

“Murder of Harry Nakamoto”

Episode Transcript

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<https://www.wrangellhistoryunlocked.com/harry-nakamoto>

Introduction

It was Tuesday, October 18, 1921. Time was 10:30 in the morning. The badly beaten body of Harry Nakamoto, owner of the Wrangell Bakery, lay before Dr. A. B. Jones.

The autopsy was clear. Harry Nakamoto did not die of natural causes.

This would result in the arrest Charles Lynch, 37, a lifelong Wrangell resident and a member of one of Wrangell’s prominent families.

The case is a snapshot of Wrangell in 1921, a place that transformed from a Gold Rush town to one of Alaska’s leading cities. It is a story that features some of Alaska’s most prominent figures and reveals what life was like for Asian immigrants to Alaska.

Today’s episode is the United States vs. Charles Lynch for the murder of Harry Nakamoto.

Chapter 1. Harry Nakamoto

A. Biography of Harry Nakamoto

Harry Nakamoto was born in Japan in 1872. He married, and had a son, who grew up to attend the University of Tokyo.¹

Harry and his wife separated, and at the age of 30, Harry Nakamoto said goodbye to Japan for the last time. He crossed the Pacific, and came to the United States in 1902.

These were the peak years of Japanese immigration to the US. In the first eight years of the twentieth century, 127,000 Japanese immigrants came to the US.² Hoping to curb the rising Japanese population, President Teddy Roosevelt negotiated a “gentleman’s agreement” with Japan, to stop sending Japanese men to the United States.³

Harry Nakamoto likely performed labor along the west coast before arriving in Wrangell a few years before in 1921.

In Wrangell, Harry Nakamoto lived alone. He owned the Wrangell Bakery on Front Street. Front Street was the long, wooden boardwalk along the coastline, connecting the homes and businesses of Wrangell. It started at the north near the prominent Fort Wrangel Hotel. Where flat, dry land wasn’t available, people simply put buildings up on pilings over the water, letting the tide come and go underneath. The “waterside” had burned down once before in 1906, and would burn down again in 1952.

In 1921, most of Wrangell’s roughly 900 residents lived along Front Street. A few Japanese immigrants called Wrangell home. Most of them worked as cooks, and some had started families in Alaska.

¹ <http://designsbytrisha.com/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/OBIT.pdf>

² Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians : Report for the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, p. 30.

³ Dates in Japanese Immigration and History, https://geriatrics.stanford.edu/ethnomed/japanese/introduction/historical_dates.html

When Harry Nakamoto died, the Wrangell Sentinel reported his funeral was attended by “a number of his countrymen.”⁴ He left a small estate, no more than \$3,000.

In 1921, Wrangell was physically close together, but socially divided. Wrangell’s school board would not allow Alaska Native children into the public school. In just a year, the town’s White election judges would refuse ballots to Alaska Natives they deemed “uncivilized,” resulting in the arrest of Tlingit elders Charlie Jones and Tillie Paul-Tamaree. This is the era of fish traps, and William Paul and Louis Paul rallying the Alaska Native Brotherhood and Alaska Native Sisterhood into the fight for Alaska Native civil rights.

B. Fear of Chinese Immigrants

Asian immigrants to America also faced challenges. Japanese workers like Harry Nakamoto experienced the same pattern as Chinese before them: embrace, suspicion, then rejection.

Starting in the 1850s, Chinese immigrants came to the United States and settled along the west coast to perform valuable services and labor. The Alaska salmon canning industry would not be recognizable without them. After thirty years of Chinese immigration, in 1882, President Arthur signed the Chinese Exclusion Act, ending immigration from China.

Japanese workers stepped in to fill the void. Demand for Japanese labor only increased around 1877 to 1879, spurred by the need to replace Chinese immigrants who went up the Stikine River in the final years of the Cassiar Gold Rush.⁵

Chinese workers once provided valuable labor, but once the public turned on them, they were not safe. In 1886, in Juneau, a mob of White miners

⁴ Petersburg Weekly Report, Nov 11 1921.

