

OFFBEAT OREGON

The opium smuggler's foster son

Editor's note: This is the first in a multi-part series about Yosuke "Frank" Matsuoka.

BY FINN J.D. JOHN

It may be true that the movement of a butterfly's wings on one side of the world can seed a tornado on the other.

But whether that's literally true or not, it certainly is figuratively true. And nowhere is it better demonstrated than in the case of 1890s businessman and opium smuggler William Dunbar of Portland.

If we could take Dunbar out of the stream of history before about 1890, we would derail events that led directly to Imperial Japan's alliance with Nazi Germany in 1940; to Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor the following year; to the nuclear bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki in 1945; and (maybe) to the fact that the world did not end in a multi-gigaton thermonuclear fireball in late October 1962.

All this because, decades earlier, an incompetent but politically well-connected drug smuggler in tiny, faraway Portland had taken a young Japanese boy into his household as a companion for his 14-year-old son.

That little boy's name was Yosuke "Frank" Matsuoka, and he would grow up to be foreign minister of Imperial Japan and the chief architect of the Tripartite Pact with Germany and Italy.

Yosuke Matsuoka was born in 1880 in the village of Morozumi in Yamaguchi Prefecture. He was a son of a local shipping company owner. When he was very young, his father's business collapsed into bankruptcy after one of his ships sank, and his father died a broken man within a few years. Matsuoka spent most of his preteen years with his widowed mother in proud poverty.

In 1891, Matsuoka's mother reluctantly agreed to let him venture overseas to do what he could to restore the family's fortunes. So on Feb. 23, 1893, following some crash course English instruction, Matsuoka boarded the steamship Tacoma in Kobe, bound for Victoria, British Columbia.

And about a month after he arrived, Matsuoka joined the Dunbar household.

William Dunbar was a wealthy widower, owner of Dunbar Produce and Grocery and Turner Flouring Mills, and co-owner of the Merchants Steamship Company. He had, by the way, been the first wheat merchant to open the trade in Oregon-grown soft white winter wheat with noodle manufacturers in China.

He was also a drug smuggler.

Under the cover of his political connections with the Port of Portland's chief customs inspector, James Lotan, he ran an industrial-scale operation smuggling opium and illegal immigrants (mostly Chinese laborers) into British Columbia and then into Portland. He owned two full-size steamships, the Wilmington and the Haytian Republic, operating out of the Dunbar Produce and Grocery wharf just north of the Burnside Bridge in Portland's old North End.

The steamships brought in groceries and produce from Vancouver for sale through Dunbar's wholesale grocery business. Of course, they also carried shipments of Turner Mills wheat to customers in China. But after those ships had unloaded their cargo in Shanghai or Hong Kong, it must have seemed a real shame to just have them steam on back home empty. So on the return trips, Dunbar's steamers took on passengers. Lots of passengers, most of them Chinese workers who each paid \$125 to be smuggled into the United States.

And, of course, the ships also brought back opium by the ton. At one point they were supplying the entire West Coast with the stuff.

The Wilmington and the Haytian Republic kept this trade up for several years, starting in 1890 or so. By 1893, when Matsuoka came on the scene, their operations were an open secret on the waterfront. Everyone pretty



Yosuke Matsuoka turns on the charm with Nazi officials Hans Lammers, Wilhelm Keitel, and Georg von Stahmer at the Japanese embassy in Berlin on March 28, 1941. This was one of several trips Matsuoka made to Berlin as foreign minister to meet with Hitler and other Nazis.



A newspaper drawing from the Portland Morning Oregonian published during the December 1893 trial of William Dunbar and his associates on opium smuggling charges. Coblenz was one of the customs inspectors working under James Lotan.



Yosuke Matsuoka was on the cover of Time Magazine for the July 7, 1941, issue.

much knew what they were doing. They had started unloading the passengers at sea onto small boats, and rolling the barrels full of opium overboard in a secluded stretch of the river before coming into port, to avoid being caught by the immigration and customs inspectors, who were among their first visitors when they arrived.

This, then, was the "family business" that Matsuoka joined as a 12-year-old boy.

