

The Trailblazer and the Goat Keeper

*The story of WPI's first two Japanese alumni,
who returned home and forged
distinguished careers in industry.*

BY ROGER N. PERRY JR. '45

The records of the WPI Alumni Association chronicle the remarkable achievements of WPI's graduates, beginning with the earliest classes. As inventors, designers, production experts, entrepreneurs, managers and presidents of companies large and small, these alumni helped drive the industrial revolution that changed the American way of life forever.

Scattered among those early classes were a few students who traveled halfway around the world and overcame the barriers of language and culture to earn their WPI degrees. When they returned to Europe, to

Asia, or to South America, their educations helped them make indelible changes in the traditional ways of their native countries.

Japan's Kotaro Shimomura, one of four foreign students representing 10 percent of the Class of 1888, was such a man. A year after he earned his degree in chemistry, his countryman Gompei Kuwada entered WPI with the Class of 1893 to study mechanical engineering. Shimomura and Kuwada were among the first of WPI's international students, but in many ways their stories are typical of those who followed.



NEW EVIDENCE OF EVOLUTION FROM VEGETABLE TO ANIMAL.

Coming to America must surely have been a cultural shock to young Kotaro Shimomura. The United States was a young country, having only recently celebrated the centennial of its founding. The West was still untamed territory and in the East, cities and industries were growing as rapidly as the flow of immigrants from Europe could help build them. The people of America were fiercely independent. They spoke their minds freely and bowed to no one.

In contrast, Japan's culture, language, social customs and politics were developed and formalized over more than 2,500 years. Until 1854, when U.S. Commodore Matthew C. Perry negotiated a trade treaty with Japan, the country was closed to foreigners. Shimomura was

among the first generation of Japanese in many centuries who were free to learn about the world outside this island empire. He was, in fact, a trailblazer—among the first Japanese to study abroad.

Shimomura accepted this challenge, no doubt considering it a great honor to represent his country and his family. During his years in Worcester the Institute underwent some important changes. It changed its name to Worcester Polytechnic Institute, and began construction on its third building—Salisbury Laboratories—where chemistry students would, at last, have adequate laboratory space for their studies.

On his return to Japan, Shimomura took charge of the Harris School of Science in Kyoto, teaching there as professor of chemistry for six years. In 1896 he went to Belgium, where he spent a

year studying by-product coke ovens. Back in Japan he was instrumental in forming the Osaka Seimi Works Company, which built Japan's first by-product ovens in 1897.

Hired as chief engineer of the company, he was soon promoted to managing director and later became president. He served in that capacity until 1926, when the company was amalgamated with the Osaka Gas Company. He was at that time already connected with the latter company as a director and consulting engineer. After the merger, he became managing director.

He founded the Oriental Wood Preservative Company and served as its president. He later wrote that he was inspired to form the company in 1907 after returning to Japan following a second trip to Belgium. There he supervised the con-

Gompei Kuwada was preparing for WPI at Northampton High School in Massachusetts as Shimomura was earning his WPI degree. Although they were on campus at different times, it is possible that they knew each other during that period. Later in life they did become close friends and business colleagues.

The 1893 yearbook notes that by the time of his graduation “Gumpy” had mastered the Yankee joke with all its subtleties. He was a popular member of one of the Institute’s more distinguished early classes. A charter member of the local chapter of Sigma Alpha Epsilon fraternity, Kuwada was also the class’s official mascot bearer—it was his responsibility to parade a goat at all class and school functions. Legend has it that Kuwada acquired his title because his initials could have doubled for “Goat Keeper.”

Among the verses which parodied a then-popular song in the 1893 yearbook was the following:

“We have a chap from Tokyo,
Who’s full of fun from head to toe.
He kills the profs with questions queer.
Which makes us smile from ear to ear.
He brought the Goat for ‘Ninety-Three,’
And had it kept without a fee.
In spite of this, he did confess,
‘I think it can be done for less.’”

Kuwada, considered the best artist in his class at a time when freehand drawing was still a required subject, contributed much of the artwork for the yearbook.

In a letter to Herbert Taylor in early 1941, Kuwada, then retired, reminisced about his class, which was looking forward to its 50th reunion. He wrote, “If you think my classmates may like to know what has become of their old ‘goat keeper’ you may put this in your journal’s spare space. What appears in print about one’s self is often so twisted up that one hardly believes it to be one’s self. So here goes a true story.”

Kuwada went on to provide a lengthy summary of his life and career. After graduation he returned home and became a mechanical engineer in the military arsenal of Osaka. After nine years there he took a job as the manager of the machine shops at Kawasaki Dockyard Company in Kobe. Eight more years passed and then he retired briefly to a seaside villa, before a call from Kotaro



Kotaro Shimomura (above) paved the way for other WPI students from Japan, including Gompei Kuwada (below). At left, one of Kuwada’s drawings.

struction and start-up of 100 Semt-Solvay Ovens at the Government Steel Works, and observed the tar oils produced by the operation of the furnaces.

