



www.vjls-jh.com

VANCOUVER JAPANESE LANGUAGE SCHOOL & JAPANESE HALL
バンクーバー日本語学校並びに日系人会館

475 Alexander Street, Vancouver, BC, Canada V6A 1C6
t 604-254-2551 f 604-254-9556 e vjls@vjls-jh.com



History Introduction - Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall

バンクーバー日本語学校並びに日系人会館

By Laura Saimoto, Community Relations Committee

The Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall was founded in 1906 by early Japanese immigrants to the Vancouver area as a grassroots community organization dedicated to education, culture and community. Over the course of a century, the organization has evolved to adapt to the changing times and conditions of society and community, both externally and internally. Above all, the main objective of the Society has continued to be sustainability and looking towards the future. This commitment to sustainability anchored the community's strategic tenacity and fortitude to survive the Japanese Canadian WWII Dispossession and Internment. It stands as a testament to community resilience to be one of the only properties returned to any Japanese Canadian after the Internment and still operating in our 114th year.

Birthered in an environment of institutional racism against Asians in Canada in the early 1900s, the organization has continued to be conscious of being a Canadian organization and safeguarding Canadian laws, organizational structures and processes, values and most of all, nurturing and developing the meaning of Canadian citizenship while at the same time, embracing Japanese culture and language. In response to these changes, it has continued to adapt and change emphases to ensure sustainability. This has resulted in revisions to its positioning, name and bylaws over the years.

487 Alexander Street, Vancouver, BC V6A 1C6
604-254-2551 | info@vjls-jh.com | facebook.com/vjls.jh | @JapaneseHall

Early History

From 1906-1919, the organization was first called "The Vancouver National Japanese Schools Maintenance Association/ The Vancouver Nippon Kyoritsu Go Gakko) Maintenance Association". In 1912, the organization officially registered as a charity with the federal government. This first original school was a regular academic school from 9 - 3 pm from Monday to Friday, with all subjects taught in the Japanese language. The purpose was to educate children of immigrants exactly the same way as in Japan so that children could return to Japan at any time.

In 1919-20, there was a major shift in the thinking about Canadian citizenship and positioning of the organization. Japanese Canadian soldiers had valiantly fought for Canada and the community continued to grow and thrive. Pressures to assimilate both inside and outside the ethnic community intensified. The School's leadership, aiming to give their children the option to build a life in Canada, consciously made a decision to change from an academic school to a second language school.¹ Children went to regular public school (in English) and after school from 4 - 5:30 Monday to Friday, they attended Japanese School. To reflect this change, the bylaws were changed and on Sept 10, 1920, the name changed to: "The Vancouver Nippon Kyoritsu Go Gakko (Japanese School of Languages) Maintenance Association".

As the community grew in the 1920s, the decision was made to build a new building to house the increase in students, which by that time had increased to close to 600. Recognizing that the organization could not fundraise alone and be financially sustainable just as a second language school, the organization expanded the positioning of the new building to a community hub: Japanese Hall. "Let us build not only a school building, but a Japanese community centre. In addition to teaching Japanese, in order to improve Japan/Canada relations, it (the Japanese Hall) has important significance."² So for the first time, the Society partnered with other community organizations to create a facility for the entire community: Canadian Japanese Association; Canada Newspaper Co.; Continental Nippou News Co (three community newspapers); hairdressing union; Labour union; Aiyuu-kai; BC Renraku Cooperative.³

A New Home

The new building, completed in 1928, housed the high school level of the school, and also the events and offices of its community partners. It was called: Vancouver Nipponjinkei Kaikan (Japanese Hall) Narabini Nippon Go Gakko (Japanese School of Languages) Maintenance Association. The bylaws were not changed at the time, nor was the new name registered with Registrar of Companies. However, the new name was adopted and used by the community. The organization became the education, community and cultural hub of the bustling Powell Street area of 8000 Japanese Canadian residents. With the outbreak of World War II, it had a student population of over 1000 students.

Internment Era

With the Internment and dispossession of all properties and businesses owned by Japanese Canadians, the Society's buildings were confiscated by the Canadian government and forcible attempts were made to sell. By virtue of the fact that the Society was community owned, ownership decisions could not be made as the board of directors were scattered in Internment camps. Thanks to the creative tenacity and willpower of the directors and by communicating to the Office of the Custodian only through their lawyer, the board was able to prevent the sale of the 1928 Building by getting into good standing with

the Company of Registrars in 1951 (had been in default due to not doing annual filings with their financial statement during the Internment from 1942-49). The building was then reclaimed in 1952 and reopened classes in 1953.

