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Chasing Forgotten Histories: Japanese Workers on America's Railroads

By Miya Hannan

Japanese laborers switching railroad rails.
(Stimson Neg 1406, Japanese steel gang at work near Red Buttes, WY, 1906, Wyoming State Archives)

Faced with strict passport requirements under immigration restrictions, the burden of large travel expenses, medical examinations, and a three-week voyage across the ocean, Japanese emigrants of the Meiji era set out for America—a distant, unfamiliar land where they could not speak the language. What dreams and opportunities drew them there? And in the end, were their hopes fulfilled?

Chasing Forgotten Histories:
Japanese Workers on America's Railroads
Miya Hannan

A few years ago, I happened to visit Missoula City Cemetery, located along the railroad tracks on the north side of Missoula, Montana. As I walked through the nearly 100,000-square-meter cemetery, a gravestone with Japanese writing caught my eye. Looking around, I noticed about 30 gravestones engraved with Japanese names. These gravestones also included information such as the deceased's place of origin, age at death, and year of death. The more I looked, the more curious I became. Most had died around the year 1900, in their teens or twenties, and many were from the same regions in Japan. Many Japanese immigrants settled on the West Coast of the United States primarily due to economic opportunities, the availability of jobs in various sectors, and the presence of a growing Japanese American community. However, Montana is an inland state, still rich in untouched wilderness. I became deeply intrigued: Why had these young Japanese individuals died and been buried in such a remote place at the turn of the 20th century?

When I spoke with the cemetery staff, they told me that a section of the cemetery had been purchased by the Northern Pacific Railway Company for the burial of their workers, and part of that area contains the remains of Japanese laborers. In fact, around 100 graves belong to these workers from Japan. However, many of them have no gravestones, and their names remain unknown. The Northern Pacific Railway was one of several companies, including the Union Pacific Railroad and the Great Northern Railway, involved in constructing transcontinental railroads across the northwestern United States. While it is widely known that a large portion of the railroad labor force consisted of Chinese immigrants, and their contributions have been acknowledged, it is far less known that, following the enactment of the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, many Japanese were recruited and brought to America to work on railroad construction. I was unaware of this myself, even after living in the United States for over 25 years. There are many things I only came to learn after leaving Japan—such as the Nanjing Massacre during the Second Sino-Japanese War and the incarceration of Japanese Americans during World War II. These experiences have made me deeply aware of the importance of viewing things from both the inside and the outside in order to truly understand them.

Most of the relatives of the workers buried in Missoula City Cemetery still do not know that their loved ones' remains lie there. One of the graves with a headstone had a monument inscribed in Japanese. It read: "A quest for my grandfather's tombstone took me to a distant land, Montana. —Kazuo Watanabe." Mr. Watanabe, a former school principal, spent three years after retirement tracking down his grandfather's grave. All he knew was that it was located in a place called "Mobura." Unfortunately, "Mobura" did not exist—what was actually meant was "Missoula." In 1991, Mr. Watanabe finally reached his grandfather's resting place. After returning to Japan, he contacted newspapers across the country, asking them to publish the names and places of origin listed on the gravestones. Through this effort, he was able to locate the descendants of ten families[1]. When I walked among Missoula's headstones myself, I also noticed that many of the names written in Roman letters were miss-spelled. I couldn't help but wonder how many connections had been lost because of mistranslations.

My research began with the discovery of Japanese workers' graves and a small article about Mr. Watanabe published in the student-run newspaper at the University of Montana. In the U.S., there is very little documentation on Asian railroad workers, and specifically, when it comes to Japanese laborers, the information is, to my knowledge, extremely limited. In 2012, Stanford University launched a project to recover the history of Chinese railroad workers. Because there are no personal writings left behind by the Chinese workers themselves, either in China or the US, the project required a large-scale effort to analyze photographs and newspaper articles[2]. It is said that, due to racial discrimination, records of Chinese laborers were often erased or ignored[3]. I wonder if the same was true for Japanese laborers. This article is a record of my attempt to trace the stories behind the gravestones and to better understand the history and background of Japanese railroad workers. While Japan also has only a modest amount of documentation, by exploring related materials from both the US and Japan, I have begun to piece together a clearer picture.

* * * *

In Japan, many people may be familiar with the stories of Japanese people who emigrated to Hawaii or Brazil during the Meiji era. There are museums dedicated to this history, and it has also been featured in films. However, at that time, Japanese immigrants also went to many other countries and regions such as Canada, New Caledonia, Australia, Guadeloupe, the Fiji Islands, Peru, and Mexico[4]. Large-scale immigration to the mainland United States began in the late 1880s. Between that time and 1908, when the Gentlemen's Agreement regarding immigration restrictions was established, a total of about 120,000 Japanese people immigrated. The reasons for immigration varied; some came to study, for commercial purposes, political asylum, or to work and send money home. There were many types of labor, but since most Japanese workers could not speak English, they engaged in simple manual labor such as railroad construction, sawmills, and agriculture[5]. Some women were brought over for prostitution. For immigrants who could not speak English, job searching was carried out through labor contractors who mediated between American employers and workers. This labor contracting business was especially active between 1891 and 1907, with railroad labor contracts being the largest in scale[4]. By 1906, about 13,000 Japanese people had been involved in railroad construction[6].

