Fundraising begins for kiln restoration

BY SEAN MCINTYRE

Restoration of an abandoned charcoal kiln in Mouat Park has sparked a campaign to commemorate contributions of the island’s early Japanese settlers.

“It has been exciting to witness the very beginning of a project to reclaim some of our history,” said Rumiko Kanesaka, a member of the Salt Spring Island Japanese Garden Society.

Earlier in 2015, Kanesaka ventured into the park with a group of islanders to assess the site’s potential. It wasn’t long before the team discovered a stone-lined oval depression, roughly 4.5-metres (15 feet) long and three metres (10 feet) wide.

“This is it. This is exactly what it is,” Stephen Nemtin recalled saying when he first stepped inside.

Nemtin, an educator, musician and amateur archaeologist who lives on Galiano Island, spent more than 20 years restoring two similar kilns near his home. The bid to resurrect a piece of the region’s forgotten past fuelled his natural curiosity and inspired a teaching opportunity for a new generation of islanders.

“Most people probably wouldn’t recognize the remains of a charcoal pit, and it is likely there are others dotted around the islands and on the mainland,” Nemtin said. “People have mistaken abandoned pits for (First Nations) pit houses, Scottish cairns and garbage pits.”

In an interview last week, Nemtin confirmed the structure in Mouat Park is one of two known charcoal pit kilns built by early Japanese settlers, probably near the end of the 19th century.

Since two workers with little more than an ax and a shovel could build a decent-size kiln in less than a week, the structures were built throughout the Gulf Islands by settlers who sought to use traditional knowledge to augment seasonal wages from the logging and fishing industries.

The particular style of charcoal, known as binchotan, was refined of Japanese descent here before we were forcibly expelled,” she said.

Nemtin said whoever was tasked with the restoration process, organizers of the kiln restoration project will speak about the kiln on April 20.

“We are going to restore the pit as it was, lit up at one side of the structure was covered up and the logs inside were left to smolder in an oxygen-limited environment for up to five days.”

“Controlling the air and circulation of the gases is tricky.” Nemtin said.

“Too much air can cause the wood to burn or to be totally consumed. If the temperature gets too high, certain kinds of charcoal can break or crumble, rendering it less useful as a fuel.”

Nemtin said whoever was tasked to watch the kiln was asked to sit on a one-legged stool, which prevented them from nodding off and neglecting their duties.

Kilns produced between half a ton to a ton of charcoal per burning. Once cooled, the product was used in leftover rice sacks and transported off island.

Kiln owner Isaburo Tatsuka, who lived on Seaview Road near the present-day site of Embe Bakery, is reported to have regularly shipped up to 200 bags per voyage aboard the family fishing boat to Victoria, where charcoal was used as a fuel for soap making.

“It doesn’t look like anything right now, just kind of like an indentation in the earth,” said Rose Murakami, whose ancestors moved from Japan to Salt Spring in 1909. “Unless you know what it is you’re looking for you’d never know it was there.”

Murakami got involved in the restoration project to preserve the memory of the many Japanese-Canadians who lived on Salt Spring before the Second World War. About 77 people of Japanese descent lived on the island before 1942, when the federal government confiscated their possessions and relocated the “suspected enemy aliens” to internment camps in the province’s interior.

Murakami and her family were among the few Japanese-Canadians who returned to Salt Spring to rebuild their lives.

“I have been interested in trying to resurrect things and make the current population of Salt Spring aware that there were people of Japanese descent here before we were forcibly expelled,” she said.

Thanks to a Salt Spring Parks and Recreation Commission decision to match donations for the project and Nemtin’s offer to volunteer his experience with the restoration process, organizers of the kiln restoration project will now have to raise roughly $12,500.

Once the project is complete, Murakami envisions a commemorative plaque to tell residents and islanders about the history of charcoal to British Columbia’s economic development as well as information about the people and families who built the pits and fired the kilns.

“We are going to restore the pit as authentically as possible,” she said.

“I’m hoping that it will be a tourist attraction as well as an educational resource for students and all the people of Salt Spring.”

Anyone who contributes to the project through the Salt Spring Japanese Garden Society is eligible for a tax receipt. For more information, visit www.saltspringjapanesegarden.com.

Murakami will speak about the charcoal kilns during the fifth-annual al blossom picnic on Saturday, April 18. The presentation is expected to start at 1 p.m. at the Heiwa Garden Peace Park.