

THE SOYOKAZE:

A Gentle Wind That Weathered the Storm

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ONE OF THE FIRST THINGS that visitors to the Museum at Campbell River encounter upon their arrival is a large fishing vessel, the *Soyokaze*. It is a beautifully restored wooden cod-fishing boat, originally built in 1939, that serves as an example of a BC commercial fishing vessel from the prewar era. This, however, is not just any boat. It is likely the only fishing vessel owned by a Japanese Canadian fisher before 1942 that was successfully reclaimed following the war. Beneath its surface lie the stories of the uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, the Matsunaga family, and the museum's role in restoring the vessel.

The trajectory of the *Soyokaze's* story and the lives of the Matsunaga family were dramatically altered when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor in December 1941. Shortly after, in 1942, 21,079 Canadians of Japanese descent were uprooted from the BC coast.¹ Each coastal community offers examples of local families who were removed and whose belongings and properties were sold off. Among those belongings were the 1,137 fishing vessels that were confiscated, sold for below market prices, and, with one exception, the *Soyokaze*,² never reclaimed. After the war, only about 10 percent of the Japanese Canadian fishers returned to the coast.³ Most who returned to British Columbia did not resettle in their prewar communities but instead started over somewhere new.⁴

The Matsunaga family bucked this trend. They returned to their prewar community of Quathiaski Cove, Quadra Island, in early 1949, and Shigekazu “Smiley” Matsunaga later became the only Japanese Canadian

¹ Masako Fukawa and Stanley Fukawa and the Nikkei Fishermen's History Book Committee, *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet: BC's Japanese Canadian Fishermen* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2009), 152.

² To the best of our knowledge and research to date, this is the only confiscated fishing vessel reclaimed by its original Japanese Canadian owner following the Second World War.

³ Masako Fukawa, interview by Beth Boyce, Museum at Campbell River, 24 January 2018, in *The Soyokaze Story*, directed by Beth Boyce and Marjorie Greaves, produced by the Museum at Campbell River and Shaw North Island TV, Campbell River, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S-uJgLK3pkQ>.

⁴ *Ibid.*



Figure 1. The *Soyokaze* on display next to the entrance to the Museum at Campbell River. Image courtesy of Lee Simmons.



Figure 2. One of the only images of the *Soyokaze* before its confiscation in 1942, taken in Quathiaski Cove, BC. Image courtesy of the Matsunaga family, CRM 20395-1.

fisher to successfully reclaim his fishing boat following its confiscation and his “internment.”⁵ What follows is the remarkable history of the Matsunaga family and their boat, the *Soyokaze*.

Shigekazu Matsunaga was born in Canada in 1908. As a young man his family sent him to their home village of Mio, Wakayama, to be educated. Upon his return to Canada, he moved to Quathiaski Cove to live near an uncle with whom he fished for lingcod.⁶ At that time, Quathiaski Cove was a small multi-ethnic community dominated by the Quathiaski Canning Company. The cannery provided work for the local First Nations communities (namely, the We Wai Kai of Cape Mudge and the Wei Wai Kum of Campbell River) and a group of skilled Chinese Canadian cannery workers. In addition, five Japanese Canadian families were involved in the fishing industry, including the Atagi family. Kiyomatsu Atagi was a boat builder and worked for the cannery to make and repair the cannery fleet while also operating an independent boatworks. The community was also home to several families of European descent who farmed, fished, and logged on Quadra Island. By 1931, the Cove had a diverse population of 270.⁷

Shigekazu began skippering a cod boat for his uncle when he was nineteen years old. A few years later, he returned to Japan to marry Toshiko Nishihama,⁸ whom he brought back to Quadra Island,⁹ where they started their family. In time, Shigekazu saved enough money to have his own boat built at the Kishi Boatworks in Steveston. In 1939, he paid \$3,600 for the thirty-six-foot double-ended cod-fishing boat.¹⁰ It was a carvel-hulled boat,¹¹ made of cedar planking fitted together so tightly it was caulked with only a single cotton thread. Partitioned tanks supplied with circulating water through approximately one hundred rectangular

⁵ This term, commonly used to describe the uprooting, detention, dispossession, and exile of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, is problematic. It is legally impossible to intern Canadian citizens, and the use of this term does not describe the full extent of the injustices perpetrated against this group of citizens during that time. For the remainder of this article, the term “uprooting” is used as a short form to describe the actions performed against Canadians of Japanese descent during the period from 1942 to 1949.

