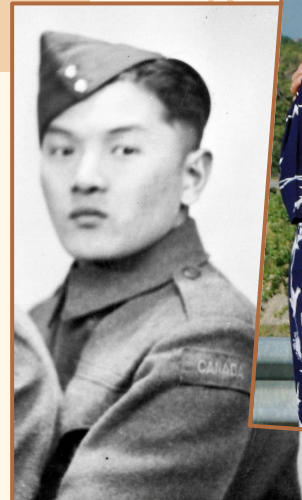


Japanese Canadians in Alberta

Pre-war to Present Day

By Carley Okamura



Terminology

Japanese Canadian- a person of Japanese ethnicity who lives in Canada. (JC)

Nikkei- Describing Japanese people or culture outside of Japan

Issei/Nissei/Sansei/Yonsei- first, second, third, and fourth generation Japanese Canadians

Perpetual foreigner- a stereotype wherein a group of people are seen as being loyal to their ethnic country of origin regardless of their time in the country where they live or having been born there. The idea that they cannot integrate and have a different culture and lifestyle than the majority of the country.



Issei Immigration to Canada (1877–1928)

The first known immigrant from Japan, Manzo Nagano, arrived in British Columbia in 1877. Until 1907, almost all immigrants were young men. In 1908, Canada insisted that Japan limit the migration of males to 400 per year. As a result, most immigrants thereafter were women joining their husbands or unmarried women engaged to men in Canada. The Issei were usually young and literate. Most were from fishing and farming villages on the southern islands. Many settled in the “Japantowns” or suburbs of Vancouver and Victoria, on farms in the Fraser Valley and in fishing villages, and pulp-mill and mining towns along the Pacific coast.

[Canadian Encyclopedia](#)



Powell Street 1928

Early Albertan Settlement

More than 1,000 Japanese came to Alberta under labour contracts for the railway or working in sugar beet fields. A group of Japanese people settled north of Lethbridge, in the town of Hardieville, where they worked in the coal mines. Still others set up farms in the Rocky Mountain House and Opal areas.

Some began to find work as cooks, and one man started a restaurant in Medicine Hat. Others set up dry cleaning businesses where their wives would mend and adjust clothes. Many fancy hotels also hired Japanese bellhops, including the Macdonald Hotel in Edmonton, the Palliser Hotel in Calgary, and the Banff Springs Hotel. By 1931, the Japanese population of Alberta was 652.

Japanese settlement in Raymond began in 1903. By 1931, more than 400 Japanese people lived there, most of whom worked in the sugar beet fields. Most retained their Buddhist religion. They also set up facilities where they could teach their children traditional Japanese culture and martial arts.



Hardieville Nikkei community, 1930

Early Edmonton Settlement

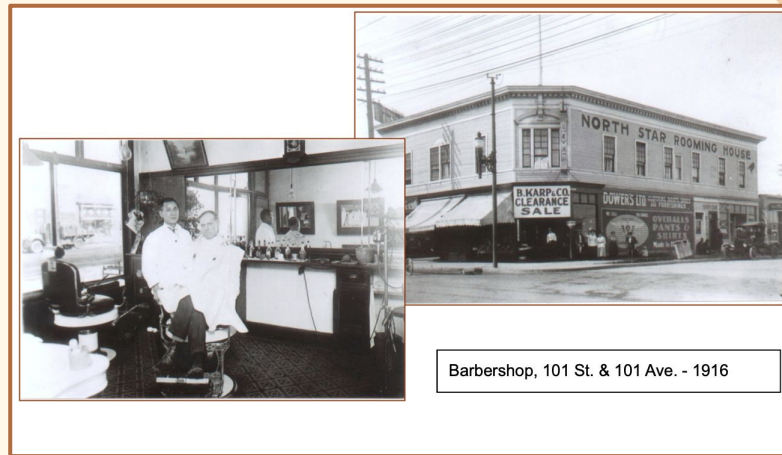
The first Japanese person recorded in Edmonton was Sugizo Nakamura, who arrived in 1912 and ran Sam's Barbershop. Around 1910, there were over 130 JCs in the vicinity of Edmonton (including temporary workers). In the city, there were seven restaurants, one barbershop and two billiards centres owned by JCs. Others worked in hotels, rail yards, farms and coal mines.

Before 1913, Toyoharu Wada and his brother and two or three JCs were living in Edmonton. Mr. Wada successfully farmed about 35 miles from the city but lost his house in a fire and gave up farming.

