

“Honoring a 100-Year Old Bridge Across the Pacific”

San Mateo Nippon Gakuyen Centennial

By Dr. Emily Murase

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I want to thank President Steve Katayama for inviting me to join the festivities this evening. He asked me to put today’s centennial into a historical context.

But before I begin, I’d like to know who is in the audience tonight.

If you are a current or alumni student of the school, would you please stand?

If you are a parent or relative of an alumni student, would you please stand?

If you are now or have ever been a teacher or staff member of the school, would you please stand?

If you are now or have ever been a member of the board of directors, would you please stand?

What a fantastic community that has grown up around this very special school!

When the San Mateo Nippon Gakuyen first opened its doors on July 1, 1916, laying the cornerstone for a Bridge across the Pacific, Americans were driving Henry Ford’s affordable Model T cars with newly available electric starters as an improvement over the standard hand crank. Model Ts headed to movie theaters featuring silent movies with Charlie Chaplin, the Tom Cruise of his day.

At that time, bread cost 10 cents, and a dozen eggs was 63 cents. A middle-class family earned just \$1,500 per year and a typical family saved only \$100 annually.

So it was an enormous achievement that the Japanese community composed primarily of *Issei* immigrant farm workers raised a mind-boggling \$3,000 to purchase the school property and facility on 2nd Avenue, in 1919, thereby making Nippon Gakuyen a fully incorporated school. By the way, properties on 2nd Avenue now sell for \$1.3M!

Also in 1919, the 18th Amendment passed, banning alcohol until 1933 when it was repealed, and California adopted the women's right to vote, a full year before women's suffrage was achieved nationally.

As a sign of those early times, Oreo cookies were introduced in 1912, and the zipper was invented in 1917.

In Japan, it was the year Taisho 8. A year earlier, hundreds of thousands of rural fisherman, farmers, and, later, urbanites, protested the 400% increase in the cost of rice due to post-war inflation. The so-called "rice riots" were widespread and resembled the images we are now seeing of Hong Kong protests, including attacks on rice merchants, sit-ins, and large marches against public officials. The government slowly ratcheted down the price of rice and the protests died down.

In terms of foreign policy, World War I ended finally with the signing of the Treaty of Versailles, and a large Japanese delegation to the Paris Peace Conference advocated for racial equity and recognition of Japanese colonial interests in Korea, Taiwan, and Manchuria as part of the founding of the League of Nations.

In urban areas, popular icons included MOBO, the "modern boy" and MOGA, the "modern girl." MOBOs had long hair, wore bell bottom trousers, floppy ties, colored shirts, and round eyeglasses known as ROIDO named for the American silent film star Harold Lloyd. MOGAs wore their hair in a bob, shed their kimono for flapper dresses, and exchanged their *geta* for high heels.

In 1919, actress and singer Sumako Matsui died, as did Princess Sutematsu Oyama, the first Japanese woman to receive a college degree from the US (Vassar College in New York). In that year, future Prime Minister of Japan Kiichi Miyazawa was born.

Another way to appreciate the early beginnings of the school is to reflect on the names of the original founders, names no longer commonly in use such as Sueto, Iwagoro, Montaro, or the names of the early teachers such as Teii, Moto, Nui. In fact, it was during the Taisho era that "ko," originally reserved for female members

of the imperial family, was democratized and became commonly used among average families. These early founders and teachers of the Nippon Gakuyen built the foundation for this very important Bridge across the Pacific.

We are very fortunate tonight to have members of the family of Tsurumatsu Saiki, one of the original 20 founders and teachers of the school, who lived in San Mateo from 1904 to 1950. In fact, it appears that his primary residence was at the school at the time WWII broke out. Please join me in recognizing Mariko and Toshi Abe, the granddaughter and grandson of Tsurumatsu Saiki, Mariko's husband William Shannon, and their two daughters Laurel and Alana. Please stand to be recognized.

