

Seat Sale

Japan via Sackville

by Mariève MacGREGOR

Yay! We're in Memramcook! No wait ... we don't wanna go to Memramcook! Our destination on this clear, crisp morn is Sackville.- So backtracking, we get to Sackville, and stop at the local MacDonald's for a washroom break/disgruntled look at the map. Our travellers include Sensei Nakagawa, Horace Yeung from Hong Kong, Sok Ngee Ng and Sharron Sio Khuan from Malaysia, Charlie and Tina Dowling, Kathy Lynn Campbell, Alex Carr, and me. Our purpose? The Fourth Atlantic Canada Japanese Language Speech Contest!

Hosted, organized, and paid for by Mount Allison University, the speech contest had the biggest turn out yet, with twenty-one entrants. Kathy, Sok Ngee, Horace, and I were among the sixteen beginners, and Alex was the only contestant in the advanced level. Don't get me wrong; he did really great, and had there been other people in his category he surely would have kicked their asses. The other contestants, however, were up against twelve contestants from UNB, MTA, and SMU.

Despite getting lost a second time and driving around Sackville to everywhere but the campus, we were first to arrive. It only took asking three groups of pedestrians to get us there. So finally, we enter Truman House, Tweedie Hall. Tweedie is an odd name for such a grand hall, for upon entering, we were all in awe. Thick burgundy carpet ran up the middle aisle to the podium, with a crest and scripture reading "Litterae Religio Scientia." Chairs were aligned on either side of the room in perfect rows. At the head of the room, towering over and demanding attention, stood a mural of who-knows-what. Something historic and importantly symbolic, I'm sure. The podium became tiny in front of the monstrous artwork, but held a tinge of fear for all who were to approach it. On the left hung the flag of Japan, on the right the flag of



Canada. (If you look from the Japanese one to the Canadian one really fast, it looks like the red dot is exploding. Just an observation.)

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While waiting for the other schools to join us, we sat down to eat lunch. Sensei had woken up at 6 am that morning, and made sandwiches, boiled eggs, and rice balls wrapped in seaweed for everyone. Slowly, the room filled with sorta-Japanese-speaking to really-Japanese-speaking people. The Japanese prof. of Mount A., Miyako Oe, emceed the event. The judging panel consisted of Erik Gingles, freelance writer/ broadcaster; Mr. Tetsuo Shioguchi, Consul General of Japan at Montreal; Dr. Haruo Konishi, retired prof from UNB; Mr. Yoshiharu Kashio, Rep. From Japan Fisheries Association in Halifax; and

Makiko Warren, Consultant, MY Planning, and the only female on the panel. They truly added to the formality of it all. "This is a wonderful turn out," said Mr Kashio. "I'm very pleased to see such numbers. Hopefully we can double the number of people next year."

Everyone had their flub ups and jittery nerves, me included. It was tough, I kid you not. Sok Ngee was a shoe-in for first place in the beginner category. Her speech about her love of the Japanese language was excellent, well spoken, and impressively presented. Kathy was adorable. As she approached the podium she bowed to both the judges and the audience. Her speech was well annunciated, and her topic entitled, "Knowledge, The Window to Peace," was very interesting. Horace did pretty well, too. I thought he had a chance of winning something. Alex was charming and funny and witty. As far as I know. I didn't quite understand everything, but you soon learn to laugh when others laugh.

I refuse to discuss my speech. The three intermediate stu-

dents were by far more advanced than we were. I was scared. So were Kathy and Sok Ngee, I believe. Also in attendance were many Japanese people. According to Alex Carr (the one and only advanced contestant), speech contests are huge in Japan.

So, the speeches, which were supposed to end at 3:30, ended at 4:00pm. The judges, who were supposed to take a half-hour to decide, took one hour and ten minutes. This allowed some leeway to go exploring. Across the street was an exhibit in the art gallery by Baco Ohama, an artist from Vancouver. We entered the gallery, and proceeded up the stairs, where a quote from the artist was displayed on the wall: "A taste that lingers unfinished in the mouth." Here I will avoid describing the odd sight that was supposed to be art, and leave you with a quote from Alex, "It's just a weird, weird thing." Right. Sign the guest book, and back away slowly.

After a leisurely walk around the gorgeous campus, we returned to Tweedie hall. Kathy came in third, and all were pleased to see Sok Ngee win first place. Prizes of Japanese dictionaries, mouse pads, and chop sticks were awarded, and everyone proceeded to a remote basement room for free mini-sandwiches, sweets, and coffee. Ii desune. In April, Sok Ngee Ng and Alex Carr will be going to Toronto for the grand contest, going against the winners from Quebec, Ontario, Alberta, B.C. and the North.

The drive home was even more fun, as we ended up lost in Nova Scotia, driving through Amherst, following an unofficial hand made "This way to PEI" sign, and drove in the pitch black down many a back road in the sticks. It only took three hours to get home and two boxes of Timbits. But that doesn't matter. What does matter is that we killed the other Maritime universities at that contest, and despite not understanding much, we felt important just being there.