Construction of the first transcontinental railroad in the United States began in the 1860s. At that time, due to a shortage of white laborers and concerns over their reliability, many Chinese immigrants were hired. However, widespread anti-Chinese sentiment led the U.S. government to enact the Chinese Exclusion Act in 1882, which completely banned immigration from China. This law resulted in an increase in immigration from other Asian countries, particularly Japan[7]. Meanwhile, Japan was undergoing significant economic and social transformations due to the Meiji Restoration and civil war. Reforms in taxation and land ownership, the decline of the samurai class, and the development of a commodity-based economy led to widespread unemployment, especially

Missoula City Cemetery

The Japanese section of the cemetery. Many graves have no headstones. On the right are the grave of Mr. Tashichi Watanabe and a monument erected by his grandson.

in rural areas[8]. Politically, Japan was laying the groundwork for a modern state, and economically, it was entering its own industrial revolution. There are several theories as to what drove many Japanese people to emigrate to the United States during this period. In *America ni Ikita Nihonjin Imin (Japanese Immigrants Who Lived in America)*, Yuzou Murayama argues that the influence of pioneer immigrants was a major factor. Even before large numbers of laborers began migrating, there were already government-contracted workers on Hawaiian plantations and self-sponsored students studying and working in the U.S. encouraged by enlightenment thinkers like Yukichi Fukuzawa. These pioneer immigrants returned to Japan and shared their experiences, which had a strong impact and encouraged others to follow. It is said that many emigrants came from the same regions as these early pioneers. The following words by an Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrant) reflects this:

> We were astonished when a fellow villager returned home proudly, with a gold pocket watch chain glinting around his waist. When we listened to his stories, it sounded as if trees that bore gold were growing all over America. Who wouldn't want to go at least once after hearing that? And then, when the young men who had emigrated from our village kept sending home as much as 100 yen a year, it was only natural for us poor folks to stare wide-eyed in amazement…[9]

America was the "land of opportunity." Let's look at the wages. In 1907, a railroad laborer working 10 hours a day, six days a week, earned between $470 and $780 a year. This was 2.3 to 3.9 times the income of agricultural laborers in Japan at the time[5]. After paying fees to labor contractors who arranged jobs for immigrants, as well as medical expenses and living costs, not much remained. Still, by living frugally, many were able to send a substantial amount of money back home to Japan. In Japan, emigration to the U.S. became a good business venture as well. In the 1890s and early 1900s, immigration and trading companies rapidly grew, actively recruiting people for overseas travel. In the 1900s, many guidebooks for emigrating to America and magazines such as *Success* were published. These publications rarely depicted the harsh realities of immigrant life, instead fueling the immigration craze. The 1900s were an era of "success fever."[10] When researching the history of immigrants in America, one often encounters themes of discrimination and anti-Japanese sentiment, giving the narrative a gloomy tone. The Japanese American historian Yuji Ichioka, in his book *Issei*, described the early Japanese immigrant experience in America as "the history of a racial minority struggling to survive in a harsh land." However, imagining the young people in Japan dreaming of traveling abroad, full of hope and ambition, casts this history in a somewhat different light.

There are few records about Japanese railroad workers who labored in inland states such as Montana, but some of their experiences can be found in surviving testimonies, letters, and a diary[11]. According to these records, the goal of many early laborers was to "save 1,000 yen in three years and return to Japan." At the time, 1,000 yen was enough to buy land in their home villages and instantly become wealthy. However, in order to earn that amount, they had to endure significant hardships and live very frugally.

Railroad construction, which began on the West Coast, reached Montana in 1881, one year before the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted. By 1907, construction of Montana's third transcontinental railroad had begun, coinciding with the peak period of Japanese immigration to the mainland United States[12]. Upon arriving at West Coast ports, the immigrants were assigned to small groups of 3 to 8 workers called "section gangs" and were scattered across the remote interior regions[9]. Life in these unfamiliar, isolated areas was vastly different from that of Japanese laborers who stayed in or near cities like San Francisco, Portland, or Seattle. These workers lived in boxcars placed along the

railroad or in tents pitched by the tracks. The following is an excerpt from the personal account of Mr. Tsutsuo Kawahara, who immigrated to the U.S. at age 17 and was sent deep into Montana:

> …Within 40 miles (64 kilometers), there were no towns—only a few Indigenous people living about 5 or 6 miles away. It was complete wilderness. Drinking water was delivered once a week by a freight car and poured into a large barrel. Water was more valuable than anything else, so it was never used for bathing. …In the summer, mosquito larvae would breed in the water barrels. …Temperatures rose above 100 degrees Fahrenheit (38°C) in summer. …In winter, it dropped to 15 or 20 degrees below zero. …To survive the cold, I wore every piece of clothing I had. …My underwear became tattered and infested with lice. …There were voices saying, "Spending 50 cents a day on food is a luxury," and we began living off dumpling soup. …Eventually, it became just salty broth with dumplings. Eventually, I developed night blindness.[9]

Everyone spoke of the salt dumpling soup, the night blindness caused by malnutrition, the nightly attacks of bedbugs, and the harshness of winter. Japanese laborers worked for lower wages than white workers and were often assigned more difficult and dangerous tasks. Unfamiliar with the land, they did not even know how to return to the West Coast. Many of the 100 laborers buried in Montana cemeteries died young, from accidents or illness, never setting foot on Japanese soil again[13]. It is difficult to determine the actual mortality rate, but the fact that as many as 100 workers died in Missoula alone is heartbreaking.

