

The Life of Jujiro Wada

This article is a summary of the book “The Samurai Dog-Musher Under the Northern Lights” (1995), written by Yuji Tani.

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Born on January 6, 1875 (Meiji 8) on the outskirts of Matsuyama, Jujiro Wada was raised in a small town on Shikoku Island in western Japan. His father died when he was four years old, leaving only his mother to care for him. Since he and his mother were poor, he started working in a paper factory at the early age of 13. During this time, he was already talking about going to America, but it wasn't until he worked for a trading company in Kobe that his co-worker managed to stow him away in a large tea box on a freighter headed for San Francisco. It was 1892 and he was seventeen years of age.

Soon after arriving in America, he was hired as a cabin boy aboard the Balaena, a support ship for the North Sea whaling expedition. During his three years on the Balaena, Wada learned English from the ship's captain, Captain Norwood. He also studied navigation in the ship's library. While the whaling ships hunted whales in the harbour of Herschel Island, Wada befriended the local Inuit and learned both their language and various Arctic skills, such as hunting, snowshoeing, and dogsledding.

Wada, a devoted son, returned to Japan in 1896 for three months to visit his mother, bringing home the money he had earned in the Arctic. Unfortunately, this was the only trip back to Japan that he ever made, although he regularly sent letters and money to his mother throughout his life. Wada did not see a future for himself in Japan, but in the land of northern lights, he was completely free from both the yoke of the rigid class system of his native country and the segregation that existed in San Francisco. In the North, he was accepted for who he really was and respected for what he actually could do. While working on ships in the Arctic, though, Wada did encounter some discrimination, as crew members would often call him names such as “fake Eskimo shorty”.

In January of 1898, Wada was aboard one of two supply vessels trapped in ice floes in Smith Bay in the Arctic Ocean. Wada was sent to get assistance from Point Barrow with a hastily assembled team of dogsleds. Travelling through Arctic temperatures as cold as minus 80 F (minus 62 C), Wada and his dog team managed to reach the Inuit he had befriended previously. Together, they secured a sufficient amount of caribou meat to save the crew members aboard the stranded ships. The men on the ships were extremely grateful to Wada and never again called him names.

In the fall of 1902, Wada found himself in the midst of great excitement about a gold strike in Chena at the Tanana River, a tributary of the Yukon River. His companion/employer, E.T. Barnette (who later became the first mayor of Fairbanks), asked Wada to take all the claim registration forms to the town of Circle and send a confidential letter to the manager of the North American Trading Company in Dawson, Yukon. Wada drove his dog sled for three weeks, finally arriving in Dawson on the cold day of January 17, 1903, when the thermometer registered minus 69 F (minus 56 C). A full page article appeared in that day's issue of the Yukon Sun, full of excitement about a big gold strike in Chena. It included a drawing of Wada

and a map of the Chena area that he drew himself. The news spread fast and set off the famous Tanana Stampede. Within weeks, 800 to 1000 prospectors rushed to Chena with dreams of striking it rich. This community of gold seekers later developed into the city of Fairbanks.

Following the rush, Wada spent the next few years prospecting and living with the Inuit people near Herschel Island. During his stay there, he gained the trust and respect of the Inuit people by helping them negotiate fair value for furs when traders attempted to barter lopsided deals. He also saved an Inuit community from possible disaster when it was hit by measles. In August 1906, when he visited Nome, Alaska with a group of Inuit people, a local paper reported that “King Wada, the chief of the aboriginal people of Icy Point” had arrived.

In 1907, Wada decided to participate in a 50 mile marathon race held in a brand new arena in Nome, likely motivated by the prize money of \$500. Without any special training, Wada surprised everyone by winning the March 9th race with a time of 7 hours 39 minutes and 10 seconds. He won another 50 mile race on March 30th, and then triumphed yet again in a 35 mile race on June 1st. Running against taller and stronger men, his success surprised even himself, as he stood at just 155cm tall. At 32 years of age, Wada’s fame as a great runner spread all over Alaska.

In December of 1909, at the request of the town, Wada established a route from Seward to the newly discovered gold mine of Iditarod. Acting as the leader of a fleet of dogsled teams, Wada had a relatively uneventful trip to Iditarod. However, on the return trip to Seward, he and his three companions had to go through prolonged minus 60 F (minus 51 C) weather. Several dogs, including his lead-dog, became too weak to survive the extreme cold and had to be put to sleep. The hardships of Wada and his companions and the ensuing rush of prospectors into the Iditarod area were widely reported in many Alaskan papers.

Around 1913, Wada travelled through the eastern states to negotiate investment deals on his explorations in the north with financiers such as E.A. McIlhenny, a former member of Congress. Despite reports in newspapers in both Seattle and Dawson about his huge financing deals, Wada abruptly disappeared from the public eye. He was falsely accused of being a Japanese spy based on unsubstantiated evidence. Due to a strong Anti-Japanese sentiment that was brewing in the southern states, Wada’s reputation was irreparably damaged by this false accusation.

After this bitter experience, Wada returned to the north. During this time, he began to write letters to his mother more frequently. In his letters, he described his time as a prospector and a surveyor in Canada’s north. He made many trips down to Edmonton and Winnipeg from northern locations such as the Mackenzie River and Herschel Island. It is estimated that in his lifetime, the total distance he travelled with his dogsled exceeded 44,000km.

On March 5, 1937, Wada died alone at 62 years of age in a hospital in San Diego, California, during his travels in the southern states. Though he died in the south, his spirit lives on in the north, travelling with his dogsled under the northern lights.

Fumi Torigai is in the process of preparing documentation on Jujiro Wada to submit to the Historic Sites and Monument Board of Parks Canada.

For a longer version of Wada’s story in pdf format and/or further information, contact Fumi at ftorigai@gmail.com.