⁶ Takao Matsunaga, from A297 Oral History Interview with Takao, Toshiko, Sam, and Frank Matsunaga, interview by Irene Ross, Museum at Campbell River, 5 January 2000.

⁷ Jeanette Taylor, *The Quadra Story: A History of Quadra Island* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2009), 196.

⁸ Masako Fukawa, *Nikkei Fishermen on the BC Coast: Their Biographies and Photographs* (Madeira Park, BC: Harbour Publishing, 2007), 88.

⁹ Takao Matsunaga, interview.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ The term “carvel-hulled” refers to the hull’s construction by laying the planks flush with one another to produce a smooth surface. The other commonly used hull design from the period is referred to as clinker-built, where the planks of the hull overlap slightly.

holes in the hull kept the herring bait and lingcod catch alive. Watertight bulkheads in the bow and the stern kept the boat afloat. The bow housed the engine room and the “doghouse,” or living quarters, was located at the stern. Shigekazu named it *Soyokaze*, meaning “A Gentle Wind.”¹²

In December 1941, after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, the *Soyokaze*, along with over one thousand other fishing vessels owned by Japanese Canadians, was called in by the Canadian Navy and brought to the Fraser River where they were stored, along with the others, tied together in large flotillas. The fishers thought this was only a temporary measure and did not realize that their boats would later be sold.¹³ The Japanese Fishing Vessel Disposal Committee (JFVDC) was formed in January 1942 in order to arrange for the “disposal” of all the vessels confiscated from Japanese Canadian fishers. Although the committee’s original mandate allowed for the “present owners of detained vessels to freely negotiate for charters, leases or sales,”¹⁴ its policy shifted by June 1942 to pursue the forced sale of the vessels without the owners’ consent.¹⁵

Although, the owners technically permitted the sales, most fishers felt that they had no choice in the matter: to do otherwise would be to show disloyalty to Canada.¹⁶ The climate at the time did not encourage dissent. Anyone of Japanese descent protesting the uprooting or separation of families was sent to the prisoner-of-war camp in Angler, Ontario.¹⁷ JFVDC member Kishizo Kimura put it mildly when he noted in his diary, reflecting on the sale of the fishing vessels, that “the owners were not in a position to negotiate a fair price.”¹⁸

On 22 April 1942, the *Soyokaze* was sold by the committee to the Canadian Fishing Company (Canfisco) for \$1,800, even though its value had been appraised by the JFVDC as \$2,500.¹⁹ At the time of the sale, the Matsunaga family was detained in Hastings Park. Frank Matsunaga, who was only one year old at the time, remembers his parents telling

¹² Osamu “Sam” Matsunaga, interview by Beth Boyce, Museum at Campbell River, 25 January 2018, in *The Soyokaze Story*.

¹³ Masako Fukawa, interview.

¹⁴ Jordan Stanger-Ross, “Telling a Difficult Past: Kishizo Kimura’s Memoir of Entanglement in Racist Policy,” *BC Studies* 181 (Spring 2014): 42.

¹⁵ Kishizo Kimura, *Witness to Loss: Race, Culpability and Memory in the Dispossession of Japanese Canadians*, ed. Jordan Stranger-Ross and Pamela Sugiman (Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, 2017), 24.

¹⁶ Masako Fukawa, interview.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Kimura, *Witness to Loss*, 51.

