# The Story of a Japanese Emigrant: The Life of Dōmoto Takanoshin

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*We have been reporting in our magazine a number of projects in remembrance of the Meiji Centennial which the Japanese have undertaken in order to look back upon various aspects of the people of the past hundred years. This hundred year period corresponds to the history of Japanese emigration, especially to America. The prologue of the book,* The 100 Year History of Emigration to the United States *by Shinichi Katō, begins as follows:*

*Emigrants to the United States were regarded more as outcasts than as emigrants. Going to North America with nothing to start with and subsisting there under the harshest of conditions, they engaged in all kinds of physical labor, and walked in areas ranging from farming to business. Gradually, in a new world with unfamiliar language and customs, they built up their own foundation, always struggling against oppressive prejudices. Then, no sooner had they established themselves as settlers, than they were ordered to vacate their lands because of the outbreak of war between America and Japan. Now, having transisted this period of trial and suffering, they are in the stage of a new development, brought about partly by the zeal of the second generation and partly by the change of attitude towards them by the people of the United States.*

*Before long they were no longer considered as emigrants or outcasts, but as full-fledged citizens. At present their numbers amount to about 500,000 and great expectations are held for the future activities of these people who bridge the oceanic gap between Japan and America. It is indeed difficult to single out individuals among all the many emigrants of the past one hundred years; nevertheless, we will turn our attention to one extraordinary man, Dōmoto Takanoshin. Many years ago he travelled across the ocean and made his fortune with a shrewd commercial spirit and sagacious business ability.*

The Japanese trade which opened up at the time of the Meiji Restoration was in reality little more than the one-sided export of US products to Japan. The conditions in the two countries were so different that it would have been impossible for Japan to exchange her products with those of the United States at that time without the energetic commercial spirit of unique far-sighted emigrants such as Dōmoto.

Dōmoto Takanoshin was born in 1864 in the village of Hinaka, located twelve miles up the Kino River from the city of Wakayama. His father's name was Kachirō and his mother's Toyono. The second of nine brothers, his family had a long history as prosperous farmers. Although he did not actually go to America until his 23rd year, he dreamt about such a trip from his early childhood. The idea to leap into the unknown, to travel to a new and progressive land, captured him as it did many others of his time. He saw the miserable lives of the farmers ever beset by blights and droughts. He received suggestions from US missionaries he came in contact with. All this led him to

point in 1884 when he took his younger brother Kanetarō and set out for America, with nothing but a bag of rice, a sword, and some silk. A Japanese sword was the symbol for the young men of Meiji. The silk was to be used if needed for barter.

In October he arrived in San Francisco and took up lodging in a hotel. Seeing a bed for the first time, he was puzzled and could not figure out how to use it, and without knowing the language he was unable to ask about it. It seems hard for us to believe now, but he slept on the floor that first night next to the bed.

His first job was working in a hotel under a ten-year contract, helping a man whose job was to handle Japanese emigrants. Many early emigrants suffered themselves to be so treated in the harsh labor environment. But Dōmoto pledged himself to serve out his ten-year contract to the end. Because of his ineptitude with the English language, he made blunder after blunder, each time recovering a little better for the experience. It was in his nature to do everything without hesitation, even when confronted with problems which seemed unsolvable. Once he was shot at by the enraged hotel-owner who discovered him in the bathroom trying to wash his wife's back. In Meiji times one of the duties of a manservant was to wash his master's back, a custom unfortunately unknown in the United States. Thankfully the bullet missed him and in his later years he often said that he probably deserved to die for showing such stupidity.

## Pyrethrum

When he had served as a hotel boy for six years, a Japanese diplomat named Mutsu Munemitsu stopped at the hotel and was greatly impressed to see his countryman discharging his duties in such an earnest manner. He advised Dōmoto to raise flowers as there was a great demand for them, and since he came from a farming family it seemed work well fitted to him. Mutsu offered to help him in any way he could. But because Dōmoto was still under contract he declined the offer deciding that his younger brother should undertake the work instead. He even collected scraps of wrapping paper and bits of string left by hotel guests for his brother to use in wrapping flowers for delivery. Through such industry the flower gardening concern progressed, so much so that two more of his brothers were brought over from Japan to help in the enterprise. Dōmoto himself continued on as a servant in the hotel. There was in the hotel a problem with bedbugs. Dōmoto worked hard to rid the bedding of the bugs. He obtained an insecticide, pyrethrum, from Stockton, which he used to exterminate the insects. He hit on the idea of marketing pyrethrum in Japan and to that end he bought 200 roots of the pyrethrum plant and sent them to Japan to his relatives in Wakayama Prefecture. There the plants were cultivated among a grove of mandarin orange trees. It was a great success, for at that time Japan had to import all its insect powder. Now most Japanese are aware that Wakayama is the home of the pyrethrum plant, mosquito sticks, and insecticide, but few know of the origin of this industry and Dōmoto's part in it.

