

Context:

Gabriola, history

Citation:

Reeve, Phyllis, The Japanese-Canadians of Silva Bay, *SHALE* 25, pp.3–8, March 2011.

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Errors and omissions:

Reference:

Date posted:

June 10, 2012.



Sunrise Lumber Company, Gabriola Island

Courtesy Sheila Bradley

The Japanese-Canadians of Silva Bay

by Phyllis Reeve

Yoshimatsu Shinde and the Sunrise Lumber Company, 1918–1925

A large photograph, 24" × 36", of the sawmill that used to exist in Silva Bay once hung in the B&K store near Twin Beaches. It was one of a number of other historic photographs from the collection of Sheila Bradley. After Sheila sold the store in the 1990s, she and the new owners, the deGroots, gave the display to the then new Gabriola Museum.

The view in the photograph looks toward the shore from the end of a log-boom with the

sawmill in the background. Two people, their faces shaded and unidentifiable under hat brims, sit on the boom and look towards the water.

A second photograph in the Museum collection shows a closer view of the sawmill building, again looking from the bay towards the building. Captioned "Japanese sawmill in Silva Bay", dated 1923 and unfortunately very faded, this image came from Joe and Hertha Davis, members of the extended Silva family who lived around the bay.



Japanese sawmill at Silva Bay 1923

Gabriola Museum Archives 1987.001.001

In her chapter on the Silva Family in *The People of Gabriola*,¹ June Harrison tells us that the “Sunrise Lumber Company” was “...run by a man by the name of Tanaka” on land leased from John Silva.² This information appears also on the Gabriola Museum website and elsewhere, and is ultimately derived from the 16-page “Compilation of Material pertaining to the History of the Families of John Silva, William Blank, and Robert Shaw” by John Silva’s grandson Leo Nelson and his wife Gaylia, presented to the British Columbia Archives in 1975.³

Unfortunately, we have found no other evidence for the existence of Mr. Tanaka. But other fragments of the story, as gathered by June Harrison, fit into a pattern for which there proves to be plenty of evidence.

In 1921, Abraham Crocker obtained permission from Victoria for the construction of the East Gabriola School on donated land close to the log church, and the Sunrise Lumber Company cut the wood.⁴

¹ June Lewis-Harrison, *The People of Gabriola—A History of our Pioneers*, 1982. The book is still in print.

² *The People...* p.49.

³ BC Archives MS-0242.

⁴ *The People...* p.49.

Elsewhere in the book, Grace Crocker Gibson, daughter of Abraham, refers in passing to the “Sunrise Saw Mill”,⁵ and in the collection of reminiscences edited by Peggy Lewis Imredy,⁶ Mrs. Gibson tells us that her father beachcombed for logs that the mill sawed into lumber for the school.⁷

For years, I paid little attention to the history of Japanese people at the “north” end of Silva Bay. My interest centred on the Koyama family who from 1934 to the fateful year 1942 operated a fish camp and store where Page’s Marina is now. I could learn nothing about their postwar life, until a sudden serendipitous reading put me on the trail of both families.

The books: *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet; BC’s Japanese Canadian Fishermen*, by Masako Fukawa with Stanley Fukawa and the Nikkei Fishermen’s History Committee,⁸ and its companion volume: *Nikkei Fishermen of the BC Coast; their biographies and photographs*,⁹ are invaluable sources of information about the Japanese community on the west coast, as well as about the complete history of the BC fishing industry.

In a paragraph about the *kika-Nisei*, people who were born in Canada but sent to Japan

⁵ *The People...* p.179.

⁶ Peggy Lewis Imredy (ed.), *Gabriola Island*, prepared for the Gabriola Three Schools Reunion at Silva Bay Resort, Gabriola Island, August 4, 1984.

⁷ *Gabriola Island...* p.50.

⁸ Masako Fukawa et al., *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet*, Harbour Publishing, 2009.

⁹ Masako Fukawa et al., *Nikkei Fishermen of the BC Coast*, Harbour Publishing, 2007.

for their education, this passage caught my eye:

Yoshiharu Shinde was nineteen and attending a business school in Osaka when called home in 1925. Fire had destroyed his father's sawmill on Gabriola Island, and presumably money was no longer available to keep him at school.



Yoshiharu (*left*) and his father, Yoshimatsu Shinde, worked as fishermen until 1942, when their boats were confiscated, and they were “relocated” to road camps far from the coast. After the war, Yoshiharu returned to

fishing, but not to Gabriola. He married Eiko Ishida, the daughter of a fisherman. One of their children is Masako Fukawa, the author of the book I was reading.

