

## Who is the samurai musher? Jujiro Wada:

### The Jujiro Wada story as a geotourism/cultural tourism opportunity for Alaskan communities

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#### Abstract

At the turn of the 20th century, stories circulated about the life and times of Jujiro Wada in Alaska as well as western Canada. Jujiro Wada came to Alaska from Japan as a young man in 1892 and spent the next 50 years on whaling ships, exploring the country, and pursuing elusive dreams seeking. Newspaper accounts track him not only in Alaska and the Yukon, but also mushing in the Northwest Territories; Jujiro Wada was also knowledgeable about the Russian Far East. Several books and numerous romanticized articles (in both English and Japanese) and movies have been made about him, but his actual feats are hard to distinguish from the romantic accounts of the journalists, authors and movie directors. Jujiro Wada was present at the founding of Fairbanks, carried word of the Fairbanks gold strike to Dawson City and almost became the first Fairbanksan lynched by the resultant mob of angry, unsuccessful gold seekers. This short, wiry man ran competitive, long-distance, 50-mile marathon races in Nome (1907) and Fairbanks. He mushed long distances to Herschel Island and the MacKenzie River Delta. He pioneered the trails now known as the Yukon Quest (1903) and the Iditarod Trail (1909). He sought financing for Alaska mining schemes from many people including the Louisiana Tabasco sauce McIlhenney family. He died impoverished in 1937 in San Diego. This article attempts to sort the "thin" facts from fiction of the Wada story, especially as it relates to early Nome, Seward and Fairbanks. Also discussed will be the upcoming live Alaska presentation of Wada's life "The Samurai Musher" by the song and dance of the Jujiro Wada Memorial Association of Ehime, Japan, in the Spring of 2015 at the Alaska Performing Arts Center in Anchorage, Alaska on May 1, 2015.

#### Key words

geotourism, Japanese pioneer, Jujiro Wada, rural development, The State of Alaska

#### 1. The samurai musher and Dr. Akasofu

Jujiro Wada Commemorative Program hosted at the Morris Thompson Cultural and Visitors Center, Fairbanks February 3, 2012 – the program was hi-lighted by a proclamation by the Alaska State Legislature noting Jujiro Wada's contributions to Fairbanks and in helping to blaze (explore) the trail between Fairbanks and the Yukon Territory, Canada. Other participants at the Fairbanks event included Dr. S. Akasofu (right) and Dr. Edgar Blatchford (left – a professor with the University of Alas-

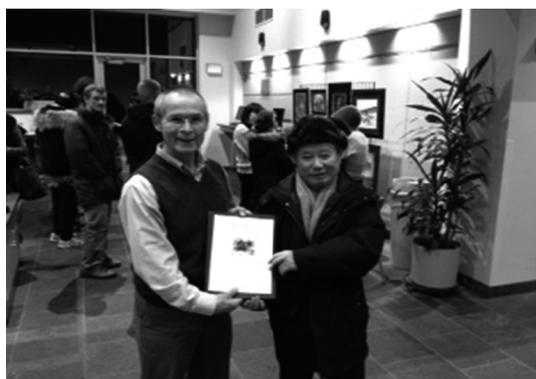


Figure 1: Dr. Akasofu & Dr. Blatchford

ka Anchorage Journalism Department, an Alaska Native and a fellow Wada enthusiast and also the former Commissioner of the Alaska Department of Commerce under Governor Frank Murkowski) below in which they participated in a recognition ceremony in which the exploits of Jujiro Wada were noted. Blatchford commented, "Dr. Akasofu's many insights and contributions into the story of Jujiro Wada are highly significant and very important in giving us a better understanding of the life and times of Jujiro Wada aka The Samurai Musher."

About Dr. S. Akasofu, he earned a B.S. and a M.S. in geophysics at Tohoku University, Sendai, Japan, in 1953 and 1957, respectively. He earned a Ph.D. in geophysics at UAF in 1961. Within the framework of his Ph.D. thesis he studied the aurora. Akasofu has been a professor of geophysics at UAF since 1964. As a graduate student, Akasofu was one of the first to understand that the northern aurora was actually an aurora of light surrounding the North Magnetic Pole.