⁵ Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians : Report for the Committee on Interior and Insular Affairs, p. 30.

expelled around 100 Chinese miners. The story made news worldwide, even winding up in a newspaper in Glasgow, Scotland.⁶ From a history of Alaska by Jeannette Nichols:

The other workmen objected to their employment in the mines, and proceeded to pack them closely into two small sailing vessels, equipped with one hundred bags of rice and some tea, and send them off to Wrangell.⁷

In the mid 1880s, Chinese miners wintered in Wrangell on an abandoned, broken down, beached riverboat.⁸ They lived on the upper decks, while the hull flooded in the high tide. It was the future location of the waterside of Front Street.

One year before, one of the most famous cases of mob eviction happened in Tacoma, Washington, and involved a future famous Alaskan politician: James Wickersham. In 1885, James Wickersham was just a 28-year old probate judge, but he joined a mob to round up Chinese families, expel them from their homes, march them through town in the rain, and push them onto trains bound for Portland, Oregon.⁹

The mob, dubbed the “Tacoma Twenty-Seven,” were charged with felonies, but they were hailed as local heroes. None of them were ever convicted.

Just thirty years later, in 1916, Wickersham lived in Alaska, served as Alaska’s elected delegate to Congress, and remembered his time in the Tacoma Twenty-Seven fondly:

I have always felt that we did a great and good work for the Pacific coast that day. There are on the Pacific Coast of Asia millions of Chinese and even Japanese

⁶ Glasgow Herald. Glasgow, Glasgow, Scotland. 14 Aug 1886, Sat • Page 4

⁷ Alaska: A history of its administration, exploration, and industrial development during its first half century under the rule of the united states, 1924. p. 111.

⁸ Images of America: Wrangell, by Bonnie Demerjian. p. 16.

⁹ The Chinese Must Go: Violence, Exclusion, and the Making of the Alien in America, by Beth Lew-Williams.

who would flood the Pacific coast if the bars were once lowered... The fear I have always had was not that the Pacific coast would be overrun by criminals and a foreign race of base and immoral character but that we would be confronted by millions of industrious hard-working sons and daughters of Confucius, who, if given an equal chance with our people, would outdo them in the struggle for life and gain possession of the Pacific coast of America.¹⁰

Chinese immigrants went from being sought for their labor, to being marked for exile.

C. Fear of Japanese Immigrants

Around the time Harry Nakamoto died, Japanese immigrants were feeling the door shut, as well. Roosevelt's "Gentlemen's Agreement" had drastically cut Japanese immigration back in 1908. In 1920, the year before Harry Nakamoto died, a United States House committee came all the way to Seattle, Washington to hold public hearings on the issue of Japanese immigration. They heard testimony questioning if a Japanese person could ever be a loyal American. Japanese immigrants were accused of reproducing children too quickly, and taking jobs away from World War I veterans. That Japanese immigrants were successful at business was touted as evidence of a Japanese plot to dominate American business and turn the United States into a colony of Japan.¹¹

In 1922, the federal government passed a law, which removed United States citizenship for anyone who married a Japanese person.¹² Two years later, the government effectively banned all non-White immigration for the next forty years.

¹⁰ Letter of James Wickersham to Herbert Hunt, April 21, 1916.

¹¹ The 1920 Anti-Japanese Crusade and Congressional Hearings, by Doug Blair. https://depts.washington.edu/civilr/Japanese_restriction.htm

¹² ¹² Dates in Japanese Immigration and History, https://geriatrics.stanford.edu/ethnomed/japanese/introduction/historical_dates.html

Harry Nakamoto lived through the changing times. He arrived when Japanese immigrants were sought for their skill and work ethic. By the time he died, Japanese immigrants were marked for suspicion.

Harry Nakamoto came to Wrangell and became part of the community with his bakery. He would get to know the town and its people. And one of the people he would get to know, would eventually be accused of his murder.