In the Edmonton area, Mr. Nakahara was the only JC who owned a farm. His farm, 160 acres, was located in Riley, about 60 miles east of Edmonton. He sold his farm for \$20,000 and moved to the United States.

Around 1921, Toshikichi Yamada owned a restaurant in Edson. There were four or five JC workers in the town and a few working in coal mines around the town. Those JCs had close relations with Caucasian residents and had never experienced discrimination. They were paid \$5 to 6 dollars an hour, much higher than others.

Edmonton Japanese Community Association History Project



Sam's Barbershop, 1916

Early Discriminatory Law

Beginning in 1874, BC politicians passed a series of laws intended to force all Asians to leave Canada. Laws excluded Asians from underground mining, the civil service and professions such as the practice of law, which required the practitioner to be listed on the provincial voting lists. Labour and minimum-wage laws ensured that employers hired Asian Canadians only for menial jobs or farm labour, and paid them at lower rates than White workers.

In 1907, whipped up by agitators from the Asiatic Exclusion League, a mob of 9,000 people smashed windows and destroyed the homes and shops in Vancouver's Chinatown and Japantown. The racism of this time period is coined as "yellow peril" and the fear was armies or hordes of Asian immigrants were going to take over British Columbia for their home countries.



Vandalized storefront, 1907

In the 1920s and 1930s, economic troubles meant JC industries were unfairly targeted. The federal fisheries department reduced the number of licenses issued to JC fishermen by one third. The provincial government denied logging licences to Asians and paid Asians only a fraction of the social assistance paid to White workers. Due to these practices, businessmen, usually Nissei, started to travel east to set up their practices in urban centres.

Discrimination in Alberta

There was no anti-Japanese movement not only in Alberta but also in Saskatchewan and Manitoba. The governments of all these provinces encouraged the settlement of industrious Japanese agricultural immigrants.

In all provinces except British Columbia, JCs enjoyed the same rights granted to British subjects. There were many Japanese with Canadian citizenship in Alberta, Saskatchewan and the Yukon Territories who had voting rights and used them. In Edmonton, Takuzo Iiyama and 45 JCs voted at the general election on April 17, 1913. Mr. Iiyama belonged to the Liberal Party and others were inclined towards Liberal Party



Kurimoto Japanese Garden, Devon

Voting Rights

In BC, all Asians were denied the right to vote. The Japanese were banned from provincial elections in 1895. That meant when BC removed provincial voting rights from JCs living in the province, they also lost the right to vote at the federal level. Three years later, in 1898, the federal government passed a law to address this barrier. People could vote in federal elections if they contacted the federal returning officer to add their names to the federal voters list. In theory, this new provision went some way to restoring federal voting rights for JCs living in BC, but in practice the measure was not widely known or used. It also required JCs to make a special effort to vote federally, a burden that was not imposed on other Canadian citizens. Many JCs struggled against this prejudicial treatment and advocated for their right to participate in the democratic process like other citizens. In 1900, Tomekichi Homma launched a legal suit to get on the provincial voters list in BC. In the end, the courts ruled that BC could determine provincial voting rights.

In 1920, the federal election law changed again. Provincial voting exclusions were upheld and provincial voting lists were to be used in federal elections without exception. Since most JCs continued to live in BC, this meant they were deprived of their federal voting rights. In 1936, a delegation of the Japanese Canadian Citizens' League travelled to Ottawa to speak before the House of Commons. The delegates, all Canadian-born professionals, spoke at length before a special committee. Some parliamentarians were sympathetic to their pleas, but others were opposed, especially some members from BC. Their request for voting rights was denied.

The forced relocation of JCs to areas outside of BC meant that they were no longer subject to the voting restrictions in BC; technically, they gained the federal right to vote. However, Parliament closed this loophole before the 1944 federal election so that JCs who had been removed from BC could not vote, no matter where they now lived. JCs gained the federal right to vote unconditionally, regardless of province of residence, in 1948.

In Alberta, JCs were not subject to any targeted voting restrictions.

Elections Canada

World War I

During the First World War, with a few rare exceptions, recruitment offices in BC would not accept Asians for military service. To circumvent this practice, over 200 Issei men travelled from BC to Alberta to enlist. Of the 222 who served, 54 were killed. 13 JC men received medals for bravery, including Sergeant Masumi Mitsui, recognized for his service at the Battle of Vimy Ridge.