Mr. Gihei Honma kept a diary during his four years in America, including his time as a railroad laborer in Montana. This diary was later published by his grandson, Eiichi Honma, under the title *Dekasegi America Meiji Nikki (Emigration to America: Meiji-Era Diary)*. Considering that virtually no memoirs or letters by Chinese laborers—who made up the majority of the railroad workforce—can be found either in China or the United States, this diary is an extremely valuable resource. As a member of a small gang working in the Montana wilderness, Honma documents daily life in it: the harsh climate, inadequate clothing and footwear, meager meals, and physically demanding work. Despite these hardships, on paydays he managed to buy slightly better ingredients or cheap alcohol, and he found time to read books. In the early entries, there is a sense of hope and curiosity, but by the third year, his writings increasingly reflect a lack of prospects for the future.

Even so, the immigrants endured these harsh living conditions with a strong sense of responsibility toward their families and the perseverance often described as the "Nihon Tamashii (Japanese spirit)." Employers preferred hiring Japanese laborers, who worked diligently and without complaint regardless of the conditions. Railroad workers were not only from China and Japan but also included immigrants from other countries such as Ireland, Italy, and Germany. The emergence of the hardworking Japanese railroad boys was seen as a threat by white laborers. Local citizens also began to harbor resentment, fearing that Japanese workers were "taking their jobs," and sometimes subjected them to harassment. When a smallpox outbreak occurred in 1892, Japanese immigrants were labeled as "dirty" and, in some cases, driven out of towns[14]. Today, the term "JAP" is recognized as a racial slur and is considered unacceptable, but at the time, Japanese immigrants were frequently insulted with "YOU JAP!" and younger men were mocked as "GREEN JAP!"[9].

Immigration issues and policies are complex. By the time Japanese immigration to the U.S. began, a considerable number of Chinese immigrants were already living there, peaking at around 120,000 arrivals in the 1870s. Chinese immigrants worked primarily in railroad construction and mining, especially in California, and their contributions to railroad development were particularly significant. Although they were initially welcomed, anti-Chinese sentiment intensified as their population grew and they were pushed out of railroad work following its completion. Chinese immigrants faced increasingly violent discrimination. Politically, exclusionist groups were formed that lobbied for discriminatory laws, such as special taxes and occupational restrictions targeting Chinese workers. Finally, in 1882, the Chinese Exclusion Act was enacted, completely banning immigration from China. It was against this backdrop of prejudice and discrimination toward Asians that Japanese immigration to the U.S. began. The Japanese government, which had only recently opened diplomatic relations with the U.S., was determined to avoid repeating China's fate. Unfortunately, as the number of Japanese immigrants increased, anti-Japanese sentiment also emerged. There were various reasons beyond job competition, and by the 1910s, as more Japanese immigrants began settling permanently in the U.S., they were increasingly seen as a threat, leading to intensified efforts to prevent their settlement[5]. When Japan won the Russo-Japanese War, concerns grew over its rising military power, further fueling fears[15]. Anti-Japanese groups eventually succeeded in implementing discriminatory policies, and in 1924, the Immigration Act was passed, banning all Japanese immigration to the United States.

Even under such harsh conditions, some individuals managed to succeed. For example, the leader of a section gang was called a foreman, and with a recommendation, workers could take the foreman examination. The test, conducted in English and requiring technical knowledge, was not easy, but some studied hard and passed. Becoming a foreman did not necessarily make the work easier, but it did increase annual earnings to $1,700–1,800, about 2.2 to 3.7 times higher than the average worker's income. Mr. Kawahara, mentioned earlier, worked in a gang for about two years but realized he had no future without learning English. He attempted to ride a freight train into the city in search of new opportunities. Unfortunately, he was caught and dropped off in the mountains, where he lived a difficult day-to-day existence. Eventually, he was helped by a kind white banker's family who supported him with English lessons and even sent him to school[9]. Mr. Honma, who kept the diary, also moved from laboring in the Northwestern U.S. to traveling across the country and Europe before returning to Japan, where he later became a member of the city council in Ishinomaki. These immigrant stories show that success often

Railroad Construction in the Northwestern States

Pacific Railroad Main Line (Overland Route)
The first transcontinental railroad in the United States.
Council Bluffs, Iowa — Oakland, California, 3,075 km
1863–1869
Companies: Central Pacific Railroad, Union Pacific Railroad, Western Pacific Railroad

Oregon Short Line
The railroad line where the first Japanese labor broker, Tanaka Chuushichi, began contracts.
1881–1884
Companies: Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company (OR&N) —later part of Union Pacific Railroad; parts of Utah and Idaho were served by Utah Northern Railroad.

Part of the Union Pacific Railroad
An important rail line connecting Portland to the transcontinental railroad (Northern Pacific Railroad).
1879–1884
Company: Oregon Railroad and Navigation Company (OR&N), later part of Union Pacific Railroad.

Northern Pacific Railroad Main Line
The rail line on which the Japanese workers buried in the Missoula cemetery worked.
Ashland, Wisconsin — Seattle, Washington, 10,900 km (Seattle to Missoula is 2,680 km)
1870–1883 (In 1883, the western and eastern lines were joined at Gold Creek, Montana.)
Company: Northern Pacific Railroad

Southern Pacific Railroad
Mainly serving the western and southern United States, this section was completed in 1887 when the northern and southern lines were joined.
Companies: Southern Pacific Railroad; the northern section was operated by the Oregon California Railroad.

