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Volume 2

Number 1

# FOOTPRINTS

*"Impressions from where we were to where we will be."*

THE QUARTERLY NEWSLETTER FOR THE JAPANESE AMERICAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF SAN DIEGO



**FISH CAMP PAINTING. ARTIST FRANK K. KOIDE WAS BORN IN SAN DIEGO, THE SON OF A COMMERCIAL FISHERMAN, WHO PIONEERED THE PACIFIC COAST TUNA INDUSTRY. FRANK'S MOTHER IS ALSO AN ACCOMPLISHED ARTIST.**

## FISH CAMP. KUSAI!

Action. Reaction.

The words virtually went together.

When the wind blew inland, you could hardly miss it. You knew where it was. But ask former residents what they thought of the place and it's almost unanimous. It was a great place to live and grow up. For recent arrivals, fish camp, as old San Diego residents knew it, was at the foot of Crosby Street in the Logan Heights area.

### NEXT ISSUE:

Area Churches History by Don Estes  
Memories . . . Part III by Michio Himaka  
Personal Views  
Footnotes - Jeanne Elyea

Another article elsewhere on these pages was written by Yukio Kawamoto of an interview he had with his mother, Sakayo Kawamoto, one of the few remaining Issei residents of Fish Camp (and what better time than now to urge readers to write down their memoirs of what they remember about their parents and grandparents and their past. It doesn't matter whether you think you write well or not. We're not Hemingways. It's not for public reading. It's to let your kids and grandkids know about their past. And besides, it might provide a few laughs for yourself and for their enjoyment.).

To continue, when you reached the foot of Crosby Street, you crossed some railroad tracks and passed between a building made of corrugated steel sheets, which was the Van Camp Seafood Co. Cannery and offices were on the left and the Southwest Granite Co. on the right. South of Van Camp was the Sun Harbor Cannery.

You travel farther down the road, hang a left turn and then a right and there it was behind the cannery. Rows of small homes on finger piers that stretched out over the San Diego Bay. Later, the City of San Diego would dredge the bay to form a beach where the kids could play.

This was home to a small community of Japanese fishing families and cannery workers.

On a personal note, and yes, I know it means nothing to other readers, but my two older brothers, Osa and Tets and my two older sisters, Suma and Emi, were born at Fish Camp as were a number of others. They lived there without parents until they moved to what is now the historic Gaslamp Quarters and opened a tofu-ya at 437 Fifth Avenue.

To get to Fish Camp from downtown during the summer months, we used to walk the railroad tracks from the foot of Fifth Avenue to Crosby Street. For a little guy, walking the tracks was no problem until we came to the section of tracks that ran over water from the bay. Mesmerized by the murky water below, the little guy would stop suddenly, fearing his feet would fall between the railroad ties. The older guys insisted the feet would not fall between the ties, but I knew better! I think they were trying to tell me to stay home. It didn't work. Naturally, the older guys had to carry the little guy over the tracks until "it was safe."

The finger piers mentioned in Yuki's article were homeports to a number of the "ken-ken bo-tos," the small fishing boats owned by the Japanese fishermen living in

*(continued on page 2)*

**(FISH CAMP continued from page 1)**

Fish Camp. "Ken-ken" was what the boats' piston-driven engines sounded like. "We kids would sit on the piers waiting for our dads to come home from fishing trips," my brother Osa said while we reminisced recently. "We were able to tell which boats were approaching from a distance by the light on the boat. We became pretty good at that."

"It was a great place to live and to grow up," recalled Sakiko Okamoto Kada, another former resident. "We used to row across the bay on big fishing skiffs to the Coronado beaches and have beach parties. Then we would row back."

"I enjoyed crawling into the empty cannery on Sundays and go skating," sister Mizu remembered. "I used to like going to mochitsuki there. I remember all the visits to family friends on New Year's Day. It was a fun place to be and to explore."

Sister Emi, who was the last of our family born at Fish Camp, said she remembered having four sets of swings in front of the house.

"Dad put swings up for each of us: Suma, Osa, Tets and me. They were right in front of the house. I think all of the families living there placed priority on the kids."