His success carried over into *mikan*, or mandarin oranges. Taking a hint from some mandarin oranges his father happened to send him from Japan, he began to import them into the United States. When the first shipments arrived, most of them were spoiled and unfit for sale. He hurriedly attempted to sell the ones not yet spoiled by hawking them on the street. In order to attract the attention of the passers-by, he wore a straw Japanese rain cloak. This was his first attempt in what was to prove a great success in the importation of mandarin oranges. We can see here the germs of an inborn business ability as well as an extraordinary industriousness. Upon fulfillment of his ten year contract, he took what money he had saved as using it as capital, set up business trading miscellaneous goods.

Two years later he established Dōmoto Co. Its first enterprise was to import from Japan *saké*, soy sauce, *miso* (bean paste), and other miscellaneous goods which the Japanese emigrants of those days longed for. Among these items *saké* especially was an irreplacable consolation for the emigrant laborers. Because the *saké* the Dōmoto Co. imported happened to be *Kikumasamune* (*kiku* meaning chrysanthemum in Japanese), it is said that many emigrants longed for home and wept while drinking Kikumasamune *saké*, reminded of their mother country which was symbolized by the chrysanthemum.

In exchange he sent tin plates, nails and wire, purchased very cheaply in America, to Japan. Noticing that California navel oranges with their thick skins did not spoil as readily as mandarin oranges, he introduced them into Kishū in Japan, where they became very popular throughout the country. He later thought seriously of exporting the navel oranges grown in Japan to Europe via the Trans-Siberian Railway, but the plan was never realized. Nevertheless, the present spread of navel oranges throughout Asia derives

*Crab-fishing in the Early Days*

*Cannery in the Early Days*

*With His Wife*

from those first transplants of Domoto.

Domoto's import and export business began to grow and grow A friend of his at the time was shocked to hear of the amounts of money flowing in. Next he chartered a ship to export wheat and lumber to Japan and in 1896 established an Osaka branch of Domoto Co., the eldest son of his brother Kaichiro engaged as manager.

## Bright, Charming Wife

His entire waking life was taken up completely with his business. Before he was aware of it he was thirty-five years old and a very wealthy man. It was time to find a wife. On the suggestions of his friends he returned to Japan to search for one. He was looking for someone who would be able to offset his own faults. Travelling to Tokyo, he stood every day outside the gates of Joshi Gakuin Women's College at Shiba, the oldest missionary college for girls in Japan. It was a school all the young girls of good family longed to attend. Standing by the gates he kept a sharp watch on the passing girls. After choosing some likely prospects he submitted their names to the school authorities and asked them to choose the one who was the brightest, especially good at English, and the most charming from the group he had selected. This done he proposed marriage to her through an intermediary. Although this was quite typical of the way men of the early Meiji Period chose their wives, such a procedure could not have been undertaken someone lacking in self-confiden The girl he chose to be his br was named Matsue; she was oldest daughter of Tomiyoshi U a former Kaga clansman fr Kanazawa in Ishikawa Prefectur

The wedding ceremony was h amid great pomp and splendor befitted this wealthy young b nessman. Then, together with new bride, he set sail for Ame once again. His wife was shoc at the terrible conditions of lif Japanese emigrants in Amer because of this she resolved devote her effort to buoy husband up. She gave birth to t sons and three daughters.

The great San Francisco ea quake of 1906 deprived Domot over 290,000 dollars overnigh is said that 8,500 bags of whe his warehouse continued to sm for thirty days. Yet this did discourage him; on the contra

*Mr. Dōmoto in His Office*

gave help to many Japanese afflicted by the earthquake. To aid himself in reconstructing his losses, he borrowed funds from a branch of the Shokin Bank. Combining four Japanese trading companies who were on the verge of collapse, he founded the North American Trading Company Ltd., and became its first president.

### A Floating Crab-Cannery

As North American Trading Company was helping find ways for the reconstruction of devastated San Francisco, the vision for a new venture, which would profoundly affect his life, sprang to his mind. He read an article in a Japanese newspaper about some crab fishermen in the areas of Sakhalin and Maoka whose nets were destroyed and who were pressing the Japanese government for help. It occurred to Dōmoto that crab was very expensive in America and if he could can them in Sakhalin he could import them to the United States. It would also be of great help to the crab fishermen. Characteristically, once he fixed upon this idea he worked feverishly to put it into effect. He travelled to northern Japan and after much effort he saw his initial idea become reality in the form of a one pound can of crabmeat. He returned home but upon opening the can he found the color of the meat had turned black. This began his painstaking work in the field of canning. He worked upon his ideas day after day, sometimes getting up in the middle of the night with a new idea in his mind to test it in his workshop. By constantly revising his ideas he perfected the presently used enamel can, for which he was granted patents in America, Japan, and England. Today, when we open a can of crab we find the meat wrapped in paper, an innovation that was originated by Dōmoto. Having overcome the problems of canning, he went once again to Sakhalin, where he worked constantly on his project for a crab-packing plant.

By travelling the 80 kilometers from Maoka to the Sakhalin Government office in Toyohara, he was able to procure a bounty of 20,000 yen for the export of canned crab. This was the beginning. In 1910 he began his efforts in opening up new markets in the United States, Great Britain, and France.

