



Seymour, Indiana, Isn't Saying Sayonara To Its V-J Day Bash

* * *

This, Though the Japanese
Are Big Employers There;
Pride and Little Prejudice

By **Jesse Pesta**

Staff Reporter of The Wall Street Journal

Page One, Aug. 12, 1994

SEYMOUR, Ind.—The Japanese staged a friendly invasion of this quiet Midwestern town in the past eight years, bringing with them industry and more than a thousand jobs. About 25 Japanese families have settled in comfortably.

Consider Takao Furuhashi, chief purchasing coordinator at Aisin USA Manufacturing Inc., an auto-

parts maker and one of three Japanese enterprises here. He plays golf at the Elks Club, and his wife sells origami for charity at the Oktoberfest, one of the town's two biggest annual celebrations.

Mr. Furuhashi has been to Seymour's other festival, too. Last year he took his young family—a son, six years old, and a daughter, two—and he promises to attend it again this Sunday.

The irony is that this weekend's festivities mark V-J Day—V-J being short for Victory over Japan. Seymour is one of a handful of U.S. towns that continue to celebrate Japan's surrender in World War II. It is probably the only one in which a Japanese industrial presence played such a big role in reversing local fortunes.

Mr. Furuhashi shrugs. "It's a parade, it's a festival. The war was 50 years ago and I am in a young generation."

Indeed, times change, the world changes, and a global economy carries opportunity to peculiar shores. In the early 1980s, Seymour certainly presented a murky shoal to commerce. A lingering farm recession pushed unemployment to 14%. A former mayor of the town, which lies an hour south of Indianapolis, was in jail for accepting bribes and the town boasted a Superfund waste site. Downtown's bumpy grade crossings and abandoned silos provided a forlorn backdrop for music videos by rock star John Mellencamp, a Seymour native.

Faced with this, some forward thinkers undertook to lure investment from outside. They put together incentives and showcased an educated work force and easy access to Interstate 65.

Aisin was the first of the Japanese firms to consider Seymour, and it knew about the parade. Indeed, its executives asked outright if they would be accepted by the community. "I told them no," says Jim Plump, director of the local development group. They would be accepted by most, he quickly added, but not by everyone—just as it would be for a U.S. firm in Japan.

It is at such moments that “your career can flash in front of you,” says Mr. Plump, who is slim. But his unorthodox sales pitch worked. Now, nearly a decade later, downtown is spruced up with brick sidewalks and fluttering awnings. The hospital and a historic library have expanded, and Mr. Mellencamp has donated a house for an arts center. Seymour is enjoying a renaissance.

It still enjoys V-J Day, too. About 135 entries will parade through town. There will be four marching bands, Shriners in pint-sized hot rods, a living Statue of Liberty—and Seymour’s congressman, Lee Hamilton, who also happens to be chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee. The day will be capped by a dance at the Veterans of Foreign Wars post, V-J Day’s sponsor.

Perhaps predictably, all this is a source of some friction, though pride and purpose on both sides keep frustrations largely under wraps.

That said, some have quietly suggested the festivities undercut the town’s modern notions of global commerce, not to mention neighborliness toward the Japanese.

But local veterans like their party just the way it is. “I wouldn’t want to broadcast it, but we’ve had more trouble with a couple of guys at the Chamber of Commerce than we’ve had with the Japanese,” says Pete Ross, 81-year-old VFW member and parade chairman of 19 years. He recalls being summoned by town stalwarts several years back who suggested changing the name of the parade to simply Victory Day—omitting the Japan.

But he didn’t retreat then, and he isn’t retreating now. “We’re not mad at anybody,” says Mr. Ross, who fought in World War II. “We do this to honor the soldiers who didn’t come back, and the disabled veterans. As far as I know,” he says, “the Japanese have no animosity toward it.”

That still doesn’t keep some politicians from being a little queasy. Russ Byrkett, the VFW post commander, says Indiana’s governors routinely used

to appear, but not any more. His theory: “They came to be afraid of making it a political issue.”

Mr. Byrkett feels this demonstrates needless circumspection. He points out that the VFW has routinely solicited Seymour’s Japanese businesses to advertise in the VFW’s parade booklet. They declined —“but they weren’t hostile, they didn’t throw me out or anything,” he adds.

Over at the Chamber of Commerce, President John Bottorff denies that the chamber ever officially tried to get the VFW to euphemize the parade. The chamber has no policy on the matter, he asserts, “formally.” But it is clearly a prickly issue: “I’m not sure how much I really want to talk about it,” he says when an interview is first sought. Mr. Bottorff also allows: “It’s a free country.”

Meanwhile, Mayor John Burkhardt, who will be riding near the front on Sunday, is philosophical. “I believe one of our faults is we try to analyze things,” he says. “I think that gets homo sapiens in trouble a lot.”

If there is Japanese anger over the parade, the Japanese are entirely too polite to show it. Not that everyone is as accommodating as Mr. Furuhashi. But there is a cultural divide that shows up in part in a Japanese concern for decorum.

Ikuko Mori, whose father is president of Seymour’s Japanese-owned steel plant, Kobelco Metal Powder of America Inc., explains that she carries no war-related emotional baggage. But she does worry that a Japanese presence at the parade might needlessly court discomfort. Thus, she won’t attend. “It’s not polite,” she says.

Similarly, three young women who give cultural demonstrations around town profess uniformly to be wearied by the subject. “I’m not interested,” says Mika Kagami. Yet this means one thing to the Japanese women and something entirely different to an American, a translator explains. The three then demonstrate this difference by interrogating a reporter about V-J Day for nearly an hour.

But the issue is closer to the bone for Sadao Seki, who is president of Aisin USA and a director of its Japanese parent, Aisin Seiki Co. He is 60, old enough to have memories of the war. He remembers it as a child, but reluctantly, saying, “I don’t want to recall a bad dream.” He would like to attend the parade, he says, “but yet there are mixed feelings.”

However, Mr. Seki takes his civic responsibilities seriously. He is happy in Seymour; deer romp in his backyard, he notes. He has a ready list of “the kindness” that he and his wife have been shown. So though Mr. Seki has never seen the parade, he decides—in the midst of an interview—that he will attend this year.

But then business intercedes. An associate tells Mr. Seki that his calendar contains a conflict. He shrugs. He won’t go after all.