



## *Japanese Railroad Burials*

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- **1880-1920.** Roughly 2,000 Japanese men came to Missoula to work, sending most of their paychecks back home to support their families. They relied on Japanese contracting companies for initial employment in America. Many of these men worked in agriculture, railroad, lumber, fishing, and mining industries.
- **1903.** Northern Pacific Railway purchased two whole blocks consisting of nearly 400 grave sites. These graves were used to inter 100 bodies of Japanese laborers moved from the area around Paradise MT to make room for the new rail line. Most of these sites remain unmarked to this day. Little is known of their origin, their names, or their history. A small few monuments written in Japanese have been placed. Many remain unmarked to this day
- Many of these men died from disease, accidents, and weather. Coming from the much warmer climate in Japan, Montana's cold winters were very difficult for some.
- Tradition for the railroad was to bury workers that died alongside the rail lines. Missoula Cemetery's Japanese railroad workers were originally buried along the rail lines around the Thompson Falls and Plains areas. When the rail road expanded and altered the lines, these workers (400 of them) were basically, dug up, hauled to Missoula and re-buried in the new city owned cemetery. The railroad followed through on their promise to these workers and set stones written in Japanese noting the individual's name, death date, and Japanese township if known. Some stones have both Japanese and English translations on them.
- When walking through this area, you may at times smell incense and see white carnations placed on the graves. This is a Japanese tradition of paying respect to their past elders. The incense is lit to remove any ill spirits and the white carnation signifies the cleansing of the area and peace.
- **1994.** Masako Kuriyama, the wife of Japan's ambassador to the United States, visited the Japanese section of the cemetery on a trip across the state. She learned of the Japanese section from former Senator Mike Mansfield who was appointed to serve as U. S. Ambassador in Japan in 1977. She was surprised and sad to see so many Japanese burials in Montana. She noted the young men were not accustomed to the bitter cold Montana winters but were working the railroad as a means of support for their families left in Japan.
- **1991.** Kazuo Watanabe placed a monument for his grandfather, Tashichi Watanabe, who had arrived in Missoula in 1904. Kazuo was unable to locate his grandfather's gravesite as Japanese records noted his place of death as 'Mobra, MT'. The Missoulian reported:  
*"...Tashichi had married the daughter of a prosperous farmer, but in his fondness for gambling had lost most of the family's land. His decision to head for America came out of a sense of shame and a desire to recover the money he had lost. Tashichi landed a job as a cook for the Northern Pacific Railroad. He felt America was a grand place as noted in a letter he wrote to his wife who remained in Japan: 'The food that I get to eat would be considered high class in Japan. The amenities here are amazing. There is no comparison between Japan and the United States.' Tashichi's last letter was postmarked from Avery, Idaho, and dated December 1912. A year later, word came from Japan's Ministry of Foreign Affairs that Tashichi, at age 41, had died on Oct. 13, 1913, in Mobra, Mont..."*

When Kazuo Watanabe retired from his job as school principal, he decided to find his grandfather's burial place. Through many letters to government and railroad agencies, the pieces of his grandfather's last days were compiled. Tashichi was working with the railroad outside Butte MT when he became ill and decided to return to Japan. When his Seattle bound train reached Missoula, his illness was so severe, he was placed into the Northern Pacific Hospital where he died the next day. His body was brought to the Missoula Cemetery for burial. Kazuo's search was documented in the local newspapers and his search was documented by the Mansfield Library in a publication titled 'About Our Ancestors'. In 1993, Kazuo returned to Missoula bringing family members of two others buried here. A formal ceremonial blessing was held by Buddhist priests for all the Japanese resting here.

- **2007.** Jay and Shoko Kakigawa of Japan visited the cemetery. They paid homage to their descendants by burning incense and placing white carnations on the graves. They volunteered to interpret the Japanese inscriptions on the monuments. Donna Syvertson, a local journalist, accompanied them and wrote down their dictations. Donna then gathered further research from the Missoula Public Library. The information noted that the majority of the men were married, probably sending money back to Japan to support their families. The stones list the deceased name, sometimes the rail worker 'gang' they were in, the name of their village or County in Japan, their age, and sometimes cause of death.
  - **Wajiro Kumagai.** He is buried in Grave 41 of this section. His monument notes that he was decorated on the national 8<sup>th</sup> grade level by Japan. It does not say why although Jay Kakigawa suggested he had been honored when serving as a soldier in the war with Russia in 1904 – 1908. Jay said, "It was very important for them (the people in the cemetery). He might have been a leader."
  - **Toyotaro Watari.** His monument bares his family coat of arms. All Japanese have coats of arms but this is the only one that Jay noticed on a tombstone.