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## Dollar a Day

*Mobs rioted against Japanese workers on the Oregon Short Line.*

by Julie Okamura

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Tadashichi Tanaka swam into the Seattle shore in 1885, dripping wet clothes hanging from his exhausted figure. It was called “smuggling in” or “jumping ship.” Men left their ships while anchored in the port, never to see Japan again. Seaman Tadashichi Tanaka was one of many men who reached America in this way. Clever but illiterate, Tanaka came to America to make as much money as possible. Working as a contractor, he brought Japanese men to Idaho in October 1891 to work as railroad laborers. In doing so, Tanaka played a prominent role in the story of Japanese who came to the Boise Valley at the turn of the 19th century.

In May 1869, the first transcontinental railroad was completed, connecting Council Bluffs, Iowa, to Sacramento, California. Thousands of Chinese laborers undertook the hazardous task of building the Pacific line, from Sacramento to Promontory, Utah. By 1882, anti-Chinese sentiment had peaked as the economy experienced a downturn, resulting in the Chinese Exclusion Act. Railroads continued to expand across the western states and the demand for laborers outdrove the local supply. The U.S. government began recruiting men from Japan. Later, Tanaka would recruit men to come to Idaho.

At its closest point, Boise was still about 250 miles from the railroad in Kelton, Utah. Both goods and passengers traveled in wagons for the last grueling stage of the trip. Although Boise lagged behind other western cities in population, at less than 2,000 citizens, its residents campaigned for a railroad for decades before the Oregon Short Line finally made its way through Idaho in 1882 and 1883. The Oregon Short Line ran from Granger, Wyoming, and stopped at Huntington, Oregon. Unfortunately for Boiseans, the line went south of Boise, following an easier grade through Nampa.

Boiseans spent the next 10 years campaigning for a rail line into Boise. The next step included a line from Kuna to the Boise Bench, south of town, near the depot today, built by Mormon workers in 1887. Finally, in 1893, the Boise City Railroad and Terminal Company, a subsidiary of the Oregon Short Line, built the first stub line into downtown Boise.

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Like many Japanese immigrants, Tanaka first lived in Seattle, unemployed and unfamiliar with the American way of life. Most likely, he hung about the Japanese section of town, frequenting gambling and prostitution houses. After living in the United States for 5 years, even men who jumped ship were allowed to obtain a “formal certificate of residence” from the Japanese Consulate. Eventually Tanaka left Seattle for Ogden (Utah), taking a Japanese prostitute with him. Once in Ogden, Tanaka met a Chinese labor subcontractor, known as Ah-Say, or Arthur. Arthur became infatuated with Tanaka’s prostitute-girlfriend. In exchange for the woman, Arthur allowed Tanaka to subcontract under him in Idaho.



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A Prussian spire marked Boise’s passenger depot.

When Tanaka arrived in Idaho, the city of Nampa had just been incorporated. Eight years earlier, the Oregon Short Line arrived and now Nampa was evolving into more than just a stop on the rail line. Tanaka set up an employment agency and hired 40 to 50 Japanese workers from Portland. Tanaka used connections in California, Oregon, and Washington to bring more Japanese workers to Idaho. By 1892, Tanaka had bypassed Arthur and worked directly under William Remington, a white contractor based out of Ogden. He sent 500 men from his base in Nampa to various places throughout Idaho to build and repair rail lines.

## *Working and Living Conditions*

Railway section crews worked 10 hours a day. Japanese laborers often performed the most difficult jobs and under white supervisors. They were also paid less than white laborers regardless of their job. Whereas white railroad laborers earned \$1.45 a day, Japanese men made \$1.15 and sometimes as little as \$1.00 a day. But the amount that ended up in their pockets was even less. Unscrupulous contractors such as Tanaka subtracted fees from the workers' wages. Tanaka took 10 cents a day from each worker as his own fee, a monthly "translation office fee" of \$1 a month, and 50 cents a month for the medical clinic.

The medical clinic in Nampa, built in 1892, was Tanaka's idea. Its purpose was to care for the growing number of workers who were often ill or injured on the job. (Today in Nampa's Kohlerlawn Cemetery, headstones—some with three names each—mark the graves of Japanese railroad laborers.) Tanaka imposed an initial charge of \$5 and then 50 cents per month from each man. These charges paid for the building and maintenance of the clinic. Tanaka also held part of their salary, at their request, to send to their families in Japan. Being a subcontractor, Tanaka was required to share his commission with the white regional contractor, William Remington. A year later, in 1893, Tanaka had about 500 men working for him. Many were recruited directly from Japan, primarily from Hiroshima, Wakayama, and Okayama prefectures.

