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Seoul Celebrates the Home of an American Hero

By Choe Sang-Hun

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SEOUL, South Korea — For decades, squatters have lived inside a dilapidated red brick house on a hillside not far from the royal palace in Seoul.

The house's significance in Korean history is hard to envision. Its windows are cracked and full of spider webs. Doors are boarded up. The leaky, sagging roof is draped with tarps.

Yet the home, known as “Dilkusha” — the Hindi word for “Heart’s Delight” that is carved into its foundation — is now being celebrated for its ties to Korea’s uprising against Japanese colonial rule in 1919.

Its owner, Albert Wilder Taylor, a gold-mining engineer from Nevada and part-time journalist, broke the news of the revolt and the bloody crackdown by Japanese troops to the outside world.

The March 1 Independence Movement, as it is now called, is enshrined in the Constitution of South Korea as a pivotal event in Koreans’ struggle to break free from the Japanese. In preparation for the centenary celebration of the revolt, the home is being turned into a museum.

“None of those who lived there, their neighbors or local officials knew the history of the house,” said Stanley Kim, a professor of film and television at Seoul University in Seoul who in 2005 helped rediscover the building’s link to Mr. Taylor. “None of them knew the meaning of the word ‘Dilkusha’ carved in a foundation stone.”



Albert Wilder Taylor in 1910.
via Jennifer Linley Taylor

Built on a slope of Mount Inwang, which overlooks the royal palace here in the capital, Dilkusha was the most prominent among colonial-style houses owned by Westerners in Seoul a century ago. Mr. Taylor built the home in 1923 and lived with his family there before the Japanese authorities expelled them from Korea in 1942.

Mr. Taylor's ties to the house and his role in the revolution were quickly forgotten. A politician occupied the house for a while, but after he was banished for corruption in 1963, homeless families moved in. As many as 20 households once squeezed inside, the authorities say. A forest of terraced houses, apartments and churches has sprouted up in the neighborhood, obscuring Dilkusha.

Kim Jeong-ok, 64, moved into Dilkusha in 2007 after a divorce left her bankrupt and homeless; she took over a two-room space from an older woman who was moving out after 30 years. Although they do not own the house, people who have lived there, some for more than 40 years, sell their space to newcomers when they move out, she said.

Like other squatters there, Ms. Kim said she did not know the house's name or history until television crews and historians began visiting.

It took Professor Kim at Seoul University two months to find Dilkusha after a meeting with Mr. Taylor's son, Bruce, in 2005, about turning his mother's memoir of her time in Korea into a film (Bruce Taylor died last year).

Since the house's history has been rediscovered, it has begun attracting tourists. The government, which owns the house and plans to designate it as a cultural asset, has said it will help the squatters relocate so renovations can begin.



Researchers at the Seoul Museum of History preparing items donated by Jennifer Linley Taylor, granddaughter of Albert Taylor. Jean Chung for The New York Times

Jennifer Linley Taylor, Mr. Taylor's granddaughter, was invited to Seoul in March for the uprising's anniversary, an important national holiday. She donated hundreds of her grandparents' belongings, including letters and drawings of Koreans by her grandmother, Mary Linley Taylor, to the Seoul Museum of History. The family had already donated Mr. Taylor's rare photos of Seoul.

The museum will display those items and "restore the status Dilkusha deserves as the heritage of Mr. Albert Taylor, who contributed to the birth of our country," said Lyu Gyeong-gi, a vice mayor of Seoul.

A government museum south of Seoul already honors Mr. Taylor as a hero who braved Japanese retaliation to report the uprising and bloody crackdown to the world. Bruce Taylor was made an honorary citizen of Seoul in 2006, and his mother's book, "Chain of Amber," was translated and published here in 2014.

Mr. Taylor arrived in Korea in 1896. He mined gold, ran an import business and worked as a correspondent for The Associated Press and The Japan Advertiser, a now-defunct American-owned English newspaper in Tokyo.

He happened upon his worldwide scoop while visiting his wife at Severance Hospital in Seoul, where she gave birth to their son on Feb. 28, 1919. Unknown to Mr. Taylor, a group of Korean patriots, inspired by President Woodrow Wilson's speech supporting countries' right to self-determination, were printing their manifesto in the basement.

When he lifted up his newborn son, he found under his wife's sheets copies of the "Korean Declaration of Independence," which called for an uprising against Japanese colonial rule the next day. Japanese soldiers had raided the hospital and found the printing press but not copies of the declaration; a nurse had hidden them in Mrs. Taylor's bed.

"To this day, I aver that, as a newly fledged newspaper correspondent, he was more thrilled to find those documents than he was to find his own son and heir," Mrs. Taylor wrote in her memoir, which was published in English in 1992, 10 years after her death.

The revolt lasted for weeks. Thousands of Koreans, many of them Christians, were killed in bloody crackdowns by Japanese soldiers, according to historians.

"Outside, on the street all was commotion, an occasional scream, shots, and at other times the sound of hymns being sung; there was one great shout, constantly repeated, 'Mansei, Mansei,'" Mrs. Taylor wrote in her book, referring to the Korean for 'Hurray!'

Mr. Taylor filed his report and a copy of the declaration through his brother, Bill, who hid them in the hollowed-out heel of his shoe and smuggled them to Tokyo, she wrote. With foreign missionaries and diplomats, Mr. Taylor later traveled south of Seoul and reported that Japanese soldiers were massacring villagers. In the town of Jeam-ri, he wrote, Japanese soldiers herded Koreans suspected as protesters into a church, shot them or stabbed them with bayonets, then set the building and the village on fire.

“When we got to the place, which had been a village of about 40 houses, we found only four or five standing, all the rest were smoking ruins,” Mr. Taylor reported in April 1919. “We found a body frightfully burned and twisted lying in a compound and another either of a young man or woman just outside the church compound.”

Mr. Taylor died at age 73 in California in 1948, three years after Korea was liberated.

In accordance with Mr. Taylor’s will, Mrs. Taylor brought her husband’s ashes to Korea, where he had spent 46 years of his life, and interred them at the Yanghwajin Foreigners’ Cemetery in Seoul. His father, George Alexander Taylor, also a mining engineer, was buried in the same cemetery in 1908.

Renovating Dilkusha, a few miles from the cemetery, will help restore the connection between Mr. Taylor and his family and Korean history, Jennifer Taylor said. “Korea was his country,” she said, “his homeland.”

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