

# MEMOIR OF THE JAPANESE SEA OTTER HUNTING VESSEL *KAISEI-MARU*

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## ABSTRACT

This article examines the Japanese fur seal economy and Japanese fishermen's sense of social obligation in the early 1900s through the story of the *Kaisei-maru*, a Japanese sea otter hunting vessel. In the 1890s, the Japanese Meiji government encouraged its citizens to hunt fur seals and sea otters in the northern Sea of Japan. The *Kaisei-maru* arrived accidentally in Redoubt Bay near Sitka after going drastically off-course and was impounded in 1909. The United States charged the crew with illegal hunting and failure to notify U.S. authorities upon entering U.S. waters. The crew was imprisoned for four months and eventually deported to Yokohama, Japan. *Kaisei-maru* crew members never shared the tragic story of their final voyage with anyone back home in Shiogama, Japan. Artifacts from the *Kaisei-maru* were discovered at Sealing Cove off Japonski Island, Sitka, in 1983, and the long-forgotten story of the ship and its crew reemerged. Stories of the friendships between Juneau residents and *Kaisei-maru* crew members are revealed in journals kept by the crew and gifts that Juneau residents received in 1909 from the *Kaisei-maru* captain, Takichi Shitara.

After the Japanese government opened its door to foreign trading in 1854, it sought to maintain its boundaries by establishing two treaties with Russia: the 1855 Treaty of Shimoda and the 1875 Treaty of Saint Petersburg. The government was at the same time promoting sea otter and fur seal hunting by Japanese citizens because the fur economy was so lucrative and fur was among the most prestigious of Japanese exports (Hosokawa 2001:32). In response to the Meiji government's increasing concerns about British, American, and Russian vessels encroaching on seal hunting sites in Japanese waters, Japanese fishermen were encouraged to hunt for sea otters and fur seals farther offshore from the 1890s until 1909. The *Kaisei-maru* affair was a consequence of that policy and economy, and it shows that the Japanese, like Euro-Americans, recognized marine mammals as valuable commodities, even to the point of extermination.

This article explores the Japanese government's encouragement of fur seal hunting in the 1890s and the fishermen's

struggle with international regulations and responsibilities to their families. The themes come together in the tragic story of the *Kaisei-maru*, a Japanese sea otter vessel that was seized by U.S. authorities near Sitka in May 1909. Artifacts from the nearly forgotten vessel resurfaced in 1983 during construction of a new city boat harbor at Sealing Cove off Japonski Island.<sup>1</sup> Shame from the loss of their vessel and the suicide of their captain prevented the surviving *Kaisei-maru* crew members from telling their story after they were deported back to Japan in October 1909. A crew member's diary discovered in the 1980s in Shiogama, Japan, revealed aspects of the crew's imprisonment. Some struggled with cultural barriers while others established friendships with local Alaskans. A great-nephew of the *Kaisei-maru* captain, Dokan Shoichi Makabe, began his journey to discover and pray for the friendships in Alaska and Shiogama. The story of *Kaisei-maru* reflects the Japanese sense of cultural obligations to society, repaying a person's kindness, and praying for peace for their families and future generations.

## THE *KAISEI-MARU* IN 1909

*Kaisei-maru* was one of the sea otter vessels that Shirakawa Shokai Trading Company owned in northern Japan. *Kaisei-maru* and *Kyoei-maru* (Fig. 1) hunted fur seals and sea otters in the northern Japanese sea (Miyagi and Aomori prefectures), Hokkaido, Urup Island, the Kurile Islands, off the coast of Kamchatka, and in the Bering Sea from 1904 to 1910 (Hosokawa 2001:27). Prior to their departures, the Shirakawa Shokai crew members always went together to the Shinmeisha Shinto Shrine in Sabusawa to pray for a safe journey. The crew felt their first obligation was to the company, to return the vessel to the port and bring pelts to support their family and community. In his book *The Misadventure of the Sea Otter Hunting Vessel "Kaisei-Maru,"* Seitoku Hosokawa (2001) used *Kaisei-maru* crew member Eizo Chonan's journal to describe details of the events. On March 3, 1909, the *Kaisei-maru*, a 68-ton sailing vessel with 30 crew members, left Ishihama port in Shiogama, Miyagi prefecture (Hosokawa 2001:23–24) (Fig. 2). The crew planned to

