

## Community Records and the Human Experiences of the Uprooting of Japanese Canadians

Eiji Okawa and Landscapes of Injustice Research Collective



(Morishita Family Collection, 2011.79.3.3-1, Nikkei National Museum)

### The Wealth of My Home (*Wagaya no tomi*)

My house is merely ten-*tsubo* (approx. 300 square feet; read SMALL)

The yard is no more than three (approx. 100 square feet; read TINY)

Some say it's so small, that it's very cramped.

It may be cramped, but it's enough to fit my legs.

The yard might be small, but it's enough for me to look up and gaze upon the vast, azurean sky, or take a few steps and think of eternity.

The divine moon and sun shine upon this space, and the four seasons come here, too.

Wind, rain, snow, and fog all come and go, one at a time.

The joy the place brings is not slight.

Butterflies come and dance, cicadas come to sing, birds come to play and in the fall,  
fireflies come and chirp.

When I perceive things quietly, I come to know that much of the wealth of the universe is  
right here in my tiny lot.

On one spring day in Lemon Creek, British Columbia, Teiji Morishita penned this poem in his elegant handwriting. To be sure, the poem is not his creation. The writer Tokutomi Roka composed it, and included it in his bestselling collection of essays entitled *Nature and Life* (*Shizen to jinsei*), which was published in Japan in 1900. The poem must have resonated with Teiji. He copied the first four lines of the poem three times, as if to memorize it by heart. Perhaps he wanted to recite it, naturally and spontaneously, as he sat in his then dwelling and contemplated on the meanings of the space that surrounded him. Maybe he wanted to share it with his peers as they socialized through the cultural medium of poetry.

With its eloquent expression of the intangible riches of a tiny home, the poem itself is poignant and enchanting. But it is the context in which Teiji wrote this poem that I want to draw attention to. It was written on March 11, Shōwa 21. In our calendar system, that's 1946. By this time, he had lost his home and business. Teiji was one of the approximately 21,000 people of Japanese heritage who were evicted from their own homes and communities as the Canadian government classified them as "enemy aliens" who threatened national security. His home on East Cordova Street in Vancouver, situated beside Oppenheimer Park where the Asahi's played ball, was seized by the government office that called itself the Custodian of Enemy Property. It was later sold without his approval. His business, the Ebisuzaki store, located on Powell Street, was forced to shut down. Like other homes, businesses, and tools and equipment of various trades that belonged to Japanese Canadians, his store was in the process of being liquidated. Teiji was left in a dire situation. He needed to support his six children and his wife Sawa by performing menial labour that his career in business had not prepared him for. Actually, on the day that he wrote the poem, he spent eight hours chopping wood.

The poem compels us to consider the experiences of Japanese Canadians when they were forcibly dispossessed and displaced in the 1940s. What was on Teiji's mind when he wrote the poem? Surely, Teiji would have had an intimate and painful understanding of the wealth of a home and what it meant to lose it all. What did it mean for Japanese Canadians to lose their homes and properties, and be forced to start their lives over in unfamiliar places? What happened to them, and how did they cope with the challenges that confronted them? How did policies that mercilessly deprived them affect their lives? How did they express themselves? What records have they left us? What do those records say, and how might they be used to deepen our engagements with our past?

These are some of the questions that I want to explore with you in a series of articles on the source materials of the Japanese Canadian experiences in the 1940s. And I want to do so by sharing with you some of the historical documents that I have encountered in my research. The records are part of Community Records, which are documents and other types of historical materials that have been preserved by Japanese Canadians.

Last summer, I worked as research assistant for Landscapes of Injustice, a multi-year collaborative project that is dedicated to recovering and grappling with the mass displacement and dispossession of Japanese Canadians enacted by the Canadian government (please see <http://www.landscapesofinjustice.com/>). My task was to survey the Japanese-language sources that are housed in the Nikkei National Museum in Burnaby. With the guidance of Linda Kawamoto Reid, the research archivist of the museum, we found many documents from the 1940s. As I pored over the texts, I soon realized how precious they were in offering glimpses of the complex lived experiences of the past. Much of the records, moreover, were new materials that have yet to be utilized by researchers. Partly, this is because the primary focus in telling the Japanese Canadian experiences of the 1940s has been what the government did to them, and the racist impulses that informed discriminatory policies. Given that the ordeal of Japanese Canadians were direct results of the government's blatant violation of their civil rights, this is only natural. However, there is a diverse range of source materials on the subject that can expand our understandings of the tumultuous 40s. Another reason why community records tend to be underutilized in existing studies is language. Many of the records are in Japanese-language, and in handwritings that look considerably different from what one encounters in printed materials.

