



Victoria crowds at the waterfront near the Japanese Tea Gardens, circa 1915.

Photo: Esquimalt Municipal Archives, V986.18.8

WITHOUT A TRACE

A small but important piano

By Michael Abe

With the invention of the incandescent light bulb in the 1880s came a boom in its production and use. Victoria was no exception: It was a modern city, with many of its better-off homes lit by electricity.

Increasing construction along the Gorge Waterway led to the expansion of the streetcar network along Gorge and Craigflower Roads. The BC Electric Railway bought 20 acres [8 hectares] of land from the Hudson's Bay Company and in a matter of months cleared half of those acres to create a park at its terminus. On July 26, 1905, Tramway Gorge Park was opened to great fanfare, with "GORGE PARK" spelled out in electric candles welcoming visitors and heralding the new industrial "Electric Age." The regular summer tram service ran two cars, each with a capacity of 100 riders paying a

five-cent fare [equivalent to about \$1.15 in 2022]. Trams ran every 20 minutes from the main juncture of Yates and Government Streets to the Gorge Loop in the park.

Tramway Gorge Park quickly became the most popular amusement site in Victoria. Outdoor movies were projected onto a huge canvas sheet, and the park also featured a merry-go-round, a dance pavilion with a fine sprung wooden floor, a roller coaster, the Scenic Railway, and a water slide called "Shoot the Chute." In 1924 a roller rink was added. Circuses, vaudeville

This article is an updated reprint of an article that appeared on October 13, 2020, as #8 in the *Landscapes of Injustice Claim Series*. See their work at <https://www.landscapesofinjustice.com/>



Zenkichi Nishimoto's *yakata* on the Gorge at the Tea Gardens, 1912.

Photo: Esquimalt Municipal Archives, V986.18.1

performances, and side shows came and went. Boating, picnics, swimming, fireworks, high diving acts, hot air balloons, and a bandstand all added to the park's vibrancy.

Japanese businessman Yoshijiro (Joe) Kishida saw an opportunity. Inspired by the 1894 California Midwinter International Exposition in San Francisco

and its popular Japanese Tea Garden, he approached Albert Goward, the manager of Tramway Company, and pitched him the idea of a Japanese tea garden to increase visitor draw. Kishida, Hayato (Harry) Takata, and four other business partners raised \$5,000 [equivalent to about \$115,000 in 2022] and were assigned one acre [0.4 hectares] of land within the Tramway Park. They leased it for \$50 [equivalent to about \$1,150 in 2022] per year. Although the lease was later raised to \$100 [equivalent to about \$2,250 in 2022], they recouped their original investment within a few years.

Joe Kishida sent for his father, Isaburo Kishida, a garden designer employed by the Yokohama Nursery in Japan. The 65-year-old Isaburo arrived by ship on April 19, 1907. Before long, he imported plants and bonsai trees from Japan, designed Japanese-style bridges over winding streams, and installed stone lanterns. Helping with falling the trees, planting shrubs, and building the garden and ponds were Japanese sealers wintering in Victoria harbour. When the Japanese Tea Garden opened on Thursday, July 11, 1907, 786 curious holiday-ers were in attendance—but that number grew to the thousands by the weekend. It was a resounding success: the gardens were beautiful; the location was stunning. And Kishida and Takata had shown a knack for anticipating Victorians' sensibilities.

Harry Takata's brother, Kensuke, would soon join him in the venture, buying Harry's shares when he returned to Japan. Isaburo Kishida returned to Japan in 1910, but not before leaving a legacy of Japanese gardens in Victoria, including those at the Butchart Gardens and at Hatley Castle.