Sgt. Mitsui and other JC veterans were unsuccessful in their early attempts to persuade the BC government to honour their military service by extending to them the right to vote. In 1925, they formed BC Branch No. 9 of the Canadian Legion to pursue their efforts further, building alliances with other legion branches in BC.

Mitsui was named branch president, and the veterans organized a comprehensive franchise campaign in 1931, when Mitsui led a delegation to Victoria to lobby members of the BC Legislature. Their efforts resulted in the legislative assembly's decision, by a one-vote margin, to grant JC veterans the provincial franchise. They thereby became the first Canadians of Asian heritage to secure the right to vote in BC. This right was only extended to these veterans.



Masumi Mitsui and Masajiro Shisido 1916

Magoichi and Mitsu Okamura

My great grandparents were one of the original JC families to settle in Surrey in 1917, in an area called Strawberry Hill. They had 10 acres on which they grew produce and raised poultry. They had 16,000 sq feet of chicken and feed houses, and 4000-6000 birds. They also had six children.

They were one of the first families to be relocated to Vancouver on April 27, 1942, and were sent to an internment camp in Manitoba where they worked on a sugar beet farm.

OKAMURA, Magoichi and Mitsu

Magoichi Okamura was born in Agenosho Tachibana Cho Oshima-gun, Yamaguchi-ken, Japan, and came to Canada in 1907. He was engaged mostly in logging in Canada. In 1916, he purchased two five acre lots on the corner of 116 Street and 92nd Avenue (road allowance reduced the actual acreages) and settled there in 1919.

The legal description of the property was : Lot 24 & 25, N.E. 1/4 section 36, Township 4, Map 1186, Municipality of Delta, Certificate #52693.

He married Mitsu Kanazawa, who came to Canada from Nishinohama, Migama Oshima-cho, Oshima-gun, Yamaguchi-ken, Japan, in 1919. They grew strawberries on one and a half acres and had one acre each in black currants and gooseberries. Most of the property was fully developed. They also had a complete self-supporting poultry operation consisting of breeding hens and roosters, hatcheries, pullets, laying hens, colony houses and 16,000 square

Chicken yard at Okamura farm with Magoichi Okamura and Shoichi Yamamoto in June, 1923

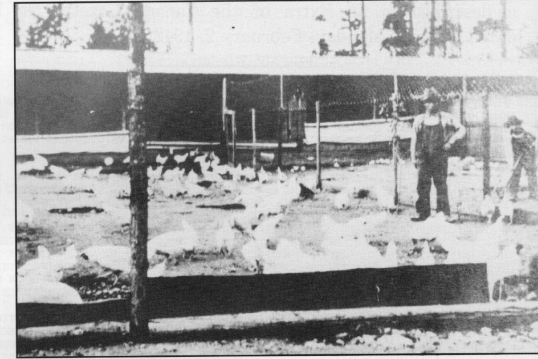
Okamura farm viewed from 92nd Avenue, North Delta: Shoichi Yamamoto, Masayoshi Okamura, Mitsue Okamura with her daughter Kimiye Okamura, and Magoichi Okamura in June, 1923

"Note size of first growth Douglas fir trees compared to second growth at left, which were 150' to 200' tall."

Information provided by:
Mas Okamura

feet of chicken houses and feed houses. The total poultry flock, depending on time of year, was 4000-6000 birds. The operation had a hatching capacity for 5200 eggs every 21 days, with automatic electric incubators for 2500 eggs, coal oil manual incubators for 2700 eggs and electric battery brooders for the chicks.

Their children: Masayoshi Okamura, Kimiye Ohno, Yoshiyuki Okamura, Chiyeiko Tomimoto (died in 1989), Yukio Okamura and Tatsuo Okamura.



Detention and Dispossession (1942-1945)

Twelve weeks after the 1941 bombing of Pearl Harbour, the federal government used the War Measures Act to order the removal of all JCs residing within 160 km of the Pacific coast. At the time the government claimed that JCs were being removed for reasons of “national security,” despite the fact that the removal order was opposed by Canada’s senior military and RCMP officers, who stated that JCs posed no threat to Canada’s security.