harvest sea otters and fur seals in the North Pacific and return to Ishihama port in the fall with about 300 hides. Chonan's journal indicates that on the day of the ship's departure, its crew members were thinking of their families because they would be away from home for a couple of months. Takichi Shitara, the captain of the *Kaisei-maru*, was having similar thoughts. He had to leave behind his wife, Oko, and their daughter, Okin, who turned two years old that year (Hosokawa 2001:25). Shitara's responsibilities as captain included leading his crew in the harvest of sea otters and fur seals, in addition to taking care of his own family.

Chonan recorded the ship's harvest each day in his journal. *Kaisei-maru* caught 10 fur seals before she passed Kinkasan, near the northern end of the Japanese mainland, in March. When sailing in stormy weather in April, the *Kaisei-maru* inadvertently passed the Kurile and Aleutian islands. On May 1, the ship arrived at the entrance to Redoubt Bay, 10 miles south of Sitka on Baranof Island in the Alaska Territory (Hosokawa 2001:4). They went to shore to get fresh water to replenish

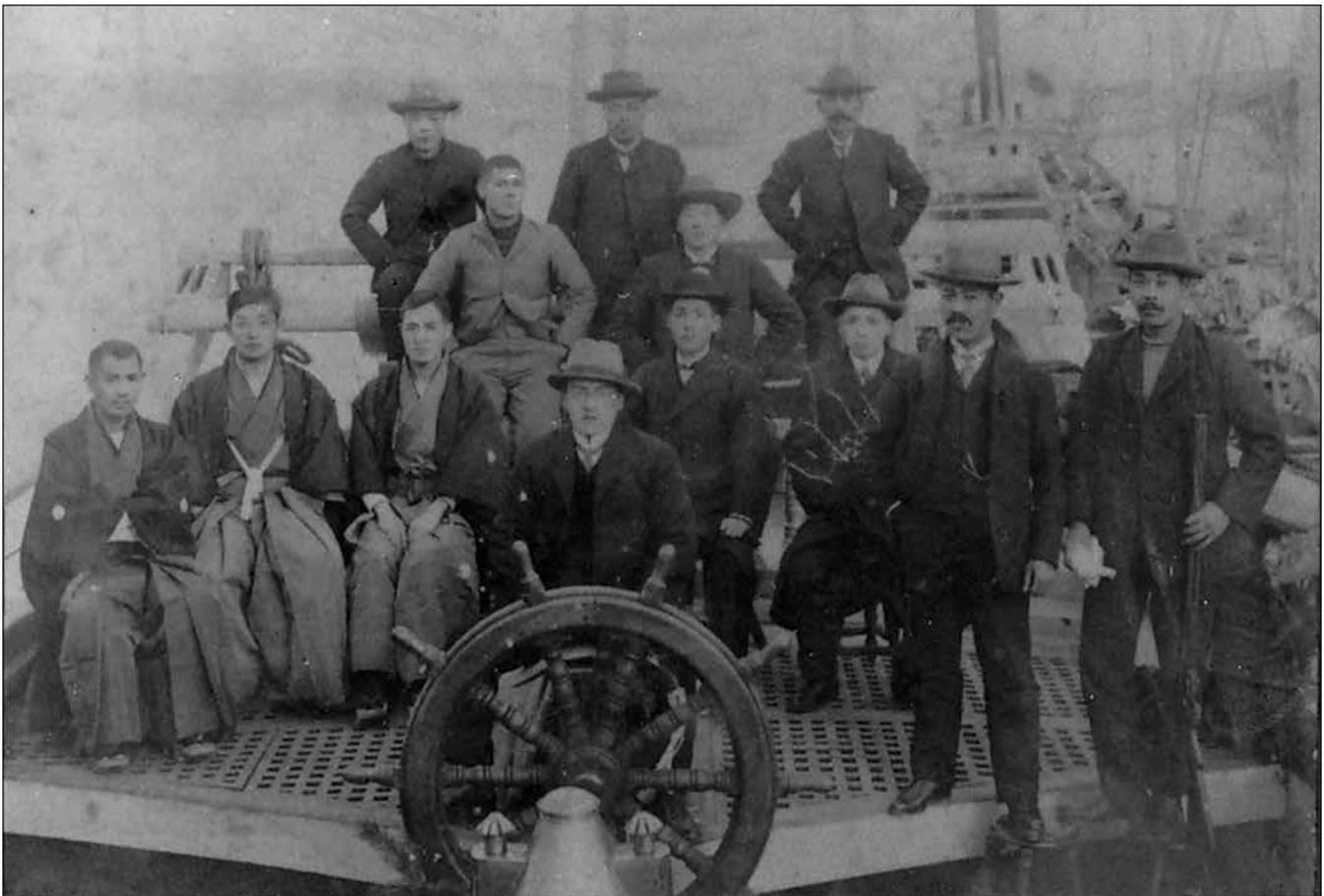


Figure 1. The sea otter hunting vessel *Kyoei-maru* and its crew (Hosokawa 2001).

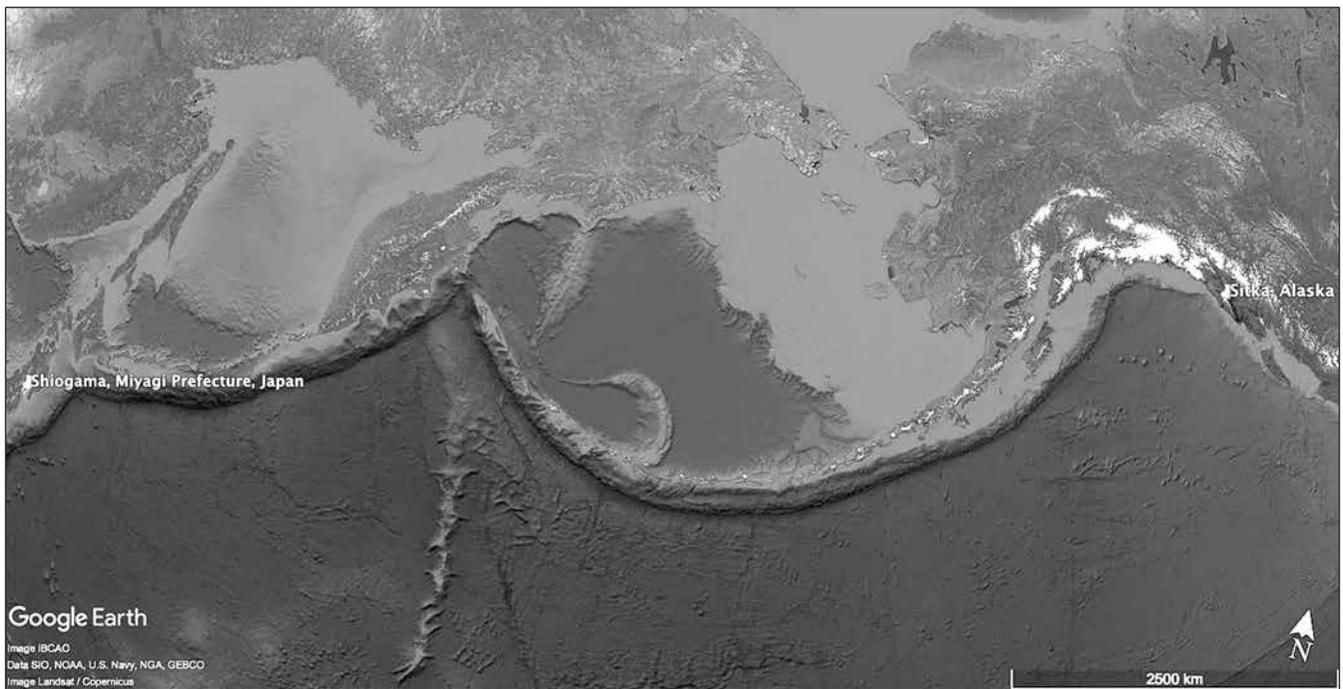


Figure 2. Shiogama, Miyagi prefecture, Japan and Sitka Alaska (Google Earth).

