

Back to the future: Revisiting Chemainus, B.C.



Visiting the town where my uncle spent most of his life

Caroline Ishii
Columnist

CHEMAINUS — Returning from Salt Spring Island, I felt a pull to stop in Chemainus on the way back to Nanaimo. I was there 22 years ago with my dad and Aunt Helen to visit my Uncle Rondy, who lived in an old fishing boat on Chemainus' harbour most of his life. That would be the first and last time I would see him. I knew he wasn't well, but I didn't know he was dying of cancer. Uncle Rondy loved Vancouver Island, which was close to Rendezvous Island, where he grew up and the family lost during the Second World War, when their belongings were confiscated and they were put into internment camps in Slocan. "Rondy" was a nickname given to him by other fishermen because he was from Rendezvous, and it stuck, plus it was easier

to pronounce than his Japanese name, Yoshinobu. When Japanese Canadians were allowed to return to the West Coast in 1949, Uncle Rondy was eager to return to Vancouver Island. He bought a boat and was excited to see the island and homestead he had grown up on, only to find out that the land had been taken over by people who did not want him there. The war was over, but the fear and racism towards Japanese Canadians lingered. Sometimes I would ask my dad and Aunt Helen if they wanted to return to Rendezvous. I thought they would want to, and that it would be fun to go with them. Instead they would give me vague answers or change the subject. I was curious why they didn't want to go back. Was it because of the stories from my uncle, when he went back to the island and was told to go away? Did the hate and anger toward the Japanese Canadians during wartime leave deep wounds? Was there sadness lingering from being forced from their homestead so suddenly? They were old enough to be sad about moving away from what they knew and to remember their parents' tears at losing everything, while their younger siblings thought it was more of an adventure and chance to get away from their daily chores and isolation of the island. Maya Angelou, American writ-



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Caroline's father, George, and her Uncle Rondy by his boat in the Chemainus harbour, where he lived for most of his life.

er and civil rights activist said, "I've learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel." As I get older, I understand how true this is. We may forget the details of a person or place, but we will always remember how they made us feel. I understand only now why my dad and aunt never went back. Chemainus harbour has

changed dramatically from when I was last there, with a new marina filled with upscale sailboats. My uncle's old boat would be out of place there now. I felt the spirit of my uncle there. He loved the area, the ocean, his boat and it was his home for most of his life. I whispered "hello" to him and toured the town, which

hasn't changed that much. Chemainus is a town known for its giant outdoor wall murals, with some honouring the 300 Japanese Canadians who settled there between the 1900s and 1940s, all who were taken away. Many people tried to tell that the government at the time that it was wrong to put Japanese Canadians into camps and take away their be-

"We may forget the details of a person or place, but we will always remember how they made us feel."

See CHEMAINUS P. 6

Frankly speaking: A week of voting, Arigato Day and the Raptors



What a week it was— Thanks to *Arigato* Day and the Raptors

Frank Moritsugu
Columnist

By this, the fourth week of October, the Toronto Raptors, have chalked up six wins, a most enjoyable start to the basketball season. Keep it up, fellows. That week also included Ontario municipal elections on Oct. 22. The results were not surprising, but the voter turnout was disappointing, with only 41 per cent of those eligible to vote. I have a feeling the older Japanese Canadians in our province would not have stayed away from the polls. Many of us are originally from B.C. and didn't have the right to vote anywhere in Canada until June 1948. To vote this month, Betty and I only had to take the elevator down a few floors because our voting poll was in our condo building. But in the past, we've been willing to walk or drive long distances, because voting is a must for us.

While waiting for the election results, my mind went back to the very first time I was allowed to vote in a Canadian election. Despite being born in Canada, Japanese Canadians had been denied the vote since the 1890s. For me and some other Niseis, our first vote opportunity to vote happened in 1945, after we became soldiers in the Canadian Army. The national ban on our enlistment had been lifted because Japanese-language interpreters were desperately needed by British forces in Southeast Asia for Japanese prisoners of war. Our group of 23 Nisei privates was on a troopship crossing the Atlantic, from Halifax to Liverpool, on our way to Asia. A notice went up about voting day on the ship. We went along, but as we waited for our turn to get a ballot, one of the guys said, "Frank, will you go ask the officer if us Japanese Canadians can vote? We never have before." So up I went to the *hakujin* lieutenant at the front desk, saluted, and said, "Sir, we're Japanese Canadians, are we allowed to vote today?" The blond officer stood up to his full six-foot-plus height, glared and roared, "Private, everybody in the Army votes!" So I said, "Yessir" and happily rushed back to my comrades. It was the first time each of us had voted. The irony is that after a year or



PHOTOS CREDIT: KELLY FLECK

Nisei Second World War veterans at last year's Remembrance Day ceremony on Nov. 3, 2017.