Community records were produced, kept and preserved by community members for themselves. As such, they offer first-hand accounts of historical events from the perspective of the people who lived through them. This contrasts from official records of the governments that were produced and preserved by public officials for the purpose of governance and administration. While policies and government records need to be examined to uncover and scrutinize the political machinations that carried out in the coercive uprooting, they are limited in telling us about the human impacts and experiences of that uprooting. Community records, on the other hand, tell us how people thought and acted under the duress of racist forces and policies. The records also speak to us about the dynamics within the community before, during and after the tumultuous 40s. They are remnants and vestiges of history itself.

At the same time, community records are diverse. They include not only correspondence among family and community members and subjective writings such as diaries, essays and poems, but also formal documents and pronouncements of the government, as well as correspondence with government agencies including the office of the Custodian. Indeed, community records present precious voices from that past that are indispensable for presenting a fuller picture of the history of Japanese Canadians, and more broadly of twentieth century Canada.

Further, a lot of the records were written by Issei. It was the people of the Issei generation who laid the foundation of the Nikkei community in Canada with their sweat, tears and even blood. It was they who witnessed the fruits of their long and grinding struggles dissolve by the high-handed measures of the government. The poem, for instance, was part of the records that Teiji had accumulated through his life experiences in Canada. He landed in the country in 1920 at age seventeen. He came from Uruzū in Fukuoka prefecture, in northern Kyushū, to help with the Ebisuzaki store that was established by Masatarō Ebisuzaki. Teiji's elder sister, Hide, had married him. With his background in business, Teiji was a meticulous record-keeper. His records include those related to the management of the store in the pre-war era, the struggle of the family

during the great rupture of the 40s, and correspondence and diaries in the postwar era. These materials were donated to the Nikkei National Museum by Teiji's eldest daughter, Nancy Morishita, and are now archived in the museum under the title *Morishita Family Collection* (hereafter abbreviated as *MFC*).

Landscapes of Injustice is committed to disseminating its research outcomes to the public through various channels and sub-projects, such as museum exhibits, teacher resources, and media outreach. But since community records belong to the community, the findings should be shared first and foremost with the community. It is in this spirit that I endeavour to launch this article series. Please note, however, that I will not be trying to present a clear and well-organized accounts with coherent storylines. Rather, the articles will introduce selective documents and records that will be featured in part or full. The documents are raw records of events and problems that had great immediacy for the persons involved. By reading them closely, we can explore the circumstances that surrounded those persons, and imagine and reconstruct the complex experiences of our past. Because the documents deal with diverse and specific matters, I will briefly discuss the backgrounds and relevant issues. But I want to let the documents speak, and allow readers to think about history through the voices from the past.

### **Teiji's Letter**

Exactly a month before Teiji wrote the poem, he sent the following letter to B.R. Dusenbury at the Custodian's office in Vancouver (*MFC*, 2011.79.1.1.2g)

Lemon Creek, B. C.  
February 11, 1946

Mr. B.R. Dusenbury  
Administration Department  
Custodian's Office  
Vancouver, B. C.

Dear Sir:

Thank you very much for your recent letter. I wish to place before you my earnest request to withdraw out of my account which you hold.

You allowed me, last December, the sum of \$35.00 for my wife's false teeth. Though I am very grateful for your consideration, this was not enough to meet the dentist's charge.

This winter, until recently, I was very glad because of the mild weather. But now the winter is really here this late. It snows almost every day. My children need overcoats, warm enough to pass this winter, this severely cold weather. My children are going to school and kindergarten in old rags—each wearing ones handed down from his elders. I am very sad to see my children's shabby looking faces, partly due to the

undernourishment and greatly to the insufficient clothings. I want to buy things for them, but you hold the money, all I have.

Furthermore, the deportation of Japanese to Japan seems to be in immediate future. We need to be ready. I am not wanting things which are expensive but few things for each child and for us, things we really need.

I have following six children:

Kuniko,	girl,	age 13,	Shoe size	3
Teruo,	boy,	“ 11	“ “	4
Hatsumi,	girl,	“ 8	“ “	1
Setsuko,	“	“ 7	“ “	12
Misako,	“	“ 5	“ “	7
Kimiye,	“	“ 2	“ “	6.

They all need overcoats. They are wearing things which are beyond patching. They also need warm underwears, dresses, sweaters, stockings, shoes or boots. Whatever we brought from the Coast three years ago, are worn out now.

We will be very grateful if you can see your way and send us about \$150.00 so that we can buy things for them and for my wife and me. If you cannot send me the money, please arrange so that you will be able to send us the clothing. The sizes for children's dresses or sweaters can be judged by their ages.

My wife and I also need clothes, underwear, sweater, dress, and shoes. My wife wears size 14 dresses, size medium in underwears, shoe size 3 ½ or narrow 4. I wear size 38 clothes, shoe size 7.