Great Northern Railway, Main Line
Saint Paul, Minnesota — Seattle, Washington, 13,467 km
1889–1893
Company: Great Northern Railway

Milwaukee Road Main Line
The rail line where Mr. Gihee Honma, who wrote the diary introduced in the main text, worked. According to the diary, Japanese workers joined the line in 1909 at Harrowtown, Montana.
Chicago — Seattle, 3,552 km
1906–1909
Company: Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad

Cascade Mountains

Rocky Mountains

Area where the remains of workers buried in Missoula Cemetery were originally interred

Ports of Arrival for Ships from Japan

Railroad workers mainly worked on railroads in the Northwest, including the Oregon Short Line of the Union Pacific Railroad, Northern Pacific Railroad, Great Northern Railway, Milwaukee Road, and Canadian Pacific Railway.

requires steadily effort and a willingness to take risks. Returning to Tashichi Watanabe, the grandfather of Kazuo Watanabe referred to earlier, his story is also unique. Unlike many others buried in the Missoula cemetery, Tashichi lived a relatively long life. Fortunately or unfortunately, he was physically weak and unable to do strenuous labor and, instead, worked as a cook for the Burlington Northern Railroad. This most likely reduced his exposure to the kinds of accidents that claimed many of his fellow workers. In one of his letters, he wrote, "Because it's not hard labor, I'm able to work every day. If it were another kind of job, I wouldn't be able to continue." He sent a few letters to his family in Japan, but never mentioned his health. According to Kazuo Watanabe's autobiography, Tashichi had a fondness for pleasure and was eventually deceived into taking on a significant amount of debt. As a result, the Watanabe family had to give up much of the farmland and heirlooms they had inherited. Tashichi, hoping to recover the lost property, decided to go to America. He collapsed while on duty and was hospitalized by the railroad company. After a period of ups and downs, he died of complications from arteriosclerosis at the age of 41. A man named Goto, likely a friend, submitted his death notice. About two months later, a package, presumably sent by Goto, arrived at his family's home. Inside was a suit, believed to have belonged to Tashichi. Then, seventy-eight years later, Kazuo Watanabe finally located his grandfather's grave[13].

Opportunities to see the graves of Asian railroad workers, as in this case, are rare. It is said that, as a custom, most laborers who died during railroad construction were buried along the tracks near where they passed away[16]. The individuals now buried in Missoula City Cemetery were originally laid to rest roughly 160 kilometers away, near where they had died. Later, when the railroad company changed the course of the line, approximately 400 remains were exhumed and relocated to Missoula. It was puzzling that only some Japanese graves had tombstones. According to the cemetery's records, "the railroad company built headstones as promised."[17] The wording is somewhat vague. However, several headstones bear engravings such as "Erected by J.M.B.A. (Japanese Mission Buddhist Association)" and "Erected by Japanese Extra Gang No. 12." Perhaps these individuals were members of these organizations, and their fellow workers and friends paid for and requested the stones. Documentation on the remains of these workers is scarce, but occasional mentions in memoirs and letters suggest that close friends, coworkers, or Japanese community organizations pooled resources to erect headstones in honor of the deceased. According to Hokubei Hyakunen Zakura (North American Centennial Sakura) by Sadaharu Shioki, when a laborer died of typhoid fever, his Japanese foreman personally retrieved the body from the hospital and arranged for burial. Later, the man's hometown friends and gang members created a gravestone for him. In another instance, when 23 Japanese laborers working on the Great Northern Railway were killed in an accident, the Japanese Chamber of Commerce of Northern California

Japanese workers posing around a handcart.
(Japanese Railroad workers, photo credit Denver Public Library Special Collections, [Z-190])

built a shared grave to honor them[18]. It is possible that more such sites could be found by visiting towns one by one and speaking with local residents. Incidentally, many cemeteries around 1900 were designated "White Only." In some cases, Japanese were accepted while Chinese were not[15], revealing the severity of racial discrimination at the time.

According to a survey using the burial records remaining in Missoula City compiled by Kazuo Watanabe, the causes of death among Japanese railroad laborers buried in Missoula City Cemetery were 22.5% from accidents, 66.3% from illness, and 11.2% unknown. Among the illnesses, typhoid fever was the most common, reflecting the harsh living conditions they endured. However, at that time, the railroad company employed skilled doctors and had modern facilities, and when workers fell ill, they were treated with dignity[13]. Despite the social discrimination they faced, it is also true that kind-hearted white individuals supported these immigrants.

* * * *

Through the research conducted so far, an overall picture of the history of Japanese railroad laborers has begun to emerge. During my investigation in Japan, the hometowns (down to the towns and villages) of twelve of the laborers buried in Missoula were identified, and I visited those places. Many of them remain rural even today, requiring about an hour's walk from the nearest train station. Around 120 years ago, leaving such remote places, traveling to a port, and then spending three weeks crossing the ocean by ship to a land with a completely different language and culture must have taken considerable courage. While, today, it is easy to fly back whenever one wishes, at that time leaving one's country likely required not just courage but a strong resolve. Another piece of information I obtained from the laborers' diary and records is the specific towns in Montana (an area of about 380,800 km^2, roughly the size of Japan) where they set up camps. My next task is to visit those towns in person and conduct further research. From my past experience, I believe that to uncover history that is not well known, it is essential to visit the actual locations.