Dr. Akasofu, a world renowned scientist, was director of the Geophysical Institute from 1986 until 1999, during which time the Alaska Volcano Observatory was established and Poker Flat Research Range was modernized. He went on to become the first director of the International Arctic Research Center (IARC) upon its establishment in 1998, and remained in that position until 2007. The same year, due to the many significant contributions to UAF, the State of Alaska and the US and to the international science community, the building,

which houses IARC, was named in his honor.

Another important dimension of Dr. Akasofu, are his many contributions towards supporting and keeping alive the memory of Alaska Pioneer Jujiro Wada and Wada's exploits in Alaska and Western Canada.

Dr. Akasofu is constantly called upon to explain both climate science and exploits of pioneer Japanese in Alaska (of which Jujiro Wada is one) to the many international visitors to the UAF campus. Below is a picture of the famous Moriken Tour led by International Coordinator/Bridgebuilder H Matsuura and world renowned tour host Moriken, which came to Alaska in 2013 and is being hosted by Dr Akasofu's lecture on the Aurora and his stories of the adventures of Jujiro Wada. They are on the UAF campus in the Akasofu Building (formerly the International Arctic Research Center)

Even today Dr. Akasofu, Emeritus Professor, continues to make numerous lectures/contributions to the Alaska and international visitors on both the science of the aurora and on the pioneer exploits of Jujiro Wada and other Japanese Alaskans at the Akasofu Building on the UAF Campus.



Figure 2: Front (L to R) : Moriken, Dr. S Akasofu, Dr. T Nakazawa, Professor H Matsuura at the Akasofu Building on the UAF Campus

## 2. Who is Jujiro Wada?

### 2.1 Wada heads for Arctic Alaska

Alaska Prospector and Blazer of the Iditarod Trail: Jujiro Wada was born on January 6, 1875, in a small town called Komatsu-cho in the Ehime Prefecture of Shikoku Island in western Japan. Jujiro started working in a paper factory when he was 12 or 13 and told his friends that his dream was to go to America and make it big. Wada's story will find him making his name as an early Alaska prospector and being credited with blazing the Iditarod Trail. Jujiro Wada, an All-Alaska personality, albeit with "thin" historical documentation, should be considered a true icon of Alaska's early pioneer-period record.

In 1891, at the age of 16 he went to Kobe, Japan, where he worked until his co-workers helped him stow away in a large tea box on a freighter headed for San Francisco. A deckhand on the freighter fed him during the voyage across the ocean.

### 2.2 Wada at Point Barrow

Upon Wada's arrival in San Francisco, he spent several weeks looking for work and the story goes that he went to a bar, was drugged and woke up the next morning on a whaling ship headed for the Arctic. He worked for Captain H.H. Norwood as a cabin boy for three years. The Captain reportedly taught him English and to read and write.

Wada also gained knowledge about navigation which would serve him well in his later adventures. In 1896 at the age of 21 he returned to Japan with the money he had saved from working (hunting, trading furs, driving dogsleds, etc.) and gave it to his mother. He stayed about 3 months then left for Point Barrow where he worked as a cook in the summer of 1897 on the supply vessel Jenny. Wada, the adventurous person he was, also during this period was trading furs and carrying the US mail.

Table 1: Brief chronology of Wada's life

1875	Born in a small town in Ehime Prefecture (Shikoku)
1891 (age 16)	Left home to go to America
1892 (age 17)	Sailed to San Francisco as a stowaway, and spent two winters in the Arctic
1896 (age 21)	Returned to Japan for three months
1897 (age 22)	Returned to Alaska and spent an adventurous life in and around the Arctic
1903 (age 28)	Set off the famous Tanana Stampede in Alaska
1906 (age 31)	Became the "King of the Eskimo"
1907 (age 32)	Won three marathons in Nome
1910 (age 35)	Blazed the Iditarod Trail
1914 (age 39)	Disappeared among rumors of "Spy Wada"
1921 (age 46)	Explored along the Mackenzie River area
1933 (age 58)	Lost his mother, who died at age 82
1937 (age 62)	Died in a hospital in San Diego, California

