



# Nikkei Images

JAPANESE CANADIAN NATIONAL MUSEUM & ARCHIVES SOCIETY

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A small village located on the coast of Wakayama prefecture in Japan, Mio appears at first glance to be no different from its neighbours: grey-tiled roofs, shrines and temples overlooking the sea, winding back streets. On closer scrutiny it becomes more apparent



Inside the Mio Museum - a display of Japanese Canadian objects.  
photo: Y. Shimpo

why it is named "America Mura" or "America Village." "America" was once a generic term used by locals to refer to Canada as well as the U.S. Mio sent a large proportion of its sons and daughters to this country, starting in 1887 with that pioneer of Japanese Canadian immigration,

Gihei Kuno. Though Manzo Nagano preceded him by ten years, Kuno's contribution was significant: he called over a steady stream of his fellow villagers who eventually came to form the core of the Japanese Canadian community in Steveston (now part of Richmond, B.C.). Until World War II, Steveston had the second largest popu-

*Though Manzo Nagano preceded him by ten years, Kuno's contribution was significant.*

lation of Japanese Canadians after Vancouver.

On a recent trip to Japan, I was able to visit Mio for two days with my father acting as translator. The purpose of the visit was to gather materials for an upcoming exhibit, *Unearthed from the Silence*, which will tell the story of Japanese Canadians in Steveston through archaeological materials from Britannia Heritage Shipyard. I also hoped to establish ties with the museum in Mio on behalf *cont'd p. 2*



## “America Village” cont'd from pg. 1

of the JCNMAS.

Actually called the “America Village Materials Repository” (*America-mura Shiryo-kan*), the one-room museum was founded by Shigeharu Koyama, author of the book, **Our Roots, American Village** (*Waga Rutsu America Mura*). Our guide for the two days was Mr. Hisakazu Nishihama, a retired high school teacher and local historian who is the present Director. The museum is housed in a new building atop one of the low-lying mountains encircling the village. As we enjoyed the view, he explained that Mio is now a peaceful place, but this was not always so:

“There were fishing zone conflicts with the next village since the end of the Edo period [1600-1867]. The Senshu conflicts [with fishermen from South of Osaka] started about Meiji 27 [1894]... During that time, for example, my maternal grandfather apparently wielded a bamboo spear and took part [in the conflict].”

With pressures on scarce marine and agricultural resources, many villagers heeded Kuno’s call. Mr. Nishihama believes another reason for emigration was their attitude: “These fishermen were willing to accept new ideas. They didn’t fear danger and had the adventurous spirit of a seafaring people.”

If Kuno had not taken the initiative, however, the Mio-Steveston connection might never had been established, and the history of Japanese Canadian immigration would have been very different.

Mio itself prospered in the early 1900s from earnings sent back by sojourners in Canada. Unlike other villages, it boasted

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***If Kuno had not taken the initiative... the history of Japanese Canadian immigration would have been very different.***

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paved streets and several western-style houses. Family members travelled back and forth: the children to receive a Japanese education, women to accompany their children, and men to visit their families. It was a lifestyle that straddled the Pacific.

With WWII, communications ceased and the money stopped coming. In 1945-46, the Canadian government pressured Japanese Canadians to “repatriate” to Japan. About 425 people descended on their old hometown of Mio which was scarcely able to accommodate them. Many returned to Canada as soon as possible. Others chose to remain in their tradi-

tional homeland.

Today, the back and forth pattern of life has ceased, as have the forces which drove hundreds to emigrate. A large proportion of Mio’s residents are now elderly. Nevertheless, there are visible signs of ties with this country: for example, a monument commemorating the 100th anniversary of emigration and a temple plaque displaying recent donations from Richmond, Vancouver and Toronto. Residents show us photo albums with pictures of relatives (or of themselves) in Canada. And the style of speech is oddly familiar...the “Steveston dialect” of Japanese. Clearly the Canadian connection is still alive. Even now, about 10% of Japanese-Canadians can trace their roots to Mio. No doubt Mio will remain the “*kokoro no furusato*” (home-town of the heart) of many Japanese Canadians for some time to come.

***Unearthed From the Silence* is a joint project of the JCNMAS, Britannia Heritage Shipyard Society and the Richmond Museum. The exhibition is scheduled to open at the Richmond Museum in 1998.**

**Yuri Shimpo is the Exhibit & Research Coordinator for the exhibit *Unearthed From the Silence*. She has a Master’s degree in Museum Studies from the University of Toronto and has taught English conversation in Japan.**



## Did You Know That...

by Midge Ayukawa

**I**n December 1891, 100 Hiroshima-ken men were brought in under 3-year contracts by the Kobe Emigration Company to work at the Union Collieries in Cumberland? Only 6, however, had any experience in mining and the rest could not be trained since they could not understand English. Although 73 miners were brought in from Fukuoka in July 1892, temporary mine closures, poor pay, and shortened hours caused many to break their contracts and leave for other areas. Only 13 of the original group remained. Later, some returned, other immigrants arrived and the communities of "Japtown 1" and "Japtown 5" were created. The towns thrived until 1942 when in less than 24 hours, residents left under government orders, never to return.

**I**n September 1913, an Issei couple named Imada opened a fish store in Ladysmith. It was during the Vancouver Island coal miners' strike of 1912-14. Ladysmith had many empty houses and buildings with broken windows due to the prolonged strike and a riot against strike-breakers in August 1913 which caused the militia to be brought in.

The Imadas moved into a former brothel/gambling house which contained an alert system — special electrical wiring whereby lights went on and off by opening and closing certain doors. The fish was supplied by Uyeno Sataro of Nanaimo and two other Issei fishermen. They also bought fish for 25 cents each from local First Nations people. For a short period, the

husband took the train to Extension to peddle the fish, but it was Mrs. Imada who operated the store for sixteen months, with little knowledge of English, and the part-time help of a white youth. Like many early pioneer women, she cared for an infant daughter and gave birth to a son, and even had a number of Japanese boarders as well.

Reprinted with permission from Midge Ayukawa. These pieces were written for *Victoria Nikkei Forum*.

**Do you have a story or an interesting piece of info? We're always looking for items for upcoming issues.**

## Exhibit Update: Unearthed From the Silence by Yuri Shimpo

**W**ork on the upcoming exhibit, *Unearthed from the Silence* is now in full swing. The exhibit focuses on prewar Japanese Canadian artifacts discovered during construction work at Britannia Heritage Shipyard (Richmond, B.C.) in 1994. The objects range from fragments of toys and fishing nets to nearly intact dishes and religious vessels which were

intentionally buried before the evacuation. These artifacts do more than just allow us a glimpse of Japanese Canadian lives of fifty years ago: they also speak compellingly of their owners' forced departures from the area.

Although the artifacts are symbolically powerful, it is through words that they will be brought to life. Thanks to those who have graciously shared their

stories, a considerable number of interviews have already been conducted and a storyline is starting to take shape. Photos and records in archives and libraries will also provide important support material.

If you have any information, photos, or stories relating to Britannia, life in the cannery area, or Steveston in general, we would appreciate your help! Please contact the Museum & Archives at (604) 874-8090.



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# Kids' word search

by Suzi Nitta Petersen

A H C O G I N B  
 I H C O M A O A  
 R H H E C W T C  
 O A A B L H E H  
 N S H E E B A A  
 T H C I R N N N  
 N I G I R I T G  
 R R E K O O C O

- bachan
- bento
- bowl
- cooker
- gohan
- hashi
- mochi
- nigiri
- noris
- ocha
- rice
- tea