Chapter 2. Charles Lynch

A. E.P. Lynch

Charles Lynch was born New Years Day, 1888 in Fort Wrangel.¹³ He was the fourth of six children born to E. P. Lynch and his wife, Susan. According to his draft card, Charles Lynch was just over 5' 9", with brown eyes, brown hair, and a ruddy complexion. He worked as a fisherman. Little else exists in the historic record to tell us about Charles Lynch's life, but his family is well-documented.

Charles' father, E.P. Lynch, also called Fred, had been around Wrangell longer than perhaps any other White man in Wrangell. He came in 1874 during the gold rush, when King Lear still owned the fort. He married an Alaska Native woman, Susan. E.P. Lynch made his first real money hiring crews of Alaska Native men to paddle boats up and down the Stikine River, until steamships put him out of work. He owned Alaska's first salmon salting plant and got into the hotel business in Fort Wrangel.¹⁴

B. John G. Grant

After a lifetime as one of Wrangell's foremost businessmen, by 1920, at the age of 85, E.P. Lynch clerked at the Fort Wrangel Hotel, owned by his son-in-law, John Goodwill Grant. Grant was married to Lynch's eldest child, Mary, making him the brother-in-law of Charles Lynch. Grant made his hotel a family affair, where family members both lived and worked. At one point, Charles Lynch worked as a bartender at the hotel.¹⁵

John Goodwill Grant was from Nova Scotia. He came to Fort Wrangel at the age of 24 along with the stampede in the 1898 Klondike Gold Rush. A year later, he married Mary Lynch and entered into business moving coal before expanding into other enterprises. When his Pioneer Hotel burned to

¹³ U.S., World War II Draft Registration Cards, 1942 for Charles Lynch

¹⁴ Biographies of Alaska-Yukon Pioneers, 1850 -1950. Compiled and Edited by Ed Ferrell. pp. 199-200.

¹⁵ <http://akgenweb.com/AKWrangell/1915directorywrangell.htm>

the ground in 1906, he built the Fort Wrangel Hotel. By 1920, 21 people, including Grant himself, lived in the Fort Wrangel Hotel, either as family members, boarders, or staff.¹⁶

In 1921, John Goodwill Grant was also mayor of Wrangell. When the first direct flight came from the United States to Alaska, Mayor Grant was there, to be the first person to shake hands with someone off a direct flight from the United States.¹⁷ Grant was politically active, too. He urged the legalization of alcohol in Alaska, was outed by a prohibitionist as notorious bootlegger with caches of alcohol hidden around Wrangell,¹⁸ and even plead guilty in 1919 to possessing alcohol, but got the charges of furnishing alcohol to Natives dismissed.¹⁹

When Charles Lynch was charged with the murder of Harry Nakamoto, it was John Goodwill Grant, and the city clerk J.E. Worden, who posted the \$5,000 bond. And it would be John Goodwill Grant who worked with the well-known lawyer who would represent the defense: James Wickersham.

C. James Wickersham

James Wickersham was one of the most famous men in Alaska. He came as a judge, entered politics, and became Alaska's sole delegate to Congress. He traveled throughout the territory, fighting the popular fight for self-governance and freedom from the control of rich and powerful outside businesses. Wickersham's name alone was synonymous with Alaskan politics. You were either a Wickershamite, or an anti-Wickershamite.

Just months before the death of Harry Nakamoto, James Wickersham left public office and returned to private practice in Alaska.

¹⁶ 1920 US Census

¹⁷ The Pathfinder, Volume 1. p. 47.

¹⁸ The Paradox of Alaska's 1916 Alcohol Referendum

¹⁹ Petersburg Weekly Report, February 14, 1919.

John Goodwill Grant may not have shared Wickersham's political vision for Alaska,²⁰ but he set that aside in order to focus on his brother-in-law's defense. In the days leading up to Charles Lynch's trial, Wickersham wrote in his private diary:

Busy today in consultation with John G. Grant of Wrangell, preparing for trial of Charlie Lynch for Killing a Japanese "Yakamoto."

Noticably, Wickersham got his name wrong.

The investigation into Harry Nakamoto's death would center on Charles Lynch almost immediately. Three young people came forward with a shocking story, one that would lead down the path to Charles Lynch's arrest.