Entrepreneur Zenkichi Nishimoto, a boat builder, constructed a 40-foot-long, 10-foot-wide [12 by 3 metres] Japanese pleasure boat or *yakata* (which most Victorians called the "sampan"). The boat was berthed

Nikkei Legacy: The Story of Japanese Canadians from Settlement to Today (Toronto: NC Press, 1983)

This book is a valuable resource and one of the first to document the century-old Japanese-Canadian story. Born in 1920 and educated in Victoria, Toyo Takata was the oldest of six children to Kensuke and Misuyo Takata. From 1948 to 1952, Toyo was the editor of the English section of *The New Canadian*, the only Japanese-run publication allowed to operate in the internment camps [see issue 54.4 for more on this newspaper]. Because of this experience, and as the president of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre in Toronto, he "became the unofficial historian of the vanished Japanese community of BC." It was through Toyo's research, including interviews with George Nagano, that he determined that George's father, Manzo Nagano, was the first Japanese person to settle in Canada in 1877. He was in error, however. See *BC History*, Spring 2017, "Canada's First Japanese Immigrant: Nagano or Mikuni? This discovery led to the commemoration of the Japanese Canadian Centennial in 1977, celebrated by Nikkei (person of Japanese descent) across Canada. From this Centennial arose a project to publish a pictorial history of the Japanese Canadians, *Nikkei Legacy*, which continues to be one of the most comprehensive books on the Nikkei community from first arrival to just before Redress.

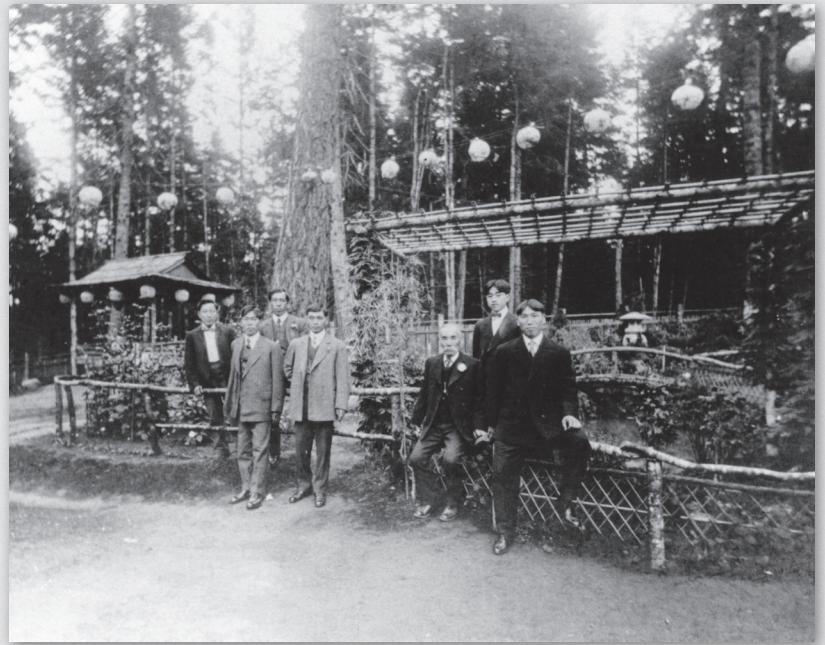
near the swimming area alongside a floating teahouse where cherry blossoms and paper lanterns trimmed the eaves. Crossing a red-lacquered bridge, one would board the vessel adorned with beaded curtains and set with tables for tea, ice cream, and “kindred refreshments.” Bamboo, imitation wisteria, and banners bearing Zenkichi Nishimoto’s name decorated the houseboat itself. Nishimoto ran his successful business from 1909 to 1920. For ten cents [about \$2.25 today], it would take visitors up the Gorge to Craigflower Bridge and back while they enjoyed the scenery, refreshments, and entertainment from a small piano.

When Nishimoto closed his operation to focus on boat building and farming, he moved the piano to his home in the nearby Tillicum area. In 1938, when the Nishimoto family moved to Vancouver, the piano was given to the Takata family.

