

# 元年者 | GANNENMONO

## A Promise of Adventure

*The little-known story of the man who smuggled the first group of Japanese citizens to Hawaii*

By Kristen Nemoto Jay

The history of Hawaii's Gannenmono—recorded as the first group of Japanese to migrate to Hawaii—is filled with so many stories, it's nearly impossible to cover them all. From the economic success of their work in the sugar plantation fields to the immense influence of Japanese culture in Hawaii, the Gannenmono have staked their place in Hawaii's history and will be remembered for generations to come.

It is interesting to note, though, that the inspiring tale of the Gannenmono is one that begins as a story of greed, deception, and the ambitions of one man in particular: Eugene Van Reed. "[Van Reed] is an important factor in the history of the Gannenmono's arrival to the islands," said Dr. Mark T. McNally, a professor of history at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa who specializes in Japan's Edo period. "There were rumors though in Yokohama that he was connected to the slave trade...so there were lots being written [about him] in the newspaper rumor mill."

Rewind a couple years prior to the Gannenmono's arrival in the islands: Van Reed was a U.S. imports-and-exports merchant in Yokohama, Japan. The year was 1866 and the *sakoku* policy, which forbade Japanese people from leaving the country and also forbade foreigners from visiting Japan, had been lifted for the Japanese.

Robert Crichton Wyllie, a minister of foreign affairs in Hawaii, sought out Van Reed and asked him in a letter to recruit agricultural laborers in Japan for the

Kingdom of Hawaii. Soon after Wyllie's death Van Reed would go on to work with Wyllie's successor and became resident consul for the Kingdom of Hawaii, and he was tasked with sending the first Japanese laborers to work in the ever-growing Hawaii sugarcane fields.

In the fall of 1867, recruitment ads made by Van Reed that promised "wealth" and "adventure" in the islands attracted hundreds of Japanese applicants, many of whom were second-born sons, looking for a chance to make their own way in the world. Van Reed was able to recruit and secure travel documents from the Edo shogunate for roughly 350 Japanese subjects. But just as he was able to bring the total number of recruits down to 180, so that they could fit aboard the 800-ton ship called the *Scioto* and set sail, the Edo shogunate was overthrown and the government changed, as part of the Meiji Restoration.

In order to keep a civil rapport with the new government, Van Reed presented his project to the Meiji authorities and

requested that his recruits be issued new passports. However, to his surprise, the new Japanese government rejected his request. The ostensible reason for the rejection was that the new government had no treaty of amity and commerce with the Kingdom of Hawaii—but the unspoken reason had to do with rumors circulating in Yokohama that Van Reed was connected to the slave trade.

A particular incident that triggered such rumors was a deal Van Reed had made the previous year for a young Japanese student named Takahashi Korekiyo. Takahashi was the adopted son of a samurai, studied English and American culture in a private school in Yokohama, and would later grow up to become the 20<sup>th</sup> prime minister of Japan. When the *sakoku* policy was lifted, Takahashi's family got in touch with Van Reed and set up an arrangement for their son to study abroad in America and stay with Van Reed's parents in San Francisco. However, between the time of Takahashi's departure from Japan and his arrival in

San Francisco, the money he was carrying, which was intended to be used to pay his hosts in San Francisco, disappeared. Van Reed's parents, who were expecting payment for allowing Takahashi to stay with them, ended up selling the boy to a vineyard in Oakland, where he spent the next year of his life as an indentured servant. "No one knows what happened to his money," said McNally. "But a lot of people speculated that Van Reed had something to do with it."

After the resident consul of Japan in San Francisco helped Takahashi raise money and return back to Japan, Takahashi informed his family and friends of his experience with Van Reed. By that time, the Gannenmono were just about to board the *Scioto* and head out on the "adventure" they had been promised.

Literally out of time and money, Van Reed disobeyed the courts and instructed the Gannenmono (whose numbers had by now been reduced to 150), all of whom were unaware of the now-illicit nature of Van Reed's orders, to board the *Scioto* and begin their journey in the early morning of May 16<sup>th</sup>, 1868.

Cut to a couple of months after their arrival to the islands—the Gannenmono were not adjusting well to their new employment. They reported "slave-like" conditions with long working hours and virtually no breaks, all for a wage of four

dollars a month, which amounted to even less than expected, as the cost of living in Hawaii was much higher than they had expected. When the Japanese authorities got word of their mistreatment, in the fall of 1869 they sent Ueno Keisuke (later known as Ueno Kagenori) and Miwa Hoichi to investigate their people's living and working conditions.

When Ueno and Miwa reached Honolulu and interviewed the

Gannenmono, however, they were surprised to learn that a majority of them were willing to stay and finish their contracts. After a few days of negotiations, Ueno came to an agreement with the Kingdom of Hawaii. The Japanese government would pardon the illegal transport of their citizens if the Hawaiian government agreed to improve working conditions and allow those who wished to return to Japan to leave immediately.

Because of Van Reed's actions and all that ensued from them, Japan's government did not support another round of recruitment to the islands for the next 17 years. It was the Gannenmono's

own success in their new home that made it possible for immigration from Japan to resume in 1885, despite its rocky start with Van Reed.

Unfortunately, not much is known about Van Reed and his true intentions for the Gannenmono other than what was recorded in Japanese texts and writings. McNally says there was a bit of karmic retribution that followed Van Reed's illegal shipment of the Gannenmono, as his last breath was drawn after suffering from tuberculosis while on board a ship that was en route back to San Francisco in February 1873. He was only 38 years old.

As 2018 marks the 150<sup>th</sup> year since they set foot along the shoreline of Honolulu, the Gannenmono continue to inspire and exemplify stories of hard work and determination. The Gannenmono's time on the islands paved the way for those Japanese immigrants who would come to be known as the Issei (first generation). The Issei, in turn, preceded the Nisei (second generation), and they went on to excel in local family businesses and also form the United States' most highly decorated military unit during their service in World War II. Van Reed may have helped the Gannenmono get to the Hawaiian Islands, but he didn't contribute to the overall success of their time spent working and living. It was the Gannenmono's own resilience and perseverance that has carved out their place in history and ensured that they always be remembered. 終

*Don't miss the last article in our three-part series on the history of the Gannenmono in the next issue of Wasabi.*

(Opposite page)

A depiction of the *Scioto* (watercolor by Tom Tomita)

(Top to bottom)

Plantation worker (watercolor by Tom Tomita)

Dr. Mark McNally

All artwork courtesy of Tom Tomita

Do you know of any interesting stories related to Japanese establishments? Or perhaps you have a great family story you'd like to share. If so, then send us an email at [mail@readwasabi.com](mailto:mail@readwasabi.com)