²⁰ Bent Pins book.

Chapter 3. Investigation & Arrest

Investigation

From the October 22, 1921 Wrangell Sentinel:

Owing to there being some question as to the cause of Nakamoto's death an inquest was held. The principal witnesses at the inquest were Louis Wigg, Maggie Gunyah, and Sarah Lott. The substance of their testimony was that on Sept. 29, they saw Charlie Lynch beating up Nakamoto at the rear of the building occupied by Jon Fanning as a fur store.

September 29 was three weeks before Harry Nakamoto's death. The location of Jon Fanning's fur store still stands today: the historic Grant/Patenaude Building, with its iconic six-sided turret and steeple top, overlooking the intersection of Front and McKinnon streets.²¹ The rear of the fur store ran along Cow Alley, a narrow path running behind the buildings on the north-side of Front Street. Cow Alley got its name in 1910, when cows were banned from Front Street but could still roam here.²²

The three witnesses were Wrangell youth. Sarah Lott was 19, while Maggie Gunnah and Lewis Wigg were 22. Lewis and his family were neighbors of Harry Nakamoto, as well as two other Japanese men who lived together and worked as cooks.

Continuing from the Wrangell Sentinel, October 22, 1921:

After viewing the remains, and hearing the testimony of witnesses the Coroner's jury made a request for an autopsy.

Dr. Jones reported that Nakamoto's death was the result of blows, traumatism or injuries inflicted upon his body by some external force to him unknown, and

²¹ A Historic Structures Report (HSR), Patenaude/Grant Building Wrangell, Alaska, p. 7

²² Images of America: Wrangell. By Bonnie Demerjian. p. 47.

that he did not die from natural causes; that the causes of his death were a ruptured spleen, a rupture of branch of right common iliac artery, peritonitis, congestion of most all the viscera contained in the abdominal cavity, and that the direct cause (sic) of death was a cerebral thrombus (blood clot) of the middle cerebral artery of the brain.

On Tuesday afternoon the coroner's jury reported that after viewing the remains, hearing the testimony of witnesses, and reading Dr. Jones' sworn report of the autopsy they were of the opinion that Harry Nakamoto's death was the result of injuries inflicted at the hands of Charlie Lynch.

B. Arrest

Based on the recommendation of the six-man coroner's jury, U.S. Commissioner William G. Thomas ordered Charles Lynch arrested and brought before him. In the hearing, Lynch was represented by William Paul.

Even though their lives had taken divergent paths, they both had a lot in common. They were only three years apart in age. They both grew up in Wrangell, came from well known families, fished, and could claim half-White, half-Native ancestry. William Paul had only returned to Alaska a year earlier, the first Alaska Native lawyer. He made his living as a lawyer taking clients like Charles Lynch, while working on his own time to advance the cause of Alaska Native rights.

From the 1921 October 28 Petersburg Weekly Report:

Wrangell Man Held for Manslaughter

Charles Lynch of Wrangell was recently bound over to the Federal Grand Jury after a preliminary hearing before W. G. Thomas, United States Commissioner at Wrangell, on the charge of manslaughter for the alleged causing of wounds that caused the death of

Harry Nakamoto, a Japanese resident of that city. He was released on \$5,000 bonds.

Charles Lynch is a young man who was raised in Wrangell and is the brother in law of J. C. (sic) Grant, a well known pioneer and owner of a hotel there. Nakamoto has lived at Wrangell for several years and operated a small bakery there.

The charges would be increased from manslaughter to murder. The trial was set for January, 1922. The location, Ketchikan. A jury would decide the if Charles Lynch was guilty, or not guilty, of the murder of Harry Nakamoto.

Chapter 4. The Trial

The Trial Begins

The Petersburg Weekly Report announced the start of the trial:

Word has been received from Ketchikan that the trial of Charles Lynch for the murder of a Japanese at Wrangell last fall has been started in District Court. Lynch was recently indicted by the Grand Jury and his trial was scheduled to be started on Monday, January 30. He is being defended by Judge James R. Wickersham, Dr. A.B. Jones of Petersburg, is one of the important witnesses on behalf of the government in the trial.²³

This announcement did not include Harry Nakamoto's name, only "a Japanese at Wrangell."

