particular "station" is usually measured in seconds, not minutes — so written text must be brief and to the point. To increase the effectiveness of an exhibition, it is important to plan related activities that supplement the information and extend the amount of contact time. The fashion show planned for Powell Street Festival in conjunction with "Our Mothers' Patterns" is a good example of such parallel programming.

From the foregoing, it is clear that by the time the exhibit cases are being assembled and filled for display, a considerable amount of effort has already gone into the development of

the exhibition. The planning process should be adequate so that there are relatively few "ugly surprises" — when cases are too wide to go through doors, colours clash unexpectedly, shadows fall in the wrong places, key names are misspelled, or maps are upside down. The audience preparation should also, on opening day, protect the museum team from (or prepare them for) an audience reaction of rage, offense, or (worst of all) indifference.

In Closing, a Reflection and an Invitation

When I was a child, first visiting museums, I saw them only as containers of objects. Basically, I saw fancy display cases full of interesting objects. I assumed that the cases would stay much the same, but that the objects would be changed from time to time. I did not think much about what had gone on behind the scenes, or about the planning that had gone into the message that I received from the objects on display. I created my own "museum" of rocks and fossils on shelves. There were few labels, because I already knew the "message," and the objects collected a disturbing amount of dust.

Later, as a university student and as a museum worker, I encountered the other world behind the display cases. I realized that in the big museums the space behind the scenes was — and needed to be — larger than the space occupied by the displays. Conservation and preparation areas, collections storage areas, and display construction areas are all exciting places in their own ways. In some museums, such as Alberta's Tyrrell Museum of Palaeontology, windows allow visitors to see into the specimen preparation lab — so that the museum workers have themselves become one of the most interesting and popular exhibits.

I also realized, to my great regret, that there are indeed museums where

the size and shape of the cases do determine the nature of the exhibit. I have visited local museums and private museums, too, where the interests of the audience are of little concern; instead, the museum curator has a particular personal "message" that will be delivered, come what may. The goal of a private collector may be to educate others, but sometimes it is simply to impress people with the "completeness" or "uniqueness" of a collection. In education, these are matters of secondary importance. Once I realized this, I dusted off my childhood collection, labelled what was worthwhile, and donated the specimens to a university teaching collection.

The Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society is seeking public input at all phases of our development. We are conducting discussions with colleagues and community members to allow the development of an effective, entertaining educational program that will appeal to as broad an audience as possible.

You do not have to be a member to contribute to the development of our program; ideas and suggestions are always welcome. But we especially welcome new members, and we are extremely grateful for the contributions — in money, materials, and volunteer service — that have already been made to help us on our way. As a society, we are so young, but with tentative steps we are walking on our own. We have ideas and plans, but we are eager for more. Please join us!

Michael C. Wilson

Dr. Michael Wilson is project director of the JCNMAS. He grew up in southern Alberta and received his doctorate in Archaeology in 1981 from the University of Calgary. He has taught at universities in Canada, Japan, and China; and has worked at museums in Canada and the United States.

More on Those Photos

Several people have asked if the train photograph in issue #1 of *Nikkei Images* could in fact be a picture from the interior (Slocan) rather than Vancouver. We wondered too, but the associated information indicates Vancouver. It was also suggested that this might be a repatriation (early post-war) train. However, the photograph appeared in a B.C. Security Commission report for 1942 and therefore is properly dated. It appeared in the report as one of a pair, the other being a photograph from an internment camp. The two photos are set up on the page as "departure" and "arrival" scenes. We'll try to identify the hillsides in the background to pin down the Vancouver locality more closely. *MCW.*

Events Calendar

August 3-4. Powell Street Festival, Oppenheimer Park (Powell Street Grounds), Vancouver, B.C. For details: PSF Society, #450 - 1050 Alberni St., Vancouver, BC V6E 1A3. ph. (604) 682-4335.

August 23-25. Rendezvous '96, Manitoba JCCA 50th Anniversary Reunion, Winnipeg, MB. For details: MJCCA, 180 McPhillips St., Winnipeg, MB R3E 2J8. ph. (204) 774-5909.

Sept. 15. Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society, Annual General Meeting. For details: JCNMAS, 511 East Broadway, Vancouver, B.C. V5T 1X4. ph. (604) 874-8090/fax (604) 874-8164. Details will be mailed to members.