There is another item you must take care for me. Before the outbreak of this war, I borrowed from my uncle, Mr. Tomizo MIYAMOTO, of 418 ½ West 17<sup>th</sup>, Cheyenne, Wyoming, U.S.A., the sum of \$100.00 in American money. Will you send the sum to my uncle out of my credit you hold. I must pay him back now before I shall be deported.

Appreciating your kindness and consideration, may I rely on your prompt action.

Yours very truly,

---

Teiji Morishita

TM\*KE

As seen here, Teiji needed new winter clothes for his children to bear the brutal cold front that struck Lemon Creek. But he did not have the cash to buy them. Understandably, the clothes that the family brought from the coast had become all worn out. Teiji was put in a helpless situation. Had he been in Vancouver, he could have easily purchased new clothes for his children to keep them warm. But his economic fate turned with the forced dislocation, and he was barely managing to support his family with the meagre wages earned through jobs offered by the British Columbia Security Commission.

But note Teiji's expression, **“you hold the money, all I have.”** He technically had the money. It was in his account that was created with the money attained from the sale of his home. But that account was controlled by the Custodian. Hence, he had to make a formal request to the Custodian to have his money released. In fact, Teiji at this time was receiving what was called monthly “remittances” from the Custodian. His home was sold at \$1,914.24 sometime before October, 1944 (*MFC*, 2011.79.1.1.4a). That sum was deposited in his account. And each month, the Custodian mailed him a \$75 cheque, as remittance that was deducted from the account, enclosed with the statement of the account's balance (*MFC*, 2011.79.1.1.2e-f). Teiji was a meticulous record-keeper, and he made sure to preserve these records.

How did the Custodian respond to Teiji's requests? Thanks to Teiji's scrupulous record-keeping practice, we know exactly how they responded. The following is a letter from Dusenbury, dated February 25<sup>th</sup>, 1946.

Mr. Teiji MORISHITA,  
Reg. No. 05057,  
Lemon Creek, B.C.

Dear Sir: -

In further reply to your letter of the 11<sup>th</sup> instant, we wish now to advise that we have heard from the Department of Labour, Japanese Division here and they do not recommend that we forward to you any of your funds at the present time. Neither do they recommend that we pay Mr. MIYAMOTO as you requested.

The Department states that you have elected to live on maintenance supplied by them.

In view of the above we cannot comply with your letter of the 11<sup>th</sup> instant.

Yours truly,  
(signature)

B.R. Dusenbury,

Administration Department

BRD/DD.

As indicated in the letter, Dusenbury consulted officials at another government office, Department of Labour, before making the call. These men of Canadian officialdom were fully aware of the hardship of Teiji's family, including children as young as seven, five and two. Yet they denied the family the means to obtain adequate winter clothing, a basic necessity of life. Let me reiterate that these men actually thought about the case at hand and discussed it among themselves before handing down the decision. Why did they not release the money? It was Teiji's, after all. And this was recognized by Dusenbury when he wrote that he could not "forward" to him **"any of your funds at the present time."**

The letter is alluding to the racist psyche that was institutionalized in Canadian bureaucratic offices. The keyword is "elected." The rationale for the denial was that Teiji had chosen to live in Lemon Creek, and support his family with the low-paying jobs offered under the aegis of BC Security Commission. But we must ask, what choice did he have? Concealed in the letter are the overbearing constraints that were imposed upon Teiji's family by the Canadian state. Let us note, too, that Dusenbury cleared himself of blame for the decision. He made it clear that the decision was not his but the other office's.

### **The Wealth of a Home**

It is bitterly ironic that Teiji wrote the poem after the above exchange of letters with the Custodian. The wealth of his home had practically vanished. The money that he was entitled to was kept beyond his reach.

What is the wealth of a home? On this, the Custodian's answer is clear. The home was sold at \$1,914.24, and that was its worth, clear and simple. There is little doubt that this figure was considerably less than its actual value, but the assumption was that the home was reducible to a static monetary figure. As far as the Custodian was concerned, once the balance in the account had reached zero, its relation with Teiji would cease. But can we reasonably determine the worth of a home that was forcibly sold by the money made through that sale? As the poem indicates, homes have wealth and meanings beyond what can be measured in dollars and cents.

Interestingly, the poem as a historical artefact is packed with multiple messages. It was written on the back side of a letter that Teiji had written, when he was in Vancouver, to a Japanese-language newspaper that was printed locally. In the letter, he asked the paper to continue to feature his store's ad during the first week of the coming month. There is an elucidating irony here. The wealth of his home was never static. It was generated through the entrepreneurial efforts that he and his family put into their business. His home was a result of hard work, and the wealth of his home was maintained by running the store that catered to the needs of the community. In the next article, we will look at records that show us the relations between Teiji's store and the community, and the disruptions that were caused by the closure of the store.

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