

Letters from an American Old-timer (Pioneer) in the Philippines (Part I)

The www.mabuhayradio.com presents the letters written by an American settler in Palawan, Philippines. His name was John Clark, the great-grandfather of our webmaster, Allan Albert. Most of the letters were written in the early 1900s. Serious students of Filipino history, Asian studies and/or Filipino-American relations perhaps may find them useful in knowing the Oriental culture and understanding the Asian mind. The letters were transcribed by the Albert Siblings who are in Southern California. Eventually, this online publication will print more data about the person of John Clark and his experiences in the Philippines and Asia. Mr. Clark's letters are published unedited.

Part One: John Clark Tells of Fair Japan

Off Shanghai.

Dec. 10, 1905.

Dear Grandfather:

The passage from Seattle to Yokohama was rough: One day we made but eighty miles and the captain, in describing the seas, wrote "mountainous" in the ship's log. We were glad of the size of our vessel (630 ft. in length; 73 ft. beam and more than 20,000 tons registry) and enjoyed the voyage although at times the sea was so high that first one rail and then the other would be running beneath the water while the waves broke even above the bridge deck, and at each roll the whole ship would quiver, the hull, and rigging groaning and creaking like a wooden house, the dining ports had extra wooden guards placed outside, several glasses having been cracked by the shock of the waves. We went as far north as 52 deg. 50 min. passing within a few miles of the Aleutian Islands. The evening of the 12th of Nov. the notice was posted that the morrow would be the 14th

and the 180th meridian having been crossed. A few of the nights were moonlight and in walking the decks one had a view not easily forgotten- the great ship alone on the deep, her masts describing large arcs across the sky the path of white moonlight on the water, reaching the horizon and contrasting strangely with the long dark roll of the waves that were without the glow. At such a time and place, man seemed mighty insignificant.

On the 23rd we reached Yokohama and found the Japanese busy greeting their returning soldier heroes. Even out in the country districts we met processions of hundreds of people escorting perhaps a single warrior to his home, where the day would be spent in feasting and cheering, the scene gay with the fluttering of many colored, silken banners and large gild globes while giant firecrackers were exploded in a really prodigal way. The Japanese might have been stoical in defeat but they are certainly not impassive in victory. Their demonstrations are almost "Gallic" in their effusiveness. Many medals have been given and the recipients, justly so, are proudly wearing them. To be a soldier in Japan is an enviable distinction.

Rumors of plague and quarantine deterred most of the through passengers from going overland to Kobe but finding one companion was willing to risk it, we left the ship at Yokohama and visited the capital, Tokyo. The railway carriages are very small, the tracks narrow -gauge and the speed is limited. Noticing a white paint line across the middle of the window glass I inquired the cause and found that as these people are not accustomed to the use of transparent glass the paint line was to prevent them from trying to thrust their heads through the panes. The Japanese houses have no windows but the side of the building is made of frail frames covered with oiled paper through which a subdued light enters but, if the weather permits, the whole side of the house maybe taken out-the paper frames and their protecting shutters being arranged as sliding doors. Being a wet day we took a "rickshaw" ride through Tokyo paying the men who pulled us ten cents an hour for his labor. We visited the shops, parks, temples and grounds about the Emperor's palace. The ivory lacquer, and silk establishments were dreams of luxuries and made one long for a

millionaire's purse or a "McCurdyian" salary.

In the Shinto temple we watched the devotees approach the shrine, toss their coins into the box then tap the gong with a silken rope that hangs across it (evidently calling attention to the contribution,) bow the head, clap the hands twice, reverently bow again, softly murmur a kind of prayer and depart. Here you may buy printed prayers and "joss-sticks" ready too burn before the image of your choice. One likeness of a warrior is placed behind a course metal screen. A person testing his fate here chews a piece of paper into a pulp rolls it into a ball and throws it at the image. Different degrees of good luck come to the thrower depending upon what part of the image is adhered to by the ball, but woe to him whose missile fails to past the screen or having past, strikes the image but fails to stick! He is certainly under the ban of the gods' most intense dislike. The expression on the warrior-images face under his plastic adornments of different hues and shapes makes this the most ludicrous looking piece of statutory that I ever saw. If you ever threw paper wads at a schoolroom ceiling you can imagine the above result in part. Another device was a large round stone, painted white. Here you tried your fortune by stabbing this stone with a pin or needle. Hundreds were sticking in the paint but thousands had unluckily fallen into the tray below. I tried it twice but neither one struck! I believe I could have succeeded better with the spit-balls.

At Kamakura we saw one of the best statues of Buddha, a bronze figure, seated and with hands resting across the knees. The height is 49 ft. the eyes said to be of pure gold, measuring nearly 4 ft. in length. The expression is one of repose and calmness representing the serenity of mind attained by the faithful, whom are beyond the cares of the world, the perfect Nirvana.

It is a really a remarkable piece of statutory and was erected about 700 years ago.

Noticing the small space used for each grave in the cemetery, I found, upon inquiry, that the Japanese, economical as always, is buried in a square box, the knees being nearly leveled with the chin. Cremation is also practiced. Around the headstones are collections of bowls and wooden staves, the former for food offerings and the latter covered with memorial inscriptions.