### 2.3 Wada returns to Nome

Wada reappeared in Nome in August 1906 with a group of Inupiat. The local papers called him "King Wada, the chief of the aboriginal people of Icy Point" and numerous articles about the "King of the Eskimo" appeared. Apparently Wada gained the trust and respect of the Inupiat people because he helped them obtain a fair deal on furs when the white traders tried to barter with outrageously lop-sided deals. He also saved an Inupiat community from a possible disaster when it was hit by measles and he was a great dog-musher which gained the respect of the Inupiat. His life as "King of the Eskimo" lasted only a few years because some white traders complained that he could not be the chief of the Inupiat, citing an old law which said only an Inupiat could be the chief.

On March 9, 1907, at the age of 32, without any special training, Wada participated in a 50 mile marathon held in a brand new arena in Nome. The prize money of \$500 probably



Figure 3: Jujiro Wada

Source: Alaska Magazine 1988 March



Figure 4: Jujiro won \$2,800 on June 1, 1907

Source: Jujiro Wada Memorial Association Japan

prompted him to join the race. Against all odds and expectations, he won the marathon with the time of 7 hours 39 minutes and 10 seconds. He also won the 50 mile marathon on March 30 by beating 17 competitors. He finished second in the 25 mile race on April 30 but triumphed again in the 35 mile marathon on June 1. For that race he won \$2,800. Wada's fame as a great runner spread all over Alaska.

#### 2.4 Wada in Seward

In December 1909, Wada arrived in Seward at the invitation of the town's Chamber of Commerce. His mission (along with a small group including Albert Lowell) was to "blaze" a route from Seward to the newly discovered gold mine at Iditarod. After a relatively uneventful trip to Iditarod as the leader of a fleet of dogsled teams, Wada telegraphed the Seward Chamber of Commerce on January 11, 1910, regarding the suitability of the route. He was 35 years old. The group arrived back in Seward on February 26, 1910, and was met by anxious prospectors wanting to hear about the gold strike. Many Alaskan papers praised Wada's effort and credited him with

starting the "second Tanana Stampede."

#### 2.5 Wada in Yukon-Kuskokwim

The activities of Wada, starting in January 1911 until 1915 are unclear, but there are some accounts that in early 1912, Wada was in the Yukon-Kuskokwim area, looking for a Japanese man, known locally as Allen, who had disappeared there. In July of that year, he and a partner made a gold strike on the Tuluksak River. Wada took about \$12,000 in gold (worth about \$274,000 in today's currency) with him when he went to Seattle to report the findings to his backers. When he returned later that year he brought with him two sled loads of mining equipment, another sled load of miscellaneous supplies and four Japanese companions who would serve as assistant dog drivers. The Japanese and their 20 dogs then drove to the strike on Bear Creek, a large northeast headwater tributary to the Tuluksak River, where Wada remained until February of 1913.

Then in October 1913, it was reported that Wada departed from Seattle heading for the Aniak goldfields in the Kuskokwim. Wada had secured the financial backing from E.A. McIlhenny, who was the Tabasco king of Louisiana. (Note: Wada had earlier met McIlhenny around 1897 at Pt. Barrow, where Wada was trading furs and carrying the mail.)

Sometime in 1914 or 1915 (age 39 or 40) an article appeared in the Cordova Daily Times accusing Wada of being a Japanese spy. Wada's backpack was found which apparently contained a very detailed and accurate map of Alaska with all the gold deposit sites and the routes. World War One had started and in some states anti-Japanese movements were starting so it was understandable that some might think that Wada was a "spy" based on this evidence. However, as an experienced prospector and an excellent surveyor, it was quite natural that Wada would possess a detailed map drawn by him.



Figure 5: Jujiro Wada 60 years old

Source: Jujiro Wada Memorial Association Japan

## 2.6 Wada returns for a last time to Japan then back to America

Back in his native Japan, Wada's name suddenly started to draw public attention in 1931 when he was 56. The July 2 issue of a daily newspaper ran a full, front-page story on Wada. The story of any Japanese person who had achieved something extraordinary abroad proved attractive to many Japanese readers at a time when the military was doing everything it could to build up a strong nationalistic pride. A number of letters Wada wrote to his mother included some of the photos he had taken while in the north. He almost always included a fair amount of money for his mother in these letters. One of Wada's endearing legacies was his devotion to his mother, albeit, long-distance, he continued to think of his mother's welfare and regularly communicated via letters with her.