20,881 men, women and children of Japanese ancestry, 75% of whom were Canadian citizens, were removed from their homes, farms and businesses. More than 8,000 were moved through a temporary detention centre at Hastings Park in Vancouver, where the women and children were housed in the livestock building. The detainees were shipped to logging camps near Hope and in the Kootenays, to sugar beet farms in southern Alberta and Manitoba, and to road labour camps along the Hope-Princeton and Yellowhead highways in BC, and at Schreiber, Ontario. Those who resisted the removal were shipped to prisoner of war camps at Petawawa and Angler in Ontario.

Between 1943 and 1946, the federal government sold all JC property: homes, farms, fishing boats, businesses and possessions and deducted from the proceeds any social assistance received by the owner while confined and unemployed in a detention camp.

In Alberta, JC families did not have to leave their properties, but were subject to the same restrictions as the newly arrived JCs from BC. Their mail and telephone calls were censored, and they were forced to carry identity cards.



Evacuation Notice in BC, 1942



Fishermen having their boat confiscated, 1941



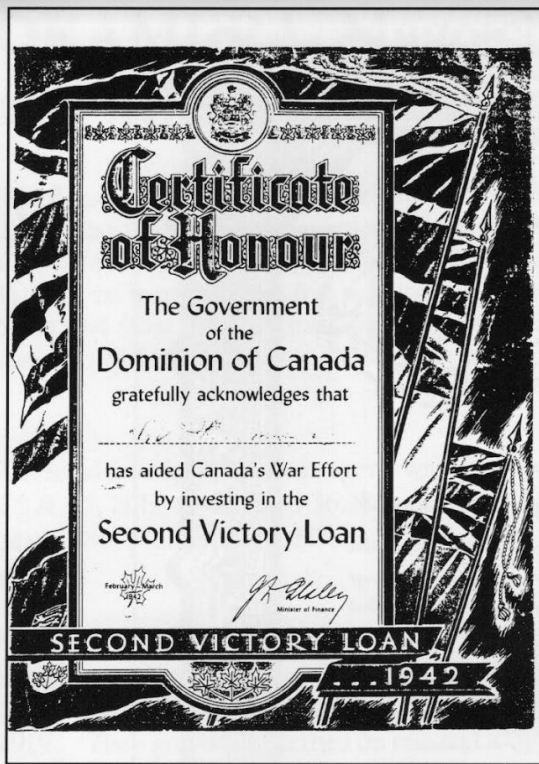
Livestock Building for women and children, 1942



Saying goodbye as families are relocated, 1942



A family being relocated, 1940's



Mr. Okamura's contribution to the war effort in February/ March of 1942 resulted in a Certificate of Honour from the government.

In April, however, he was told by the B.C. Security Commission that the family should be ready at 3:00 p.m. on April 25th to leave their home to work in the "Manitoba Sugar Beet Scheme."

B. C. SECURITY COMMISSION

To Mr. Okamura Date 18.4.42
Manitoba
 Japanese Serial No. 10761
 Parole No. _____

Your family has been selected for the Manitoba
 Beet Sugar scheme.

You will please have everything packed and ready to be loaded on trucks at 3pm on Sat the 25th instant, your family to be ready at same time.

Take blankets and clothes for the trip, and hand baggage, on the coach with you.

You are allowed, in addition, household possessions up to 150 lbs. per adult and 75 lbs. per child under 12. The Commission will pay for baggage up to 1,000 lbs. per family, (including free Railway allowance).

Mattresses should be taken.

[Signature]
 B.C. Security Commission.

[Signature]
 R.C.M.P.

Received the above instructions.
Mr. Okamura April 12 - 1

**Okamura Family
 contribution to
 war effort, and
 notice to relocate
 to Manitoba**



**Okamura Family on their doorstep for
the last time, 1942**



Sugar Beets in Alberta

In BC, farming families were given a choice: stay together and be assigned to a farm in Alberta, or be separated and have the men go to labour camps and the women and children go to internment camps in interior BC. This is how many families came to Southern Alberta.

The homes provided were for summer beet labourers, they were not insulated and offered sparse living conditions. The government offered limited assistance by supplying some building materials to improve their new homes. The detainees were also expected to assist financially in maintaining and upgrading their accommodations with the meager wages earned in the fields.



Takeyasu family in a sugar beet field, 1941-1945



Arriving in Picture Butte, Alberta, 1942



Typical home provided for Japanese Canadian detainee families

It was not unusual to find up to 11 people, including elderly grandparents and young children, living in a 12 x 20 feet shack. The lack of a good and abundant water source was also difficult. Isolation on the beet farms made medical attention difficult and expenses were high.