His total export in 1916 amounted to 80,000 boxes, and increased greatly from year to year. In 1938 it reached over 363,000 boxes with a value of nearly 20,000,000 yen. His business acumen no doubt played a great role in his success with canned crab, but it was due even more to his new patent and to his ability as an inventor. The confidence he gained through his canning experiences were to be of great help in his future work. For example in 1924 at a time when only the lower classes in Japan ate the *asari*, or short-necked clam, found in Ariake Bay in Kyūshū, he began to export them to America. He called them "Baby Clams," canned them, and exported over 30,000 boxes, representing 200,000 dollars yearly. Success in this case can probably be traced to the name "Baby Clam," his observation that the name would appeal to American housewives proving to be correct. In addition, he canned oysters, white-clams, tuna, and mandarin oranges, the latter being an especially successful enterprise. He had earlier made great profits by

importing mandarin oranges from Japan to the United States. His success was such that California orange-growers united against him and succeeded in having a law passed prohibiting their importation. Dōmoto got around this readily by canning the oranges. In later years Japanese canning associations used to hold yearly banquets in Dōmoto's honor for his invaluable contributions to the industry.

### King of Canned Goods

In spite of the great success enjoyed by North American Trading Company, Dōmoto was not a man to sit back and count his profits. Whatever the product, whatever he saw or heard, if there was any way to consider it in relation to Japanese-American trade, he would lose no time in putting all his resources to the job of putting it to market. As a by-product of his never-ending search for new marketing procedures, he came to hold over ten patents. Beneath his commercial spirit which searched for profit was the simple nationalistic spirit of the Meiji emigrants. He was always urged on by a sincere desire to help further friendly relations between Japan and the United States. Hearing that an outbreak of goiter had broken out in the Chicago area, he flew to the area and inaugurated a movement to introduce kelp into the people's diet, which would supply the needed iodine and thus cure the goiter. Hearing that tomatoes are rich in vitamin, he travelled throughout Japan in order to encourage its cultivation, for in those days tomatoes were highly disliked by the Japanese, who called them "mad apples." Since he wanted the Japanese living in the United States to be able to eat Japanese food, he began to can soy sauce, sake, and beer. At that time soy sauce was inseparable from the distinctive soy casks, which not infrequently would explode during the hot summer months due to fermentation. And the canning of beer, now a commonplace, was an almost epochal event when Dōmoto first accomplished it.

### His Last Vision

As his fame and prosperity grew, it seemed that he became more and more lonely. Many calculating people asked him for loans, and many took advantage of his good will. Although regarding this as a natural consequence of his position, he nevertheless used to get very annoyed with such people. More and more he began to isolate himself from the rest of the Japanese population. He built a huge and splendid mansion in Oakland, California, with 40 rooms. He took in many Japanese who were out of work and looked after them in this house, which is there even today.

When the Imperial Hotel was about to be constructed in Tokyo, Dōmoto heard that its design, by Frank Lloyd Wright, was originally meant for Mexico, and when Mexico cancelled its request, Tokyo had taken it up. Dōmoto felt this to be a slight on the honor of Japan, so he commissioned Wright* to design him a personal residence for him in Kago-machi, Koishikawa, Tokyo, for him to use as a residence when in Japan. This house, filled with many unnecessary luxuries, afforded him intense satisfaction, but was destroyed by fire during the war. He reaped tremendous profit from wartime commerce, trading in iron goods, machinery, platinum, tungsten steels and other chemical industrial goods, valued at more than 2,500,000 dollars. He acquired a patent of machine-gun parts and acted as a "merchant of death," selling to America and Germany, but offering them free to Morioka Kōgyō in Japan.

He turned to the abalone fisheries and devised a method of preparing abalone steak which he advertized and imported into the United States. He even thought of canning caviar from Manchurian sturgeon.

Meanwhile in Japan the militaristic policy continued unabated and little by little Japan became isolated from the rest of the world. As the relations between the two countries cooled, he began to buy Japanese government bonds with his assets, persuading other Japanese in the United States to do likewise. Hearing of the severe battlefield conditions in China, he experimented with canning rice. Many problems arose until he worked out a method of canning rice by a double-heating process, in which a can could be converted into cooked rice just by a three-minute heating. During this period it was discovered that he had tongue cancer. Although nearly 80 years old an operation would have given him a chance of recovery. But he refused, preferring death to the loss of his sense of taste, for it was, after all, food that had given him his livelihood and his fame. He returned to Japan where he died in 1940 in his mansion in Tokyo. On Christmas Day, just four days before his death, he gathered samples of all the foods he had produced during his lifetime and piled them on a stone in his garden. One by one he ate them. This was the direct cause of his death. His exact age was not known because he had always refused to submit to the census register. It was most fortunate that he died before the onset of World War II. Although after Japan's defeat people forgot all about him, his children all received fine educations and they and their descendants are still prospering. (TM)



* not him – "another Caucasian" per Yuki Maki during conversation Oct 1976 Wak