so serving of Canada in uniform in different parts of Asia, when we returned home and became civilians again, the same old restrictions—including no voting—applied to us again, even if we were overseas veterans. In fact, it wasn't until 1948 that Japanese Canadians got the federal vote—which meant we could finally vote in provincial and municipal elections as well. This year's election day took place the day after the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre's annual *Arigato* Day in Toronto. Hosted by the JCCC Board of

Directors, it's an opportunity to express thanks to the many volunteers for contributing to the successful activities that make the centre so appealing. On Sunday, Oct. 21, nearly 300 members gathered for the event in Kobayashi Hall. Betty and I attended because, in addition to being a volunteer, I had been asked to participate in a certain award presentation. Under Marty Kobayashi's cheerful MCing, we played bingo and then tried a team com-

petition quiz game. After some awards, the *bento* dinner arrived. As usual, they were supplied by Mr. Ishii, who makes everything so tasty. Next on the program was the Nisei Veterans' Award, given for the 12th year. Second World War veteran, Tom Nishio, who created this award, was present with his daughter, Robynn. As the presenter, I went up to the stage. Climbing up the short stairs, I got to the stage with the help of a couple of youngsters.

"So up I went to the hakujin lieutenant at the front desk, saluted and said, "Sir, we're Japanese Canadians, are we allowed to vote today?"

See FRANKLY P. 15

Nikkei Voice

Subscription Form

Name: _____
Address: _____
City: _____ Province: _____
Postal Code: _____ Phone #: _____
Email: _____

Annual subscription rates:

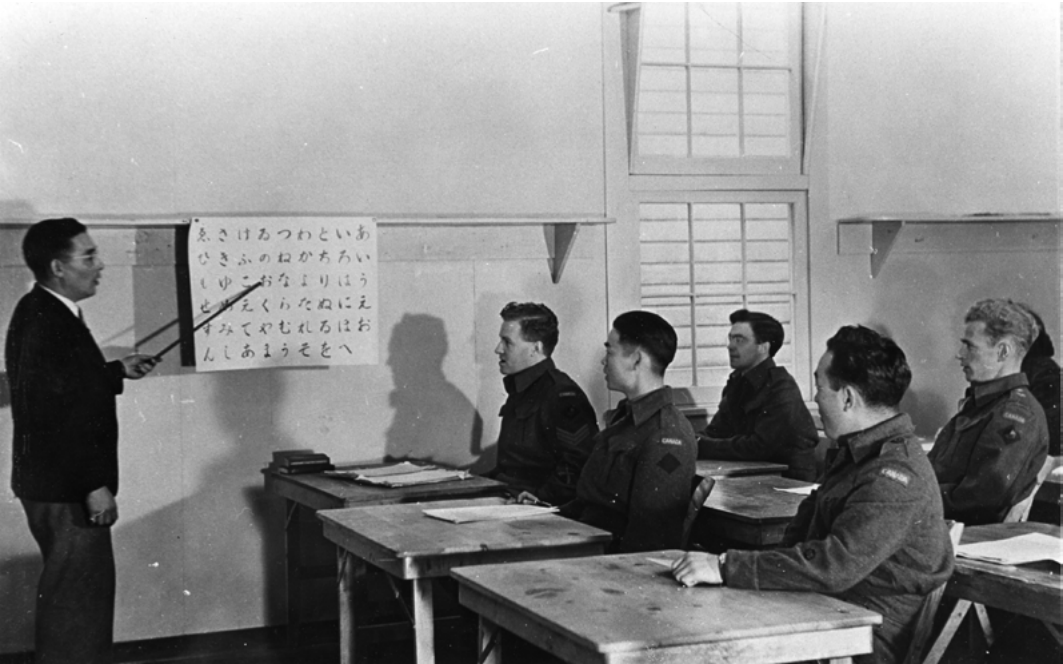
Canada: \$40/CDN (student rate: \$35)
U.S.A.: \$45/U.S.
Overseas: \$60/CDN

Please enclose payment (cheque payable to Nikkei Voice):

Subscription rate: _____
Donation (optional): _____
Total payment: \$ _____

Please forward to Nikkei Voice Business Office:
6 Garamond Court, Toronto, ON M3C 1Z5, Canada

From the Nikkei National Museum’s Collection: LOST AND FOUND



The Nikkei National Museum (NNM) in Burnaby, B.C. is requesting help to identify names, places, and other information or photographs they have in their collections. If you have further information on this photograph, please contact Lisa Uyeda at luyeda@nikkeiplace.org; or call 604-777-7000, ext. 140. When providing information for this photograph, please indicate the title: “Learning the Japanese alphabet S-20, Canadian Army Japanese Language School” accession number (2001.4.4.5.7), and collection: Roy Ito Collection, Date: Circa 1945.

From CHEMAINUS P. 5

longings. But in wartime, the overriding feeling is fear.