Finally, I would like to state something important. It is true that Asians have faced discrimination. However, identifying which race was the oppressor and which was the victim is not my intention in presenting this history. Immigration issues are complex, and similar situations have occurred in many countries, including Japan. What matters is that learning history helps us properly address future political, social, and moral challenges. Of course, today's issues do not exactly mirror the past. The writer Mark Twain is said to have remarked, "History doesn't repeat itself, but it often rhymes." This phrase encapsulates the essence of this idea. By understanding history, I hope people will broaden their perspectives and be better equipped to think through intricate matters.

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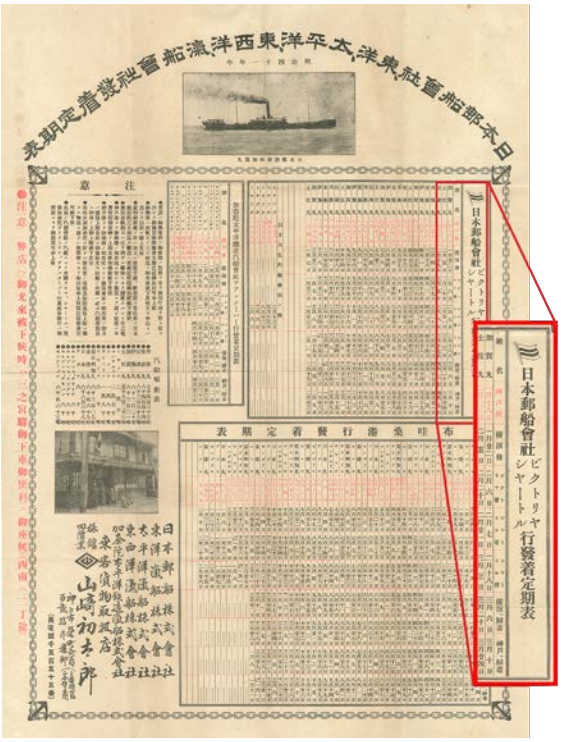
Miya Hannan is an interdisciplinary artist whose work tris to preserve stories that are almost forgotten or would otherwise be lost. Current project forces on Japanese immigrant history. She creates research-based artwork along with scholarly articles. She has actively shown her work in many solo and group exhibitions nationally and internationally. She is a recipient of the Franklin Research Fellowship by American Philosophical Society, Philadelphia, PA in 2025 and the Nevada Council Artist Fellowship in 2023. Her artist's book, "Three Poems Disrupting a Language," a collaboration project with poet Bill Kelly and Brighton Press in San Diego in 2017-2019, is now in the collections of 30 institutions including the Getty Research Institute, Harvard University, Library of Congress, and Stanford University. In 2012, she was commissioned by TEDxSan Diego to create an installation for their meeting. She also received the 2013 Distinguished Alumni Award from Mesa College, San Diego. Before coming to the United States, she worked for a hospital as a radiation technologist for seven years in her native country, Japan.

Voyage by Ship to America

The voyage from Kobe to American ports (Seattle, Tacoma, Portland, San Francisco) took approximately three weeks, with slight variations depending on the ship. According to the 1901 publication Guide to Traveling to America, the fare for steerage class was 51 yen, while the 1902 guide A Guide to Emigration to America lists it as 60 yen. At that time, the average monthly wage for common workers was about 9 yen, and the annual income from farmland for farmers was around 50 yen. In addition to the fare, emigrants needed funds for the landing fee (money shown to immigration inspectors), preparation costs (expenses for buying clothes and other items), and pocket money for use on board and at the port. Taking these into account, approximately 150 yen was required to emigrate to America.



"Nippon Yusen Kaisha (NYK) Regular Schedule for Departures and Arrivals to Seattle and Victoria" 1908 (From the Hawaii Immigration Museum, Nihojima Village Collection)

According to this NYK's Kaga Maru schedule, the voyage from Kobe to Seattle was planned to take 20 days.

Life on the Ship

"However, the ship was far too rough a cargo vessel for 'gentlemen' to ride. There were no passenger cabins. Opening the deck hatch to load cargo revealed an empty room lined with rows of bunk beds. There was no electric lighting, and it was pitch dark. For the entire 14 days until we arrived in Vancouver, we were not allowed to bathe even once... A total of 300 people boarded from Hiroshima, Yamaguchi, and Kumamoto prefectures... The biggest problem was the food. The Chinese-style rice was okay, but the ragged rice with side dishes fried in pork fat was utterly inedible." (Inotao Tawa)

"In the third class where I traveled, there were more than 160 people, and there was no bunk to rest on. I laid out the futon and blankets I brought myself on the wooden deck beside the hatch without windows or electric lights. A large net was hung above our heads, and when the ship rocked violently, we would roll across the floor, scrambling to grab hold of the net. Every day, the weather was bad and the sea was stormy. The hatch was tightly closed, limiting air circulation, and a foul smell filled the space, making it unbearable. Because the ship was small, each time a large wave struck, it hit the upper deck hard, and the sound of the spinning propeller was piercing. The food was coarse: second-rate rice from Nanjing, salted fish guts, and clam preserves mixed with debris—food that would be impossible to eat today." (Kubo Chōjirō)