their drinking water supply. Shitara said, “It seems like we have returned to Matsushima Bay,” because the scenery around Sitka Sound was similar to the northern Japanese islands (Hosokawa 2001:4). The crew soon discovered that they had landed in a different place, and worse, they had failed to report to U.S. immigration authorities upon entering the country. While staying at Redoubt Bay due to a growing storm, the *Kaisei-maru*’s anchor cable broke, and the anchor was lost (Hosokawa 2001:6). This made it difficult for the crew to engage in traveling and hunting. Mistaking Japonski Island for part of the Japanese landscape must have been heartbreaking for the crew. Ironically, Japonski Island was named after Japanese castaways detained there during the period of national isolation during the Edo era (Hosokawa 2001:11).

Shortly after locals from Sitka observed the *Kaisei-maru* at Redoubt Bay, they notified the U.S. marshal, who immediately arrested the vessel’s crew. At the time of their arrest, the *Kaisei-maru* was carrying 10 salted fur seal pelts that they had harvested before entering U.S. waters (Hosokawa 2001:12). The U.S. attorney from Juneau arrived in Sitka on May 10, with a Japanese translator, to investigate the case of *Kaisei-maru*. Captain Shitara and his mate, Genkichi Umemori, testified that they had to anchor in Redoubt Bay for an emergency and all pelts were hunted in the Kinkasan area in Japan. Local Native people testified for the prosecution, stating that they

had witnessed Japanese people hunting seals (Hosokawa 2001:12–13). As a result, the Japanese crew members were charged with two crimes: first with illegal hunting, since the crew could not prove that fur seal pelts in their hold were caught outside Alaska waters, and second for failing to notify U.S. authorities when entering territorial waters (*Alaska Daily Record*, 13 May 1909). Shitara referred to the ship’s log to explain the *Kaisei-maru*’s position. However, because the ship’s logs were written in Japanese, the prosecuting attorney could not read them, making it hard to determine when and where the pelts had been harvested. Language barriers made the task of defending themselves against accusations of illegal hunting difficult. The crew also had difficulties proving they were in Japanese waters when the pelts were taken.

While they were held in the detention center in Sitka, Shitara encouraged his crew members, saying, “Let’s maintain our dignity,” and “Don’t forget that it was we Japanese who beat the Russians in the Russo-Japanese War” (Hosokawa 2001:10). National pride grew after the Russo-Japanese war and the Japanese government began fighting for fur seal territory with other countries (Hosokawa 2001:29). The *Kaisei-maru* crew members remained strong mentally, but they could not stand the bland American food at the detention center. One of the English-speaking crew members requested the deputy marshal get

some rice and pickles from the hold of the *Kaisei-maru* to ease their confinement (Hosokawa 2001:10).

On May 16, *Kaisei-maru* crew members were transported to the detention center in Juneau, where they had access to local and Japanese newspapers and were allowed to send letters home to Japan (Hosokawa 2001:16). They were offended by being referred to as “Japs” in the newspapers, and believed that Americans had no sympathy for them (Hosokawa 2001:18) (Fig. 3).

