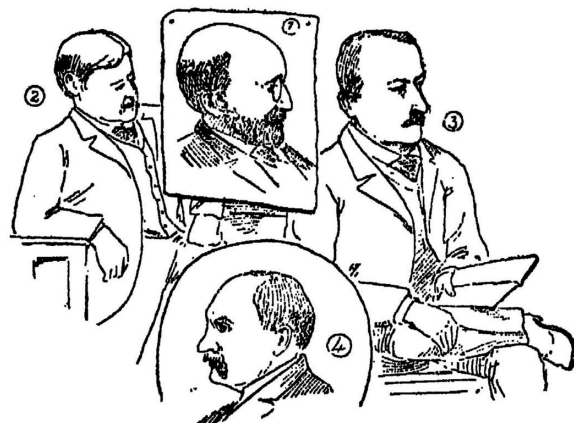
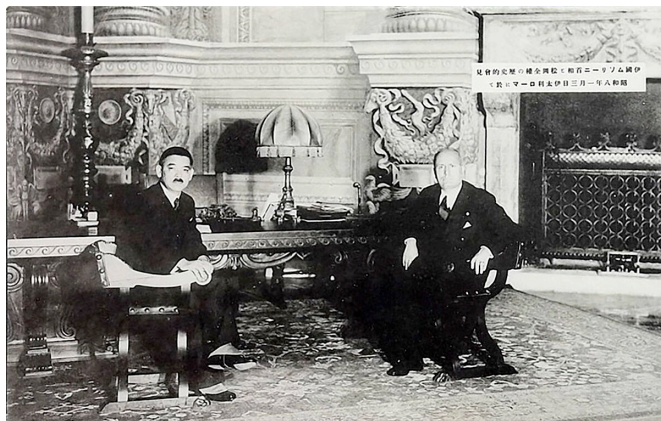


Offbeat Oregon: Oregon had friends in high places ... in Imperial Japan

November 10, 2022



1. Judge Bellinger. 2. Es-Inspector J. H. Coblenz. 3. Nat Blum. 4. William Dunbar.





It may be true that the movement of a butterfly's wings on one side of the world can seed a tornado on the other.

But whether that's literally true or not, it certainly is figuratively true, and nowhere is it better demonstrated than in the case of 1890s businessman and opium smuggler William Dunbar of Portland, Oregon.

If we could take Dunbar out of the stream of history before about 1890, we would derail events that led directly to Imperial Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany in 1940; to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor the following year; to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945; and (maybe) to the fact that the world did not end in a multi-gigaton thermonuclear fireball in late October of 1962.

All this because, decades earlier, an incompetent but politically well-connected drug smuggler in tiny, faraway Portland had taken a young Japanese boy into his household as a companion for his 14-year-old son.

That little boy's name was Yosuke "Frank" Matsuoka, and he would grow up to be foreign minister of Imperial Japan and the chief architect of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy.

Yosuke Matsuoka was born in 1880 in the village of Morozumi in Yamaguchi Prefecture. He was a son of a local shipping-company owner; but when he was very young, his father's business collapsed into bankruptcy after one of his ships sank, and his father died within a few years, a broken man. Matsuoka spent most of his pre-teen years with his widowed mother in proud poverty.

In 1891, Matsuoka's mother reluctantly agreed to let him venture overseas to do what he could to restore the family's fortunes. So on Feb. 23, 1893, following some crash-course English instruction, Matsuoka boarded the steamship Tacoma in Kobe, bound for Victoria, British Columbia.

And about a month after he arrived, Matsuoka joined the Dunbar household.

William Dunbar was a wealthy widower, owner of Dunbar Produce and Grocery and Turner Flouring Mills, and co-owner of the Merchants Steamship Company. He had, by the way, been the first wheat merchant to

open the trade in Oregon-grown soft white winter wheat with noodle manufacturers in China.