Fear clouds our judgment and makes us see what we want to see, blinding us to things that are right in front of us that we may not want to see.

It makes us do things that are safe rather than right, and lash out in hostility versus peacefulness.

"Fear is a lack of trust in ourselves, and because of this, we don't trust life," says writer Louise Hay. Hay says that the only thing that can fill up that gaping hole, is love for ourselves.

My Japanese ancestors may not have seemed to have much love for themselves. It was and still is part of the Japanese culture to give selflessly to others, and the love wasn't outwardly shown in big kisses and hugs in public.

However, there was a quiet, underground love, shown through gestures. The mother feeding her children first, the older brother ensuring his younger sister is taken care of, or my grandmother making bread with the flour collected from neighbours to feed her family and others in the camp.

What is love for ourselves? It is being kind to ourselves, not calling ourselves names or being too critical of ourselves, moving forward despite what is happening in our environment at the time and what people are telling us to do, as well as letting go, when necessary.

Japanese Canadians could not control the Second World War or being moved to the camps in the B.C. interior, but they could control how they would act. Many townspeople came to see the Japanese Canadians being loaded onto trucks and trains and were surprised to see them dressed in their best clothing, not making a disturbance, and going in peace with their heads held high.

Accepting what we cannot control, is one of the greatest things we can do for ourselves because it brings us peace and love for ourselves and others. It has been one of the hardest lessons for me.

Louise Hay says the major cause of much suffering in our society is trying to change what we cannot control. It is hard to take off our rose-coloured glasses at times, to take a hard look at what is before us and within us, and go from there. It starts from the truth, looking at our options, knowing that we have the freedom to do what we want. Even though we may not want to choose an option, it still is an option and choosing to do nothing is also an option.

We may sometimes feel that we don't have a choice, that our wings have been cut and we are not free. This is often far from the truth. While we may think the cage door is closed, it has always been open. It's the cages we put ourselves in where we suffer the most.

Nelson Mandela, South African anti-apartheid revolutionary, political leader, and peace activist was imprisoned for 27 years. He said, "As I walked out the door toward the gate that would lead to my freedom, I knew if I didn't leave my bitterness and hatred behind, I'd still be in prison."

Uncle Rondy accepted that Canada was at war with Japan, a country he had never been to and was only associated with through his Japanese ancestry. He faced racism and hate for the way he looked.

Despite all this, he went back to an area that he loved, bought a boat, and lived a simple life with his Indigenous partner on Galiano Island.

When she died, he moved his boat to Chemainus harbour and lived there most of his life. He took control of his life and had little regrets, despite what life had handed him. Isn't this self-love in



PHOTO COURTESY: CAROLINE ISHII

Chemainus is know for its murals across the town. This one is called, *The Winning Float*, by Joyce H. Kamikura.

action?

He was a generous and kind man, so much that he would give away most of what he owned if someone needed it. Was it a flaw? If so, his siblings were the same. People would often say that my father, George, was too nice, over-generous, and people would take advantage of him. Interesting enough, people would often say the same about me.

From what the Ishii family had been through and having little after the camps, money was important to them. They were always playing the lotteries, there was constant chatter about how much things cost, and stocking up on the necessities on sale was a shared passion. But at the same time, it didn't define them. They lived simple lives and were happier to give than receive.

I realize now, to appreciate where you came from, be grateful for what you have, and be compassionate to others because you understand what it's like to not

have anything, and how it feels to be feared and hated because you look a certain way, is a gift that is needed now more than ever.

We must go back to the future and share this gift, which is love, for ourselves, people we love, and even more for those we may not agree with or understand.

"No one is born hating another person because of the colour of his skin, or his background, or his religion. People must learn

"They loved sharing food with others. 'It tastes better when we eat together,' my dad used to say. I couldn't agree more."

to hate, and if they can learn to hate, they can be taught to love, for love comes more naturally to the human heart than its opposite," said Mandela.

Speaking of love, this column is dedicated to my aunt, Joy Flink, who died suddenly on Sept. 27, 2018, in Spring Creek, Nev. She was born Toshiko Ishii on Aug. 12, 1925, on Rendezvous Island, B.C., the youngest of six children. I am heartbroken by her loss, as

are many. Our world has lost an incredible woman, mother, aunt, and friend. Her life took her to many places, but she was always an Ishii at heart, full of generosity and kindness, cheerful and playful in nature.

If I can have some of those traits passed on to me, in my DNA and from having the opportunity to spend time with her, and her children, I am grateful.

I imagine my Aunt Joy as a sparkling star in the sky. I know she is always with us, watching and encouraging us to carry on with courage and love.

She would be annoyed at people for making a fuss about her and being sad about her loss.

I picture her eating good food with her siblings and laughing. Good food was and is still is important to our family. But more than this, they loved sharing food with others. "It tastes better when we eat together," my dad used to say. I couldn't agree more.