"Most of us learned to swim there," brother Tets recalled. "I think we started learning to swim from age four. The dads would make floater rings out of netting cork and put them around us. We started out with three rings. Then each year, they would remove one ring until we were swimming on our own. On the other hand, some people never learned to swim."

But then, who in the world would want to learn to swim in what amounted to the world's largest toilet bowl with the most natural flusher one could imagine? With the homes sitting over the bay water, why not? The benjos were outhouses hanging over the bay. What an experience trying to hit a target several feet below you with your missiles. And anyone who says they didn't try it at one time or another is probably fibbing.

Fish Camp had the original "sewage outfall" before the term became fashionable to use in public.

"Raw sewage" couldn't have been any rawer. It came right from the source to literally on top of your head, if you happened to be swimming in the area. Swimming became a challenge.

"We called them 'yellow-floaters,'" Tets recalled. "We used to push them out of the way with each swimming stroke."

Naturally, what followed after a swim like that was a bath, which was another unique experience familiar to former Fish Camp residents.

We took baths in the o-furo, a Japanese-style community bath. Measuring about 12 feet by 12 feet and standing 3 to 4 feet deep, it served the entire community and its visitors. It was big enough to swim in and it was co-ed. A huge hot water boiler heated the water.

The ritual was to soak in the clean water, get out, wash,



**CHILDREN OF FISH CAMP. CHILDREN OF JAPANESE FISHERMEN WHO LIVED IN BACK OF THE VAN CAMP SEA FOOD CANNERY IN THE 1920'S WITH THEIR "BABYSITTER," AN OLD FISHERMAN KNOWN ONLY AS NOMIKI-SAN. INFANT IN NOMIKI-SAN'S LAP IS MASATO ASAKAWA. THE CHILD ON THE RIGHT IS OSA HIMAKA. IF ANYONE RECOGNIZES THE OTHER CHILDREN CONTACT A JAHSSD BOARD MEMBER OR NEWSLETTER EDITOR.**

and rinse outside the tub and then soak again before wiping.

In the 1930's, the bay used to run beneath the piers under the houses. Each house had a dust hole through which the dust was swept into the water. The holes proved to be deadly in that at least one or two infants fell through and drowned in the bay.

The benjos were big enough to have youngsters fall through, too. "A friend" of mine fell through once but was found clinging to one of the pilings below and rescued.

"In the 1930's, the City of San Diego came along and dredged the bay area around Fish Camp and we got a beach between the cannery and the homes," Osa said.

The residents built a large sandbox for the kids to play in and to do sumo. "We were able to play softball on the beach and it led to the formation of the Falcons softball team," Osa said.

Another treat for Fish Camp youngsters was walking to "Kanta," a small Japanese restaurant operated by Mrs. Shimoda, where we bought ice cream cones, the kind that could hold two or three scoops of ice cream and on the bottom had slips of paper that let you know if you won a free cone.

"Kanta," I surmise was Japanese for "counter," which was horseshoe-shaped and took up much of the restaurant space. In later years, it became better known as Mary's Lunch, when it was operated by Walt Obayashi.

Fish Camp wasn't all fun and games. There was tragedy too. But we need not dwell on that.

All in all, though, Fish Camp was a great place to live and a great place to grow up, smell or no smell.

— Michio Himaka



**KAWAMOTO FAMILY, 1924. IMATARO, SAKAYO, FUSAKO SHIMIZU, HIROSHI KUBOTA, TOMIKO KOZUMA.**

## I REMEMBER FISH CAMP

I came to Fish Camp in 1917 when I was 18 years old. My first husband to be, Masaichi Kubota, who had been living in Fish Camp, went to Japan to visit his parents and we were married before he returned to the U.S. We came to America together by ship disembarking in San Francisco. We took another ship to come down to San Diego. I was seasick for most of the trip from Japan, so I did not want to make another trip on a boat, but my husband insisted. The trip from San Francisco, however, only took one night to reach San Pedro. The next night, we stayed in a hotel in San Pedro, then continued our trip to San Diego on the same boat.