He was also, as we've noted, a drug smuggler. Under the cover of his political connections with the Port of Portland's chief customs inspector, James Lotan, he ran an industrial-scale operation smuggling opium and illegal immigrants (mostly Chinese laborers) into British Columbia and thence into Portland. He owned two full-size steamships, the *Wilmington* and the *Haytian Republic*, operating out of the Dunbar Produce and Grocery wharf just north of the Burnside Bridge in Portland's old North End.

The steamships brought in groceries and produce from Vancouver for sale through Dunbar's wholesale grocery business, of course, and they also carried shipments of Turner Mills wheat to customers in China. But after those ships had unloaded their cargo in Shanghai or Hong Kong, it must have seemed a real shame to just have them steam on back home empty. So on the return trips, Dunbar's steamers took on passengers. Lots of passengers, most of them Chinese workers who each paid \$125 to be smuggled into the U.S.

And, of course, the ships also brought back opium — opium by the ton. At one point they were supplying the entire West Coast with the stuff.

The *Wilmington* and the *Haytian Republic* kept this trade up for several years, starting in 1890 or so. By 1893, when Matsuoka came on the scene, their operations were like an open secret on the waterfront; everyone pretty much knew what they were doing. They had started unloading the passengers at sea onto small boats, and rolling the barrels full of opium overboard in a secluded stretch of the river before coming into port, to avoid being caught by the immigration and customs inspectors who were always among their first visitors when they arrived.

This may actually be how Matsuoka got to Portland; although later in life he was always happy to talk about his voyage across from Kobe on the *Tacoma* (which was stormy and miserable), he never spoke much about the journey from British Columbia to Portland. Most biographers have tended to assume it was a simple, uneventful railroad journey, and so it may have been; but if he actually was smuggled illegally into the country by Dunbar's crew, he certainly wouldn't have wanted to talk about that in later years after he'd grown up and become a diplomat.

This, then, was the "family business" that Matsuoka joined as a 12-year-old boy. A gregarious and outgoing lad with a rapidly increasing fluency in English, he must have gotten to know many of Old Man Dunbar's sketchy business associates, including notorious shanghaier Joseph "Bunco" Kelley and flamboyant Merchants Steamship co-owner Nat Blum. He also probably learned a great deal about the opium trade. (Opium, at the time, was legal, but taxed very heavily.)

The household consisted of Dunbar, his 13-year-old son Lambert, and his widowed sister, Isabelle Beveridge. Matsuoka joined the family in a similar role as that of Hadji in the old *Jonny Quest* cartoons — as a sort of foster brother and companion for Lambert. Mrs. Beveridge took a particular interest in the young Japanese boy, and spent countless hours with him working on his English pronunciation and helping him and Lambert with their schoolwork.

It was an idyllic life for Matsuoka, but it couldn't last. Dunbar's smuggling operations were too flagrant, and the underworld characters he had working for him were too unreliable. In December of 1893, the boom came down. Fifteen people were arrested on smuggling and human-trafficking charges, including Dunbar and chief Port of Portland customs inspector James Lotan. Lotan, in addition to being customs inspector, was a very prominent member of Portland's business elite and was the president of the Oregon Republican Party; so his presence in the trial guaranteed a lot of media coverage.

It ended with a hung jury, and the process of getting a trial rescheduled dragged out well into 1894. Dunbar's business partner, Nat Blum, turned state's evidence and testified against him, but did it so "creatively" that by the end of the second trial attempt no one believed a word he said any more. At that point, Dunbar left on a "business trip" to Hong Kong, and stayed there in exile, leaving young Lambert and Matsuoka behind with Mrs. Beveridge.

In 1898, Matsuoka enrolled in the University of Oregon, pursuing an undergraduate degree in law. After graduation, he spent some time trying to get admitted to an Ivy League graduate law school back east; and if he'd been left to his own devices, he probably would have succeeded. But back in Japan his mother's health was declining fast. So in 1902, he decided it was time to return to his native land.

