

Pacific and Asian Letters, II

We resume with our observations of the Gooney Birds on the Midway Islands.

Gooney Birds nest on the ground – all over the ground for that matter, from one end of the island to the other. All over lawns, woods, beaches, roadways, etc. The nests look like small volcanoes with a three-foot base sloping up eighteen inches to the rim of the depression, which is the actual nest. One egg is laid and no more, for nature has adapted the Gooney in a rather unique way: they have a pocket just aft of the breastbone into which the egg snugly fits. It sometimes takes five or more tries before the egg fits in properly. This egg is about the size of a 100 watt bulb. Gooneys will not leave their nest, no matter how closely you approach them. Come too close and you'll get nipped, but not in anger, just a way of saying "mind your own business."

The Midway Islands are the only place known on earth where the Black-footed Albatross nests. [Although years later studies revealed that the Black-footed Albatross spend much of their time in the waters off the west coast of the North American continent, where they catch fish which they then carry all the way back to the middle of the Pacific Ocean! For more on this topic, log on to the Colebrook Historical Society's website, then go to "Bob's Bytes of History", then look for "The Romance of Maps".] The U. S. Government has made the entire group of islands a game sanctuary for them. It is a court marshal offence to hurt or annoy a Gooney Bird. I noticed a remarkable thing: let an adult human approach a Gooney and it will clap its bill as a warning, but I saw a little boy of three or four playing in his yard, which also was home to 30 Gooney Bird nests. The boy was pushing a little red fire engine around, and whenever he went past a bird, (incidentally, they were about the same size as the boy), he would reach out and pat them as they sat on their egg, and they would make a clucking sound in their throats like a setting hen. They could have easily killed the child, but I wouldn't be surprised if they would protect him if danger threatened. In comparison to other birds, the Gooney is unique, but they're not as "gooney" as you'd be led to believe.

Diary entry, May 26 1954 Midway Islands, [on our return voyage]: The only thing different on the island are the young Gooney Birds. They are now almost the size of their parents, but covered with dark brown fuzz. They sit on their rear ends and prop themselves up by their "elbows", with their huge webbed feet sticking up at a 45° angle. Craziest thing I ever saw!

Letter, off North Korea, 18 January, 1954 Japan is a most extraordinary place. The people are fine, reserved folks who are warm, friendly and sincere; the ones in small towns and in the country, at least. The country is spectacular and reminds me vaguely of the most mountainous sections of New Hampshire's White Mountains. Prices to us are fairly cheap after they have been bargained down, while to the Japanese, the price they ask is exorbitant. Thus both sides are satisfied, and the more money that pours into Japan, the better, as they appear to be putting it to good use by advancing facilities in schools and medicine. When you get to talk with the

Japanese, you realize what a great tragedy the war was for them, and how unfortunate it was that they had the leaders fate dealt them.

The Russians and Chinese must be the same way. Remember how we hated the Japs, and now we hate the communists? I'll bet it's their leaders and not the people who are at fault. I'll bet that in a few years if we can know them as we know the Japanese, they will be just as friendly.

Letter, Sasebo, Japan, 15 February 1954 Last Sunday, a friend of mine and I hired bicycles here in Sasebo and had a little excursion for ourselves outside the city. Sasebo is, of course, a great deal Anglicized due to the vast number of American and UN forces stationed here and therefore spoiled as far as "typical" Japan is concerned. Prices are exorbitant, and most of the merchandise a very low grade. To get back to last week though, we followed the railroad route out of the city in a northwesterly direction (the only really accessible route due to the mountainous nature of the vicinity). The first two or three miles out was still city, but from there on you find yourself in rural terrain. There is a sharp dividing line from the city limits to the country along the highway, as Sasebo is built on the slopes of hills facing the water, and from the crest of the ridge into the valley beyond, it is something like stepping into rural Vermont or New Hampshire, except of course, for the style of the buildings.

Even though it is winter here, the countryside is green and rather pretty. The view from the ridge is really breath-taking. A vast valley lies before you, subdivided into several smaller valleys. The higher spots hit you first. They are, for the most part, covered with rice paddies. The paddies are a light green hue set off by the duller shade of green of the retaining terraces. The valley floor and the smaller hills are liberally sprinkled with trees and shrubs. Here and there is a small house. None of their houses have lawns or any kind of landscaping. If anything, there will be a rice paddy. Also, there is a noticeable lack of barns. Once in a while you will see a low shed, but nothing more. The houses appear to be mostly quite old, and in poor upkeep. The people are pitifully poor, and what money they get must go for the bare necessities of life, with little if anything left over for such things as paint for the buildings and what not. The worst that we saw was a shack beside the road that measured perhaps 12 by 14 feet with one door and one window. Of course there was but one room (as the door was open and we slowed down purposely as we went past). In the center was the inevitable hibachi pot. From the door peered three little grimy faces, none of them older than five or six. For a privy, they had a plank across a small irrigation ditch directly behind the shack. Unfortunately, it is people such as these that are prime targets of the communists. Of course they will believe whatever false promises that are given them. Anything would be an improvement over what they have. I believe that I could succumb to that philosophy myself if I lived under similar conditions. I might add that the roof was made of corrugated metal patches, and the walls patched with woven bamboo. It is inconceivable to imagine such a situation without seeing it. This is not typical by any means, but it occurs all too often.

To be continued.