The crew found living conditions at the Juneau detention center better in some ways than in Sitka. The center provided rice once a day, a great improvement in their meals. Crew members could write letters home to Japan, and Japanese newspapers and magazines were delivered through the Japanese consulate in Seattle and Japanese people living in Juneau (Hosokawa 2001:16–17). Nevertheless, Captain Shitara was frustrated with not knowing when they would have a trial. He planned hunting possibilities for after their release. Shitara estimated they might be able to harvest several hundred fur seals off the Aleutians and Kamchatka in July and August (Hosokawa 2001:22). He was concerned about how to pay his crew members for this trip while they were not able to hunt and return home with any pelts (Hosokawa 2001:34). Shitara might be able to pay them by asking the ship owner to advance him his payment for the following year; however, then he might not be able to support his family. As a typical traditional Japanese man, Shitara felt more responsibility to his society than to his own family.

By the end of July, Shitara had finally met with a representative of the Japanese consulate from Seattle and learned that their trial was not likely to occur until August. This news must have devastated Shitara. The *Kaisei-maru*

would not have time to go hunting; instead, they would have to return to Shiogama before the typhoon season came. While Shitara was searching for possible options for his crew members, they became frustrated with their situation and began complaining to Shitara.

Their trial was finally held, and on September 23, 1909, they were found not guilty of illegal hunting and were ordered out of the territory (*Alaska Daily Record*, 24 September 1909). The crew could not sail the *Kaisei-maru* home because the weather could be rough in Alaska waters in the fall. Instead, the crew boarded a steamer from Juneau to Seattle on October 1. They arranged to travel to Japan on the Osaka Shosen steamship *Seattle-maru*, which departed Seattle on October 9 (Hosokawa 2001:43). Distraught with the shame of being unable to bring the *Kaisei-maru* home, Shitara jumped into the water to commit suicide a day before they landed in Yokohama, Japan (Hosokawa 2001:50). His shame was amplified by the fact that the *Kaisei-maru* could not bring any furs home, and subsequently Shitara could not pay the crew.

Shame, derived from the samurai era, plays an important role in constructing the collective identity in Japan (Ikegami 2003:2). Shitara had received honor from society and his crew because he was a young, successful captain and brought a high profit to his community. Meanwhile, he had responsibility for the crew’s collective identity and the dignity of Japanese society. The marine police and crew members searched in vain for Shitara’s body in the ocean near where he had jumped from the ship. Failing to locate any evidence of their captain, the *Kaisei-maru* crew members returned to Shiogama on November 1, 1909 (Dokan Shoichi Makabe, pers. comm. 12 January 2016).

### JAPANESE FUR SEALING IN THEIR LOCAL AND NATIONAL ECONOMY IN THE NINETEENTH CENTURY

In the beginning of the Meiji era (1868–1912), the new Japanese government established trading partnerships with foreign countries and encouraged the acceptance of Western technologies, education, and political systems. Japanese fishermen’s involvement in fur seal hunting in the 1890s was one of the government’s responses to the arrival of foreign vessels in Japanese waters (Tezuka 2003:36). The Japanese government supported their fishermen to maintain the country’s economy, such as encouraging seasonal fur seal hunting using guns, in addition to their traditional fishing. In 1896, the Japanese government established

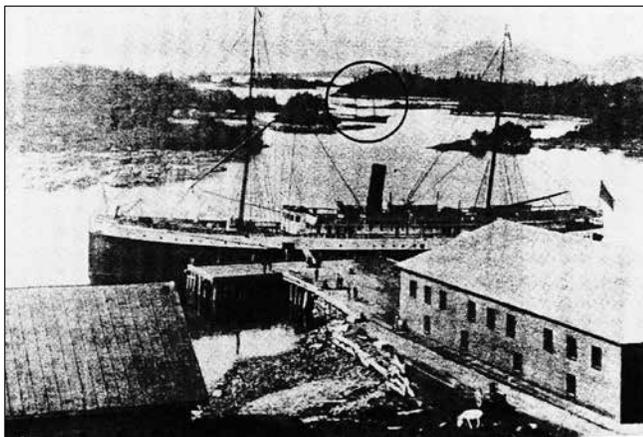


Figure 3. *Kaisei-maru* in Sitka Harbor (circled) in 1910 (Hosokawa 2001).

the Seal and Otter Hunting Law.<sup>2</sup> A central aim of the law was to maintain seal and sea otter populations under government control by establishing hunting seasons for different locations and requiring Japanese fishermen to report their harvests to the government, as well as to register their ships and the names of their crew members (Tezuka 2003:36). The government began subsidizing pelagic hunting and fishing expeditions in 1905 (Hosokawa 2001:27; Yamaguchi 1969:50). According to government records, sea otter and fur seal hunting vessels and hunters received the highest amount of funding from 1898 to 1909 (Ninobuta 1981:158–160).

