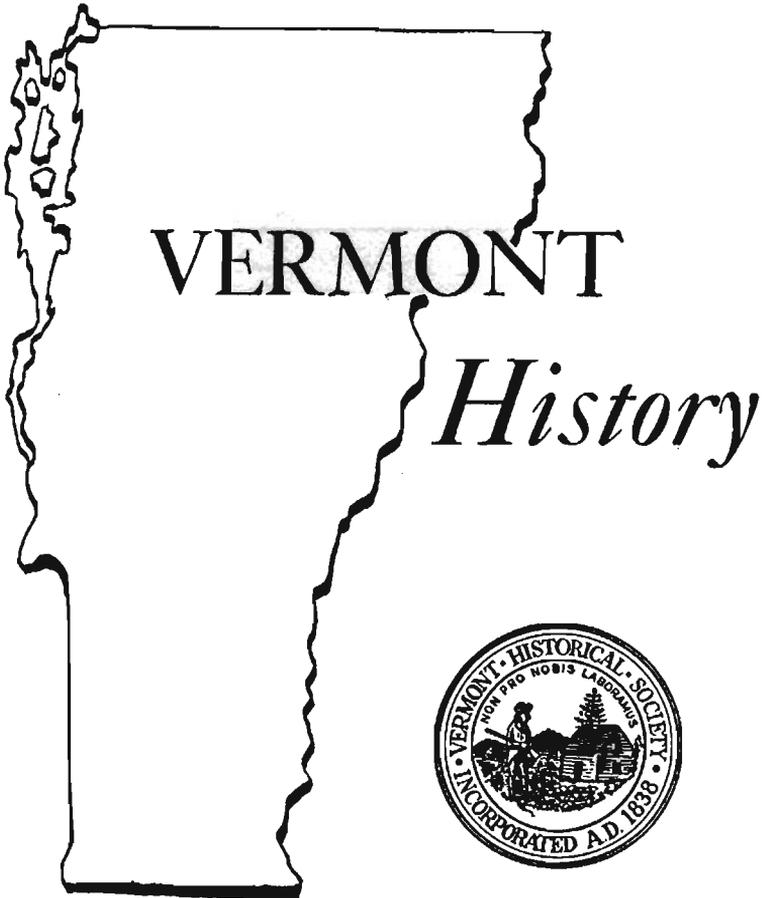


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Frederick Billings, the famous railroad builder from Woodstock, made it possible for Sho Nemoto to attend the University of Vermont . . .

The World is Becoming a Single Room: Sho Nemoto's Years in Vermont and Japan

By BETTY BANDEL

IN July 1969 a group of devoted people travelled to the village of Mito, north of Tokyo near the coast of Japan, to place offerings of sake, fruits, vegetables, and sweets before the statue of a man who at one time called Vermont "home." The Shinto priest who bowed before the statue as it was unveiled saw to it that the proper bamboo shoots and white papers were put there to purify the place.

This gesture, in the present ecumenical age, would very likely have seemed quite proper, if also ironic, to the man whose bust had just been placed in front of the railroad station of his home town. The man—Sho Nemoto (1850–1933), graduate of the University of Vermont in 1889, member of the Japanese Diet (House of Representatives) from 1898 to 1924—travelled half around the world to attend a small New England college because, as a convert to Christianity, he found Christian missionaries and other friends eager to speed him on his way to a higher education in their Christian homeland.

In 1969, more than eighty years after Nemoto became an ardent if temporary Vermonter, his great-granddaughter unveiled his statue, to the accompaniment of proper Shinto rites, while Nemoto's daughter, Mrs. Sukekiyo Sumiya, and his grandchildren looked on with pride and approval. One of the grandchildren, Mr. and Mrs. Sumiya's son,

Kiyoshi Sumiya, is now Counsellor at the Japanese Embassy in Ottawa, Canada.

The story of the intertwining of Nemoto with Vermont, and of two distant cultures, is a reminder that the Peace Corps and a student exchange program are merely new names for old practices—at least where Vermonters are concerned. In December of 1888, a few months before his graduation, Nemoto wrote, “The world is gradually becoming a single room.” Thirty years later, in 1918, making one of his usual generous contributions to the University of Vermont Alumni Fund, and answering a query from the university’s alumni office for information regarding himself, he wrote in the blank provided for “war work”: “No war work. Peace only.”

It was a well known Vermonter, Frederick Billings of Woodstock, who made it possible for this able and in the end distinguished worker for peace and prosperity to win his bachelor’s degree at the University of Vermont. Billings, himself a UVM graduate in the class of 1844, had so prospered as a lawyer in San Francisco and as builder and president of the Northern Pacific Railway, that he was able to build not only a church in the city named for him, Billings, Montana, but also a splendid library (now Billings Student Center) at his old college in Vermont. Nemoto, sent by missionaries in Japan to San Francisco in 1879, met Alfred Barstow of Oakland, secretary of the Society of California Pioneers; and it was Mr. Barstow who introduced the aspiring young Japanese to Billings. When failing health drew Billings back from California to his homes in Woodstock and New York, what more natural than that he should guide his “Japanese youth” to the college in Burlington? And what more characteristic of Vermont than that Billings should make Nemoto a member of his household in Woodstock during summer holidays throughout Nemoto’s student years?

