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Alice Murata

Northeastern Illinois University

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120 Years Since Fujita's Birth

by Alice Murata

Chicago is a rich source of interest for Japanese scholars. From August 8 to 30, Dr. Hiromichi Yamashiro, History Professor at Hiroshima University accompanied Mr. Naoki Tahara, writer for the Chugoku Shimbun to study Jun Fujita, a well known Chicago photographer and Tanka poet writer. I asked if there was a special reason for studying him now, and Yamashiro replied no. This is however, 120 years since Fujita's birth and a special reason to remember him. They attempted to trace Fujita's life by going to the places he lived, attended school, worked, and played.

Fujita was born in Hiroshima on December 13, 1888. At the age of 16, he fell in love with his Tokio High School teacher. The love note he wrote to her became public. Scandalized, he came to America thinking people here worked one hour a day and played the rest of the time. His uncle commissioned him to photograph the Canadian fishing and lumber industries. Fujita remained in Canada working as a construction worker, domestic, train porter, and valet. When he had sufficient money to leave Canada he wanted to fulfill his dreams of Utopia and choose Chicago as his destination.

After Fujita graduated from Phillips High



Fireman rescuing a child in the Eastland Disaster, 1915. Photographer, Jun Fujita 1919. Courtesy of Chicago History Museum.

School, he decided to become a movie star. Being told he had a future in movies, Fujita worked for the Essanay Company. From minor parts he rose to a leading role in the thriller, *Otherwise Bill Harrison*. Unable to make the money he wanted in films, he became a photographer for the Chicago Evening Post.

Fujita attended Armour Institute studying mathematics and paying for tuition by doing photography. We visited Armour and saw 1893 engraved on the building. This is the year it opened. It merged in 1940 with Lewis Institute of Design and in 1949 became a part of Illinois Institute of Technology (IIT).

Fujita worked as a photographer to make a living but considered it "not a medium, or, at the best, a very poor medium for artistic expression. Never can a camera be inspired. If the plate catches and perpetuates a truly artistic thing, it is a mere accident."

Photography was not an easy job. The equipment was heavy to take to sites. Fujita said he often was the only photographer for his paper while other papers had two or three men on the same story. "I had a harder time getting around because I have no automobile and must rely on L trains and taxis." Nitrate negatives are dangerous and require special handling and separate storage.

Called Togo by his colleagues, Fujita took photos of football games and situations like the Leopold Loeb court case. He took photographs of famous celebrities as their train stopped in Chicago. Fujita liked "Theodore Roosevelt the best" because "He was the most human and democratic celebrity I ever photographed." and considered Hoover as "always nice, before he became President." He is most known for covering dangerous and violent historical Chicago situations such as the Eastland boat disaster, the race riots of 1919, and the St. Valentine's Day Massacre.

Extensive photographs documenting the Eastland disaster were taken by Fujita for the Chicago Daily news. This excursion boat was built in 1903. On July 21, 1915 the capacity of the boat was increased from 2183 to 2570. July 24th was the first time the new capacity was employed. It made the boat top heavy and capsized claiming 812 lives. Fujita's most dramatic photo is the image of a rescue work carrying a child. Fujita

of the drowning multitude." Fujita's images are powerful because he was able to convey emotions through his photographs.

Most memorable in Fujita's collection is his photos of the race riot in 1919. During World War I, the city lacked workers and tens of thousands of African Americans came to Chicago from southern states such as Mississippi, Alabama, Tennessee, and Georgia in what was called the Great Migration in search of work and freedom. They were forced to live in overcrowded neighborhoods in what was called the Black Belt, and now known as Bronzeville. Blacks faced racial prejudice, discrimination, and hostility from whites. Segregation existed.

The July 27th incident that started the race riot was when a black teenager, Eugene Williams crossed an imaginary line at the 29th Street Beach separating the races. A white man hurled a rock that hit Williams on the head causing him to drown to death. Fujita took a photo of the very huge gathering crowd on the beach. Police then arrested and fatally shot a black man causing the crowds to riot.

Fujita captured images of blacks forced to move from around 35th and State Streets, (now the south border of IIT) but also made a series of photos he called "The Kill." The first photo is of an angry white mob chasing and throwing stones and bricks at a black man and the final photo shows him lying on the ground dead. The violence and anger are captured of whites participating in horrifying actions. At the end on August 3rd, there were 38 deaths, 500 injuries, and a million dollars worth of property damage. The police were ineffective and the state militia was called to end the violence. For a gentle person such as Fujita, these must have been unbelievably terrible actions of man against man. Others witnessed these events but turned away. Only Fujita choose to reveal the truth by documenting these events through his photographs.

to be continued...



Next to the last photo in "The Kill" series which began with the stoning of a black man by a white mob. In the final frame, the man is dead as police look at his body. Photographer, Jun Fujita 1919. Courtesy of Chicago History Museum.

wrote that he wanted to capture the "horror on the face and terror in the eyes of the fireman. His fixed stare reveals the agony of struggle he witnessed, the torture and anguish

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