According to Hosokawa (2001), Japanese fur hunters typically caught about 50 animals on a single voyage, which provided each crew member with as much as 150 yen salary per voyage. The cost of building a house in rural areas during the 1900s was about 50 yen, so hunters brought significant income to their households (Hosokawa 2001:32). Japanese fishermen were generally young, and the *Kaisei-maru's* captain, Takichi Shitara, was only 36 years old (Hosokawa 2001:32). Shitara's great-nephew, Dokan Shoichi Makabe, remembers that the local people called sea otter hunters *Hanta-san*, or “Mr. Hunter,” indicating the prestige of their positions (Dokan Shoichi Makabe, pers. comm. 12 January 2016). There is another word for “hunter” in Japanese, *ryoshi*, which is used for the ordinary huntsman. Traditionally, the *ryoshi* were lower-class people because the job was associated with killing animals. This further illustrates the point that the *Hanta-san* were considered special and held more prestige in Shigama. Makabe (pers. comm. 12 January 2016) explained that locals acknowledged and respected sea otter hunters' work because it brought significant wealth to their families and villages.

#### AFTER THE TRAGEDY OF *KAISEI-MARU*

After returning to Shiogama, the *Kaisei-maru* crew members did not talk about or keep any record of the trip because they felt shame about not returning the ship and Captain Shitara to Japan (Dokan Shoichi Makabe, pers. comm. 12 January 2016). The *Kaisei-maru* was moored near the shore of Japonski Island, eventually sank, and was forgotten. After archaeologists examined the ships' artifacts in Sitka in 1983, Ty Dilliplane, then the state of Alaska historic preservation officer, contacted Japanese archaeologist Yoshinobu Kotani for further investigation of the *Kaisei-maru* in Japan. Kotani found the name “*Kaisei*

*Maru*” in a registration record and contacted Kanzo Suzuki, a local historian living in Shiogama City (Rigg and Kotani 1894). Suzuki confirmed that the *Kaisei-maru* was owned by Kozo Shiraishi. A family member of Eizo Chonan also discovered Eizo's journal and shared it with Dokan Makabe. Makabe remembered that his grandmother had told him his great-uncle Takichi Shitara died by accident in the ocean; however, he did not know the details (Dokan Shoichi Makabe, pers. comm. 12 January 2016).<sup>3</sup> The tragedy of the *Kaisei-maru* had finally returned to its hometown, Shiogama.

While archaeologists were researching the origin of the *Kaisei-maru* artifacts, two Japanese swords that were in the private collection of Bill Jorgenson were determined to have come from Captain Shitara. Bill's father, George Jorgenson, received the swords as a gift from Shitara after he assisted the *Kaisei-maru* crew in unloading their belongings and food from the vessel to the small jail in Sitka. George had been curious about the Japanese vessel and visited Sitka to see it. After George returned home to Juneau, he continued to help the Japanese crew members with whatever they needed. This story demonstrates that Shitara and his crew members quietly established friendships with locals and acknowledged their support with gifts, despite their frustration with the political issues. Offering Japanese swords to an American reflected Japanese pride, because swords were prestigious and expensive items in Japan. Shitara was likely showing his gratefulness to George by the gift offerings.

After learning about the untold *Kaisei-maru* story, Dokan Makabe visited Sitka to learn about the place where the *Kaisei-maru* saga ended. While visiting Sitka and reading Eizo's journal, Dokan Makabe heard that local Sitkans had helped the *Kaisei-maru* crew members get their Japanese food from the vessel while they were being held in detention (Dokan Shoichi Makabe, pers. comm. 12 January 2016). Moreover, he became friends with some Sitka residents who had collected *Kaisei-maru* artifacts in the 1980s.