The Ketchikan courtroom was crowded all week.²⁴ A.G. Shoup and Lester O. Gore represented the government's case, while Wickersham represented the defense. In print, some newspapers still called him "Judge," even though he had not been a judge in many years, and in the trial, he represented the defense.

The prosecution presented their case. Three eye-witnesses, who knew both men, watched Charles Lynch beating Harry Nakamoto on Cow Alley. Seventeen days later, Harry Nakamoto died. According to Dr. Jones's autopsy, Harry Nakamoto died of external forces, severe enough to cause a fatal blood clot in his brain.²⁵ Charles Lynch caused the injuries that killed Harry Nakamoto, therefore, the jury should find Charles Lynch guilty of murder.

²³ February 3, 1922 Petersburg Weekly Report

²⁴ February 3, 1922 Diary of James R. Wickersham

²⁵ February 3, 1922 Diary of James R. Wickersham

The defense put the spotlight on Harry Nakamoto, with a revelation it hoped would sway the jury.

Wickersham argued that Harry Nakamoto was an alcoholic.

He said Harry Nakamoto was drunk when he ran into Charles Lynch that day on Cow Alley, that Harry Nakamoto seized onto Charles Lynch, who defended himself by shoving the drunk man away, causing Nakamoto to fall. Friendly as he had always been toward Nakamoto, Lynch helped the man to his feet, where Nakamoto fell a second time. This was no beating, argued Wickersham.

A few days before he died, revealed Wickersham, Harry Nakamoto fell off the back of his bakery, onto the beach. This was another opportunity to produce the bruising on Nakamoto's body, and suggested Nakamoto's danger to himself.

Wickersham argued that Dr. Jones described bruising not backed up by the coroner's jury or the hospital nurse, casting doubt on the veracity of the autopsy.

For these reasons, Wickersham urged a not guilty verdict.

Diary of James R. Wickersham

Today, we have a source nobody else could have had in 1922: the private diary of James Wickersham. In his diary, he was candid. In his own handwriting, he paints the picture of a defense attorney up against some tough odds, looking for any reason to sew doubt in the jury's mind.

Here now are the entries in James Wickersham's private diary for the trial of the United States vs. Charles Lynch:

Thursday, January 26, 1922. Four days before the trial:

Court called Charles Lynch in today to plead - not guilty. Am now actively at work on court business and will begin the trial of Lynch on Monday.

Monday, January 30, 1922. Trial Day 1. Wickersham uses a racial slur for children of Native Americans and Europeans, which I have replaced with the words "mixed race."

Case of U.S. v Lynch. Murder first degree, began today. Got jury before noon & prosecution putting its case this afternoon. Will probably take two days more to complete trial. Lynch is a "mixed race" - John G. Grant's brother-in-law and we have a good case - for a minor degree anyway.

Tuesday, January 31, 1922. Trial Day 2. Wickersham uses a racial slur for Japanese people, which I have replaced with the word "Japanese."

Have had a hard day of it in trial of Lynch. Dr. Jones, the principal witness for the prosecution made the autopsy of the dead Japanese with only 3 Japanese to assist, and no other person or doctor present. That gives him sole power to testify as to the cause of death, etc. and no chance to check upon his statements. He is bitter, unrelenting and cunning in swearing to every detail to convict - and we have no answer. We must depend on circumstances & the hope the jury will not believe his full story!

Wednesday, February 1, 1922. Trial Day 3.

Have had a hard day in the defense of Lynch. The more I consider Dr. Jones testimony of yesterday the harder it seems to meet it. Today I have put in our defense - generally - and their testimony - I am trying to get Medical Experts to offset Dr. Jones - but find it almost impossible to get a safe base to act from. Working tonight with physicians who seem willing - but not hampered by want of information - Jones conducted the post mortem - alone - and it is hard to make sufficient statement.