¹⁹ As of 30 November 2018, *The Ledger: Witness to Loss*, Nikkei National Museum website, <http://witnessstoloss.ca/the-ledger/>. The Kishizo Kimura fonds at the Nikkei National Museum, call no. NNM 2010.4.

him later how they were taken to Hastings Park before being moved to Taylor Lake, near 100 Mile House.²⁰ Fortunately, they were able to afford to go to one of the self-supporting projects and keep the family together. Only 1,161 of 21,079 uprooted Japanese Canadians went to self-supporting projects: most families were separated, with the men initially sent to labour camps.²¹ From Taylor Lake, the family moved to Bridge River and, finally, to Lillooet.

In April 1949, the Mastunaga family took immediate steps to return to their interrupted life.²² Shigekazu was among the first to register for a fishing licence. His name appears in a report submitted on 6 April 1949 to the director of Pacific and Inland Fisheries, which lists nine Japanese Canadian fishers who were issued fishing licences. The names listed include Shyojiro Kaneko, Shigekazu Matsunaga, Tokuichi Mizuyabu, Yasuichi Sakai, Yoneichi Sakai, Tomizo Sato, G. Suzuki, and Yoshio Teranishi.²³

Sam Matsunaga, who had been born in Bridge River, distinctly remembers the day the family returned to Quathiaski Cove on the Union Steamship *Chelohsin*. He was only six years old, and his father had promised to buy him some candy from the general store next to the wharf. Unfortunately, the boat was late getting in, and by the time they arrived the store was closed and Sam did not get his candy.²⁴

Once he had his fishing licence in hand, and his family resettled in Quathiaski Cove, Shigekazu began to search for his lost boat. It had been seven years since Canfisco had purchased the vessel, and a lot can happen in seven years. The sale overseen by the JFVDC was not registered, so there was no accessible paper trail for Shigekazu to follow. Further, the *Soyokaze*, like many other vessels sold during the war, had been renamed, making the search even more challenging. It was several years before Shigekazu found his boat.

Sam remembered what his father did in the meantime. “The first boat he bought was a little cod boat from Nanaimo: he fished that for about two to three years. And then he bought the *Terry Q*, a local boat [from] Quadra Island, and he fished that til ’57.”²⁵

²⁰ Fujio “Frank” Matsunaga, interview by Beth Boyce, Museum at Campbell River, 25 January 2018, in *The Soyokaze Story*.

²¹ Fukawa et al., *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet*, 152.

²² 1 April 1949 was the first day that Japanese Canadians were allowed back to the coast of British Columbia.

²³ Fukawa et al., *Spirit of the Nikkei Fleet*, 179.

²⁴ Sam Matsunaga, interview.

²⁵ Ibid.

Unbeknownst to Shigekazu, his boat, renamed the *North Star II*, had been sold to Freda Harlock on 7 December 1951. The vessel registration record contains a note stating, "Authority granted by Transport Order No. 184 in 1951, dated November 23, 1951, to register the motor vessel *North Star II* without the production of a Builder's Certificate and Bills of Sale establishing a chain of title."²⁶

When Shigekazu finally located the *Soyokaze*, it was due to the sharp eye of a friend. Sam remembered, "A fisherman friend told him ... they were out looking for boats too, and they saw my dad's boat at Sidney... A lady had it!"²⁷ Under its new name, the *North Star II*, it was the boat itself that was recognised by Shigekazu's friend and not its name. Retired cod fisher Tom Forge explained how this could happen:

At that time, all the small boats were wooden and hand-made by small shipyards, so each boat was an individual. Even today, when most boats are manufactured from fibreglass, aluminum and steel, fishermen have a strong connection to their boats and the boats of other fishermen, and can usually recognize them from afar.²⁸

Shigekazu travelled to Sidney and met with Freda Harlock. Sam remembered that Harlock had been using it as a pleasure boat to travel to the United States.²⁹ The boat was not for sale, but she agreed to sell it back to Shigekazu because he was its original owner and, on 25 February 1957, fifteen years later, he was finally reunited with his boat.³⁰ The fact that Harlock was not using it to fish commercially is likely a factor in why Mr. Matsunaga was successful in reclaiming his boat. If the boat had been owned by fishers who were earning their living from it, it might have been much more difficult to convince them to part with it.

