

Newsletter



Photo by Karen E. Tourangeau - Cora Brown Trail on Sea Island

WHAT'S NEW

LAUNCHING OF NEWSLETTER

The Sea Island Heritage Society is launching its quarterly newsletter with this first September 2021 edition.

If you wish to contribute to the newsletter, or have questions or comments, we would love to hear from you. Our contact information is listed at the end.

HOW TO BECOME A MEMBER

To become a member of the Sea Island Heritage Society, please send us an email. Our yearly membership fee is \$10.00, and you can request a tax receipt.

You can mail us a cheque or send us an e-transfer.

TIMELINE OF HISTORICAL EVENTS

The Society is developing a timeline of historical events related to Sea Island.

Each newsletter will highlight several of these events in chronological order.

See the historical events below from **1600-1800**.

President's Message

We welcome you to our first quarterly Sea Island Heritage Society newsletter! Enjoy reading about upcoming events, our historical timeline, and a vibrant Japanese-Canadian community that lived on the southwest shores of Sea Island.

The Covid pandemic has certainly curtailed activities for all of us, from cancelling our monthly in-person coffee chats, to postponing our first ever Sea Island Reunion. With fingers crossed, we are hoping we can hold our reunion in 2022.

You might have used this shutdown time to sort photos and other mementos. If you found anything pertaining to Sea Island that you no longer want or have no space for, contact us. We welcome any historical memorabilia about Sea Island. Don't want to part with your photos? Please, scan them and send us a copy. Some topics include: house histories, school class photos, teacher biographies, family stories, and aviation.

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Let's stay connected - check out our website (<https://seaislandhome.org>) and Facebook page (https://www.facebook.com/seaislandheritagesociety/?modal=admin_todo_tour).

Watch for the next newsletter in December!



Eunice Robinson



President

Sea Island Heritage Society

UPCOMING EVENT

Zoom Coffee Chat - Tuesday, October 19, 2021 from 10 to noon. Register by sending a request for the Zoom link to seaisland20@gmail.com

Zoom AGM - Saturday, November 20, 2021 from 10 to 11 am. Register by sending a request for the Zoom link to seaisland20@gmail.com.

Sea Island Reunion - Covid-19 permitting, the Society will be holding its first Sea Island reunion on May 28, 2022 in Richmond, British Columbia. Details will be posted to our website, Facebook page and following newsletters.

TIMELINE: FIRST HISTORICAL EVENTS

Some events listed are from Leonard Ham's (1987) *An Archaeological Heritage Resource Overview of Richmond, B.C.*

1600 - The Coast Salish people were the first to come to Sea Island to fish, hunt and collect berries, establishing summer camps and temporary winter homes on the northwest corner of the island.

1781-1782 - Smallpox is widespread and ravages the Coast Salish peoples.

1792 - Galliano and Valdez moor near the mouth of the North Arm of the Fraser.

Watch for descriptions of Sea Island settlers and other events in the 1800s in the next newsletter.

NEWS FROM BURKEVILLE

View the Global News "Where we live" segment on the vibrant community of Burkeville at <https://globalnews.ca/video/8192515/where-we-live-burkeville>.

A CANNERY COMMUNITY: JAPANESE CANADIANS LIVING ON SEA ISLAND



The Japanese Consul and his wife visit the Japanese Canadian community living at the southwest shore canneries on Sea Island. Source: City of Richmond Archives, BC.

Sadajiro Asari, a young fisherman from Koza, Wakayama, Japan came to Sea Island with his father in 1912 at the age of 15. They were looking for work opportunities and a better life. In fact, in the early 1900s, many from Wakayama had heard the promising stories of those already here and decided to come to Canada to work in the expanding salmon industry. Many went to Steveston, while some, like Sadajiro, settled on Sea Island.

The success of the canning industry varied over the years, but large runs of salmon and high demands from foreign markets in the 'boom years,' 1870-1890, resulted in a rapid growth of canneries that peaked in 1917. On Sea Island, the canneries were built on the north and southwest shores as well as on nearby Swishwash and Dinsmore Islands (see interactive map at <http://tidestotins.ca/canneries> for their specific locations). Settlers and overseas investors owned most of the canneries while the fish were caught and canned by Japanese, Indigenous, Chinese and European workers.

