

PHOTO VIGNETTE

Erasures

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Visitors to Moresby Island today will find few traces of the copper mine established on the island by Arichika Ikeda in 1907. The only copper mine in the area that consistently turned a profit at the time was funded by Japanese capital and operated through August 1920, when it was shut down due to a decline in copper prices that followed the end of the First World War.¹ Although the cove where the mining operation was situated was later named for Ikeda, there is little left at the site that tells the story of the distinctive mining community, described by the German American engineer hired to oversee its operations as “this Japanese place,” that flourished there for some two decades. Residents celebrated both the Meiji Emperor’s birthday and Canada Day, held teas in the Japanese tradition on special occasions, and regularly entertained Euro-Canadian visitors from Jedway, a seven-kilometre walk away.² Ikeda Mine arguably serves as an example of how settler relations in British Columbia might have evolved had it not been for the persistent impact of anti-Japanese exclusionary law and sentiment – an example that gives us access to a more complete understanding of the full range of possibilities contained in British Columbia’s past. Fragile though this moment may have been, it is nevertheless one part of a larger story that takes account of its many contradictory elements, including those that did not continue into the present – what Richard White calls “crossroads, points where history might have gone in another direction, but did not.”³

¹ Jutaro Tokunaga, “The Exploits of a Pioneer Issei,” *Journal of the Queen Charlotte Islands Museum* 3 (1973): 22. Tokunaga was Arichika Ikeda’s son-in-law.

² For a detailed account of the mine seen largely through the eyes of Joseph Marko, the engineer Ikeda hired as superintendent, see Andrea Geiger, “Haida Gwaii as North Pacific Borderland, Ikeda Mine as Alternative West,” *Pacific Northwest Quarterly* 108, 4 (2017): 119–33, citing Joseph Marko Diaries, 1908, 1909, Nancy Jo Taylor Marko Fonds, Dia 23.1, 23.2, 23.3, Haida Gwaii Museum at Kay Linagaay, Skidegate, BC.

³ Richard White argues for the importance of including such alternate possibilities in the histories that we write in order to avoid distorting the past by suggesting that it was comprised only of elements that seem to shed light on the present. See Richard White, “Other Wests,” in *The West: An Illustrated History*, ed. Geoffrey C. Ward and Dayton Duncan (Boston: Little, Brown, 1996), 48, 53.



Figure 1. Young Japanese men loading copper ore on the dock at Ikeda Mine circa 1910. Awaya, Ikeda and Company invested heavily in the infrastructure of the mine. *Source:* Image H-04600 courtesy of the Royal BC Museum and Archives.

We catch a glimpse of the community that existed at Ikeda Bay around 1910 in the first photograph, which depicts some of the young Japanese men employed at the mine working on a dock, also built by Ikeda, loading copper ore onto a vessel moored there. Tracks lead to the ore bunkers, visible in the background, and continue up into the forest to the Lily, just one of the whimsical names Ikeda gave the forty-seven overlapping mining claims he filed in the area.⁴ The second photograph, taken towards the end of the twentieth century, depicts the grave of a young Japanese man who was one of two who died in a mining accident at Ikeda

⁴ Other names Ikeda gave the claims he filed include the Peach, Sweet Pea, Pansy, Orchid, and Wisteria. See Geiger, "Haida Gwaii," 123. A majority of his claims had reverted to the Crown by 1930, but Ikeda renewed his claim to the Lily in 1937, just two years before his death in 1939 at the age of seventy-four. See Geiger, "Haida Gwaii," 128. In many cases the forced removal of Japanese Canadians from the coast during the Second World War played a critical role in erasing historical memories of the contributions they had made; here, nature and changing economic conditions were also a significant factor.



Figure 2. Overlooking the Ikeda Mine site, this headstone marks the resting place of a young Japanese man who died in a mining accident on 9 February 1909. *Source:* Prince Rupert City & Regional Archives, Neil & Betty Carey Collection, 2017-016.

Mine on 9 February 1909.⁵ These were two of the many young Japanese men with a sense of adventure who travelled to North America eager to learn new technologies, some of them miners brought from Japan to work at this particular site, whose contribution to the development of British Columbia's coastal infrastructure and economy has been largely erased from our historical memory. This gravestone, together with another

⁵ The stone records the year as Meiji 42. Marko died in a mining accident three months later in May 1909. Geiger, "Haida Gwaii," 128.

nearby, also in Japanese, serves as a reminder of the contributions made not just by those who survived and succeeded but also by those who lost their lives in that endeavour, including Japanese labourers like this young man whose efforts are made visible only through his death.

And yet, Ikeda's very ability to secure a series of mining claims and to build a successful mine at this location was itself premised upon earlier erasures – not least the erasure of the historical presence and ownership rights of the Haida people who have never ceded title to these lands, and that of two separate Haida villages whose people knew Ikeda Bay as Guuna GawGa (Bare Bay). Like their Euro-Canadian counterparts, Meiji-era Japanese settlers viewed the land as empty and as open for settlement. They, too, proudly embraced an image of themselves as pioneers who had “parted the grass” so that others might follow in their footsteps and assumed, wrongly, the demise of those on whose homeland they had settled.⁶

The still woods that surround the quiet gravestone of the young man who died at Ikeda Mine in 1909, in short, have a far larger and still more complicated story to tell. The successful colonization of British Columbia, as it unfolded during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, these woods remind us, depended not just on one but on multiple erasures, including both legal and narrative forms of erasure – here, of Indigenous possession, of the role of Japanese labour and capital, of the Haida villages once situated on the banks of Guuna GawGa, and of the small Japanese mining community that existed at this site just one hundred years ago. Only when we take into account each of these layers of erasure, including the omission of unrealized possibilities that existed in the past but did not continue into the present, do we have the tools in hand to develop a more complete understanding of BC history – an understanding that does not strip it of its unanticipated and contradictory elements.

⁶ Geiger, “Haida Gwaii,” 122. I am grateful to Joy Kogawa, who first pointed out to me some of the many sites in Vancouver where Japanese homes and shops were once located but where no memory of their presence remains. The same is true of any number of farms in the Fraser Valley, the Gulf Islands, and elsewhere in British Columbia.