(Quoted from *One Hundred Years of Cherry Blossoms in North America*)

Worker Placement and Recruitment Methods

Labor contractors used various methods to find workers. In San Francisco, they utilized lodging facilities where newly arrived people gathered. The operators of these lodging houses provided workers in exchange for a commission. One such operator was Tokunosuke Tamura, originally from Hiroshima, who managed multiple establishments. In Washington and Oregon, labor contractors made direct contracts with workers. They approached people who barely had enough money to pay for lodging and hired them in exchange for advances on living expenses and immigration costs. Some contractors even paid existing workers small amounts to write letters encouraging their friends and family to join them. In 1899, Ototaka Yamaoka established the Toyo Trading Company in Yokohama to advertise employment opportunities. The Toyo Trading Company signed a contract with the Great Northern Railway the same year. To limit the increasing number of immigrants, the government imposed restrictions on passport issuance. However, Yamaoka illegally obtained passports. Because government policies remained firm, labor contractors turned their attention to Japanese workers in Hawaii instead. Research in America shows that between 1902 and 1907, when the Gentlemen's Agreement between Japan and the United States prohibited transit from Hawaii, as many as 38,000 Japanese moved from Hawaii to the U.S. mainland. The Gentlemen's Agreement not only targeted Hawaii but also banned new immigration directly from Japan to the United States. Some Japanese entered the U.S. via Mexico and Canada.

(Ichioka, Yuji. The Issei, 1973, pp. 62-65.)

Advertisement Published in Japanese-Language Newspapers Issued in the United States

The wages of railroad laborers fluctuated due to labor shortages and competition among companies. The advertisement on the right, published in 1902, lists a daily wage of $1.30. The advertisement on the left, from 1905, shows $2.50, which was considerably higher than the average. Based on advertisements, documents, and workers' testimonies, wages in the early 1900s generally ranged from $1.00 to $1.75 per day. Labor contractors charged fees and deducted medical expenses, usually between 10 and 15 cents per day, so actual take-home pay ranged from less than $1.00 to about $1.60. After subtracting costs for food and daily necessities, the remaining amount was not substantial. (Exchange rate: $1 = 2 yen)

(Collections of Hoover Institution Library & Archives, Stanford University)

Nichi Bei Shimbun, May 22, 1905

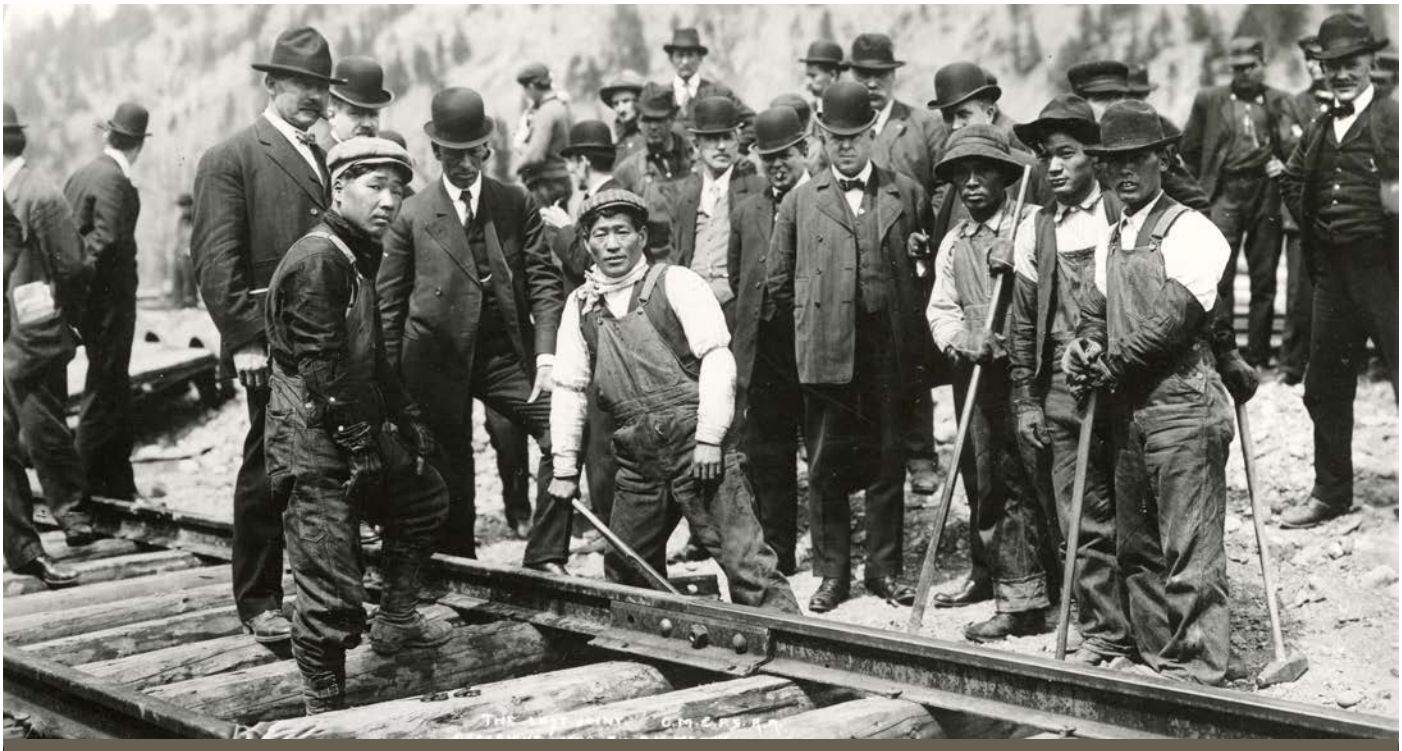
The Nichi Bei Shimbun was established in 1899 following the merger of the North American Daily and the San Francisco Japanese Newspaper. Later, it became one of the twin pillars of Japanese-language newspapers in San Francisco alongside Shin Sekai (New World). Today, it continues online under the name Nichi Bei News, publishing articles in English.