Sea Island Canneries

1882-1905 - Richmond Cannery
 1889 -unknown - Sea Island Cannery
 1894-1913 - Dinsmore Island Cannery
 1896-1930 - Vancouver Cannery
 1897 - unknown - Fraser River Cannery
 1899 - 1918 - ACME Cannery

Sadajiro Asari worked and lived on Sea Island as a fisherman. He lived with his father at the canneries. Life was challenging. Single men lived in company-owned bunkhouses, while some huts were provided for families. Others created their own dwellings, often made of river wood. Initially, fishermen did not own boats and had to rely on those that belonged to the canneries, most often small, two-man wooden sailboats. Early on, workers faced discriminatory practices such as low pay, restricted fishing licenses and language problems. Mechanization was beginning to take over much of the canning process. Yet, perseverance and hard work among Japanese Canadians working the river and at the canneries strengthened their community life. By the early 1900s, Japanese Canadians were building most of the wooden boats used in the fishing industry. Many now owned and operated their own small fishing boat(s).



Canneries on the southwest shore of Sea Island, looking east from Vancouver Cannery, 1912.

Source: Provincial Archives of BC.

Few families came from Japan. They were mostly single men looking for opportunity and planning to return home. However, the fishing was good and, as hard as life was, many readily completed citizenship papers to make this place their home. They were keen to start a family and began a process of choosing a Japanese bride. Future wives were selected from pictures—a 'picture' bride—or arranged by families and sent to Canada. Sadajiro, too, sent for his bride, Some. She came from the same village of Koza as Sadajiro. Married on January 28, 1918, they lived in a hut on the dyke between Vancouver and ACME canneries that Sadajiro had built of found river wood. They raised five children there.

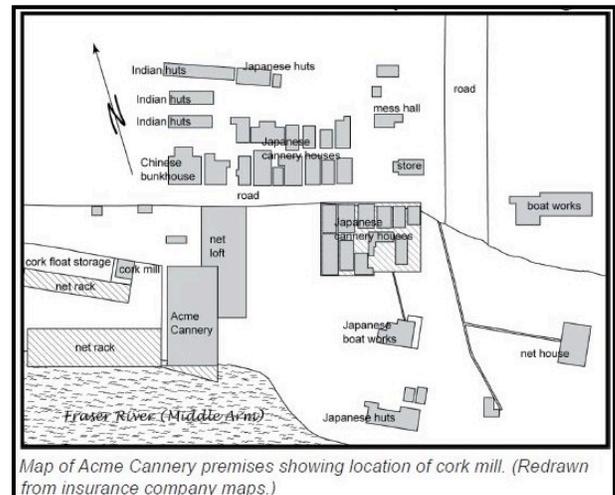
Fishing and cannery work was busiest during the fishing season, typically from May to October. During the off-season, many cannery workers were recruited for the railroad, mining or logging camps. But workers were also wanted at the canneries in the off-season to do repairs and



*Sea Island Japanese School, Div. 2, 1929.
City of Richmond Archives.*

maintenance, and to make cans and corks needed for next season. Many of the Japanese Canadians took on those made-by-hand tasks at the canneries. Sadajiro's interests were in building and repairing small fishing boats. As the Japanese Canadian community became settled in cannery life year-round, they looked to establish a church and school near the canneries. The *Sea Island Japanese School* opened in 1929 for the children of Japanese Canadian workers.

Sea Islander, Doreen Braverman, remembers her childhood in cannery housing. She writes in *The Cork Mill* (2008) of her grandfather, Thomas Goulding, owning and operating a cork mill near the ACME cannery to make corks/floats from red cedar for gillnets. Even though the canneries on Sea Island had closed by 1935, fishing continued out of the southwest shore and corks were needed there and at other fishing centers. Doreen's memories bring to life special moments with her family living in cannery housing and later on the south end of Shannon Road. She also tells of the extensive work of the salmon cannery industry in B.C. in the first half of the 20th century. The cork mill remained operational until expropriated by the Federal Government in the mid-1950s. The land was needed for airport expansion—the beginning of a familiar story for many living on Sea Island, including those who settled in the Cora Brown subdivision as veterans after WWII.



*Map of Acme Cannery premises showing location of cork mill. (Redrawn from insurance company maps.)
Source: *The Cork Mill*, in *Nikkei Images*, Volume 13, No. 2, p.3. Used with permission from D. Braverman.*

Toshi Koyanagi (1911-1974) and Mitero Higo (1920 - 1995) were born on Sea Island of immigrant Japanese Canadian parents fishing and working at the canneries. While their ages differ, they most

likely spent time with each other and the Asari children. Doreen remembers how spotlessly clean the huts on the dyke were where she played with her Japanese Canadian friends, including the Asari sisters. In the late 1930s, public schooling was available to the children living at the canneries, including Doreen. She recalls riding the bus with her cannery friends to Bridgeport Elementary School on Lulu Island. After school, the bus brought them back to the canneries where Doreen would go to the cork mill to help attach corks to the gillnets. Others would attend the Japanese school at the Vancouver Cannery. In the late 1930s, sports teams, such as the *Sea Island Hurricanes* lacrosse team, competed against other communities nearby. And, the *Sea Island Young People's Society* organized social events for their community. On Sundays, Japanese Canadian families would attend church together.