A gregarious and outgoing lad with a rapidly increasing fluency in English, he must have gotten to know many of Old Man Dunbar's sketchy business associates, including notorious shanghaier Joseph "Bunco" Kelley and flamboyant Merchants Steamship co-owner Nat Blum. He also probably learned a great deal about the opium trade. Opium, at the time, was legal, but taxed very heavily.

It was an idyllic life for Matsuoka, but it couldn't last. Dunbar's smuggling operations were too flagrant, and the underworld characters he had working for him were too unreliable. In December 1893, the boom came down.

Fifteen people were arrested on smuggling and human-traf-

Sources

Agony of Choice: Matsuoka Yosuke and the Rise and Fall of the Japanese Empire, 1880-1946, a book by David J. Lu published in 2002 by Lexington Books; "Yosuke Matsuoka: The Far-Western Roots of a World-Political Vision," an article by Masaharu Ano published in the Summer 1997 issue of Oregon Historical Quarterly; "Americans Rate Canada, Britain, France, Japan Most Favorably," an article by Megan Brenan published on news.gallup.com on March 14, 2022

ficking charges, including Dunbar and chief Port of Portland customs inspector James Lotan. Lotan, in addition to being customs inspector, was a very prominent member of Portland's business elite and was the president of the Oregon Republican Party. His presence in the trial guaranteed a lot of media coverage.

In 1898, Matsuoka enrolled in the University of Oregon, pursuing an undergraduate degree in law. After graduation, he spent some time trying to get admitted to an Ivy League graduate law school back east. If he'd been left to his own devices, he probably would have succeeded. But back in Japan his mother's health was declining fast. So in 1902, he decided it was time to return to his native land.

We'll talk about Matsuoka's early career in Japan in the next of this three-part series.

■ Finn J.D. John teaches at Oregon State University and writes about odd tidbits of Oregon history. His book, *Heroes and Rascals of Old Oregon*, was recently published by Ouragan House Publishers. To contact him or suggest a topic: finn@offbeatoregon.com or 541-357-2222.



An illustration of a group of smugglers bringing opium and illegal Chinese immigrants into Oregon, from a 1889 issue of Portland-based magazine The West Shore.

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102 Public Notices

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Probate Department
In the Matter of the Estate of **THOMAS S. PARKS**, Deceased
Case No. 21PB10813
NOTICE TO INTERESTED PERSONS
Notice is hereby given that Melissa Ward has been appointed as the personal representative of said estate. All persons having claims against the estate are required to present them to the undersigned attorney for the personal representative at 530 Center St NE, Suite 730, Salem, OR 97301, within four months

102 Public Notices

after the date of first publication of this notice, or the claims may be barred.
All persons whose rights may be affected by the proceedings may obtain information from the records of the Court, the personal representative, or the attorney for the personal representative.
Dated and first published on November 12, 2022.
Melissa Ward
Personal Representative
ATTORNEY FOR PERSONAL REPRESENTATIVE
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Puzzle Solutions

Guess Who?

Answer: Tina Turner

WORD SCRAMBLE

Answer: Blood

SUDOKU

6	5	1	3	7	4	8	2	9
7	4	8	2	6	9	3	1	5
2	3	9	8	1	5	7	4	6
8	9	2	7	4	1	6	5	3
4	6	5	9	3	2	1	8	7
3	1	7	5	8	6	2	9	4
5	8	4	6	2	3	9	7	1
1	2	3	4	9	7	5	6	8
9	7	6	1	5	8	4	3	2

WORD SEARCH

M P R I P Y M C Y T M N M C B F E E T S P
 V R Y A R Y C K N V K A A C Y E L F K A T
 T O L T D E D E F R A T A H C O C V U A
 I D I S T O M G B I M R G C S R F N S R
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 Y D R H E K L O F O I O M H D F B E A E
 V P C V U K L B N O P T N T A E N A I G
 D G D P S T D R U L I N S U L I N E U D
 S A N E R V E S R B O O G L U C O S E T

CRYPTO FUN

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 A B C D E F G H I J K L M N O P Q R S T U V W X Y Z

Answers: A. glucose B. insulin C. levels D. diet