

Selections from NDL collections

## Photograph albums: Materials from the Special Purpose Reading Room for Books

Noriko Yamaguchi, Book and Serials Division, Reader Services and Collections Department

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The National Diet Library (NDL) maintains collections of “non-book” materials, which comprise materials that are not books, such as monographs, or serials, such as newspapers and magazines. Non-book materials include unbound maps, microfilm, CD-ROM, and other types of media, and are handled at different circulation counters or reading rooms, depending upon their format. Thus, these materials are assigned special classification numbers that indicate their format (reference: [National Diet Library Classification \(NDLC\)](#) in Japanese).

This article is an introduction to photograph albums published in the early 1900s that are now a part of the non-book material collection available at the Special Purpose Reading Room for Books of the Tokyo Main Library. There are very few photograph albums in the NDL collections: Some have luxurious bindings and others have simple ones, but they all reveal memorable glimpses into historical events and scenes from days gone by. These photograph albums owned by the NDL are searchable in [NDL-OPAC](#) by inputting “YKA11” in the classification column of the advanced search screen. Other collections of photography are searchable in NDL-OPAC by titles or authors.

*Karigijido kinen shashin* (commemorative photos of the provisional parliament building) (Images 1 and 2, NDL Call No. [YKA11-19](#)) is a photograph album showing the third provisional building used by the Imperial Diet before completion of the present Diet Building. The Imperial Diet Building was first built in 1890 and was a victim of fire on two occasions thereafter. This was the third building, constructed in 1925. This photograph album comprises 70 photos, including portraits of former Diet members as well as photos of the closing ceremony and farewell luncheon, which were held when the third provisional building was retired from use upon completion of the present Diet Building in 1936.



Image 1: Front cover of *Karigijido kinen shashin*



Image 2: Photo of the third provisional building of the Imperial Diet

Some of the most striking photograph albums in the collection are those taken in the aftermath of the Great Kanto Earthquake, which occurred on September 1, 1923. For those of us who experienced the [Great East Japan Earthquake](#) in 2011, especially, these photographs vividly depict as if it were yesterday a disaster that occurred 92 years ago. Portable folding cameras, called “clap cameras,” had just appeared on the market, and many of the photos taken of the devastation caused by the 7.9-magnitude earthquake were taken with these devices. *Kanto Daishinsai shashincho* (lit. photograph album of the Great Kanto Earthquake) (Images 3 and 4, NDL Call No. [YKA11-](#)

[L1](#)) contains vivid photos of this disaster.

These photos of Tokyo in ruins and the aftermath of the earthquake include shots of well-known Tokyo landmarks that had been turned into rubble, such as Manseibashi station, the Mitsukoshi department store, and Azumabashi bridge, as well as dreadful scenes of human suffering in the area surrounding the Hifukusho (army clothing depot) and Benten Pond in the Yoshiwara district. Particularly shocking to the people at the time was the collapse of the Ryounkaku, Japan's first western-style skyscraper, which was built in Asakusa in 1890. The twelve-story Ryounkaku was destroyed by the earthquake and the remains were later demolished. The third volume of *Tokyo Daishinsai shashincho* (photo album of the Great Tokyo Earthquake) (Images 5 to 7, NDL Call No. [YKA11-L10](#)) describes the demolition in detail, attesting to the strong public interest at the time.



Image 3 and 4: Photos from *Kanto Daishinsai shashincho*



Image 5: Front cover of Tokyo Daishinsai shashincho



Image 6: Photos of blasting the Ryounkaku

These photograph albums also include photos showing how ordinary people lived right after the earthquake (Image 7). There are scenes of people living in temporary shelters and the stalls of street vendors, a statue on which many notices of missing persons or evacuation sites have been posted, persons kept police custody during the turmoil after the earthquake, and weapons confiscated from vigilante corps (upper right in the image 7). Some of the photos in these albums were made into postcards and sold on the street in places like Ueno Park, where they were apparently very popular.



Image 7: Photos of the post-disaster situation

Photos of the earthquake not only record the damage, but also provided hints about how the people of the time felt about the disaster. What did they think of the

transformed cityscape while they were taking these photos? Although we can only speculate about what they were thinking, the photos vividly depict people attempting to console the spirits of the dead as well as their strength and hope for reconstruction. They also show us the importance of recording serious disasters and make us think about who intended to transmit what message to posterity.

**The following search tools are useful for viewing old photos:**

- 1) "[The National Diet Library Inventory of Photographic Albums 1868-1926](#)" *Reference service and bibliography* [NDL Call No. [Z21-291](#)], 33. (in Japanese)
- 2) *National Diet Library Inventory of Photographic Collections 1926-1945* [NDL Call No. [KC711-G5](#)] (in Japanese)
- 3) "[Search for photographs \(Japan\)](#)" in Research Navi (<http://rnavi.ndl.go.jp/>) (in Japanese)
- 4) Online Gallery: [The Meiji and Taisho Eras in Photographs](#)