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Honouring Galiano's Japanese Heritage

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Those of us who live on the Gulf Islands have each had to piece together in our own way the still largely-untold story of the Japanese presence on these islands. The Japanese Canadian population on Galiano was once substantial, as is made dramatically clear by the school photographs hanging in the North End Hall, once a schoolhouse. Until 1942 there are several Japanese students; afterwards there are none.

When I first moved to Galiano Island in 1978, to a tiny cabin tucked up against Mount Galiano, I'd often walk down the road to the little cemetery overlooking Active Pass and wander around the graves. Two stood off by themselves, hoary and moss-covered but beautifully carved in ancient Japanese characters.

In 1978, remnants of Japanese-Canadian industry were still around the island, including pilings from a cannery at Saltery Bay that mysteriously burned down the year the Japanese were interned, and abandoned structures on Gossip island. I'm told people still find broken glass in the woods on Mayne Island, remnants of extensive Japanese greenhouses from a time when they supplied tomatoes to much of the Pacific Northwest.

On the beaches of Galiano we occasionally find shards of fine pottery that the Japanese Canadians themselves destroyed in 1942 before they were ignominiously rounded up and interned, first for six months at Hastings Park in Vancouver, and then in the BC Interior.

On an abandoned property beside my cabin way back then, I came across a teardrop-shaped, rock-lined pit in the woods. It was clearly man-made, but when, by whom, and for what purpose no one seemed to know. A couple years later, my brother-in-law Steve Nemtin inherited my cabin. Steve is a great outdoorsman and dedicated amateur anthropologist who quickly made the whole of Mount Galiano his own. He too was fascinated by the rock-lined pit next to our cabin, and soon discovered several others around the island.

Some people told Steve they were garbage pits, others said they were remnants of Native pit houses, but eventually Tony Kingscote, who was born on Galiano, told him they were

Japanese charcoal pit kilns. He knew this because the schoolchildren were warned not to go near the pits because of the toxic smoke they generated. He told Steve of two pits on Salt Spring that had been owned by the Tasaka family.

Japanese-Canadians were not allowed to return to the West Coast after the war, so the Tasaka family resettled near New Denver, where Steve tracked down Ty Tasaka, then 84. Ty was one of 17 children; his job as a boy was loading charcoal into empty rice sacks which his family sailed over to a Victoria soap factory. His sister Omi, who Steve visited in Vancouver, told him that her job was to sew up the 'rabbit ears' on the filled sacks. The Tasakas earned \$60 per burning, which was very good money in those days. Charcoal was prized in many industries, including the canneries, where it was used for soldering the cans. The Tasaka land with its two charcoal pits, which like their boat and holdings was unceremoniously sold off, is now a park outside Ganges.

How the charcoal pit kilns worked remained a mystery; there was no record anywhere of this industry, even among Japanese-Canadian historians. An immigration census from 1900 of Gulf Islanders, which listed occupations, made no mention of charcoal production, likely because the census official simply didn't know enough to ask. Steve Nemtin worked as a counselor at the Galiano school, and he started taking schoolchildren to one of these pit kilns to teach them about the history of Galiano. With their help, he began the process of restoring it, learning as he went.

By now Steve had immersed himself in the history of charcoal making, which in Japan goes back to 3,000 BCE. It was hugely important to the development of Japanese industry: the high heat generated by charcoal was crucial to everything from smelting precious metals, including the steel for samurai swords, to the development of Japan's famed ceramics. Steve tried to contact the Japanese community in Vancouver to share his findings, but was initially rebuffed.

Meanwhile, in the early 1980s Dorothy Livesay, a distinguished poet who'd retired to Galiano, invited Mary Ohara, a Japanese Canadian born at Alcala Point on North Galiano Island, to read one of Dorothy's poems at a poetry

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festival; the poem celebrated the memory of those displaced by the war. Mary had not set foot on Galiano since she and her family were interned when she was fifteen. Dorothy took Mary to the cemetery and showed her the Japanese graves. Mary, who couldn't read Japanese, made paper rubbings of the inscriptions and sent them to relatives in Japan. Eventually she discovered that one of the two men buried there was a relative; he had died in a logging accident in 1899, when he was just nineteen.

Mary Ohara heard about Steve's work on the charcoal kilns and, in the 1990's, came to visit him with a friend who was an anthropologist in Asian Studies at Cornell University. They were astonished by the amount of research he'd collected, much of it still in Japanese, and by the size of the kilns themselves, and urged Steve to write an article on his findings for a historical journal. They also introduced him to the Steveston Japanese Canadian Buddhist community, most of whom, like Mary herself, were originally from Japan's Wakayama Prefecture.

A delegation from the Wakayama Ken Jin Kai in Steveston came to visit. They lit incense and performed Shinto prayers at the cemetery and at the charcoal pits to honour their pioneer ancestors. When they discovered sand at the bottom of the pits, there was a great 'aha' moment—binotang! The charcoal made in Wakayama was among the most prized in Japan because, instead of sealing the pits with a mixture of clay and dirt, the charcoal makers used clay and sand, which they carefully watered, creating a type of ceramic seal on the kiln which allowed it to reach the highest temperatures. This was binotang, famous for making the best samurai swords and the finest porcelain. Here in the wilds of the Gulf Islands Japanese settlers had recreated, with shovels, rock, alder and sand, the great binotang kilns of their home province.

By now Steve had discovered a pit kiln on public land in the middle of Bluff Park, and had received permission from the Galiano Club to restore it; the Wakayama Ken Jin Kai agreed to pay for a commemorative stone and plaque when it was done. Steve has done a magnificent job. His own aha moment was discovering the Galiano settlers had changed their technique slightly, adding an additional air vent flue,

one on each side of the central fireplace, so they could better control the heat and smouldering of the kiln.

On September 16, 2001, 60 people from the Steveston community, accompanied by Mary Ohara and Susumu Tanaka, then Deputy Counsel-General of Japan, travelled to Galiano. The Galiano Club and our Museum Society jointly hosted a lunch at the hall, and then the party travelled up to Bluff Park for the site dedication. One elderly woman, like Mary, was born on Galiano and had not been back since. Many tears were shed; everyone took pictures and tiny handfuls of charcoal as a keepsake. For the first time, the shame they'd felt at their banishment was replaced with pride at the remarkable accomplishment of their ancestors.

The restored charcoal pit kiln continues to generate interest. In 2002 our Lieutenant-Governor, Iona Campagnolo, who was born on Galiano, returned with Mary Ohara and Susumu Tanaka to unveil an information board and shelter on the site, which Steve Nemtin also built. A group from Mayne Island came to study it in order to make a replica for Mayne's Japanese Gardens. MP Elizabeth May visited the site this summer, and began musing about the possibility of turning it into a national historic site.

Most recently, a professor and students from UBC's Institute for Resources, Environment and Sustainability, who heard about the Japanese charcoal industry from Steve's article in British Columbia Historical News, came to take soil samples. Their specialty is biochar, and they were intrigued by the opportunity to study local, man-made charcoal over 100-years-old.

For Nemtin, discovering, studying and restoring two of these pits was, he says, like digging for buried treasure. It was also emotional: to honour a way of life that was abandoned so quickly and tragically which has been so unjustifiably forgotten, and to witness the tears of joy when the Steveston community returned to honour their ancestors.

On September 16, the Galiano Club and the Museum Society jointly celebrated the 10th anniversary of the site's dedication. ☺

youtube.com/watch?v=iFPFTqo_gks to see more of Steve Nemtin's story.