Nikkei Tapestry

Sgt. Mitsui WWII

In 1942, Mitsui was escorted to Hastings Park in Vancouver to be registered as an enemy alien. Responding to a question from an official there — “What can I do for you, Sarge?” — Mitsui reportedly pulled out his war medals and threw them on the table, asking, “What are the good of my medals?” While his medals were returned to him, he stopped wearing them in public. His farm was seized and he and his family were forcibly relocated to Greenwood, BC.

Following the war’s end, the restrictions on Japanese Canadians were not relaxed. Mitsui’s family was prevented from returning to the coast and the federal government sold their farm without their consent. Forced into financial hardship, they relocated to southern Ontario, eventually settling in Hamilton.

With the movement towards JC redress in the 1980s, Mitsui’s remarkable achievements came to light. In August 1985, when he was 98 years old, Mitsui was invited back to Vancouver as the honoured guest in a ceremony to relight the lantern at the Japanese Canadian War Memorial in Stanley Park, which had been extinguished in 1942. Masumi Mitsui died in 1987, a few months before his 100th birthday.



Sergeant Mitsui after WWI

Postwar Period (1946-1988)

In 1945, the “East of the Rockies” order was issued by PM Mackenzie King. It gave JCs two options: resettle outside of BC, with a minimum of government assistance, or sign up for “voluntary repatriation” to wartorn Japan once the war ended. In the latter case, they could receive financial assistance. Though officially neutral, Ottawa’s policy was designed to pressure JCs into giving up their citizenship and leaving the country.

The majority of JCs agreed to move east of the Rockies, though they still faced legal restrictions. Once the war ended in 1945, Ottawa issued orders to deport the 10,000 people who, by refusing to move, were deemed to have “agreed” to “voluntary” repatriation. JCs and their allies mobilized to block this deportation. The matter went to the Supreme Court of Canada which upheld the constitutionality of this involuntary deportation.

In 1946, the press shared the deportation plans which resulted in a massive public protest from all parts of Canada. Referring the matter quickly to the courts to buy time for a political solution, the federal government accelerated the dispersal of JCs to eastern provinces and expedited the deportation of 4,000 JCs 2,000 of whom were aging Issei who had lost everything and despaired over starting again, and 1,300 of whom were children under 16 years of age. The remaining 700 were young Nisei over 16 years of age who would not abandon their aging parents.

King ultimately dropped the policy in the face of public opposition. Many of the 4,000 had to wait for years before they could return. Meanwhile, the government maintained the wartime restrictions on JCs. They were not allowed to return to the West Coast until 1 April 1949. JCs were also received the right to vote in 1945.

Postwar Period (1946-1988)

With the East of the Rockies policy, JC communities began growing in Prairie and Eastern provinces. The Nissei and Sansei generations established businesses, received educations, and moved to cities. There was a boom of immigration from Japan in 1967, when immigration laws were amended and a point system was instituted. Many Japanese immigrants during this period worked in business, the service sector and skilled trades. This also sees the start of JC multi-generational communities mixing with new Japanese immigration.

During this time, the Edmonton Japanese Community Association, the Calgary Japanese Canadian Association, and the Nikkei Cultural Association in Lethbridge were formed.

The Canadian Encyclopedia
Edmonton Japanese Community Association



Edmonton Japanese Canadian Community



Postwar Period (1946-1988)

In the late 1970s, redress of the wrongs suffered during WWII became the primary focus of the National Association of Japanese Canadians. They wished to persuade the federal government to acknowledge wartime wrongs, to negotiate compensation for those who were wronged and, most importantly, to change Canada's laws to prevent other Canadians from suffering similar wrongs. In 1984, then PM Trudeau's government responded to NAJC's request for redress by expressing its regret for the wartime internment policy, but did not offer financial compensation. The argument was that other ethnic groups had also suffered historical discrimination, and said that the government could not begin to correct all past historical injustices.

In 1988 after many negotiations between the government and the NAJC, PM Brian Mulroney rose in the House of Commons to acknowledge the wartime wrongs and to announce redress compensation.

In 2012, the government of BC apologized to JCs for its role in their internment and dispossession. Vancouver City Council apologized the following year.