To see a little of the cruel life, we left the railway at Kodzee and went inland to the mountains using "rickshaw" and chairs for conveyances. Here we caught glimpses of real Japanese life. We sat on mats and ate on tables perhaps 14 inches in height; the stove was brazier filled with charcoal over which we warmed our hands. The Japanese dress warmer but keep their houses cooler than we the fireplace was a small pit in the floor filled with coals, over which was placed a wooden frame and over this a heavy coverlet seated on mats around this we put our feet (carefully) under the cover and talked with our host. That is we talked as well as we could but as our vocabulary consisted of less than 100 Japanese words our conversations were, necessarily, very brief supplemented, however, with gestures almost eloquent. Thus was our information laboriously acquired. At meal time we were waited upon by small Japanese girls charmingly dressed in their kimonos and obis, costume than which there is none prettier in any land. Bowing and smiling this little maids make and serve tea with such rare grace and ease that you resolve never were such tea nor such servers of tea! Upon entering a tea house they will request you to remove your shoes (instantly you are struggling with your memory about your holes in your hosiery) and as you hesitate one of the cheerful little bodies will stop and begin to unlatch the latchet, and you succumb-but you insist on finishing the work yourself-Japanese maids are too dainty for such menial tasks!

Dismissing rickshaw men and scorning sedan chairs, I set out on foot from Miyanoseta to Hakone following paths through the valleys and climbing ridges, meeting people of the lower classes bringing loads of wood down from the hills but always cheerful and polite in spite of their heavy burdens. Hills are kept planted with trees in Japan and rows of them can be seen

extending from the base to summit of mountains so steep that you wonder how the planter kept his footing. Passing through the mountains we descended a slope to the shores of Lake Hakone, the goals of our pilgrimage. Here is a view rare in its beauty of color and form and its value doubled by the reflection seen on the surface of the mountain lake. On the right and left are hills wooded at their bases with dark evergreens and red and yellow maples; higher up the colors change to brown and silver gray. Away in the distance, people of base and snowy of summit rises Fujiyama, the Sacred Mountain of Japan. Our won western mountain peeks are rugged and full of grandeur like an assembly of gods held in council the clouds about their heads; but Fujiyama is alone in its majesty, it stands more than 12,000 ft. above the surrounding plains. No rival mountains are near to share its homage. The curves of its sides volcano-formed, seem of mathematical exactness a mantel of snow reaches halfway down the slopes meeting the greens of the trees from below.

We watched a few fleecy clouds gather about the summit, watched them fade into nothing and saw the wind increase and scatter flurries of snow down the leeward slopes; saw all grow calm again and the gigantic cone-shaped crest stand out again against the dark blue of the sky, resplendent in the rays of the declining sun. Looking into the clear depths of Lake Hakone we saw, far below us, a second mountain, so true in form and color that it almost needed the presence of the fisherman's boat upon the water to prove which was the reflection and which the real Fujiyama. Leaving the Sacred Mountain in its setting of gold and purple and orange, we reluctantly returned to the village of Miyanosthea and two days later we bade "Sayanora" to Fujiyama's snow clad summit- and to the country tea house with all the charms and comforts.

Arriving at Nagoya we spent a part of two days visiting shops, factories and building. The skill of the worker in porcelain and cloisonné (sic) is very great and the products all hand made, are objects of art. On a castle roof we saw a pair of golden dolphins the value of which had been declared to be 30,000

English pounds.

In Kyoto, the ancient capital, we saw more cloisonné, silk and the famous "satsuma ware" establishments. We visited an old temple where [we] took off our shoes at the entrance and accompanied by a guard went through the building. A priest was beating a drum before an image; the guide said he did that for two hours every morning. A very large bell nearby was placed at our service for the modest sum of half a cent. This fee entitled us to strike the bell three times with a great wooden beam that hung on ropes and which was with difficulty set in motion. One deafening peal was enough for me but the guide finished the second and third saying it was unfortunate not to use all that your ticket called for.

We reached Kobe the next day and joined our ship, sailing later the same day for Nagasaki via the Inland Sea, with its thousands of islands. We coaled here; men, women and children carrying the baskets of coal to the bankers. This required but a part of a day and late that evening we left for Shanghai arriving the morning of the 7th and anchoring in the channel of Yangtze Kiang near Fort Woosung. Twelve miles up the river is the city of Shanghai where we stayed two days. Visiting the native city was interesting but decidedly offensive to the olfactories. A wall encloses (sic) the town and 1 ½ million of people live therein.

The place fairly swarms with humanity. The streets are so narrow that two chairs can hardly pass and men carrying loads continually cry out in order to clear the way. There is no system to the crooked streets and a guide is necessary in order to find one's way about. We saw the opium dens and "joss" houses, the latter filled with dirty, strange-looking images. We took the railway back to Fort Woosung and passed through the fields. They were small and nearly every one had several coffins or grave mounds scattered about. These coffins, made of heavy lumber, often stand for

Written by John Clark

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months or even years in the fields before the sod is finally heaped about them. They do not bury beneath the surface, simply setting the coffin down anywhere in the field (sometimes in the very path as though the pall bearers had become tired) and wait until the priests decide upon a favorable spot. There the corpse is then moved and sod built over the coffin. Not to find the proper location for burial is apt to bring evil to the descendants of the deceased. The whole seemed to be a necroyolis and I was glad to get a "sampan" at the wharf and reach the ship.

Tonight we are on our way to Hong Kong where we expect to arrive the 11th. When our boat was loaded heavily and drawing more than 37 feet she was quite steady but now that her depth is less than 31, the? Of the screw causes quite a vibration. You will have difficulty in reading this and I should not have inflicted so much upon you at once but I enjoyed Japans so that I wanted you to know and wished more than once that we might have seen it together. This will be mailed [to] you from Hong Kong.

Yours with love,

John.

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