Yosuke Matsuoka left his Oregon home for the last time in 1902, when he was 22 years old; he'd lived in Oregon and, briefly, California, since age 13. His Oregon years had been happy ones, and he would remember them fondly for the rest of his life.

Oregon would remember him fondly, too (until Pearl Harbor Day, of course). Within 25 years of his graduation he would be probably the most famous University of Oregon alumnus in the world; within 50, its most notorious.

That, of course, was all far in the future. Just now, back in Japan, Matsuoka was not finding his hard-earned U. of O. degree very useful; no Japanese universities would recognize it. That effectively foreclosed future studies at Tokyo Imperial University. As the son of a merchant, he lacked any of the family connections that might be parlayed into a civil service career; nor did he have any law-school connections that could help him in Japan.

So he took the Foreign Service exam instead, and launched upon a career as a diplomat.

As a diplomat, Matsuoka was excellent. His natural "gift of gab" had been nurtured and shaped in the boisterous, outgoing style of frontier Oregon. He'd worked in a newspaper office in Oakland, Calif., for long enough to know how to get along well with reporters. He could be garrulous and gaffe-prone, but he was generous with his time, was obviously brilliant, and was very good at the political games that always come along with diplomacy. He quickly rose through the ranks. After the First World War, he was in the Japanese delegation to the Versailles Peace Conference.

For many years after that Matsuoka served as an executive in the South Manchurian Railway Company, a Japanese-owned railroad cutting through Chinese territory which Japan had seized from Tsarist Russia in the

Russo-Japanese War.

Then in 1931 came the “Manchuria Incident.” A cabal of Japanese army officers blew up some dynamite near a South Manchurian Railway Company line, blamed the Chinese for it, and used it as a pretext to invade and occupy Manchuria and set up the puppet state of Manchuko there. Faced with this fait accompli, and wanting of course to keep the conquered territory, the Japanese government backed the officers up. The League of Nations strongly objected, and Matsuoka, by now a widely internationally known diplomat, was assigned to the League to handle the fallout.

Matsuoka was bitterly opposed to the idea of Japan withdrawing from the League of Nations, and tried very hard to prevent it. But, ironically enough, it was he that had to lead the Japanese delegation in their dramatic walkout on Feb. 24, 1933.

On the way back to Japan, Matsuoka worried about what his reception might be. After all, his diplomacy had failed — Japan had withdrawn from the League of Nations. As a businessman, he knew what that meant. Internationally, it was a bad look; it made Japan look like a rogue state and an unreliable foreign-investment partner.

But when he arrived back home, he was welcomed as a hero. The pageantry of the Japanese delegation’s dramatic exit, heads held high in solemn dignity, had appealed to the populace. Matsuoka was, at that moment, the most popular man in Japan other than the actual Emperor.

But all was not as peachy as it might have looked. With no personal family networks to support him, he had to seek support where he could find it; and the business elites that would ordinarily be with him were furious about Japan’s withdrawing from the League. It may have been an important point of national honor, but it was going to cost them a lot of money; Japan was now almost an international pariah.

And yet the population of laborers and farm workers loved him.

So Matsuoka took the path of William Jennings Bryan, whom he had once met in California, and stepped into the role of a populist politician. His idea was to build a fascist-style grassroots organization similar to the one Mussolini had developed in Italy.

After two years of barnstorming around the country giving populist speeches, though, he knew he was not going to be able to get enough traction to build the mass support he’d need to overcome the challenges of being a political outsider; so in 1935, when offered the presidency of the South Manchuria Railroad, he accepted and went back to Manchuria.

Then in 1940, Matsuoka’s old acquaintance Fumimaro Konoe took over as prime minister. Seeking a foreign minister who knew diplomacy and would get along well with the army and navy ministers, Konoe tapped Matsuoka for the job.