Asahi Shimbun, November 29, 1906

The Asahi Shimbun was a daily newspaper founded in 1905 in Seattle by its president Juichiro Ito (Seido). It ceased publication in 1918.

Shin Sekai, September 23, 1902

Shin Sekai boasts one of the oldest histories among Japanese-language newspapers in San Francisco. Originally, it was published by young activists of the Japanese Christian Young Men's Association (YMCA) in San Francisco (1894–1932), but later separated from the Christian church.



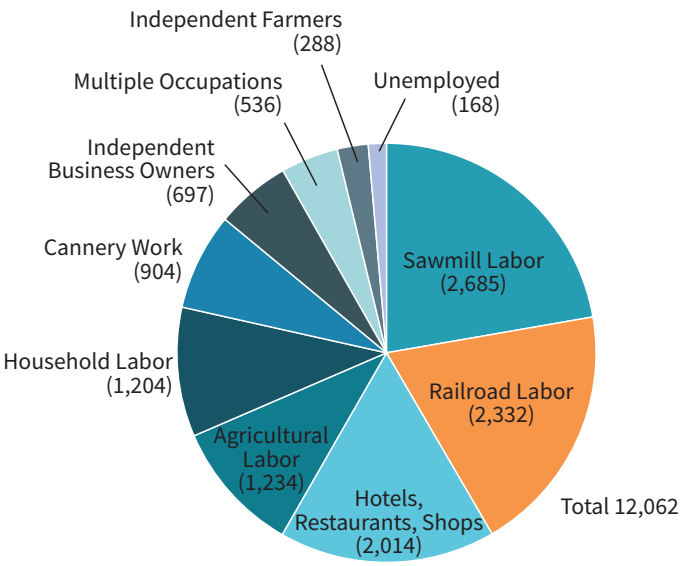
The Milwaukee Railroad was completed in Montana. The final nail was driven by a Japanese worker. The photo shows executives celebrating and observing this moment. Honma's diary, introduced in the main text, records the events of that day. Could Honma himself be in this photo?

(McKay, R. H. (Rollin H.), The Last Spike of the Pacific Coast Extension of the Milwaukee Road, near Garrison, Montana (1909-05-19). Montana History Portal, accessed 28/02/2025, https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/74081)

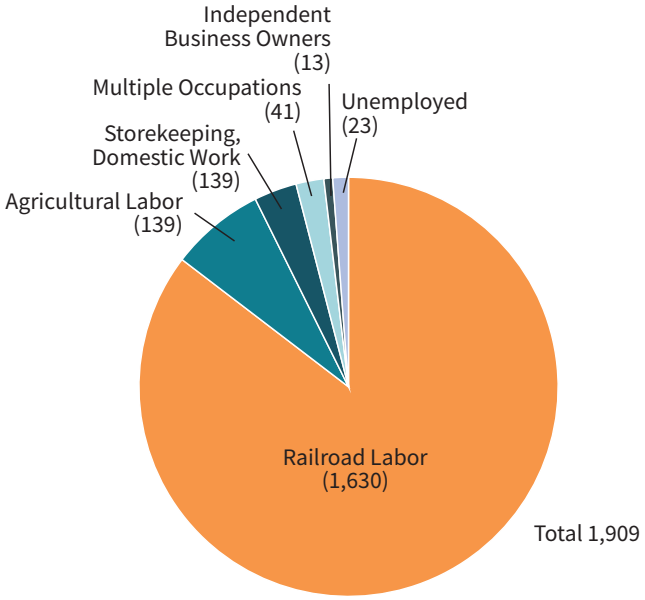
Occupational Breakdown of Japanese Residents (1907)

According to the 1900 U.S. Census, there were 24,326 Japanese people, most of whom lived on the West Coast. Washington State, home to Seattle and Tacoma, was one of the West Coast states. In addition to many hotels and restaurants concentrated in urban areas, the state also had thriving sawmills and fish canneries.

The statistics below are referenced from Kōjirō Takeuchi, *History of Japanese Immigrants in the Northwestern United States* (Seattle: Okita Daily News Company, 1929), pp. 791–802.



Washington State



Montana State

Occupational Breakdown of Japanese Population in the Western United States, 1909

Occupation	Number
*Railroad Labor	10,000
Sawmill Labor	2,200
Cannery Work	3,600
Fishery labor	200
Mining labor	2,000
Steel mill labor	200
Agricultural Labor	38,000
Urban Labor, Small Businesses	22,000

*At the peak of railroad labor in 1906, the number rose to approximately 13,000 to 14,000 workers.