If you are planning an event related to the history or culture of Japanese Canadians, or to the development and betterment of museums and archives, please send us the details!

1995-96 Directors



Your 1995-1996 Board of Directors, photographed at Christmas party, December, 1995. *Front row, left to right: Eric Sokugawa and Frank Kamiya. Middle row: Suzi Nitta Petersen, Judy Inouye, Mary Seki, and Ray Ota. Back row: Wes Fujiwara, Yosh Kariatsumari, and Norm Tsuyuki. Not in picture: Art Miki (Winnipeg) and David Fujiwara (Toronto).*

Would you like to be a volunteer?

The Japanese Canadian National Museum & Archives Society is looking for enthusiastic volunteers. You can assist in the development of our program and facilities, as we look forward to the construction of our permanent home in the National Nikkei Heritage Centre, in Burnaby. The Museum and Archives will build upon collections of photographs, documents, oral history tapes, and artifacts to produce exhibits, publications, and other projects relating to Japanese Canadian cultural heritage.

As a volunteer, you could help to organize fund-raising activities, undertake archival work, translate documents, catalogue and describe artifacts, assist with office operations, help to plan and set up exhibits, or perform other duties.

Help us to continue toward our target of an important public facility. A time commitment of just a few hours can make a big difference!

For further information, please contact us at (604) 874-8090 in Vancouver.

New Founding Members
(May to July, 1996)
**Japanese Canadian National
Museum & Archives Society**

Mr. Alfred Kamitakahara
Ms. Florence Mitani
Mr. and Mrs. Tatsuo and Michi
Saito

New Financial Donors
(May to July 1996)

We gratefully acknowledge generous financial donations from these individuals:

Drs. Wesley and Misao (Yoneyama)
Fujiwara
Kami Insurance Agencies Inc.
(Mr. Alfred Kamitakahara)
Ms. Rose Murakami
Mr. Ray Ota
Mr. and Mrs. Harold and Donna
Takayesu

Do you have a used but serviceable 386 or better computer that you would be willing to donate to the JCNMAS? Or a jet printer? If so, we would like to hear from you. With our staff expanding, the demands upon our computers are steadily increasing.

If we have missed any members or donors, please contact us so we can make amends!

Nominations Welcome

In preparation for the annual meeting, the JCNMAS Nominating Committee (Suzi Nitta Petersen, Yosh Kariatsumari and Judy Inouye) invites nominations of members to be elected to the Board. You can contact the committee c/o the JCNMAS office at (604) 874-8090. We also invite members to volunteer to serve on our committees (Program, Advocacy, Human Resources, and Finance).

List of Donors-in-Kind

Since the founding of the JCNMAS, we have received a great deal of community support in the form of donations-in-kind: food for events, prizes of many kinds for charity draws, construction materials, and even a computer. We are very grateful for this support and salute the donors!

ABC Photocolour Products Ltd.
(Mr. Eddy Lee)
Abbott & Tincombe Photographic
Services Ltd. (Ms. Ena Petkov
and staff)
T. Amano Co. Ltd. (Mr. Shig Amano)
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Ms. Kaz Takahashi

Information Please:
Powell Street (Japan Town)
Restaurants

Frances Miyashita, Irene Kondo, and Shirley Kakutani have submitted a list of restaurants that were in the Powell Street area, Vancouver, about the time of the evacuation in 1942. Some, but not all, are on our Powell Street map. The names that they can remember include Mesamashi, I'puku, Yoshino, Raku Raku, Fukusuke, Tengu, Hinode, Momotaroo, Hayashi, Maneki, Maruman, Suehiro, Kintaro, Suzuran, Kintoki, Chidori, and Hinomaru. The Mesamashi served a 95-cent dinner once a month!

Our map, assembled by Ray Ota based on information for 1941, shows

the Mesamashi (243 Powell), Ippuku (251 Powell), Yoshino (362 Alexander), Raku Raku (130 Gore), Hinode (232 Powell), Hayashi ya (362 Powell), Maruman (215 Gore), and Hinomaru (266 Powell). The other restaurants may have been outside the mapped area, may have changed names, or may date from a slightly different time than the map. Another possibility is that some were named bars or coffee shops within hotels or stores.

Can any readers remember where these other restaurants were, and when they existed? Do you have stories or photographs relating to them? You are always welcome to contact us at the JCNMAS office with information or anecdotes — or with questions!