Matsuoka was only foreign minister for a year. But, it was an extraordinarily action-packed year. From the start, his goal was to forge an official alliance with Nazi Germany. He was convinced that only as a partner

with Germany could Japan negotiate on an equal footing with its greatest Pacific rival, the United States. And he hoped that the treaty could be spun as a failure for the Roosevelt administration, causing Roosevelt to lose the 1940 election. Matsuoka had given up on ever being able to do business with Roosevelt's people — they were too intransigently opposed to Japan's occupation of Manchuria, which he considered an indispensable "lifeline" of raw materials for the island empire. A new administration under Wendell Wilkie would be eager to break from the old regime, and perhaps with the right kind of diplomacy it could be brought around to Japan's way of thinking. Then the U.S. could broker a peace-with-honor deal for both China and Japan — both countries had been bogged down in a shooting-war stalemate in Manchuria for half a decade — and everyone could settle down again.

The problem was, Matsuoka thought he understood America, when in fact what he understood was the rough-and-tumble waterfront districts and lumber camps of 1890s Portland. He thought of Americans as a bluff, straightforward bunch who despised weakness but respected guts and strength. He also thought of them as not being too hung up on things like anti-smuggling laws. The sheer audacity of the Blum-Dunbar gang's opium operations had commanded respect in Portland. Matsuoka naturally thought Americans would respond positively to similar kinds of audacity played out on the international stage in Manchuria. (He also seems not to have understood that the Japanese army's atrocities in Manchuria were the real problem there.)

But America in 1940 was completely unlike waterfront Portland in 1893. In fact, throughout the late '30s Oregon raconteur Stewart Holbrook made a good living pumping old retired waterfront gangsters for stories of those crazy old days and publishing them in the *Morning Oregonian* for modern readers to shake their heads over in amazement at how much different their world had become. Matsuoka was a living anachronism, and his confidence in his understanding of the country he spent his teenage years in was about to bite him, and his country, really hard.

When Yosuke Matsuoka accepted his appointment as Imperial Japan's foreign minister, it was the fulfillment of a dream for him. The gregarious 13-year-old boy who had been informally adopted into Portland opium smuggler William Dunbar's household back in 1893 had come a long way in the following 47 years. He had become a national hero in Japan, and was by far the single most famous Japanese person in the world internationally and almost certainly the most famous University of Oregon alumnus.

It should have been a triumphal time for him. And while it did have its moments, Matsuoka's year in the chair as Japan's top diplomat was a real pivot point in his life. The mistakes he made as Foreign Minister — crucial strategic mistakes that ironically came disguised as huge foreign-policy wins — would define Matsuoka and his legacy forever, and not in a good way.

The first of these, and the biggest, was the pact with Nazi Germany — the Tripartite Pact.

The pact was signed on Sept. 19, 1940, bringing Japan officially and irrevocably into the Axis. Japan was now, for better or (much) worse, an ally of Nazi Germany.

But instead of respecting Japan's resolve and working to defuse tensions to prevent getting drawn into a two-front war, the Americans grew alarmed, sensing that they were being closed in upon. Instead of sending

Roosevelt packing as punishment for allowing this setback to occur, they rallied around him and started getting ready for the upcoming fight. Instead of making it harder for Roosevelt to sell assistance to England to the American public, the pact made it easier.

There was something else that Matsuoka did, too, that he soon bitterly regretted, although it was one of the most signal diplomatic master strokes of his career. In April of 1941, while visiting Hitler in Berlin, he induced Hitler to do a little bragging and to get carried away while talking about what Germany might do in a war with the U.S.

“Germany would wage a vigorous war against America with U-boats and the Luftwaffe, and with her greater experience,” he assured Matsuoka. “This would be more than a match for America.”

That’s when he said it, proudly and publicly — a single sentence that would literally seal his own fate, along with Matsuoka’s and that of both their countries:

“If Japan gets into a conflict with the United States, Germany on her part will take the necessary steps at once.”