As more men began leaving Japan, the Japanese government diligently worked at keeping men like Tanaka out of the United States because they gave Japan and its people a bad name. Japan watched the problems of China's immigrants and vigorously worked to separate themselves from the negative stereotypes and prejudice associated with the Chinese. Immigrant guide books soon popped up to assist the men and women in what to expect once they arrived in America. One warned men of "corrupt bosses," referring to railroad contractors.

Tanaka was aware of the negative consequences of being lumped with the Chinese. He helped his workers adapt and



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Workmen borrowed suits and retouched photos to lure "picture brides" from Japan.

assimilate into Idaho culture by insisting they wear American clothes and eat American food. This type of assimilation, called *gaimentaki dōka* in Japanese, included observing American traditions such as not working on the Sabbath and commemorating American holidays such as Thanksgiving and Independence Day. Japanese associations in Idaho even entered floats in Fourth of July parades.

NATIONAL PARK SERVICE



Japanese immigrants pass through immigration at Angel Island, about 1910.

In addition to making his men wear western shirts and pants, Tanaka prohibited them from eating rice, miso soup, and soy sauce. He told them, “Since you are different from Chinese, live like Americans!” In yet another way to stuff his pockets with money from his workers, Tanaka owned a restaurant near his office. He also sold food that came in on the Oregon Short Line. But his workers didn’t know what to do with their limited American food items. They settled for cooking dumpling soup for breakfast and dinner. “We chopped bacon and fried it, then added potatoes and onions with salted water, and cooked the flour dumplings in that,” one Japanese laborer told an interviewer decades later.

On cold and wintry nights,  
Sound of the boiling kettle  
Of dumpling soup—blub, blub...

(Taro)

The men took turns preparing meals for their section. If food costs rose above \$3 or \$4 a month for each person, the workers complained. The drive to spend as little as possible on food so they had more money to support their families cost some men their lives and many their health. One gentleman said, “Those who had left their families in Japan had the single-minded purpose of saving 1,000 yen in 3 years, without eating or drinking, and then go back to Japan.” One laborer described it as “fasting for three years.” Some of the men suffered from night blindness resulting from their poor diets. Among the Japanese graves in Kohlerlawn Cemetery in Nampa lie two men, Tashima Otomats and H. Kimura, who died in 1892, most likely due to their poor diets.

The housing provided by the railroad was next to the train tracks. It usually consisted of box cars or shacks, neither of which protected the workers from the heat or the cold. Six or eight men to a boxcar is how the men lived while laying track in the Boise Valley.

### *Negative Press and Xenophobia*

Although the men were known for being hard workers and well behaved in camp, an 1892 article in the *Idaho Statesman* noted the arrival of more Japanese laborers contracted by “Tanaker” [sic] and their disorderly conduct. By summer of 1892, anxiety was building. As Japanese laborers continued arriving in Nampa, their presence caused uneasiness among the local citizens. Tensions grew. Some locals believed the men were competing and taking jobs away from white laborers. “The Japanese have within the last four months completely demoralized the laboring interests of Southern Idaho,” reported the *Statesman*. In early July, Tanaka sent a section crew of a dozen Japanese workers to Mountain Home. When the townspeople found out, “about eighty *best* citizens” including “men of position” forced the crews out and demolished the newly constructed “shanty.” The mob ordered the workers to leave on the first train.

At the end of July, a smallpox scare proved enough for citizens of Nampa, Caldwell, Notus, and Boise to force all the Japanese laborers out of the valley. The cause of the trouble



THE WASP

Chinese exclusion in the 1880s open the door for a limited quota of Japanese.



ALAMY.COM

Steam locomotives reached beyond Boise to Barber in 1906.

was one sick Japanese man traveling to Portland on the train. Except for Tanaka (who was in Portland at the time), all of the Japanese railroad workers were ordered out of Nampa and sent to a “vacant building two miles north of town and an armed guard was placed over them.” Boise warned the public of smallpox-exposed Japanese sneaking into town and expelled them from the capital city. A “committee of citizens” ran the Japanese out of Caldwell at 1 a.m. one morning. The *Caldwell Tribune* commented that the smallpox scare was reason enough to oust every Japanese in the county, including any Chinese. Another article stated Caldwell citizens were divided over the problem. “The more conservative condemn the action as an outrage, while others believe the proper thing was done.”

“The Short Line will not again permit them to come into our midst,” the article concluded.