Sea Island Young People's Society, 1939. City of Richmond Archives photograph 2013-81.

For many years, the Asari family was part of a hard-working, vibrant Japanese Canadian community living on Sea Island. Suddenly, that came to an end in December 1941.

After the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, WWII extended to the Asia-Pacific regions and, as a result, the Canadian government declared Japanese Canadians "enemy aliens." They confiscated their radios, cameras, vehicles and fishing boats and sent them to internment camps while all their belongings were auctioned off.

At a few days' notice, the Asari family went to Lillooet where over 300 people were housed in 62 tarpaper shacks. Doreen remembers the morning she got ready for school only to realize her Japanese Canadian school friends were not getting on the bus with her. They were gone.

The Lillooet town website states "After resident Sadajiro Asari found and repaired a pump, the Japanese Canadians were able to use an old wooden irrigation flume to carry water up from the muddy Fraser River to wooden storage tanks. Sadajiro became a tomato farmer in Lillooet.

In 1950, Sadajiro Asari returned to Steveston where he worked in the shipbuilding industry. He lived through much change, from building small wooden sailboat-type fishing vessels to much larger, more mechanized seiners. Sadajiro and Some celebrated their 50th wedding anniversary in Steveston in 1968. Sadajiro died in 1983.

Note: The SIHS is grateful for conversations with Doreen Braverman in 2021. Listening to her share her personal experiences at the canneries, the fishing industry as she remembered it, and the close friendships she made with the sons and daughters of cannery workers is touching testimony to the resilience, humility, and strength of the cannery community that lived on Sea Island.



Seiners Span Marriage Years. Source: Richmond Review, February 28, 1968, City of Richmond Archives.

References

To learn more about canneries and the Japanese-Canadian community on Sea Island:

1. Read Leslie J. Ross' *Richmond Child of the Fraser* (Harvesting the River pp. 111-130). Available online at https://www.richmond.ca/_shared/assets/childofthefraser34680.pdf.
2. Read Mary Keen's history of Sea Island *A Bridge to the World* (Canneries on pp. 26-28). Available online at https://www.richmond.ca/_shared/assets/childofthefraser34680.pdf.
3. Read Doreen Braverman's account of her time at the cork mill with the owner, her grandfather, Thomas Goulding, in the 2008 Summer Issue of *Nikkei Images*, Volume 13, No. 2, pp. 3-4. Available online at <https://centre.nikkeiplace.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/2008-Volume-13-No.-2.pdf>.
4. Read *Japanese Canadians on Sea Island* presented by Friends of the Richmond Archives, <https://richmondarchives.ca/2015/01/06/japanese-canadians-on-sea-island>.
5. Visit the Gulf of Georgia Cannery National Historic Site in Steveston. See <https://gulfofgeorgiacannery.org>.
6. View the Gulf of Georgia Cannery Society's *Tides to Tins* website at <http://tidestotins.ca/home> to learn about the history of salmon canning in B.C., including a historical timeline with images and an interactive map.
7. Visit the Japanese Fishermen's Benevolent Society building as part of the Steveston History Society. See <https://historicsteveston.ca>.

8. View the Sea Island Heritage Society's website at <https://seaislandhome.org> to read about pioneer families, a number of whom were Japanese-Canadians living on Sea Island.

LIST OF BENEFACTORS

Since the beginning of 2021, the following memorabilia were given to the Sea Island Heritage Society:

- **Colin Bleker** - photo of Reinder Bleker (Colin's grandfather) with a group of Boeing Plant workers
- **Marjorie Haire** - photo of aircraft from Sea Island Air Show "Wings of Victory", possibly from Stanley J. Smith
- **Leah Cooney** - photos / Cooney family portraits
- **Duncan Etches** - photos/Etches family portraits
- **Bruce Richards** - photo of Mack Richards with 442 Squadron 1950-52 and other military photos
- **Gordon McQueen** - great grandson of John Bailie McCleery, and son of Betty McCleery McQueen, providing information about the McCleery family
- **Dorothy (Wallace) McCord** - letter from the cousin of her grandmother, Ernest Cooney to her grandmother, Maggie (Gordon) Wallace in Grand Valley, Ontario in 1922. Ernest wrote he had a farm on Sea Island.

CONTACT US

If you have questions, comments, or want to share your memories and photos, we would love to hear from you.

To submit a letter, documents, photos or your membership fee via snail mail:

Sea Island Heritage Society

Box 94444

Richmond, BC V6X 8A8

To be added to our E-Newsletter, or e-transfer your membership fee: seaislandbc@gmail.com.

Our website: <https://seaislandhome.org>