PM Brian Mulroney and Mr. Art Miki, 1988

Notable Figures

Dr. Gordon Hirabayashi, an American human rights advocate, moved to Edmonton and became the Chair of the Department of Sociology at the University of Alberta in 1963. He was actively involved in the Edmonton Japanese Community Association and founded their newsletter, Moshi Moshi, to keep the community informed during the redress movement. He was a well-known and active member on the NAJC Council during the 1980s. His historical perspective and strong belief in individual rights helped shape the NAJC redress principles and laid the groundwork for future redress settlements. He received the NAJC National Award in 2003. Dr. Hirabayashi died in 2012. He was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom posthumously by President Obama.

National Association of Japanese Canadians

Art Miki was president of the NAJC during the redress movement in the 1980s. Miki described the settlement as marking "a great day for justice and human rights" and "a historic day for Canadians of Japanese ancestry who have been struggling so long to resolve the injustices of the 1940s". Miki was later the Director of the CRRF and in 2012 was awarded the Order of Manitoba.

Wikipedia



Dr. Gordon Hirabayashi



Art Miki

JCs Today



The postwar generation grew up in overwhelmingly White-dominated communities. The remnants of the pre-war JC community persisted only in three newspapers and a few churches, temples and community clubs in the largest cities. Scattered, and without contact during their youth with other JCs, many of the Sansei speak English or French but little or no Japanese, and have only limited knowledge of Japanese culture, past or present. More than 75% of Sansei have married non-Japanese partners.

[The Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

In 2021, Statistics Canada showed there were 129,430 JCs, or 0.36% of the total Canadian population. The population is spread evenly over new immigrants and multi-generational families. 42.2% of the total JC population lives in BC, 32.6% in Ontario, and 14.4% in Alberta.

Language loss is a strong concern in the community. In the second generation, 32% maintained Japanese as their mother tongue. In the third generation onwards, only 2% held Japanese as their mother tongue. English was the mother tongue of 96% of the third-and-more generations of Japanese Canadians.

There are significantly more women than men among new Japanese immigrants. The proportion of female immigrants has been about 75% since 1991.

[Takashi Ohki](#)



JCs Today



In Alberta, connection to Japanese culture is strengthened through access to activities and programming, such as language lessons, martial arts, and music. Many of these clubs were founded in the post-war period. These activities are also enjoyed by non-Japanese people interested in culture. There are summer festivals in the three major cities that are open to the public. There are large Japanese gardens near Edmonton, and Lethbridge. Many Albertan cities and towns participate in twinning programs with Japanese cities, where they enjoy student and cultural exchanges.

Across Canada there are efforts of preserving JC history and recording the experiences of elders. In Alberta, there are efforts to increase and improve the content of JC history in school curricula.

There are Buddhist temples located in Lethbridge and Calgary, and a historical Buddhist church in Raymond.



Links for more Information

1. Nikkei History in Southern Alberta- <https://www.nikkei-tapestry.ca/>
2. Sgt. Mitsui- https://youtu.be/7iTMiSU_mIM
3. Sugar Beets- <https://centre.nikkeiplace.org/2020/10/28/bitter-sweet-trail/>
4. More sugar beets- <https://www.nikkei-tapestry.ca/chapter/arrival-in-southern-alberta>
5. East of the Rockies- https://www.nfb.ca/interactive/east_of_the_rockies/
6. Edmonton Japanese Community Association- <https://ejca.org/>
7. Calgary Japanese Community Association- <https://calgaryjca.com/wp/>
8. Nikkei Cultural Society of Lethbridge- <https://nikkeiculturalociety.com/>
9. National Association of Japanese Canadians- <https://najc.ca/>



Picture Sources



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[Karate Alberta](#)
[CJCA Omatsuri 2017](#)
[Galt Museum](#)
[Nikkei Tapestry](#)

Slide 3

[Canadian Encyclopedia](#)

Slide 4

[Nikkei Cultural Society](#)

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[EJCA History Project](#)

Slide 6

[Wilfrid Laurier University](#)

Slide 7

[Flickr](#)

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[Nikkei National Museum](#)

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North Delta History and Heritage (2020 4th edition), J. MacDonald.

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[Canadian Encyclopedia](#)
[Vancouver Public Library](#)
[CBC News](#)

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North Delta History and Heritage (2020 4th edition), J. MacDonald.

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[Galt Museum](#)

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[Consulate General of Japan in Calgary](#)
[Nikka Yuko Garden](#)
[Kita no Taiko](#)

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Supplied by Gordon Okamura