Thursday, February 2, 1922 Trial Day 4.

Another hard day - but finally got all my case to the jury. Called Dr.'s Mustard and Ellis as an offset to Dr. Jones - Mustard was bully - but Ellis backed as much as he went forward - but got a good offset

record. When I had all my other witnesses in I put Charlie Lynch on in his own defense & he did a beautiful job. He is a "mixed race" - has a slow speech, a low voice and a fearless eye. The Judge, jury & prosecuting Atty, were all amazed at his curt and perfectly straight story - in exact agreement with our facts and theory, and in 15 minutes he had knocked their case against to smithereens - if we can keep it.

Friday, February 3, 1922 Trial Day 5. The final day.

This has been a very strenuous day - we finished the evidence in the Lynch Case & the prosecution opened the argument before noon. I began at 2 o'clock and talked to the Jury for an hour and a half & Shoup an hour. The jury went out just About dinner time - but promptly demanded dinner & convened again at 8 oclock. In a few minutes they sent for Judge Reid - court met & they told the Judge they could not read a page of his instructions - which he had written! so he read it for them & he sent them back to consider their verdict.

Jury came in at 9 oclock! Not Guilty! John G. Grant and Lynchs relations and friends were overcome with joy at his release, and many of my friends cordially **congratulated** me on the outcome. It did me much good in a business way.

According to a news clipping, Wickersham's defense was highly effective. The jury deliberated only five hours, returning a verdict late Friday night. On the first vote, the jury unanimously found Charles Lynch not guilty of murder. Two jurors pushed for an assault conviction, but they ultimately succumbed to the will of the majority, and voted not guilty to that charge, as well.²⁶

Charles Lynch was a free man.

²⁶ Diary of James R. Wickersham February 4, 1922.

Chapter 5. Epilogue

In 1953, nine years after World War II ended in the Pacific, the United States looked for investors to run timber mills in southeast Alaska. The government offered a generous, 25-year contract for timber, and got no takers. They sweetened the pot to a 50-year contract. An offer came in from across the ocean, from a former adversary, with the promise of capital to run a mill in Wrangell.

After some initial reluctance, and much internal debate, the federal government authorized the Japanese-owned Alaska Lumber & Pulp Corporation to operate a mill in Wrangell, Alaska. The mill employed locals, became a major piece to the local economy, and defined Wrangell in the second half of the twentieth century. Staffed my Americans, but always Japanese-owned.

Harry Nakamoto's Wrangell was the same place, but a much different time. The lack of records about the lives of Japanese, Chinese, and other Asian immigrants to Alaska is a side-effect of the time they lived.

After the trial, Charles Lynch returned to Wrangell in the company of his brother-in-law and others who came to Ketchikan for the trial.²⁷ He continued to live in Wrangell for many years, working as a fisherman. At the end of his life, he was in Ketchikan. Like his father, he lived well into his 90s, dying in 1985.

The shadow of James Wickersham looms large in the pantheon of Alaska history — so large, that it makes the Lynch case look like a footnote. Lynch was just another client, while John Goodwill Grant was a man Wickersham would work with again, as they shaped Wrangell and the territory of Alaska.

For Wrangell, the 1920s were a politically-charged time, where simmering battles came to a head. The death of Harry Nakamoto provides a backdrop

²⁷ Diary of James R. Wickersham February 4, 1922.

to the events of the time, painting a more full understanding of what life was like in Alaska, how the wheels of justice turned, and a chance to watch some of Alaska's most important figures at work.

Though Harry Nakamoto only lived in Wrangell a few years, he is forever a part of its history.

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Today's episode contains musical recordings from the 1920s, courtesy of the Rekion National Diet Library, Historical Recordings Collection.

Sing to the Sea - Summer Suite. Recorded in May 1929 by the Orchestra Symphonica Takei. Morishige Takei, Composer.

Suzaka Song. Recorded August 1928 by Chiyako Sato, accompanied by the Japanese-Western Ensemble. Ujo Noguchi, Lyrics