Now back to the school history. Just 10 years after its incorporation, the school faced the Great Depression. On October 29, 1929, the stock market crashed on what is now known as "Black Tuesday," quite a shock to the early stages of this Bridge across the Pacific.

According to the *Wall Street Journal*, global GDP fell about 15% as a result of the Great Depression. In comparison, global GDP fell only 1% during the 2008 Great Recession. Unemployment grew to 25% and, as a result of the Smoot-Hawley Tariff Act, international trade plunged by over 50%, and protectionism spread throughout the world. German financial institutions began to fail, fueling the rise of Hitler's Nazi Party.

Farmers were hard hit during the Great Depression and many lost their farms. Immigrants, including the *Issei*, became convenient scapegoats for the economic woes in California and anti-Asian, anti-immigrant sentiment intensified.

Despite international upheavals and domestic turmoil, Nippon Gakuyen school leaders managed to purchase a larger property on South Delaware Street and created two classrooms for an expanded enrollment of 80 students. These determined leaders provided enough support to sustain the shock of the Great Depression and growing anti-Japanese sentiment.

While World War II had its origins in Hitler's invasion of Poland in 1939, it was in 1941 that the United States entered the war. President Franklin Delano Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 in 1942, incarcerating 110,000 Americans of Japanese ancestry in remote desert prison camps. While the war formally ended in 1945, Japanese Americans remained incarcerated in the high security Tule Lake camp until March, 1946.

Miraculously, Nippon Gakuyen re-opened its doors in 1949, enrolling about 50 students, just 3 short years since the closure of the last wartime prison camp for Japanese Americans. Having lost their homes and businesses, many Nikkei families were still struggling to find stable housing and employment and yet the school persisted. It would take over a decade for the school to return to its pre-war enrollment of 80 students.

In the meantime, the City of San Mateo condemned the aging school building and required its demolition, so the school moved and leased space at the San Mateo Buddhist Temple. In 1961, school leaders sold the South Delaware property for \$20,000 and created a trust fund. By the way, a comparable property a block away on South Delaware Street was valued this month at well over \$1 million.

By 1967, school enrollment reached 110 students and grew steadily. By 1989, 70 years after the school founding, enrollment reached 150 students. As you heard from Principal Kerr, today, 100 years after the school first opened its doors, there are 170 students from very diverse backgrounds, not just limited to immigrants from Japan and their children.

Before I close, I'd like to recognize long-time partners of the school.

First, I would like to recognize San Mateo JACL, a long-time partner of the school that has itself been around for 84 years, represented by Kathy Sneath. If you are member of the San Mateo JACL, please stand!

Second, I would like to recognize Reverend Henry Adams of the San Mateo Buddhist Temple and the entire temple congregation for steadfast support of the school. Would you all please stand?

Finally, earlier this evening, I had the chance to speak with Honorary Director Kozo Kimura and his wife Kathleen. All three of their children are alumni of the school and all three are here at the event tonight. Please stand to be recognized.

In closing, I had the opportunity to attend the first day of this year's school term and was truly impressed with the strong community that exists here.

The history of this gem demonstrates the incredible spirit of the Issei generation to establish a solid foundation for a Bridge across the Pacific, the determination of postwar Japanese immigrants and the Nisei generation to build upon that foundation, and subsequent generations to continue in the spirit of the early founders, teachers, and parents.

I want to thank Consul General Tomochika Uyama and his wife Keiko for joining us this evening and for the presentation of the Foreign Ministry commendation. This is quite an honor for the school.

This 100-year old bridge continues to enable young people from the community to move back and forth between the United States and Japan, through language, culture, and, importantly, lifelong friendships.

Each and every one of you have played an important role, contributed a brick or two, to this impervious bridge. Please continue your good work to sustain and expand this bridge so that it will last for at least another 100 years! Congratulations!
Hyaku shuu nen kinen omedetou gozaimasu!