Takao (Tak) Matsunaga, the eldest son, remembered his dad talking about the condition the boat was in when he bought it back. "The only thing missing was the steering wheel ... Otherwise it was all in original shape. Everything was there."³¹ Although with time Shigekazu made changes to the boat, he never changed the name back to *Soyokaze*; instead, he kept the name *North Star II* for as long as he fished from it. His children could not say why.

²⁶ Registry of Vessels, Transport Canada, *North Star II*, 194364, call no. 2010-4-4-1-727.

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Tom Forge, retired cod fisher, personal communication, 26 November 2018.

²⁹ Sam Matsunaga, interview.

³⁰ Registry of Vessels, Transport Canada, *North Star II*, 194364, call no. 2010-4-4-1-727.

³¹ Takao Matsunaga, interview.

In 1958, to make it more versatile, Shigekazu altered the *North Star II* by removing the aft (rear) cabin and outfitting the cod-fishing boat with a gillnet drum. This adaptation allowed the family to fish for salmon in the summer months so that they did not have to rely solely on the cod fishery. When gillnetting, the rectangular holes in the hull were stoppered with specially made plugs to create standard holding tanks for the catch.

The Matsunagas were a large family of five sons and one daughter, and all were involved in the fishing industry in one way or another. Bill Henderson, master carver from the Wei Wai Kum First Nation, was himself born into a large fishing family, and he remembers fishing alongside the Matsunaga family in the 1960s:

We had a bait pond over at Quadra Island. And Matsunaga family, they had their bait ponds: in fact, we fished together and filled their ponds and our ponds, and worked together. With everybody. Shared our bait. And the great times I can remember going to Quadra to get bait and Smiley³² and Tak and them are all on their boats, waving and chatting ...

[They] created a lot working together, that family ... Proud of them. Coming back from where it was ... Taking those boats away from them ... And for them to come back, the way that they did. Wow. That's pretty cool.³³

The Matsunagas did not just fish for cod and salmon; in time, they also started a family fish-buying business. The Campbell River Fishing Company was formally established in 1968.³⁴ Sam remembered that “Dad built the *Miss Quadra* for Tak in '62, that's the first year we started buying.”³⁵ Bill Henderson remembered selling fish to the Matsunaga family in the early days of their operation:

The Matsunagas bought the fish off of us. They had a little scow set up ... Tak and his family got a barge, and it was anchored out by the lighthouse [Cape Mudge, Quadra Island], tied on the pilings,

³² “Smiley” was Shigekazu Matsunaga’s nickname among the local commercial fishing community.

³³ Bill Henderson, interview by Beth Boyce, Museum at Campbell River, 9 November 2017, in *The Soyokaze Story*.

³⁴ As of 30 November 2018, *Canada Seafood Buyer's Guide Online Directory*, entry for Campbell River Fishing Company, https://www.contactcanada.com/database/freesearch.php?portal=0a9&action=view_profile&cid=1392.

³⁵ Sam Matsunaga, interview.

and we sold the cod there a lot, and then it moved to the breakwater [Campbell River] there, and they bought all our fish off of us.³⁶

The family continued to fish from the *North Star II* until the Department of Fisheries closed the cod fishery in the Gulf of Georgia in 1980.³⁷ Although retired from fishing, the family continued to maintain the boat by annually painting its hull.³⁸ It remained afloat, docked alongside the other family vessels that were still working. Before Shigekazu died in 1995, he made it known to the family and local fishing community that he hoped for the boat to be donated to the Museum at Campbell River. As Sam remembers, “He’d always say he wanted to donate the boat, if they would accept it. He’d be happy if he could donate it. That’s what he kept telling me.”³⁹

The next chapter of the *Soyokaze*’s journey saw it lifted from retirement into a new kind of vocation, that of museum artefact and storyteller.

The late 1980s and early 1990s saw the Museum at Campbell River undergo a rapid transformation. The non-profit society that operates the museum pursued a massive fundraising campaign to build a new state-of-the-art facility to house its collections and exhibits. For the first time, large-scale artefacts could be a part of the displays. After the new facility was opened in 1994, the museum was tasked with developing and installing permanent exhibition galleries to tell the stories of the human history of the North Vancouver Island region. This monumental work carried on for years and involved community members from all sectors, including the local commercial fishing industry.

