

## **Jack Shortlidge, “The Seabrook Educational Center: Telling the Story of a Japanese American Community in Southern New Jersey,” *Voices: The Journal of New York Folklife* Vol. 31 (Spring/Summer 2005).**

Since their arrival in Cumberland County, New Jersey, from World War II internment camps in the western United States, the Seabrook Japanese have adapted to the surrounding culture, while maintaining traditions associated with their ethnic background. The process has resulted in a distinctive community, partly rural and small-town South Jersey in orientation and partly Japanese. The mixture is present in all aspects of life, including work, and extends to the group’s expression of ethnic identity in cultural, artistic, and religious activities. A museum begun by Japanese residents, the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center, helps to preserve a shared identity among the Seabrook Japanese, while providing a platform for presenting their story and the stories of other former Seabrook workers to museum visitors.

The Japanese American community in southern New Jersey is centered in Seabrook, a small town in a farming district just north of the city of Bridgeton....In 1944 and ’45, about 2,500 Japanese Americans from internment camps in the western U. S. migrated to this area...and at the time they were the largest group of people of Japanese descent anywhere in the country. Charles F. Seabrook and his three sons ran the [frozen foods] business like a giant agricultural factory with 20,000 acres under cultivation (Noguchi 1994). During the war years, they faced a labor shortage of crop pickers and workers for their food processing plants. This need led the company to recruit interned Japanese Americans starting in late 1943 and to bring in after the war displaced Europeans, including Germans, Estonians, Latvians, Ukrainians, and other refugees.



These people joined a workforce that already included “African American workers from the South, Scots-Irish from Appalachia, and contract farm workers from Jamaica, Puerto Rico, and other parts of the Caribbean” (Noguchi 1994). At its peak in 1947, Seabrook Farms employed about 5,000 workers speaking more than 30 different languages.

**War Relocation Authority I-686, August 1944. Left to right: Fukuji Sasaki, Ellen Ayako Nakamura, and Harold Ouchida. Photo: Ikaru Kawasaki. Courtesy of Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center.**

In October 1994, some area residents who used to work at Seabrook Farms opened a small museum called the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center (SECC). Several hundred Japanese Americans came from all over the United States to attend the celebration, joining with the community of about 300 people still living in or near Seabrook.

The SECC Museum is located in the basement of the Upper Deerfield Township municipal building, which is just across the road from the site of Hoover Village, the barracks-like area where Japanese workers and their families lived during the 1940s. The museum has two rooms with displays and video kiosks that tell the story of Seabrook Farms and the people who worked and lived there (SECC Bulletin 2002).

A brochure at the center calls the SECC Museum a place dedicated to “preserving the rich multicultural history of Seabrook, New Jersey.” Inside the brochure is an essay by Rei R. Noguchi, professor of English and linguistics at California State University, Northridge, and a former Seabrook resident. Professor Noguchi’s essay is an upbeat narrative about a place that during the 1940s had become “a ‘global bootstrap village,’ where downtrodden yet hardy peoples of diverse cultures were given a chance to regenerate their lives.” Ellen Nakamura agreed that Seabrook Farms offered a fresh start for Japanese Americans and other displaced people: “We put our best foot forward, [but] the assembly line work around the clock was difficult. The children studied hard and picked beans in the summer, and they established new records athletically and academically [while they were in school]” (1995).

The museum is staffed by volunteers and directed by John Fuyuuume. Mr. Fuyuuume grew up in Pasadena, California, where his parents grew vegetables and owned a family grocery store. His family was interned in 1942 in a camp in Gila River, Arizona, where they stayed until relocating to Seabrook in 1944. Like Mr. Fuyuuume, most SECC volunteers are former Seabrook workers and residents who can give visitors a personal perspective about the displays and the stories they illustrate.

Before the war, thousands of Japanese Americans had lived on the West Coast, where the men were farmers, fishermen, or ran family businesses. By the end of 1942, virtually all of them had been forcibly relocated to other parts of the country by the American government. Years later, Mrs. [Ellen] Nakamura said that she saw the SECC as a way to make sure that the story of what had happened to her and so many others would not be forgotten. As she put it, “If we don’t do it [start a cultural center], fifty years from now, there won’t be anyone” left who remembers what happened to the Japanese Americans during the war (1995).

Mrs. Nakamura’s desire to tell the Seabrook story to others was evident as well in her role as the presenter of Seabrook performing groups, such as the *Minyo* (folk) Dancers and the *taiko* group, called the *Hoh Daiko* Drummers. She had been working as a presenter for the dance group ever since they were formed, as part of a cultural presentation by members of the Seabrook Japanese community at the 1975 Smithsonian Festival of American Folklife.

Her descriptive introductions of the dancers’ performances at multicultural events such as the festival in Washington dovetailed with her early training as a journalist in Tulare, California. Her

presentations were tailored for the ears of non-Japanese audiences, which may have had little exposure to Japanese music and dance. (Nakamura 1995).

Over the past sixty years, the Seabrook Japanese have adapted to the surrounding culture, while still maintaining a connection with their ethnic background....There is an active Buddhist congregation at Seabrook,...it helped Japanese residents maintain and practice their cultural identity for many years before the Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center opened.