With that, Japan had the personal pledge of the Nazi dictator that if war came, Germany would be in it.

But as Matsuoka quickly learned, that was a sword that cut two ways: It turned Japan into a tripwire that the Roosevelt Administration could tug on to bring a reluctant America to the aid of the beleaguered British.

As far as I know there isn’t any direct evidence that Roosevelt’s people started tugging on that tripwire. But, given the circumstances, it would be contrary to human nature and the nature of diplomacy if they didn’t. And Matsuoka clearly thought they were doing exactly that, in the months that followed.

Matsuoka’s tenure as foreign minister ended three months later, in July 1941. Convinced the U.S. was trying to bait Japan into war, he’d become something of a loose cannon, and had lost the confidence of army minister Gen. Hideki Tojo, who by now was the real power in the Japanese government. Prime Minister Konoe accordingly dissolved the cabinet and re-formed it without Matsuoka in it.

Konoe’s government only lasted a few months after that. Tensions with the United States got worse and worse. Tojo got more and more bellicose. Finally, in October, Konoe took the hint and resigned.

He was replaced with Tojo ... and, of course, Tojo took the country straight to war, taking especial care to make sure the Nazis would back Japan up as their Fuhrer had pledged to do. As, of course, they did.

On the morning of the Pearl Harbor attack, Matsuoka heard the news on the radio, like everyone else. Initially he was exhilarated, but a day later the situation had sunk in a bit more. “The Tripartite Pact was my worst mistake,” he told a visitor. “I had hoped to prevent the United States from entering the war.”

Matsuoka spent the war years struggling with the tuberculosis that would shortly kill him. By the time the two atomic bombs had been detonated on Japanese soil, he was in obvious decline; but he hadn’t given up. Despite the bleak outlook for his country, he got involved with a plan to form an underground resistance

government. He believed the remains of the Japanese army could hold out for ten years on a guerilla basis. America had all the strength, he admitted; but, he claimed, not the patience. A “third-rate politician” like President Truman would not be able to inspire his rabbley democratic masses to put up with a ten-year struggle to subdue Japan, and they would win by attrition. Of course, there might be a few more nuclear bombings in the meantime, but he thought they could tolerate those.

But it was not to be. The emperor, when he caught wind of this plan, put his foot down. Enough was enough, he said.

And so the war ended with Japan utterly supine, and with Matsuoka nearly on his deathbed. He finally succumbed to his tuberculosis at age 66 in June of 1946 while in prison, awaiting trial on war-crimes charges.

Yosuke Matsuoka was a product of his time. But more than that, he was a product of another time, and another place — of the late 19th century in one of the roughest, least refined parts of the American frontier: The shanghaiing-era Portland waterfront.

And it showed. Just after the war’s end, a Japanese reporter asked him what Americans were like. This was his response:

“Now assuming that you are walking on a small path in a field, which is so narrow that only one person can pass through, and an American comes from the opposite direction,” he said. “You are facing each other and neither side is willing to yield his right of way. Soon becoming impatient, the American will clench his fist and sock you in the jaw. Taken by surprise you may lower your head and let him pass by. Next time when you meet him on the same path, he will simply raise his fist. He considers that the best solution.

“On the other hand,” he continued, “if you do not retreat the first time, and engage in a counterattack, the American will be shocked and take another look at you. ‘Well, this fellow knows what he is doing’; so recognizing, he will become your best friend.”

Responding to this quote, David Lu, Matsuoka’s biographer, writes, “This was the America of cowboys, of confrontation at ‘High Noon,’ and of the Wild West. And this image of the bygone era acquired in the still underdeveloped Pacific Northwest was to govern Matsuoka’s thinking when he negotiated with the United States.”

As evidenced by the fact that he was still thinking this way in 1945, after it was all over and his “punch the cowboy and he will become your pal” strategy had failed again and again and again, Matsuoka never really learned this lesson.