The Japanese government drew on Shimomura’s expertise in technical matters when the outbreak of World War I cut off imports of foreign dyestuffs. He was asked to organize, construct and begin manufacturing in the government-subsidized Japan Dyestuff Company in Osaka. In recognition of this contribution, the government bestowed on him the title of Doctor of Science in 1915.

In a 1926 letter to WPI Alumni Secretary Herbert Taylor summarizing his career, Shimomura modestly mentioned that the Emperor had recently decorated him with the “Indigo” Order of Merit for technical services in industry. WPI also paid tribute to Shimomura’s distinguished

career. On the occasion of the 45th reunion of the Class of 1888 in 1933, the college conferred on him the honorary degree of Doctor of Science.





One of many scenes of natural beauty drawn by Kuwada for his yearbook (top). Kuwada in later life (below).

supplies and not a single spindle could be imported.”

While it turned out that running a business meant “working for other people more than ever,” he stayed at it for 22 years, eventually producing spindles for 60 percent of the spinning mills in Japan. He increased the company’s production rate from a few hundred spindles to nearly 200,000 per month and expanded its product line. Finally, the demands on his company for new types of products outstripped its capabilities.

“Moreover,” he wrote, referring to himself in third person, “being within an ace of ‘three score and ten,’ he followed the words of the Good Book and resigned from the duties as president of the company. . . . The company was ultimately acquired by a larger firm. Thus ended his war,” Kuwada wrote, “and like Humpty Dumpty he is ‘no more.’ ”

After his retirement he studied herbs in the Kyoto botanical gardens and assisted professors at Osaka University in medical research, an interest prompted, he noted, by his upbringing in a family with several generations of doctors.

In summary, he wrote that his 47 years of work [were] “very interesting, as these years passed through the period of mechanical and industrial expansion and through the stresses of several wars. . . .”

What Kuwada omitted was the fact that WPI, in 1928, awarded him the honorary degree of Doctor of Engineering. That same year, at his 35th Reunion, the old goat keeper was present to see a tradition of his undergraduate years revived. The class had commissioned the creation of a bronze replica of a goat’s head attached to an abnormally small body. This was presented to the college as the trophy for the traditional freshman-sophomore competition.

Kuwada’s son and only child, Suyenori Kuwada, entered WPI with the Class of 1930, but became ill and died while still a student. In his letter to Herbert Taylor, Kuwada included a personal postscript: “It avails none to count the age of one’s children passed away, but when I see the figure of so many young undergraduates as depicted in the *Journal*, I think of him also grown up and recall with deep gratitude the great kindness that the boy’s good friends of America had shown him during his period of study at The Tech and during his distress. Such thoughts lead to mutual understanding, which, if attentively cared for, should not throw

nations into war.”

But such mutual understanding between Japan and the U.S. was not to be. As Kuwada was looking forward to WPI’s 1943 Reunion, the events surrounding World War II made mortal enemies of the two countries he held dear. Kuwada’s last personal contact with someone from WPI was in 1947. Frank Harding ’50 had often heard his late grandfather, John P. Coghlin, speak of his Japanese classmate. While serving in the U.S. Army of Occupation in Japan, Harding and Sumner Herman ’50 searched out Kuwada.

“We had his address from the WPI Alumni Office and we set out by train from Tokyo to Kyoto,” remembered Harding. “He lived in a very traditional Japanese house, the kind I’d always imagined as a kid growing up. It had suffered no damage during the war. About the only nontraditional feature was a black lacquered, Western-style dining room set of table and chairs. He was very proud of this.”

The two WPI graduates were welcomed by Kuwada and his wife and enjoyed an amiable and polite conversation. Kuwada showed the visitors a lantern with a square hole set up near a pond in his traditional Japanese garden. “He explained that there was a festival each fall in which fires were burned in a particular pattern on a mountainside 20 miles away. When that happened, the light from the fires shone through the square hole and reflected on the surface of the pond.

“Although our visit was brief, he seemed pleased that we had come. He was clearly proud of Worcester Tech and his association with the college. He expressed the hope that a spirit of friendship would grow between Japan and the United States in the aftermath of the war.”

The final chapter in this story of WPI’s first two Japanese students is but three sentences long. It came in a letter to WPI from Akira Shimomura, dated September 16, 1949. “I regret to inform you that your alumnus Dr. Gompei Kuwada passed away on the 13th of September at the age of about 80. He is survived by his wife—no children. Dr. Kuwada was a very good friend of my deceased father, Dr. Kotaro Shimomura, who died 12 years ago.”

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Shimomura brought him back into the world of engineering.

Shimomura asked Kuwada to take charge of the mechanical side of the Osaka Gas Company’s business. While there he supervised the construction of the Japan Dyestuff Company. Finally, tired of working for other people, he started a small company, making spindles for textile mills. Until then, he wrote, “all such machine parts had been imported and it was just about that time that the European War had cut off foreign