Fish Camp was behind the cannery at the foot of Crosby Street. When I came to Fish Camp, the cannery name was Premier Cannery after the owner, Mr. Premier. Through the years the cannery changed names several times, but it was probably best known as Van Camp. Mr. Premier was very sympathetic to the Japanese and treated us very well. The camp consisted of wooden shacks built right over the water on a pier behind the cannery. All the houses were provided to the fishermen by the cannery rent free with free utilities. In those times, there was no concern about pollution so outhouses were built right over the water and everything went right into the bay. Trash and garbage were also thrown into the bay—each shack had a little trapdoor where the trash and garbage went. There was a Japanese style community bath where everyone bathed. Each family took turns tending the fire and cleaning the bath.

Fish Camp actually consisted of four camps; the camp where I lived was called "Naka no Kyampu" (Middle Camp) and was located behind Premier Cannery; one to the east called "Ue no Kyampu" (Upper Camp) was behind a cannery I can't remember the name of; one to the west called "Lower California" was behind a cannery of the same name; and the fourth one was on Crosby Street across the railroad tracks running in front of Premier Cannery. This camp was the only one among the four that was not built over water and we called it "Kushimoto no Kyampu" because most of the people living there were from a town named Kushimoto in Wakayama-Ken. When I first came to Fish Camp, the Kushimoto camp housed men who worked in the cannery, but later on it was also used by fishermen and their families. When Kushimoto was used to house cannery workers, Frank Yamada was foreman of the cleaning operation at Premier Cannery and he lived at Kushimoto. Between the railroad tracks and the Kushimoto camp was a cafe we called "Kanta" (probably a Japanese pronunciation of counter) and run by Mrs. Shimoda, more popularly known as Kanta no Obasan. I don't know if at the time Kanta's real name was Mary's Lunch or if it was named later on. Dick Fuji owned and operated a fertilizer making shop between Premier Cannery and the cannery to the east. There was another fish camp located a few miles north near the airport across Pacific Highway from what is now Solar Turbines; it was called "Hokkaido" because it was north of Fish Camp.

There were many families living in Fish Camp and a lot of them stayed for just a short time and moved on. It's been such a long time ago and my memory has faded so I can't remember very many of the names of families who lived there. Some of the families I remember were: In Naka no Kyampu — two Uyeji families, Matsutaka, Shimizu, Osada, Fukada, Sakaguchi, Ochi, Ozaki, Kawagishi, Okamoto, Koba, Hatada, Yagura, and Miyamoto; in Ue no Kyampu — Kobayashi, Tsuno, Namiki, Himaka, Yagura, Suga, Asakawa, and Shimada; in Lower California — Takehara, Nakano, Nakamoto and Goto; in Kushimoto — two

*(continued on page 4)*



# THE Van Camp News

VOL. 11, NO. 1 TERMINAL ISLAND, CALIFORNIA MARCH/APRIL 1953



THIRTY-FIVE YEARS OF SERVICE—(Left to right) in rear: F. Serrano, S. Tsuno, F. Nakamura, M. Koide. Front row: G. C. Van Camp, S. Asakawa, Foley Foster.

**VAN CAMP NEWSLETTER, MARCH/APRIL 1953.**

## *(I Remember. . .continued from page 3)*

Nakamura families, Minamide and Hibi. Most of the people in Fish Camp were from Wakayama-Ken. Our family (Mr. Kubota, Mr. Kawamoto and myself) were about the only ones from Hiroshima-Ken. I'm not sure, but I believe Mrs. Koyoshi Nakamura, Mr. Moichi Suga, Mrs. Naoye Yagura, Mrs. Shizuko Koba, Mr. Yasutaro Hibi and myself are the only surviving Isseis from Fish Camp in the San Diego area. Of course, there are many, many Fish Camp children who still live in San Diego. All my children, except the youngest, were born in Fish Camp. My first husband died in 1922, then I married Imataro Kawamoto, who was also a fisherman living in Fish Camp. My first two children were by Mr. Kubota and the other 4 were by Mr. Kawamoto.