**Hoh Daiko Drummers at Longwood Gardens, Delaware, on November 10, 1995. Courtesy of Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center.**



The Seabrook Buddhist temple, founded in 1945, is affiliated with the *Jodo Shinshu* sect, a denomination with nearly a century-long pedigree among Americans of Japanese descent. The temple building fits unobtrusively into the farm country in rural Cumberland County. It is a white brick structure similar in style to Protestant churches found on highways

throughout Cumberland County and nearby Salem County. As the historian Sucheng Chan has pointed out, Japanese Buddhism has “adapted itself to the American setting” with the use of pews and hymnals and by adopting the word “church”, as in the umbrella organization called the Buddhist Churches of America (Chan 1991, 73). Through such trappings, the Seabrook congregation worships in a setting that is similar in appearance to many Christian houses of worship in this country. At the same time, the service itself, with sutras and chants in both English and Japanese, evokes the dual heritage of the *nisei* (second-generation) worshipers and their children, who make up the majority of the congregation.

One of the striking features of the Japanese Seabrook community is the prominence of women in all of the organizations concerned with maintaining cultural heritage. In the temple, women organize events such as fund-raising dinners and the July *Obon* festival....Mrs. Nakamura and other women active in the community have explained their leadership in a matter-of-fact way: the men of their generation used to lead, but most have now passed away.

The women who serve as community leaders are now mainly in their seventies or early eighties. They are *nisei*, born in California, who came to Seabrook with their husbands or families in 1944 and 1945, when they were in their teens or early twenties. These women grew up in households where Japanese was their first language: several (including Mrs. Nakamura) learned English only when they began attending grammar school. In some families, the parents learned English while helping their children with their homework. These *nisei* who made a new life in New Jersey

regard themselves as Americans. Their brothers and husbands, in many cases, went straight from internment camps to serve in the 442nd combat regiment in Italy and France during the bloody campaigns of 1943 and 1944. Their status as native-born Americans would be too obvious to mention, except for the fact that they and their families were once displaced from their homes because of their parents' nationality.

The Buddhist temple sponsors the two performing groups, the Minyo Dancers and the Hoh Daiko Drummers. The minyo dance group began in 1975, under the direction of Sunkie Oye. Mrs. Oye was trained in classical dance as a young girl and had led the dancing at the annual Obon festival held each July outside the temple. The Minyo Dancers don't perform classical dance, which they view as highly improvisatory and requiring years of rigorous training. They instead learn and perform folk dances associated with the peasantry in various parts of Japan (Oye 1995).

Since their first performances at the 1975 Smithsonian Festival, the group has danced at many events, such as the People's Inaugural for President Jimmy Carter, and at regional summer festivals such as the Fairmount Park show held each June in Philadelphia, when the group helps raise money to maintain the Japanese tea house on the park grounds.

The Hoh Daiko Drummers group was formed in 1991. Taiko is an ensemble activity requiring close cooperation among the performers. There are times during a taiko performance when five or six people in the group may be switching from drum to drum, keeping the rhythms going as they move from position to position in a graceful choreography that is evocative of some martial arts stances and body movements. It is exhilarating to watch—and to perform. All of the Seabrook drummers regard their group as a spiritual activity that requires discipline and unity among the members. Not all the drummers are Buddhist or, indeed, ethnically Japanese. But as Ellen Nakamura has said while introducing a Hoh Daiko program, they do regard their drumming as a form of meditation.

From the group's inception, the Seabrook drummers have learned a great deal from their New York taiko counterparts. Besides basic drumming routines, the Seabrook drummers were taught how to make their own drums from oak wood wine and whisky barrels, a common practice among taiko groups in America. (In Japan, drums are commonly made from hollowed-out sections of tree trunks).

The people who came to Seabrook from the western internment camps during the war have made New Jersey their home, and many of them have made good lives for themselves. Some had careers working for the Seabrook company, while others branched out to area businesses...Many in this younger generation now work throughout the United States in a variety of professions, including in their number at least 4 lawyers, 2 dentists, 4 medical doctors, [and] over 10 Ph.D.s.

The goal to include other groups in the center's archive and programs does not negate the pride that Seabrook Japanese have in their own culture. It instead demonstrates the emphasis that the SECC board and staff place on their communal experience at Seabrook, and their desire to tell the whole story. For the Japanese, the story began in the dark days after the 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, when war hysteria and race hatred resulted in a truly ugly episode in American history.

The SECC museum, however, testifies that the Japanese and other displaced people at Seabrook were able to start their lives over once they were released from internment in this country or emigrated from refugee camps in post-war Europe. Ellen Nakamura, the community leader who had the original vision of a cultural museum, passed away on April 25, 2000. In 2001 the Seabrook museum opened a new display room in her honor, the Ellen Nakamura Memorial Art Gallery, which exhibits paintings by refugee residents and workers at Seabrook Farms.

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Excerpts and photographs above are from “The Seabrook Educational and Cultural Center: Telling the Story of a Japanese American Community in Southern New Jersey” by Jack Shortlidge which was published in *Voices* Vol. 31, Spring-Summer 2005. *Voices* is the membership magazine of the New York Folklore Society. To become a subscriber, [join the New York Folklore Society now.](#)