Although “home” for Yoshiharu was not Gabriola, but Steveston, where he had been born in 1907, he and his older brother Kichitaro spent enough time at the sawmill to retain fond memories many years later. After I contacted Masako Fukawa by email, she replied:

According to my uncle, my grandfather's mill was located in Silva Bay. He pointed to it on the map of Gabriola and mentioned the names of two women who lived nearby. My recollection is that the girls were the daughters of the landowner who lived nearby (up the hill?). In the 1980s, we went with my father to Silva Bay to look for any remains of the mill—pilings for example—but did not see any. The name “Sunrise” seems appropriate in that the Japanese flag was a rising sun.

Her husband, Stan Fukawa, added:

What I remember about Mas's uncle's comments were how fondly he seemed to remember the two sisters (I think he said they were sisters). I got the impression that

the one who had the 3 or 4 syllable English-sounding name was a most charming young woman, such that an old man would remember her quite vividly 50 or 60 years later. I'm sorry I can't remember the lady's name. It struck me as being not the usual Canadian name but one that would be more normal for someone with a preference for traditional English names—perhaps that ran in the family. It wasn't Gwendolyn but was something of that sort or so it struck me.

Masako's uncle's name was Kichitaro Shinde who went to school probably in Vancouver and was trained as a bookkeeper.

We must regret that they did not visit Grace Gibson on that trip in the 1980s to Silva Bay. Perhaps she, despite having a one-syllable name, was the “most charming” lady. Both Shinde brothers died in 1986, Yoshiharu in Nanaimo, and Kitchitaru in Grand Forks BC.

Continuing his research into Japanese sources, Stan Fukawa found and translated the entry in the *Kanada Zairyu Doho Soran*, by Nikka Jiho Sha,¹⁰ titled, *Biography of Sawmill Company President: Yoshimatsu Shinde*. The entry read:

Original domicile: Mio-mura, Hidaka-gun, Wakayama-ken [southern Japan].
Current address: Gabriola Island, BC, Canada, British Empire.

Many early BC Japanese immigrants came from this village, Mio, in the Wakayama Prefecture. As was the custom, Shinde retained close ties with his home village and visited family there, sometimes staying for extended periods. The entry continued:

In Sept. 1906, he returned to Canada and fished from Steveston for 5 years. In 1912, he opened a grocery and general store and, just as his business was beginning to thrive, he lost everything in the Great Steveston Fire

¹⁰ Edited by Yoshio Matsue, published in 1920, p.370.

of 1918. He ‘thought deeply and meditated’ on his future, and ‘with a brave and indomitable spirit and a quick and clear mind’ changed directions and in September 1918 joined forces with Fujiichi Matsunaga, Sentaro Namidome, and Matsunosuke Shinde (his younger brother), raised \$30,000, and formed the Sunrise Sawmill Co. At present, the enterprise is developing daily with good results. It is said that the mill has the capacity to mill 20,000 board feet.

The Sunrise Lumber Company is listed in the 1923 (5th Edition) of the ABC Lumber Directory, as follows:

Sunrise Lumber Co., South Gabriola, BC
 Established 1919
 Y. Shinde President & Manager
 K. Shinde Sales Manager
 Manufacturers of Fir Cedar Spruce Hemlock;
 Finish Lumber, Dimensions (ie 2 × 4s), Ties,
 Boxes
 Daily production capacity 15,000 board feet.

Forest history researcher, Tim Woodland, tells me that this figure suggests a smaller, local business mill as compared to the big industrial mills of the day at 200,000+ board feet per day. Sunrise is not listed in either the 1921 (4th Edition) or 1924 (6th Edition).

Masako Fukawa commented on the listing:

Y = Yoshimatsu Shinde, my grandfather; and
 K= Kichitaro Shinde, my uncle (my father,
 Yoshiharu's, elder brother).

It was my uncle Kitchitaro who said that the sawmill was destroyed by fire. The mill was operating in 1923 and my father applied on July 8, 1925 to return to Canada, so we can safely deduce that the fire occurred sometime between these two dates.

For a while, the Silva children played on planks and pilings left from the sawmill, until, according to Annie Silva Koehler, Jimmy Davis fell through the rotten wood

and ruptured a kidney, ending that game and the story of the Sunrise Lumber Company.¹¹

We have found no trace of the “man by the name of Tanaka”. Perhaps the interviewee “mis-remembered” after fifty years? But we have found Yoshimatsu Shinde, whose brave and indomitable spirit sustained him through his fishing career interrupted by two disastrous fires and the even worse disaster that was the war.