And yet: Is it possible that the crafty old diplomat was actually right? Certainly not in his own lifetime, but in ours, Japan has become many Americans’ favorite foreign country. In fact, according to Gallup’s annual World Affairs poll earlier this year, 82 percent of Americans regard Japan “Mostly favorably” or “Very favorably.” This puts Japan in fourth place, behind France (84%), Great Britain (86%), and Canada (87%).

As the rawness of the wounds of the war has faded to a memory, a certain admiration and respect for an uncommonly gutsy old adversary remains. In fact, that analogy of the American cowboy and his Japanese new best friend sitting side by side at the bar in a saloon, each with a shiny new black eye, having a beer together — that actually seems pretty spot-on, doesn't it?

There is something else Matsuoka was long-term right about, too, and this is where this story actually gets a little spooky. It was a famous speech, one that he gave in Geneva in 1931 as the League of Nations debated what to do about the Manchuria Incident (the invasion by rogue Japanese army officers, you'll remember). Matsuoka stood before the world on that day, and this is what he said:

"Humanity crucified Jesus of Nazareth 2,000 years ago," he declaimed. "And today? Can any of you assure me that the so-called world opinion can make no mistake? We Japanese feel that we are now put on trial. Some of the people in Europe and America may wish even to crucify Japan in the 20th century. Gentlemen, Japan stands ready to be crucified! But we do believe, and firmly believe, that in a very few years, world opinion will be changed and that we also shall be understood by the world as Jesus of Nazareth was."

This speech was not well received, especially by serious Christians who felt it was borderline blasphemy if not worse. But in Japan it was a sensation. Translations were printed and distributed. The speech was used in schools' English language programs alongside Shakespeare. A phonograph record was made of the speech and sold in shops.

And again, looking back on that speech from 1945, it sure must have looked like that had been just a lot of hot air, liberally spiced with bitter irony. Japan had been "crucified" indeed, on a cross not of gold but of uranium, and for what?

But by 1962 it actually made some sense. In fact, if someone had brought it to Nikita Khrushchev's attention during the Cuban Missile Crisis after he made the conscious decision to risk being ousted as leader of the Soviet Union by reaching past the big red button on his desk and picking up the phone instead ... a decision that has to have been influenced by the spectacle of Japan's burning cities and radiation-ravaged people and the gut-wrenching journalism of John Hersey in his eyewitness account of Hiroshima after the Bomb ... maybe Khrushchev would have understood, and agreed with, Matsuoka's sentiment.

It is entirely possible, if not likely, that Japan's atomic sacrifice saved the world from nuclear holocaust 17 years later. The argument goes like this: Hiroshima became a sacrificial lamb on that day and a few days later Nagasaki became another, giving the world a small taste of what nuclear holocaust might look like in the era of multi-megaton hydrogen bombs. After seeing that film footage and reading those eyewitness accounts, no one would ever be able to think of nuclear war in purely abstract terms again. No one would ever be able to hold "national pride" in one hand, and "thermonuclear war" in the other, and think for one second that they were of similar value.

And that is a gift the whole world received in 1945, paid for in full with the blood of Japanese innocents. The gift they bequeathed us was a visceral demonstration of why such weapons must never be used again. And we may never know if we owe those innocents our own lives ... but it seems likely, doesn't it?

So, maybe — just maybe — we would all be dead today and our beautiful planet a scarred and smoking cinder if it hadn't been for an incompetent drug smuggler on the old shanghaiing-era Portland waterfront taking a little Japanese boy into his household, 130 years ago. And if that's not the "butterfly effect," I'd just like to know what is!

(Sources: Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946, a book by David J. Lu published in 2002 by Lexington Books; "Yosuke Matsuoka: The Far-Western Roots of a World-Political Vision," an article by Masaharu Ano published in the Summer 1997 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly; "Americans Rate Canada, Britain, France, Japan Most Favorably," an article by Megan Brenan published on news.gallup.com on March 14, 2022)

Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.