Unfortunately, his letter dated October 11, 1934, did not reach his mother in time; she had passed away on August 15, 1933, at the age of 82. Wada did not find out about her death for over a year.

Wada died on March 5, 1937, in a hospital in San Diego, California. He was 62 years of age and had 53 cents in his pocket. He had suffered a heart attack three days earlier. Since no acquaintance was found, he was buried in an unmarked grave.

## 3. Epilogue of the Jujiro Wada story – Jujiro Wada returns to Alaska

The story of Jujiro Wada has many enduring aspects that have captured the current imagination of people in Japan, Canada as well as Alaska. Jujiro Wada was a prospector, blazer of the Iditarod Trail, a wanderer who literally traveled to all parts of Alaska and western Canada – over 45,000 miles by dogsled by some estimates.

It is now 100+ years since Jujiro Wada's initial treks, virtually crisscrossing Alaska's Seward Peninsula to Dawson City, Yukon Territory. To recognize and celebrate the life and times of Jujiro Wada, memorial groups have organized in Japan, Alaska and the Yukon Territory. At Mile "0" of the Iditarod Trail in the City of Seward, the Nome Chamber and Tourism Bureau, along with the Alaska Jujiro Wada Memorial Association and others, held a re-enactment of the Wada-Lowell Historic blazing of the Iditarod Trail on Labor Day September 6, 2010. It was broadcast by the Alaska Sealife Center to Japan, Canada and statewide in Alaska.

Other celebrations have occurred including the Fairbanks, Wasilla and Knik have all had formal programs recognizing the extraordinary contributions of Jujiro Wada's life and times in Alaska. Additionally, the story of Jujiro Wada, due to the efforts of the Jujiro Wada Legacy Project, is now being recognized by the Alaska State Library Historical Collections.

Of special interest is on May 1, 2015, the Asian Alaskan Cultural Center, in cooperation with the Japanese Society of Alaska and several other organizations and sponsors, will host the US premier of the musical program "Chasing the Aurora –

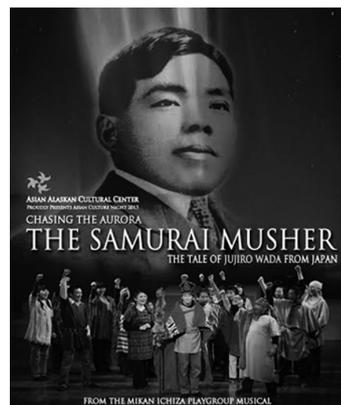


Figure 6: Musical "The Samurai Musher" – The Tale of Jujiro Wada from Japan 2015

Source: Asian Alaskan Cultural Center 2013

"The Samurai Musher: the Tale of Jujiro Wada from Japan". This program will occur at the Anchorage Performing Arts Center and will feature the Mikan Ichiza Playgroup Musical from Matsuyama, Japan. Part of this program will involve tours/visits by the Mikan Ichiza Playgroup, in addition to Anchorage, will include visits to the Alaska communities of Seward, Wasilla, Knik and Fairbanks

### Notes

Participating Members of the Alaska Jujiro Wada Legacy Project include: Edgar Blatchford, UAA School of Journalism and Public Communications, Steve Wang, UAA Project Management Program, Hiroyuki Matsuura, Taisei Gakuin University, Osaka, Japan, Fumi Torigai, Whitehorse Canada, Tony Nakazawa, UAF Cooperative Extension Service, Jim Sinnett, Executive Director of the Alaska Jujiro Wada Memorial Committee and David Walberg, Alaska Japan LABO 4-H Volunteer Assistant Coordinator.

### Acknowledgements

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We are very grateful for the many contributions of Dr. S Akasofu on helping us understand the contributions of Jujiro Wada to Pioneer Alaska. Thank you Dr. Akasofu.

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