Dokan Makabe said prayers for the souls of the people who were on the *Kaisei-maru* and for those who had helped them. These prayers are Japanese rites, or *kuyo*, which help the soul of the dead person to go to the spiritual world, or “the other world” (Umehara 1991:170). Prayers and meditations practiced by the living assist the souls of the dead to peacefully cross over to the other world and become enlightened (Umehara 1991:181). The *kuyo* practice connects the living and the spiritual worlds, with the souls

of the dead overseeing the living. Dokan Makabe visited Sitka annually until 2009 and established friendships with local Sitkans for many years. During his multiple visits, he asked the Sitka Historical Society to return some of the *Kaisei-maru*'s artifacts, such as glass oil bottles, painted porcelain rice bowls, and hunting tools, to Shiogama. He also received two Japanese swords from the Jorgenson family, and brought them to Shiogama in 1995 (Tsunoda, in Hosokawa 2001:31). Despite the tragedy and struggles of the past, Dokan Makabe's prayers were given to the people of Sitka, strengthening the relationship between two communities.

### CLOSING REMARKS

Japanese fishermen traditionally did not engage in hunting seals, but they started fur hunting instead of fishing at the government's urging and because of the tremendous profits. The tragedy of the *Kaisei-maru* occurred when Japan was drawn into the fur economy. The crew suffered from their lack of understanding of the English language and international politics. Eizo Chonan (1912) rose to the rank of captain just one year after the *Kaisei-maru* incident and, according to his diary, the company had by then

placed English speakers on ships (Chonan 1912). This is probably due to the difficulties the *Kaisei-maru* faced in communicating while in the United States. Chonan made his last sea otter hunting voyage on *Kyoei-maru* in 1911, the year the North Pacific Fur Seal Convention treaty was signed by the Empire of Japan, the Russian Empire, the United States, and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Ireland.

The *Kaisei-maru* was held at the shore of Japonski Island, sank sometime in the mid-twentieth century, and was eventually forgotten until 1983. Shortly after the discovery of its artifacts, local Sitkans encountered several untold stories about the vessel and its crewmembers. Dokan Makabe assumed that these incidents were intentionally connected to enable him to find out about his great-uncle's story and to pray for the people of Sitka and Shiogama. In June 1989, the Shiogama UNESCO Association members visited Sitka to receive about 20 artifacts, including plates and coins from the *Kaisei-maru*, from the Sitka Historical Society. The artifacts were subsequently donated to the City of Shiogama (*Sankei* newspaper, 8 July 1989). In 2009, Dokan Makabe and Tsunoda requested the Sitka Historical Society to help organize a ceremony commemorating the 100-year anniversary of the *Kaisei-maru*



Figure 4. The stone monument to the *Kaisei-maru* at Sealing Cove (photo by the author, July 4, 2015).

incident (Fig. 4). The ceremony was held on October 9, the same day that *Kaisei-maru* crew members were deported to Japan 100 years earlier. The *Kaisei-maru* crew members and their families suffered from the tragedy in 1909; however, it ultimately led to the establishment of a peaceful friendship between Sitka and Shiogama that will remain in the future, with Dokan Makabe's prayers.

## NOTES

Sitka locals found the artifacts of the *Kaisei-maru* when the City of Sitka constructed a new harbor at Sealing Cove, off Japonski Island, in the summer of 1983. Some artifacts are stored and displayed at the Sitka Historical Society.

The author translated some reference books and newspaper articles written in Japanese for this research. Note that the titles of Japanese government regulations can be translated into English in several different ways.

Eizo Chonan's family found his journal after Eizo passed away at his home. They donated it to Mr. Makabe, the great-nephew of the captain of the *Kaisei-maru*. In October 2009, 100 years after the tragedy of the *Kaisei-maru*, Mr. Makabe brought a copy of Eizo's journal to the Sitka Historical Society.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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