In gratitude to his old patron and to his college, Nemoto in 1895 had “the best Imperial artist in Japan,” Mr. U. Okuma, execute a bronze bust of Billings which, thanks to the tenacious way that art has of looking like itself, has the slanting almond eyes of an oriental because the sculptor was oriental. Generations of UVM students have been fascinated by these oriental eyes looking down from the bust placed in a niche above the main desk at Billings Library—especially if they have compared the bust to portraits of Billings which show him to have been as round-eyed as New Englanders of Yankee stock persist in being. Yet to Mr. Nemoto, looking with his own oriental eyes upon the bust, “the likeness is as exact as when [Mr. Billings] said to me, ‘I wish you to be useful in Japan.’”

Useful to Japan Nemoto most certainly was, as his handsome portrait now hanging in the Japanese House of Representatives attests. The portrait shows, around Nemoto's collar, the ribbon and medal of the Order of the Rising Sun, awarded to Japanese who have given distinguished service to their country.

If you should wish to examine the whole record of Nemoto's service, an article by Theresa O. Weiss in the June 1940 issue of *The Vermont Alumnus* gives full details. Or if you should consult Nemoto's own *In Memoriam—Frederick Billings*, published in Tokyo in 1930 (a copy is in the University of Vermont's Wilbur collection in Bailey Library), there are many details, fortunately in English as well as in Japanese—but remember to start at the back rather than the front.



Sho Nemoto
Class of 1889, University of Vermont

In 1922, according to these sources, the Japanese Diet passed a Juvenile Alcohol Act which prohibited the use of alcohol by minors—and Sho Nemoto had introduced the bill every year for twenty-three years in order to secure its passage. He was also author of a bill prohibiting the smoking of tobacco by minors (passed in 1900), the nation free education law (passed in 1900), and several other acts which furthered the cause of education. His championing of the development

of railroads—perhaps inspired by what he saw Billings do for railroads in America—was also reflected in several Japanese laws. It is probably this one of his many interests which accounts for the fact that his fellow townsmen chose to place his statue beside their railroad station. The first statue was destroyed in World War II, and the one dedicated in July, 1969, replaced that earlier memorial.

In this day of cancer research and the discovery that certain drugs are less habit-forming than alcohol, Nemoto's ideas do not seem as quaint as they might have a decade ago. His interest in temperance and abstinence from tobacco may have stemmed from the brand of evangelical Christianity which he espoused early in life. He had seen Dwight Moody, the evangelist of Moody and Sankey fame, as an honored visitor at the Billings house in Woodstock.

Certain of Nemoto's accomplishments, however, seem less a result of evangelical Christianity than they do of college days in that hub of Yankee ingenuity, Vermont. The quotation given earlier, "The world is gradually becoming a single room," is from the preface to a book, *A New and Practical Vocabulary and Conversations of the English, French, German and Japanese Languages in Parallel Columns*, published in Tokyo in 1889, the year of Nemoto's graduation from UVM. This booklet, a copy of which is in the Wilbur collection, offers a practical, immediate aid to the tourist or student who would like to land in Tokyo, Paris, Berlin, or New York without feeling suddenly tongue-tied. In the preface Nemoto remarks, "The many families of mankind are being reduced to one by means of an easy communication by telegraph, railroad, steamboat and other methods." To Nemoto, who was thirty-five before he could enter college, and who had made the money for his preliminary education in English while he was a young man in Tokyo by drawing a jinrikisha at night, these marvels of modern communication never ceased to be marvels. He mentions several times the fact that Billings sent for him to travel three hundred miles to the New York Billings residence for Thanksgiving dinner, and that his graduation present from Billings was a trip around the world.

After that magic trip Nemoto returned to Japan, where almost immediately the Emperor made him a special commissioner of commerce and industry to investigate and report on the economic conditions of Central and South America, of Mexico and the United States, and even of India. He visited Mexico in 1894, Brazil in 1895, Central America and the United States in 1899; and when he returned to Japan his reports instructed modern Japanese regarding the ways of the occidental world.

Since, as he tells us, "the best hours I have spent in my life were when I was in the University, and the happiest days I enjoy now, are all due to the University," it is not surprising that he remembered his old school even after marriage, the cares of a large family, the ownership of much property in Tokyo, and his legislative and other governmental activities occupied much of his time. He sent his former classmates fine wood-cut paintings. In 1969 his daughter Mrs. Sumiya wrote: "I remember he corresponded with his classmates whom he loved so much and to whom he sent the pressed morning-glory which he made himself. He deeply wished to visit the States again at his last years. I never forget the sweet taste of the maple syrup cakes his friend sent us."

Near the close of his life Nemoto himself wrote, "I live at the south end of the city near the Yedo Bay where I can get the sweet and fresh air coming swiftly from the UVM through Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Ocean." For Nemoto, at least, the world had become a single room.

How They Cured Mary Ann of Her Nightly Death Wish:

"An old man had a poor, cranky bit of a wife, who regularly once a week got up in the night and invited the family to see her die. She gave away her things, spoke her last words, made her peace with Heaven, and then about eight she got up in the usual way and disappointed everybody by going at her household duties as if nothing had happened. The old man got sick of it finally, and went out and got a coffin, with 'Farewell, Mary Ann' worked in, and a handful of silver-plated screws. Laying the screwdriver beside the collection, he invited her to holler die once more. 'Do it,' said he, 'and in you go, and this farewell business is over.' Mary Ann is at this moment baking buckwheat cakes for a large and admiring family, while they dry apples in the coffin up in the garret."

—*Vermont Watchman and State Journal (Montpelier)*
Wednesday, December 23, 1874.