(61st Congress, "Immigrants in industries: part 25 Japanese and other immigrant races in the Pacific Coast and Rocky Mountain state," volume I, 1911, p33.)

Railroad Construction Scene in California in the Early 1900s (Collection of the Hawaii Immigration Museum, Nihojimamura)

Emigration Fever and Publications

During the "success boom" of the late Meiji period (1901–1912), numerous books and magazines were published promoting emigration to the United States. These publications functioned as guidebooks for Japanese prospective immigrants, offering detailed information on travel methods, life in America, and its social systems, and exerting a significant influence on those considering migration.

(Collection of the Hawaii Immigration Museum, Nihojimamura)

Ichiyanagi, Shōan. Tobei no Shiori [Guide to America]. Tokyo: Sasaki Kansuke, 1902.

Aijima, Kanjiro, and Masajiro Sato. *Tobei no Shirube*. Tokyo: Okajima Shoten, 1902.

Miyamoto, Kanjiro. *Shin Tobei*. Tokyo: Shuppan Kyōkai [in Japanese], 1904.

Life of Railroad Workers

Railroad workers commonly slept in boxcars. Depending on the work, they also camped outdoors in tents. Inside the boxcars, there were two-tiered wooden beds—just simple sleeping spaces. Instead of mattresses, they laid down straw and then their own blankets on top to sleep. Many accounts mention suffering from bedbug infestations at night.

Their meals were quite meager. To save 1,000 yen in three years, expenses had to be minimized, and food costs were the easiest to cut. This led to a diet centered around dango-jiru (dumpling soup). Although recipes and ingredients varied, the basic preparation involved boiling water flavored with bacon or dried small fish (iriko), then dropping in kneaded wheat flour dough. Seasoning was salt, and ingredients included dried daikon radish, onions, and potatoes—whatever was available. When ingredients ran out, it was just salty broth with flour dough. At that time, rice was an expensive imported product from Japan, so wheat flour often became the staple food. Many suffered from malnutrition-related night blindness. In the evenings, they groped their way around in the dark. This was due to vitamin A deficiency, but symptoms were alleviated after eating eggs for a while. Here are some examples of menus from *One Hundred Years of Cherry Blossoms in North America*.

Breakfast: Rice, miso soup
Lunch: Bottera (wheat flour dissolved in water and fried on a pan) jam, tea
Dinner: Red miso dango soup

Breakfast: Bottera
Lunch: Dango soup
Dinner: Salted pork soup

Breakfast: Bread, butter, coffee
Lunch: Bread, butter, water
Dinner: Rice, pickled radish (takuan), simmered vegetables (nishime), Japanese tea

Breakfast: Wakame seaweed miso soup, rice
Lunch: Bread, a small amount of sausage or cheese
Dinner: Simmered dried daikon radish

Workers Standing Behind a Boxcar, Hell Gate, Montana, 1909 (Unidentified photographer, Northern Pacific Railroad employees at Hell Gate, Montana, May 19, 1909. Montana History Portal, accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/77609)

Workers Posing on a Handcar, Butte, Montana, 1905 (Unidentified photographer, Four Men on a Handcar near Butte, Montana (circa 1905). Montana History Portal, accessed February 28, 2025, https://www.mtmemory.org/nodes/view/74177)

As a result of the U.S.–Mexico War of 1848, California, Nevada, Utah, and other territories were annexed to the United States. This made the construction of the transcontinental railroad a reality, and the West Coast experienced an unprecedented development boom. In 1868, the U.S. concluded a treaty with China and brought in large numbers of Chinese laborers to work on railroad construction. However, in 1882, just as the completion of the entire line came into sight, the U.S. abruptly passed the Chinese Exclusion Act. In 1888, an even stricter law was enacted, absolutely barring new Chinese immigrants from entering the country.

Since Chinese workers had made up about two-thirds of the railroad laborers, their absence was significant. From around 1890, Japanese immigrants began to arrive in increasing numbers to fill this labor shortage. That year, there were 2,039 Japanese residents in the U.S.; by 1894, the number had surpassed 7,000.

Wages were about $40 per month—double what Japanese immigrants earned on Hawaii's sugar plantations. For many, going to the mainland and changing jobs was a dream, but the barrier was the "three-year labor contract." However, when Hawaii was annexed by the United States in June 1900, U.S. domestic laws came into full effect there, and the contract labor system was abolished. This delighted not only the Hawaiian immigrants themselves but also recruiters from the mainland, who saw an opportunity. They went around the plantations personally recruiting workers, opened hiring offices, and even worked with Japanese inns in Honolulu to carry out aggressive recruitment campaigns. Planters and the Hawaiian government, sensitive to the outflow of workers, responded by imposing a business tax of $500 per year on anyone recruiting laborers for the mainland. Yet, this was hardly a burden for the recruiters, and it had little effect.

So, against this backdrop, the "migrants" who decided to set out for America—did they, in fact, find happiness?

> In June 1887, Kakugorō Inoue from Hiroshima Prefecture, at the encouragement of Yukichi Fukuzawa, led a group of more than 30 fellow prefectural natives and landed in San Francisco. They were employed in clearing farmland and working on railroad construction. Fukuzawa's aim was to "set an example of pioneers in overseas migration," and he personally covered all expenses, including travel costs.

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