

Japan Town Mukilteo

A Garden of Eden

by Mas Odoi

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under the title "The Lighthouse Illuminates History"*

Mas ODOI, a member of the Mukilteo Historical Society, was born and raised in the community of Japanese who worked for the Crown Lumber Company in the part of Mukilteo known as Japanese Gulch. For some time I had been wondering about where to find sources on the Japanese (Issei) and Japanese-Americans (Nisei) of Mukilteo when I encountered Mr. ODOI at a MHS meeting. He had printed for everyone present a copy of his prose-poem photo essay, "The Lighthouse Illuminates History," and kindly granted permission for it to appear in *The Sounder*. What follows are Mr. ODOI's personal reflections and opinions. Photos were enhanced with the help of his nephew, Steve ODOI, who provided further information for the captions.

The poetry that Mr. ODOI writes has been expanded from traditional Japanese forms to accommodate the requirements of English. He told me that in his haiku he is flexible in the number of syllables so as to get the idea across. He quoted a haiku he had written:

After a thousand-mile
journey of the soul,
a brief whitecap frolics..

He interpreted the image in this haiku to stand not only for the journey of one generation of Japanese across the Pacific to Washington, but the journey of all our ancestors across history, a journey that culminates in a single lifetime—our own.

Japan Town Mukilteo

A Garden of Eden for Japanese Americans in the Early 1900's

Above Japanese Gulch, Mukilteo
in Centennial Park on 5th Street,
stands a granite monument,
topped by a three foot origami crane
with the words PEACE and HAPPINESS,
inscribed in English and Japanese
on a bronze plaque.
Unveiled on Memorial Day, 2000,
it's the only reminder left of the thriving Japan town
of immigrant sawmill workers in the early 1900's
which was called the best Japanese lumber camp, of the dozens
that sprang up in the Northwest a long century ago.

Japan town was a Garden of Eden for us Japanese American kids
with endless facilities to play and gad about
A creek ran down from large reservoirs high up in the wooded hills
along two rows of houses, then under a road to Everett
and tracks of the Great Northern Railroad
to blue waves of Puget Sound.
There were deep pools along its mile long course
with hungry trout, eager for wriggling angle worms,

skewered by boys on hooks of their fishing lines.
The surrounding forest was honeycombed with trails
for exploration by adventurous souls and nature lovers.

A shallow, sandy beach near the border with Everett
was a favorite place to frolic on warm summer days.
We would bring food and drinks and hold picnics,
roasting weenies, marshmallows, and other goodies.
We enjoyed swimming, wading, and splashing each other,
or making driftwood rafts to pole around.
When the tide went out, we dug for clams or gathered crabs
and other edible marine life to take home.
We often fished off the sawmill docks for perch, cod, shiners,
or netted shrimps off the pilings.

Our fathers built a large community center
for programs, movies, games, and other recreations.
They cleared off a playground for baseball, football, basketball,
tennis, and other fun filled activities.
They made a grassy plot into a large park with seesaws and swings
and high jump and pole vault stands to practice our skills.
They erected a boys' club house with a large garden plot
and a fish pond to hold extra trout we caught.
They encouraged us to develop initiative and good character,
which served me in the adverse years to come.

But what we Japanese American children appreciated most
was the friendship of our Caucasian neighbors and of classmates
at Rosehill School and Christian churches.
We had fun together and visited each other's homes,
often being treated to cookies, candy, fruit, and milk.
We competed against each other and developed habits
of good sportsmanship and fair play.
We learned good race relations, a dedication to the basic principles
on which the United States was founded,
conducting ourselves in accordance with our God given rights
to freedom, equality and the pursuit of happiness.

Examples of this can be found in our annual class plays,
to which the public was invited.
Our third grad class of twenty-five students presented a comedy
of a Chinese cook in a California gold mining camp.
I was chosen to play Fat Sing, the lead role.
The next year, our class selected a long, two-part play
about a rascally Old Man of the Sea.
Because the main part had much to memorize, the first half
was given to my twin, Hiroshi, and the last half to me.
Though children's programs, this succession of feature roles exemplifies
how we JA's had been treated on equal terms in Mukilteo.
And this attitude enabled us to maintain our faith in America
throughout the grievous years of the war with Japan,
when even our basic rights as citizens were grossly violated.

During the Great Depression of the 1930's, the Crown Lumber Co closed its doors, and there was a mass exodus of its workers. Japanese families all departed to find jobs, never to return, except for occasional visits. And as countless years went by Japanese Gulch became a wilderness of bushes and giant trees. However long we JA's had been gone from our birthplace, the Mukilteo spirit still lingered in our hearts and minds. Wherever we and our children settled down, we never found another environment as perfect as our childhood homes in Mukilteo.

In the long lifetime since we moved away, little Mukilteo incorporated, annexed populous areas, and grew into an affluent city of 20,000. The newcomers are hardly aware that the desolate Japanese Gulch was once a neat settlement of immigrant sawmill workers. And that the progeny of these laborers learned well lessons of Americanism and had a notable impact on our country's history. They kept the FAITH through hard times of depressions and wars, when they had been treated like second class citizens. And their deportment and unconditional loyalty earned for them the accolade of "model minority".

Sequel: World War II and After

In the half century after leaving Mukilteo, we JA's encountered dramatic ups and downs of adversities and successes. The period of our greatest heartache began with the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941. We JA's were labeled "national security risks", and everyone of Japanese ancestry living along the Pacific coast was evacuated to relocation camps in remote wastelands. Despite our shock and resentment at the injustice, when our eligibility to serve in the army was restored, thousands of JA's enlisted in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team or the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific Theater.

All four JA boys, sitting together in the 1929 third grade class picture, served in World War II. My twin, Hiroshi, and I fought in Europe with the 442nd R.C.T. and helped in small ways to make it "the most decorated unit of its size in the United States Army". As 100th Battalion citation clerk, Hiroshi successfully wrote up the Congressional Medal of Honor for Pfc. Sadao MUNEMORI, the only CMH won by the 442nd R.C.T. during wartime, after it had been rejected by the Fifth Army as "unacceptable". It validated our reputation as "most decorated unit".

Shigeo TAKEUCHI and Bright ONODA joined the Intelligence Service. Other Mukilteo JA's also fought in World War II. We are not recorded on the local register, because we had enlisted from other cities.

Our unconditional loyalty made the American people aware of the injustice of their wartime mistakes, and they atoned in millions of ways, rescinding anti-Japanese laws and customs and opening wide the gates of opportunity in every field. In 1988 the redress bill, HR 442, was enacted, that awarded \$20,000 to every living JA evacuee, with a presidential apology.

We Mukilteo JA's had been scattered from coast to coast by World War II and its aftermath. But many of us went to college and developed thriving careers in various professional and business fields. The best examples include: A pharmacist, who had an activist son; a noted community leader, and two talented daughters, one a famous telecaster and the other an actress and dramatist. A son of a Mukilteo JA sang lead roles in operettas in New York and London. Other JA's accomplished much in less publicized ways. Thank you, Mukilteo, for friendships that helped us find happy endings, beyond our fondest expectations!