Life of a fisherman was very difficult. The boats were small, slow and because there was no refrigeration or iced holds, the boats could only fish local waters on one day or two day trips. The men fished mostly in the summertime for albacore and skipjack tuna. When I first came to Fish Camp the canneries were not taking skipjack so any skipjack the men caught had to be thrown back to the ocean. In those days, the fish had to be headed and gutted before the cannery would take the fish. For some reason, the Japanese fishermen were not as good as the Italians at wintertime fishing for rock cod and yellowtail, which were market fish and not cannery fish. At that time the market was very limited; most of the time, when our men caught market fish, the market wouldn't take the catch because they already had enough. Sardines were also caught in the wintertime, but sardines were netted and our menfolk for some reason didn't fish sardines. Mostly, the fishermen spent the winter repairing their boat and fishing gear to get ready for the next fishing season. Some of the fishermen

found jobs as farm laborers during the winter months to make ends meet. The cannery lent money to the fishermen for their boat and living expenses. The cannery kept track of how much money was owed each boat for their catch and how much the cannery lent the boat. Each fall, the net amount was paid out to the boat owner who then divvied up the money among the partners and crew. In a good year, there was money to be divided up, but in a bad year (and there were more bad years than good), the boat was in debt to begin the new year.

Being the wife of a fisherman wasn't easy either. Most of the wives, including myself, worked the canneries to supplement the family income. If there were children, the wives stayed home or else they had to find someone to take care of the children while they worked. Some wives dried fish and sold them to other Japanese families. Wintertime was the sardine season. The sardines were caught at night and when the boats came in to unload the sardines late at night or early morning, the cannery would blow a whistle to call us in to work. Many times, we would finish one batch, go home, then be called back again to work on another batch.

About 1925, my husband had a string of bad years. It began when his boat collided with a Navy boat taking sailors from their ship to shore and he had to have extensive repairs made to his boat. After that happened, it was one bad thing after another, so he wasn't able to catch much fish. In about 1928, albacore and skipjack didn't show up in the San Diego area for 2 or 3 years and fishing was very bad. He finally gave up fishing and in 1930 our family moved out of Fish Camp. Fish Camp stayed in existence until World War II; then, it was no more.

**— Mrs. Sakayo Kawamoto**  
(As told to Yukio Kawamoto)

## HERITAGE

### HOME IS THE SAILOR

"Just who was the first Japanese in San Diego?" asked the kindly white haired lady, raising one of those issues that always manages to make historians feel very, very uneasy. Very uneasy because we simply don't know, and historians are always troubled by things they don't know. There are a number of candidates for that position, but unfortunately, no real proof to support any of them.

We can, however, identify the first Japanese to die and be buried in San Diego. Interestingly enough he was not one of those we would classify as an Issei pioneer. Rather, he was simply a visitor who ended up in San Diego because of an accident. But, accident or not, his story is certainly part of the local Nikkei experience. At Mount Hope, the city owned cemetery, there are several sections where local Nikkei are buried. In one of the older plots is a fairly modest, but nonetheless handsome, tombstone that can still be seen today. On it are inscribed the words "Tsunejiro

Toya, Seaman First Class, H.I.M.N. Tsukuba, November 22, 1887." Seaman Toya represented one of those mysteries historians don't like, except in this case, the mystery was solved.

The Tsukuba was a training vessel built in England in 1851 and later sold to the fledgling Japanese navy. She carried a normal complement of 273 officers and men. On November 19, 1887 the Tsukuba became the first Japanese man of war to visit San Diego.

The arrival of the first friendly visit of what would be many for the Japanese navy was a major event for the city. The officers and men were feted and given the grand tours of the area culminating with a gala banquet hosted by the city's Board of Trustees. After three days of celebration the ship departed on November 22 for Panama. As the Tsukuba was towed out into the bay by a steam tug, and during that operation seaman Toya fell from the tug, and sank before he could be rescued. Captain Nomura of the Tsukuba delayed his departure for one day while a search that was fruitless was carried out. Captain Nomura requested that if the body should be recovered that the Board of Trustees make disposition of the remains. The city fathers agreed to accept the charge.

Twenty one days later the body was recovered and buried at Mount Hope. In 1939 Tsunejiro Toya was moved by the San Diego Nihonjinkai to rest among other Japanese at Mount Hope. The Nihonjinkai took it upon themselves to provide a fine new granite tombstone.