With federal orders to forcibly uproot Japanese Canadians in 1942, the Takatas were among the 273 men, women, and children herded on to a CPR steamship in Victoria Harbour on April 22, 1942, bound for Hastings Park in Vancouver. After five months in the detention centre there, where they lived under unsanitary conditions, the Takatas were interned in Sandon, a silver-mining ghost town in the West Kootenay. After the war, the family resettled in Ontario.

Records of correspondence from the Office of the Custodian of Enemy Property to the Takata family mention the piano. “If the piano is not to be sent to Kensuke Takata, Mr. Stancil informs me that he is prepared to purchase it, provided the appraised value is within his means. In the alternative it is recommended that it be moved to auction.”

After the family had moved to Toronto, Kensuke Takata’s daughter Toshie wrote to the Office of the Custodian after efforts to preserve her piano from dispossession had failed. Toshie wrote several times to Mrs. Stancil between July 18 and August 1, 1945. In one letter, she writes, “I would like to know if my piano is still under your care. I need a piano very badly now that I have plenty of room to place it. If the cost



Group of Japanese men at Japanese Gardens. Back row of left group unidentified. Front row of left group L-R: Kensuke Takata, Hayato Takata. Right group L-R: Isaburo Kishida (landscape designer), Yoshijiro Kishida (his adopted son), Yoshi Jiro. September, 1907.

Photo: Esquimalt Municipal Archives V986.18.20



Takata children L-R: George, Seiji, Kenji, Toshie, and Toyo, with Marie in front, circa 1939.

Photo: Takata Family Collections



The piano that provided entertainment at the Tea Gardens from 1909–1920.

Photo: Courtesy Dillon and Lisa Takata

of freight is too high it seems rather foolish to have it shipped out here. If I'm able to sell that piano for at least One Hundred Dollars, then with that much plus the cost of freight I can practically buy a piano here . . . I would appreciate it very much if you would buy it from me, much that I'd hate to sell it, but when I know of its owners it gives a different feeling." The Chattel Summary,¹ dated April 17, 1946, indicates that the piano was sold to the Stancils on August 20, 1945.

The Takata family reunited briefly in Toronto before Harry returned to Japan to take care of the family

business. Kensuke's family rebuilt their lives in Toronto. Kensuke became a master of bonsai and returned to his hometown for a visit in 1979 where he died at the venerable age of 95, in the same Japanese house where he was born.

One of his sons, Toyo Takata, became a JC community historian and stayed in touch with many friends and classmates in Victoria. He wrote *Nikkei Legacy* [see sidebar on page six] and he helped build Takata Garden at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific in Victoria. His grandson, Dillon Takata, the great-grandson of Kensuke Takata, returned to Victoria where he is a doctor. He and his wife, Lisa Hansen, got married in 2016 in the Takata Garden, and they have been deeply involved in the tea house revitalization campaign since it began. The successful campaign will see the completion of the Esquimalt Gorge Pavilion with Japanese aesthetic design features in early 2022. Members of the Takata family were in attendance on October 15, 2021 for a ceremonial planting and unveiling of the Takata Cherry Forest with more than 26 trees donated by the Takata family, which included a good portion from the estate

of Toshie Takata, who had passed away just a few years before.

But what became of the piano?

Shortly after the initiative for the revitalization of the Japanese Tea House in Gorge Park began, the Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society (VNCS) received this email:

My name is Steven Lennon and I have lived in Victoria all my life (as did my parents and grandparents). I read with interest the article in the *Times Colonist* on April 14, 2019, and believe that

Horticulture Centre of the Pacific

After Redress in September 1988, community funds were available across Canada for capital projects that served the Japanese-Canadian community. A campaign was underway in Victoria to rebuild the Japanese gardens at the Gorge, but the Takata Garden Society was frustrated by bureaucracy from the Esquimalt Parks and Recreation. (A far cry from the incredible support seen today from the municipality of Esquimalt, mayor and council, and Esquimalt parks and recreation.) In 1995, some of the funds raised were used to donate 15 *sakura* (cherry blossom trees), a plaque, and a memorial stone that commemorated the history of the gardens. The majority of the funds were used to build Takata Garden and Teahouse at the Horticulture Centre of the Pacific. Begun in 1995, the Takata Garden opened in 1999 with members of the Takata family in attendance. A Zen-style viewing room was added in 2003, overlooking a small traditional-style teahouse that hosts events, tea ceremonies, and weddings.