Kanshiro Koyama **“The Japanese People where** **Page’s is now”**

Koyama’s store at the southern end of Silva Bay is mentioned by both Bill Coats and Jimmy Rollo in interviews documented in June Harrison’s book.¹² Reminiscences from the Page family told me a little more.

The Koyamas, like the Pages, were fishermen, and their store, listed in the Gabriola directory as a general store from 1934 to 1942, was also a fishing-buying wharf, trading at least as much with boaters as with landlubbers. So, when Jack and Les Page from Galiano acquired the store in 1943, they were not strangers either to the previous owners or to Silva Bay. Two buildings sat on floats close to the shore.

Peggy Lewis Imredy lived on Gabriola as a child from 1930–38, and she remembers the Koyama business. In her *Gabriola Three Schools Reunion* publication she included a photo of the store and wharves, with boats the *Wanderer* and the *Gabriola Pass* and an unnamed boat belonging to Louis Silva.¹³

She wrote:

First day of the open blueback season was always an exciting day, as each trolling boat reported in with the number of fish they had

¹¹ *Gabriola Island...* p.105.

¹² *The People...* pp.60 & 128.

¹³ *Gabriola Island...* p.61.



Koyama's store and fish buying wharf at Silva Bay, 1938. The *Wanderer* and *Gabriola Pass* are two boats identified and Louis Silva's boat, not named.

from Peggy Imredy (ed.) *Gabriola Island*

caught. I do not remember which fish buying company Koyama represented, but salmon was the important fish. Cod was not considered a saleable fish. We could all catch our own if we wanted to eat cod.

Koyama had a tank where he kept cod until it was needed for his Japanese employees' use.

The attitude to cod would change during the war.

Peggy's family lived on Cooper Road near Gabriola Pass. Even though their property was inland, they could hear fishing boats passing, and could tell by the sound of the engines which boats belonged to Japanese fishermen. Their motors were much the most powerful.¹⁴ Masako Fukawa describes the enterprise and innovation that created those boats and engines in the *Boat Builders* chapter of his book.¹⁵

Kanshiro Koyama's name is listed among the displaced fishermen in Fukawa's 2007 book, but without biographical information. In response to my question, she recalled Frank Koyama, who had a seafood company at Brechin Point in Nanaimo.

Subsequently, the Gabriola Museum received a query about E.G. Taylor, a

fishing inspector and friend of the Koyama family. According to this researcher, Frank Koyama's store supplied fish to Nanaimo restaurants, and his brothers were fishermen, at least one of them living on Gabriola.

With this information, we have a little more context for the Koyamas of Silva Bay. We know a tiny bit more about their family and friends. But we still know nothing about their lives after their internment.

Postscript or Prologue: Before the Sawmill and the Store

The 1911 Census lists eight Japanese names for Gabriola Island. The hand-written names may easily have been miswritten, so this list is an approximation.¹⁶ Three—K. Manakora, K. Shimada and T. Haseguwa—state their occupation as “logger” and their place of work as “woods”. Five—K. Fukurama, S. Shimuzo, K. Tsumi, D. Yada, and G. Hayanaka—are “fishermen” employed at the “cannery”.

What, if any, was the relationship between the loggers and the Sunrise Lumber Company? Or between the fishermen and Koyama's store? Who were Koyama's “Japanese employees” referred to by Peggy Imredy? Where and when was the cannery? Did Koyama build his fish business on the site of an earlier one? Or did the fishermen listed in the census live or camp on Gabriola and work at one of the canneries in Nanaimo?

One old-timer, whose family has lived on the island since 1920, believes the Japanese arrived before World War I and were on Gabriola at Silva Bay and on Valdes and other nearby islands, working as fishermen until 1942.

¹⁴ Telephone conversation, March 29, 2010.

¹⁵ *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet...* pp.58–72.

¹⁶ More common *Nikkei* family names were Shimada (?Shimada), Hasegawa (?Haseguwa), Tsuji (?Tsumi), and Tanaka (?Hayanaka).

Why does the *Three Schools Reunion* publication, while referring several times to two Japanese businesses, give no Japanese names among the schoolchildren?

Unfortunately, we do not yet have access to the 1921 and later census records, which might provide either more clues or further puzzles. What we do know is that there were at least two Japanese families contributing to life on Gabriola through much of the first half of the twentieth century. When we remember the veterans and victims of the Second World War, we might spare an extra moment of silence for the “relocated” fishermen and their families.

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Thanks to: *Sheila Bradley, Tim Brown, Paul Champion, Masako Fukawa, Stan Fukawa, Jenni Gehlbach, June Harrison, Barrie Humphrey, Peggy Lewis Imredy, Gail Page, Les and Joan Page, and Tim Woodland.*