Today Seaman First Class Toya rests at Mount Hope, having the distinction of being the first Japanese buried in San Diego. One wonders what he was like? Did he leave a family? What of his survivors who knew only that he was lost in a far away place? Contrary to the poem, not all sailors come home from the sea.

— Don Estes

## SPLINTERS FROM THE BOARD...

### I REMEMBER-

The current issue of Footprints focuses on the fishing industry. Local Nikkei played a major role in the industry. I can recall going out to the pier to watch the fishing boats returning from a day of fishing. We would try to guess the sized of the catch by how low the boat was sitting in the water. It was always a great sight to see them chug to the pier to unload the catch. This part of the industry has all but disappeared for local commercial fishing has been so poor in recent years

— Mas Asakawa, Board Member

### SPECIAL THANKS

Special thanks to the Kamiura Family for their gift of eight drawings and paintings by the late Mr. Suketaro Kamiura to the JAHSSD.

### VOLUNTEERS WANTED

The JAHSSD is an all volunteer organization. Since our inception in late 1991, the Board of Directors, under the able direction of our president, Ben Segawa, has concentrated its efforts on the task of getting organized, developing the by-laws, obtaining the charter as a non-profit corporation from the state of California, obtaining tax exempt status as a non-profit organization from the IRS, conducting the initial membership drive, and publishing a newsletter. Now that most of these tasks are behind us, we can begin concentrating more of our efforts on the main reason we were organized; that is to preserve and document

(continued on page 6)

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### ***(Volunteers Wanted continued from page 5)***

the history of the Japanese Americans in the San Diego area. One of the priority goals that the Board of Directors has selected is to document the oral history of the remaining issei and nisei before it becomes too late. Under the guidance of Professor Don Estes, teams are being trained to go out to collect as much of our Nikkei history as we can. We know that there is a great wealth of this history out there and to accomplish this goal and other tasks that need to be done, we need volunteers. We need people to help us by conducting interviews for the oral history project, transcribing interviews, writing articles for the newsletter, etc. If you can help in any way, please call Masato Asakawa at 453-2739 or Yukio Kawamoto at 239-0896 (weekday mornings) or 286-8203 (other times).

**– Masato Asakawa and Yukio Kawamoto,  
Board Members**

## **FOOTNOTES . . .**

Pamphlets, written in Japanese, are available on these topics:

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For free copies of these pamphlets send your name and address to:

Jeanne K. Elyea  
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### **DID YOU EVER-**

Get a yaito? Masato Asakawa thought only boys got yaito, but the girls were threatened with yaito too, but never did anything deserving of one. Michio Himaka said that the first thing that mothers packed to take to camp was their yaito kit, which usually consisted of: Mogusa (medicated cotton) Senko (incense sticks) and matches. By hearsay, you understand, you had to hold your hand out, then a portion of Mogusa (the size determined by your crime and the punisher), was placed on the back of your hand and lit with a Senko and you were to hold your hand out until the cotton was completely consumed. Ouch! Yaito is actually a form of treatment for various ailments, i.e. backaches, arthritis, etc., and the Mogusa is placed on designated areas and lit.

**– Jeanne Elyea**

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**YASUTARO HIBI**

**JUNE 11, 1899 - JANUARY 18, 1993**

*Grandpa has not left us altogether; he will always be with us as well as being a part of us. He has only gone on another fishing trip where fishing is more plentiful. He'll be there fishing with his friends, learning new techniques, awaiting to teach us. Until that time we can use what he has taught us to make life as happy and as enjoyable as only he would wish us.*

*- David Hibi*

**THIS EDITION OF THE JAHSSD  
NEWSLETTER HAS BEEN  
DONATED**

**IN THE MEMORY OF  
YASUTARO HIBI**

*June 11, 1899 -*

*January 18, 1993*

**BY**

**MRS. MABEL HIBI**

Mr. Ben Segawa  
Mrs. Katherine Segawa  
442 Sandy Creek Dr.  
Bonita, CA 91902

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## POSTON VIDEO

VHS tape of the slide presentation by Don Estes  
featured at the 1991 Poston Camp III Reunion.  
\$20.00 per tape.

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