Buford Haines, a local fisher and friend of the Matsunaga family, had been helping the museum to develop its exhibits and made the initial approach to the museum about the boat. Lesia Davis, the executive director at the time, remembered:

Buford Haines, and a couple of others from the commercial fishing exhibit ... I remember them sitting behind my desk and saying, “There’s a boat at the dock there that’s really deteriorating and it’s an important part of our history. And we’ve come here on behalf of Mr. Matsunaga, ‘cause he’s not well, and he’s probably too modest to come. But the boat is deteriorating, he’s aging, and we really feel there’s some urgency to it.”

³⁶ Bill Henderson, interview

³⁷ Frank Matsunaga, interview.

³⁸ Sam Matsunaga, interview.

³⁹ Ibid.

And so, I starting asking around, and I met with the Matsunaga family ... And they confirmed that they would be thrilled if the museum could take it on. Because they felt there was important education there for future generations.⁴⁰

It was clear that the story of the boat was an important one and worth preserving; however, the museum had to be cautious when it came to taking on such a large artefact, which required substantial restoration work. Although the hull had been maintained with annual painting, everything above the waterline had been deteriorating for many years. The museum commissioned a marine survey of the *North Star II* to determine how much restoration work was required. The survey found that:

The former cod fishing vessel *NORTH STAR II* is no longer seaworthy and, without proper preservation measures, can be expected to deteriorate rapidly. However, it is considered a suitable candidate for restoration as a museum artifact provided such work begins soon. Restoration would require 1500-2000 hours of skilled and semi-skilled labour over a period of one and a half years.⁴¹

The survey also found that: "A name-board bearing the name *NORTH STAR II* (painted over) has been affixed to each bow. This is an unusual practice except where a name has been changed, so that these may hide an original name (possibly in Japanese characters) carved in the planking."⁴²

On 26 November 1999, on a clear sunny day, the Matsunaga family, museum board and staff members, and a videographer gathered at the Campbell River wharf to pull the *North Star II* out of the water. Present on the day were Mrs. Matsunaga and all six of her children. Before moving the boat to the dry dock, the name-board was removed by Tak Matsunaga and Lesia Davis, revealing the name *Soyokaze* beneath.

What followed was nearly two years of careful work by museum staff and special contractors to restore the *Soyokaze*. The restoration project was directed by exhibits designer and construction manager George Murdoch. Several additional carpenters and contractors were hired specifically for the project, including shipwright John Jordan, who, coincidentally, had grown up next door to the Matsunaga family in

⁴⁰ Lesia Davis, interview by Sandra Parrish, Museum at Campbell River, 28 September 2017, in *The Soyokaze Story*.

⁴¹ Murdoch and Company marine surveyors and consultants, *Report of Survey made at the request of the Campbell River Museum, October 18, 1999, by Murdoch & Company marine surveyors and consultants, of the vessel North Star II with the vessel afloat in Campbell River, 4 November 1999, 6.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, 4.



Figure 3. Takao Matsunaga and Lesia Davis remove the *North Star II* name-board from the vessel, revealing the name *Soyokaze* beneath. Image courtesy of the Matsunaga family, MCR 20466-1.

Quathiaski Cove. Harumi, Shigekazu's daughter, used to babysit him as a child and Jordan remembered seeing the old aft cabin from the boat in their backyard.⁴³ He was very familiar with the vessel as he often helped the family unload cod from it when he was young, making him an invaluable part of the restoration team.

The *Soyokaze* had to be rebuilt from the waterline up. Beneath the waterline, the boat was in perfect condition, the caulking so tight it had never been recaulked, a testament to the fine craftsmanship of the boat builders at Kishi Boatworks and the Matsunaga family's care of the boat. All of the accoutrements of the boat, the steering gear, drive shaft, and so on remain original. Although the original Easthope engine had at some point been replaced with a diesel engine, an Easthope collector in Vancouver was able to set up the restored *Soyokaze* with a similar one-cylinder model 8-10 Easthope.⁴⁴ The final touch was to restore the boat to its original paint colours and name.

