A remarkable document, in Japanese, is titled “Meiji Foreign Office Report on Idaho” (as translated). It is undated, but since it refers to the 1895 Sino-Japanese War, and to the beginning of Japanese employment on railroad construction in southern Idaho “four years ago” [i.e., 1892], it was probably written about 1896 [in contrast to the 1899-1900 date mentioned in the following article from the Asian American Comparative Collection Newsletter]. Here, on the map that accompanies it, a few place names and railroad names have been translated into English.

MEIJI FOREIGN OFFICE REPORT ON IDAHO

Edited and with introductory remarks by Ronald L. James

The following Meiji Era Foreign Office report on working conditions for Japanese immigrants living in Idaho was received from Aaron M. Cohen who found the document while conducting research in the Japanese Foreign Affairs Ministry archives. It is not dated but a reference to the 1895 Sino-Japanese War helps place its origins to sometime around 1899-1900. The document is five pages in length, and consists of a title page, three pages of text, and a map of Idaho. The document is written in a combination of Chinese characters and kana syllabary, with kanji for part of the title page and for the map locations. The document was recently translated from Japanese to English with the assistance of Jessica Silver, an archivist at the Japanese American National Museum, who arranged for Amy Ota to translate the older Japanese script that can no longer be read by most Japanese. Chika Shimono, a teaching assistant at the College of Southern Idaho, provided additional clarification and translation assistance for some of the specific place names.

Following the 1868 Meiji Restoration, Japan began a massive and ambitious program of modernization. Industrialization was financed by taxing the farmers, which resulted in severe economic hardship for the rural prefectures of Kumamoto, Hiroshima, and Yamaguchi in southwest Japan. At the same time, Japan began to loosen its restrictive emigration policies. Internal pressures on Japanese society, brought on by the Meiji push to modernize, were partly alleviated by allowing more Japanese to migrate to Hawaii and the United States (Takaki 1998:43-46). Between the years 1885 and 1924, 180,000 Japanese migrated to the United States with Idaho being one of the first states to receive significant numbers of Japanese immigrants, primarily as railroad construction workers (Sims 1978:2).

The Japanese government "viewed overseas Japanese as representatives of their homeland... Review boards screened them to ensure that they were healthy and literate and would creditably 'maintain Japan's national honor’” (Takaki 1998:46). The Japanese government also closely monitored working and living conditions for the Japanese emigrants. The following document was written by an unidentified informant reporting back to the Foreign Affairs Office in Tokyo on the status of working conditions, wages, and economic opportunities for the Japanese living in Idaho.

References Cited

Sims, Robert C.

Takaki, Ronald

The document begins:

REPRESENTATIONAL ITEMS

40 acres farmland crop worth $5560.
40 acre expenses $1580.
Balance net earnings/year $3980.
For the above the yearly income is 1% per $1000 invested per acre

There is much hope for the future in this newly settled land although many of the [Japanese] laborers coming into this area are without money and skills. Most seek railroad construction jobs in response to want ads from the Portland and San Francisco areas although only a limited number of people are hired. Those not hired by the railroads are forced to seek out less preferable opportunities. One way to improve opportunities would be for businessmen to invest in farming or stock, which is impossible to do in Japan. Anyone attempting this would be very welcomed and could become very successful. The independent businessman would, in addition to establishing a profitable business, also achieve great status.
The State of Our Immigrants' Work and Remuneration

In this state most of the Japanese laborers are railroad workers and number about 400. Working hours are 7:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., ten hours a day, $1.15/day with Sunday off. Overtime work should pay much more but the Union Pacific Railroad Company contracts the hiring of Japanese laborers to private contractors who hire the laborers. The Union Pacific Railroad Company pays the contractor and the contractor pays the laborers. The extra money paid for overtime hours goes to pay for the businessman's expenses and the favors of influential people. The contractor is also in the grocery business so the laborer's livelihood is completely in his hands. The laborer becomes the contractor's steady customer with all expenses deducted prior to payment of the laborer's wage.

Present State of Japanese Laborers' Condition

Most of the laborers in Idaho work for the Union Pacific Railroad Company. Japanese workers have been responsible for helping build this famous railroad which runs 541 miles from Wyoming to Granger, Idaho and then on to Huntington, Oregon; counting extension lines, the miles total 560. The Idaho or the Oregon Short Line employs 400 laborers during the summer time but during the winter months the numbers drop to only 100. Their duties are mostly repair work and the foreman in charge of the Japanese is always white. Our laborers are overworked and the unequal working conditions cause resentment. The living quarters are a wood barracks building, 12x20 feet, with 5-12 people living together. They are fed flour dumpling soup, which was recently improved by the addition of meat and vegetables. The bosses noticed that improving the workers' diet increased their efficiency. The railroads built by the Japanese laborers have a reputation for quality construction and a much smoother ride for the passengers.

When railroad construction began four years ago, hostile whites attempted to force the Japanese out but these threats soon subsided. At the same time the victory of the Sino-Japanese War [1895] caused many whites to change the way they viewed the Japanese. White laborers are paid $1.50/day but the Japanese are more diligent workers. Many of the laborers were farmers from Hiroshima, Kumamoto, Wakayama, Yamaguchi, and Okayama [prefectures] who regularly sent their money back to their hometowns. During the Sino-Japanese War the Japanese consulate requested contributions to the war effort. These laborers worked overtime to earn extra money and donated 930 yen to the Japanese Navy. Even when they are far away from home there is no change in their love of their country.

There has been much discussion among the Japanese laborers about working conditions, antagonism from white workers, safety issues, and the profitability of the companies that they work for.

Consideration of the Pacific Northwest, the People, and the Issues Concerning Japanese Laborers

Idaho is in the Pacific Northwest and more rugged than the eastern states. Lately many migrants from the eastern states have arrived and compared to twenty-some years ago, the social climate is more peaceful and orderly, but still depending on whether it is an area like "South h" City where many of the local people were friendly to the Japanese from the beginning or other places in which the people have been hostile to the Japanese. [The identity of "South h" city is a mystery, since the character in question has multiple meanings. "South h" can be phonetically translated as "Tomoe" (similar then to Tacoma) but it could also be "Nan" (Chinese for "south") Pa, which then resembles Nampa].

For Japanese in the Pacific Northwest, finding jobs has been difficult due to the large numbers of white workers. But anyone with assets, ideas, and the ambition to invest in long term business ventures such as farming, stock ranching, or mining could be successful and would be welcomed.

The South h? where the Japanese immigrants were welcomed had living quarters and even hospitals for them. Laborers with families back in Japan were able to support their families with the money they sent home. Some were able to use their savings to buy property or start a business, but many single men without responsibilities did not save their money to maybe start a farm, stock farm, or mining. The sad result was that they squandered their earnings. Compared to the Japanese, European immigrants had more opportunities to purchase inexpensive, undeveloped land, make improvements, and then resell it for a large profit.

The major political parties in Idaho are the Republicans, the Union Party, and the Democrats. Their views can be summarized as follows: To have the Chinese removed (but so far, as of today, there does not appear to be too much of a threat to continued immigration from Japan), and to protect American laborers from competition from foreign workers. English people have invested much money into the U.S. [End of text].

[AACC Newsletter editor's note: A copy of the document and the map are in the Asian American Comparative Collection at the University of Idaho, Moscow. The map is on the Friends of Minidoka Web site, <http://www.friendsofminidoka.org>, under Immigration.]
図解: 労働者保護のための労働者保護条例の要約

- 労働者の保護
- 労働者保護条例
- 労働者保護のための条例
- 労働者保護のための労働者保護条例

(以下、図解の詳細は省略)