

一世史

Miyo Iwakoshi, right, the first Japanese to settle in Oregon, is shown in her Orient home with her son-in-law Shintaro Takaki. This photo probably was taken in the 1920s.



Photo courtesy of Sumiko Ando

Forgotten pioneer

The forgotten pioneer has been remembered at last.

At 1 p.m. on Sunday, May 29, members of the Japanese-American community and the Gresham Historical Society will meet in Gresham Pioneer Cemetery to dedicate a memorial marker on the grave of Miyo Iwakoshi, the first Japanese person to settle in Oregon.

Until now, the grave has been marked only by a Japanese cedar tree.

Flying in from Sacramento for the event will be Iwakoshi's great-granddaughter, Minnie Iseri. There will be memorial wreaths and speeches by dignitaries, including the Japanese consul general, and remembrance of a tiny woman who found her way to Oregon in 1880.

To prepare for that event, The Outlook is reprinting an updated and edited historical series about Iwakoshi and her family that first appeared in the newspaper in 1979. The story will appear in installments in coming issues.

The Japanese brush stroke calligraphy accompanying this article was done by Shizuko Ouchida of Gresham in 1979. It means "pioneer."

Miyo Iwakoshi is Oregon's forgotten pioneer.

For many years, the first Japanese person to settle in Oregon has lain in an unmarked grave in the Gresham Pioneer Cemetery. When research into her past began in 1978, there were only a few people left who had fragile memories of the tiny woman who was called the West Empress and reigned in the community of Orient a few miles east of Gresham.

An accidental meeting between Gresham resident Margaret Okrasinski and Akiko Sugioka of Sapporo, Japan, brought the story to light.

The two met in the cemetery in 1978. "I am looking for my roots," Sugioka told Okrasinski. The Gresham woman, there researching pioneer grave stones, was so intrigued that she abandoned her own work and offered to tag along with the Japanese visitor and her

hostess, Sumiko Ando of Gresham.

The three became allies researching the roots of the Japanese woman who was transplanted, like a rare flower, to Oregon more than a century ago. The story was pieced together from scraps of information found on both sides of the Pacific. It is a family saga with all the ingredients of a Gothic novel — romance, adventure, tragedy and murder. The tale spans more than 100 years and starts with an adventurous Scotsman.

Akiko Sugioka is no stranger to Oregon. An employee of Sapporo City Hall, she has been active in sister-city programs in Portland. She interpreted for Gresham residents when they were establishing their sister-city relationship with Ebetsu, Japan.

During a visit here in 1978, Sugioka became curious about the origins of the name of the community of Orient. Though she has no direct blood tie with Iwakoshi, she decided to research the Japanese pioneer who arrived in Oregon 10 years ahead of the major immigration of Japanese laborers and 30 years before the arrival of most Japanese women.

Having learned of the American "melting pot" while studying at the University of Michigan, Sugioka became fascinated about the role of Japanese, especially Japanese women, in American society.

Nine years ago when the Sapporo woman found her way to the Gresham cemetery she was in for a disappointment. Though she located the graves of Iwakoshi's family members, there was nothing to show where the matriarch of the clan was buried. Okrasinski offered her help and found cemetery records proving that Oregon's first Japanese settler lies near the grave of Andrew McKinnon, the Scotsman who brought her to Orient in 1880.

With the help of her friends here, Sugioka pieced together a story that first appeared in a Hokkaido news magazine.

Many Oregonians who find it difficult to track their ancestors across the Oregon Trail will understand how hard

it is to trace someone across an ocean and from one culture to another.

By the time Sugioka launched her search, the trail was cold. Records, especially on women, are hard to find.

But Andrew McKinnon, who brought Iwakoshi and her adopted daughter, Tama Nitobe, to the Northwest, left a trail a mile wide.

McKinnon, whose grave also is in the pioneer cemetery, was born in 1822 in Argyleshire, Scotland. He became an expert in farming, dairy farming, hunting and sailing, according to Japanese histories. He first farmed in Australia, a 12-year effort that failed because of drought and epidemic. He then set off to try his luck in Japan.

That country was in turmoil. In 1868 the Meiji Restoration ended the rule of Japanese feudal lords. Sumurais gave up their swords for plowshares. In 1873, McKinnon found a job teaching Japanese warriors to farm.

"The Samurai-turned-farmers struggled against extremely poor land where vegetables hardly grew," Sugioka wrote. "Many of them had to survive eating frogs and dogs."

Nevertheless, McKinnon was a successful teacher. No one knows why, at the age of 58, he suddenly decided to pull up stakes and settle in Oregon. But when he sailed for this country, he brought with him 28-year-old Iwakoshi and five-year-old Tama, said to be "of certain good lineage."

One of the mysteries of the story is Tama's origins. The phrase "of certain good lineage" is a polite way in Japan of hinting that Tama might have been the illegitimate child of a high-ranking official. The Nitobe name is prominent in northern Japan today. Though McKinnon was rumored to have fathered children during his stay in Japan, Sugioka believes that Tama Nitobe was a full-blooded Japanese and could not have been his daughter.

Nor is there any proof that McKinnon and Miyo were married, though the two were commonly regarded as husband and wife.

Saturday: Living in Orient.

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