The installation of the restored *Soyokaze* was celebrated on 10 June 2001. The *Soyokaze* was blessed by Toshiko Matsunaga, who poured

⁴³ John Jordan, interview by Beth Boyce, Museum at Campbell River, 8 December 2017, in *The Soyokaze Story*.

⁴⁴ George Murdock, interview by Sandra Parrish, Museum at Campbell River, 1 December 2017, in *The Soyokaze Story*.



Figure 4. Takao Matsunaga assists his mother, Toshiko, as she blesses the *Soyokaze* with sake at the official opening of the *Soyokaze* exhibit, 10 June 2001. Image courtesy of the Museum at Campbell River.

sake on the bow of the vessel. Frank shared a memory explaining why the family would pour sake over the bow: “In the olden days, [when] we were tied up at the dock every year, we would put a small Christmas tree on the boat ... and in the morning sometimes we would pour some sake ... for good luck I guess.”⁴⁵

Following the completion of the restoration project, the *Soyokaze* was honoured with a British Columbia Heritage Award. John Jordan remembered the celebration:

We had a dinner at the Anchor Inn. The Matsunagas took us all, I mean, the staff, for sushi. And in the midst I had made a picture frame. And we took the one picture we had of the *Soyokaze* [before the Second World War] and had it blown up a little bit, and matted. And the picture frame was made from the wood panelling from the inside of the boat, the glass from one of the windows in the front, and the bottom of the picture frame was the actual registration number off of one of the beams. And I presented it to Mrs. Matsunaga that night.⁴⁶

This picture frame is still within the family.

⁴⁵ Frank Matsunaga, interview.

⁴⁶ John Jordan, interview.

Today, the *Soyokaze* has pride of place at the entrance to the Museum at Campbell River, where it greets visitors and locals alike, overlooking the waters it once fished. The Matsunagas continue to visit the boat, taking family portraits onboard. Sam noted, “Every time I go by here, I look at the boat.”⁴⁷ And family members continue to make annual donations to the museum for the upkeep of the *Soyokaze*.

The museum’s recent participation in the Asian Canadians of Vancouver Island (ACVI) history project encouraged the institution to further explore and make accessible its archival and artefact holdings relating to Asian Canadian history. With funding support, the ACVI project also enabled the museum to produce a short film documentary about the history of the *Soyokaze* called *The Soyokaze Story*.⁴⁸ It was produced in partnership with Shaw North Island TV, where it has been shown on the local television station, and it can now be found online. Many of the interviews quoted here were conducted as a part of the documentary project.

Mr. Matsunaga’s hope that the *Soyokaze* would educate future generations continues to be fulfilled in several ways. In 2017, the museum developed a school program for middle and secondary school classes concerning the uprooting, detention, dispossession, and exile of local Japanese Canadian families during the Second World War. As a part of the program, the *Soyokaze*’s story is shared, as are the experiences of the Atagi family, also from Quathiaski Cove, who were uprooted to Kaslo, BC, after a lengthy detention in Hastings Park.⁴⁹ In the summer months, the museum conducts specialized tours and programs for the visiting public, and one of the topics regularly explored is the history of the uprooting of Japanese Canadians during the Second World War, centring on the *Soyokaze*’s story.

It is disquieting to learn that, of the 1,137 vessels confiscated – none of which their owners wanted to surrender or sell – the *Soyokaze* and the Matsunagas had the only reunion. It is important to document and share these stories, to understand the full impact and ramifications of the actions of governments past so that today we do not make comparable policy decisions based upon prejudice, racism, and fear. Our community museums, often overlooked by scholars, are the keepers of these stories.

⁴⁷ Sam Matsunaga, interview.

⁴⁸ *The Soyokaze Story*.

⁴⁹ Unpublished memoirs of Ayako Higashi (née Atagi), 20 October 1989, archived at the Museum at Campbell River, 90-10.