As noted in *Gateway to Promise* by Ann-Lee and Gordon Switzer, one of the most exciting additions happened in 2008 when two of the cut-leaf maples originally located at the Japanese Tea Garden at the Gorge, by then 100 years old, were moved from their second home at the former Blair family residence on Goldstream Avenue and successfully replanted in the Japanese Garden.



Dillon Takata and Lisa Hansen were married at Takata Garden in 2016.

Photo: Courtesy Dillon and Lisa Takata

I have the piano that was at the Gardens during the War. As a child, I was told that the “caretakers” were friends with my grandparents, Ernest and Muriel Stancil. They sold it to my grandparents when the original owners at the Gardens were interned during the war.

Over time it came into my possession. I have had it for 41 years while prior to this, my parents and grandparents had it in theirs. I would like to donate to the Society if there is interest in having it.

Steven’s generous offer to finance the refurbishing of the piano and its donation back to the community quickly circulated through social media, and a young Japanese-Canadian musician from Ontario was inspired to compose and perform a piece of music to tell the

story. Another Nikkei artist, a dancer from Vancouver, will team up with her. We look forward to seeing this performance live in the newly opened Esquimalt Gorge Pavilion in 2022.

The provenance of this piano is a wonderful symbol of the dispossession and resilience of a community. ■

Endnotes

1. The Canadian government confiscated the property and “chattels” (movable personal belongings such as cars, boats, furniture, tools, etc.) of Japanese Canadians in 1942. The Chattel Summary listed the seized items of the Japanese Canadians. These items were sold at auctions, often for very low prices, in Vancouver between 1943 and 1947. “The government held the money in accounts for those in the camps, paying no interest, and limited their withdrawals to \$100 per month. Japanese Canadians were forced to use the funds to pay for their confinement.” Greg Robinson, “Internment of Japanese Canadians,” *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/internment-of-japanese-canadians>

Acknowledgements and References:

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Michael Abe is a third-generation Japanese Canadian (Nikkei Sansei), born and raised in Ontario. After spending six years in Japan, Mike and his wife, Izumi, have been living in Victoria, BC (since 1993). They have two children, Kento and Natsuki. Michael was the project manager of Landscapes of Injustice, a major research project headquartered at the Centre for Asia-Pacific Initiatives at the University of Victoria (UVic) that focused on the dispossession of property owned by Japanese Canadians during the 1940s. He is the past president of the Victoria Nikkei Cultural Society (VNCS) and former newsletter editor. He also spearheaded the Gambare Nippon Support Japan 2011 group that raised funds to aid victims of the earthquake and tsunami in 2011. Michael is the co-chair of the VNCS Heritage Committee with daughter Natsuki, a recent history grad from UVic.

Timeline of the revitalization of the Japanese Tea House in Gorge Park

- JANUARY 2017** • Capital Regional District and the Township of Esquimalt agree on an amenity-funding package. The McLoughlin Point Amenity Reserve Funds will be used for capital projects in waterfront parks and recreation facilities. Public is asked for project idea proposals for use of funds.
- FEBRUARY–MAY 2018** • Public online survey of proposals, round one.
- MAY–DECEMBER 2018** • Round two online survey.
- NOVEMBER 2019** • Esquimalt council approves multi-purpose building for Gorge Park.
- JANUARY 2020** • Detailed design phase of the project with Iredale Architecture. Construction commences shortly after.
- JANUARY–FEBRUARY 2022** • Anticipated completion of Esquimalt Gorge Pavilion.
- APRIL 2022** • Planned grand opening with historical display wall.