Post-War Renewal

After having their lives and community shattered, community members of the Society began to rebuild. By 1960, seven years after the post-war reopening, they updated the bylaws to make the 1928 name, Vancouver Nipponjinkei Kaikan (Japanese Hall) Narabini Nippon Go Gakko (Japanese School of Languages) Maintenance Association, official in the bylaw revisions (Extraordinary resolution) and up-to-date with the Company of Registrars. Both education and community foci gave the organization a diverse revenue base to continue operations, with partner Japanese Canadian community organizations being housed in the facility.

Recent History

In the mid to late 1980s, the board recognized the changing demographics of the student population as well as of changes in the neighbourhood, what was then known as 'Skid Row'. The majority of students no longer spoke Japanese at home, the Japanese Canadian population was moving to the suburbs and was shrinking, and most Japanese post-war businesses left the neighbourhood. To survive teaching language and culture, the board recognized that Japanese needed to be taught as a second or foreign language and that the 'community' base needed to diversify outside of solely Japanese ethnic boundaries.

The other major strategic consideration was the recognition of the historic significance of the 1928 building and of the organization's and community's recognition of the value of their history. With the shame of the War and Internment, the confidence and pride of the community had been shattered and emotionally scarred. The Redress Movement began to correct past wrongs, and the hidden history of the organization was brought to light. With these two factors in mind, the organization again made another major shift and positioned itself as an education community hub, while leveraging its unique history in the context of Japanese Canadian history to remain economically viable. Education meant including childcare, which was not dependent on the shrinking ethnic Japanese Canadian population.

Thus, the board updated the Society's constitution on June 27, 1994. The new purpose: "To promote and foster the study of the Japanese language and culture; To provide adequate physical facilities and academic instruction for the study and understanding of the Japanese language and culture; To advance multi-cultural and multi-lingual understanding; To assist interested persons or groups in encouraging all of the above; to pursue any other objective that may be incidental to any of the above." After purchasing the neighbouring corner lot, 487 Alexander, a year later, both sites were rezoned into one municipally designated heritage site and the building of the 5-storey Y2K wing was initiated and completed in the year 2000. To emphasize the importance of an education hub with Japan's rise as an industrial power, the name was changed to the Vancouver Japanese Language School and Japanese Hall. It is important to note that 'education' was broad and inclusive, integrating childcare, and education of culture and other areas of learning which could draw students of all backgrounds and ages from the city.

The Heritage Daycare Renovation Project which renovated our 1928 Heritage Building and launched Children's World Childcare Centre, was completed in 2012. For over 100 years, the board of directors had been a working volunteer board, both governing and managing the organization. However, with the

growth of the organization, a working board was not a sustainable governing structure. For this reason, the board committed in 2014 to move to governance and to hire a senior manager. In 2016, the Canadian Government updated the Society Act. In response to this change, all charities and non-profits had to update their bylaws. Now in 2020, the board, as part of the evolution towards governance, is updating our bylaws to reflect both our inside and outside evolving conditions to ensure sustainability for ensuing decades.

BIBLIOGRAPHY and SOURCES

1. Sato Fonds, 1996.170.1.8; 1996.170.1.8, 1996.170.1.1, 1996.170.1.2, Nikkei National Museum Archives.
2. Sato, Tsutae & Hanako, "*Kodomo-to tomo-ni Gojyuu-nen* (Teaching Japanese-Canadian Children for 50 Years)", Nichi-bou Publishing, 1969.
3. Primary historic board documents, conducted at the times of the bylaw changes to outline reasons for changes and strategic visioning for the organization, Vancouver Japanese Language School & Japanese Hall archives bulk storage (creation of community archives in process).

Sources

1. Sato, Tsutae & Hanako, "*Kodomo-to tomo-ni Gojyuu-nen* (Teaching Japanese-Canadian Children for 50 Years)", Nichi-bou Publishing, 1969, p. 53-54.
2. Sato, Tsutae & Hanako, "*Kodomo-to tomo-ni Gojyuu-nen* (Teaching Japanese-Canadian Children for 50 Years)", Nichi-bou Publishing, 1969, p. 53-54
3. Sato, Tsutae & Hanako, "*Kodomo-to tomo-ni Gojyuu-nen* (Teaching Japanese-Canadian Children for 50 Years)", Nichi-bou Publishing, 1969, p. 71.