Despite the prejudice and the calls to expel the Japanese, the demand for their labor continued. White laborers either quit at harvest time or were unwilling to work for such small wages. Because of recruiting offices set up in the Northwest, Hawaii, and Japan, hiring Japanese was easy and convenient. But opposition to Japanese laborers in Idaho continued. The *Idaho Statesman* reported from the Ada County Democratic convention platform, which stated, “We are opposed to the importation of foreign contract labor whether white or yellow, and we denounce the wholesale employment of servile Japanese on the Union Pacific Railroad as an outrage upon our laboring classes.”

### ***Boise Stub Line and River Bridge***

The next spring, Tanaka sent groups of up to 12 men throughout Idaho to build and repair rail lines. Seventeen-year-old Inota Tawa was excited to leave his family’s small farm in Okayama Prefecture and come to the United States. Poverty prevailed in Japan, especially in rural areas. One of his reasons for leaving, besides the adventure, was the opportunity to earn much more than if he stayed in Japan. In 1893, \$1 was equal to 2 yen. Tawa had a goal of sending 1,000 yen back to his father in 3½ years.

Tanaka also sent men to begin constructing the 6.3-mile stub line into downtown Boise. This would be the first line to bring passengers and freight directly into Boise. The Boise City Railroad and Terminal Company, controlled by Union Pacific, was chartered on March 20, 1893. Grading began on the stub line from the Boise Branch at Boise Junction into downtown on April 25. The *Statesman* kept track of the progress for residents. The workers built the 6-mile line in less than 4 months and the bridge in about 12 days.

Bridging the Boise River included not only driving pilings into the bank but also building up the banks with large lava boulders to prevent erosion. It took three men to move one rock—two men lifted the boulder onto the back of a third man and together they loaded the rock onto a flatcar. The flatcar



The exchange rate for the U.S. dollar in 1893 yielded twice as many Japanese yen.



then took the rocks to the river's edge, where the action was repeated in reverse and the rocks were placed on the bank. It was dangerous work. At least two Japanese laborers died from accidents on the job: J. Mizoguchi died on May 6, 1893, and N. Okita on May 20. Both were from Hiroshima Prefecture and were probably recruited directly from Japan.

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Wooden trestles bridged Idaho's fractured landscapes.

On August 17, 1893, the first train made its way into downtown Boise, crossing the newly constructed wooden bridge. “It was greeted with cheers from the men, waving of handkerchiefs by the ladies, and music by the band,” the *Idaho Statesman* reported. Although the train went into Boise and then had to back out, it was a monumental achievement for the small capital of Idaho. The newspaper made no mention of the Japanese laborers who graded the land, laid the tracks, and built the bridge across the Boise River.

In an event known as the Idaho Anti-Corruption Incident, Tadashichi Tanaka was accused of embezzlement when he could not account for \$15,000 that his workers gave him for remittance to their families. Remington fired Tanaka and replaced him with another Japanese subcontractor, named Yasuteru Narita. The money was never found, but Tanaka reportedly “ended up living like a king” on 75 acres of land he had bought.

The contributions of Japanese railroad laborers have often been overlooked in the building of the Boise Valley. Their willingness to work on difficult and dangerous crews improved the valley and brought opportunities to the area that otherwise would have been slower in coming. Some of these

men returned to Japan to fight in the Sino-Russian War, a few returned with their fortunes, but many stayed in the United States. After a few years, many of these men moved away from grueling railroad work and begin working on the sugar beet farms. Shortly thereafter, Issei (first-generation Japanese immigrants) began farming on their own. Because men were continually leaving the railroad but railroad construction continued, the demand for more laborers persisted until the Gentleman's Agreement in 1907 effectively stopped the immigration of Japanese laborers.

By 1905, one of six Japanese immigrants worked on railroads. The 1900 census includes 200 Japanese men living at the same address in Ada County; all are listed as railroad laborers. In Nampa, some of the men were grouped in sections of 10 to 12. At another area, the census taker specified that the men lived in box cars. Tatusgero Motonari was listed as a labor agent on Bannock Street. Subcontractors and their men were dispersed throughout Idaho and the Boise Valley. By 1907, there were about 1,500 Japanese men working throughout Idaho, constructing and repairing railroads.

The wooden Boise River bridge that the Japanese laborers built in 1893 was replaced 30 years later with a steel bridge that still stands in 2016. The bridge is on a section of the greenbelt just west of the connector and east of the Fallen Firefighters Memorial on Shoreline Drive. Pedestrians, bicyclists, and joggers cross this bridge each day with no awareness of its significance. The bridge is a reminder of the long forgotten Japanese who sacrificed their dreams, their health, and, in some cases, their lives to bring the railroad to downtown Boise.



CHAD ESTES

A steel bridge, now part of the Boise River Greenbelt, marks the location of the original Boise River Bridge built by Japanese laborers in 1893.



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