

# Cemetery plot tells story of first Japanese family

**Editor's note:** This is the final installment in a series of articles. The series first appeared in The Outlook in 1979.

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A memorial to East Multnomah County's forgotten pioneer, Miyo Iwakoshi, will be dedicated at 1 p.m. Sunday at Gresham Pioneer Cemetery.

Iwakoshi and her adopted daughter, Tama Nitobe, came to Oregon in 1880 with Scotsman Andrew McKinnon. In 1891, Tama married a visiting Japanese salesman, Shintaro Takaki, and the two began to raise a family in Orient.

Out of necessity, Miyo Iwakoshi and the Takakis became fluent in English. They were well-established in Oregon by the time the first Japanese laborers began streaming into the state in the 1890s. The confused and jobless immigrants sought out the family who already knew the ropes.

Shintaro Takaki lost his first business, a Portland restaurant, because he was a soft touch. His countrymen literally ate him out of house and home.

He then became a labor contractor, organizing Japanese crews to work on the railroads. Tama Takaki and Iwakoshi were members of a Japanese Methodist church that served as a refuge for the immigrants.

At the same time, the newcomers viewed the family with some suspicion. Iwakoshi and the Takakis owned land, having inherited property from Robert Smith and McKinnon. Shintaro Takaki did not earn his way with a pick or a hoe. He was a businessman and dressed the part.

"He (Takaki) never worked very hard. He was an educated character and dressed up all the time," said Leonard Lauderback, interviewed in 1979 before his death. Lauderback, then owner of the Scenic Fruit Co. at Pleasant Home, remembered that the Takakis were better off than his family.

Tama Takaki, in fact, had been raised with all the advantages available to children of prosperous white families.

Sumiko Ando remembers that Tama Takaki could play the piano. "I was surprised," Ando said, "that a woman of her age could play." Most of Tama Takaki's contemporaries, she explained, had been too busy building farms and homes to take time for the luxury of music lessons.

But prosperity is no guarantee against sorrow. The grave site in Gresham bears mute testimony to the family's trials.

Tama and Shintaro Takaki had six children, only half of whom lived to adulthood. Three daughters died in their teens and are buried in Gresham.

The most tragic was the eldest, Mamie, who was murdered in 1905 in Spokane.

It was Miyo Iwakoshi's habit to shelter young Japanese immigrants in her home. The most



Miyo Iwakoshi, Oregon's first Japanese pioneer, is shown in this portrait taken in the 1920s. She was known as 'Grandma Miyo' to her former neighbor, Eva Harris, who supplied this photo.

famous of these was Yosuke Mat-suoka, who returned to Japan to become that country's foreign minister during World War II.

Another was a young gambler by the name of Yasuzo Hama. According to Japanese histories, Miyo told Hama he could marry her eldest granddaughter when the girl become old enough. But Mamie refused him and he shot her in her sleep and killed himself with a razor.

"The Takakis were in Spokane at the time," Lauderback recalled. "They had business interests there but they brought Mamie home for burial."

"I was a classmate of hers at Orient school. She was a beautiful girl. I think she was the prettiest of all of them. We walked six miles to Gresham to attend her funeral in the little Baptist church near the cemetery, the one that was just moved to make a museum."

"I even remember the song they sang at the funeral," Lauderback said, reciting the first verse.

After the deaths of Minnie (1920) and Margaret (1930) only Hannah survived. Though she married several times, she had no children and little else is known about her.

The Takakis also had two sons, Robert and Max. Max married and fathered four children before he and his wife divorced. The oldest child, Minnie Iseri, is coming from Sacramento for Sunday's ceremony.

"Max was a wayward sort of character," Lauderback said with a grin.

Two of Max's sons account for two more markers in the cemetery. Five-year-old Paul Takaki died when he fell from the family car. And Robert Takaki, Max's other son, disappeared in the South Pacific in 1945. He is remembered in a memorial in the family grave plot.

"He was studying in Japan when the war started. He was drafted by the Japanese military and his body was never found," explained his uncle, Jack Ouchida, Gresham.

Max eventually moved to California. He, too, is dead.

The last burial in Gresham was Miyo Iwakoshi who died Jan. 19, 1931, in Portland at the age of 79.

By then, an anti-Japanese attitude had been building on the West Coast since 1920. Despite the fact that Japanese were leading berry growers in Gresham, their

names were almost non-existent in the newspaper columns of the day.

The death of Oregon's Japanese pioneer went unnoticed except for a terse paragraph in The Oregonian.

Until a marker was placed in Gresham Pioneer Cemetery this month, only a Japanese cedar tree marked her grave.

Others remember another part of Iwakoshi's legacy, the camellia or the "Japanese roses" that the Takaki girls took to classmates at Orient School.

"Nobody else in the area had anything like them at the time," remembered Melba Milne of Orient.

"And she (Miyo) had silkworms and she would uncurl the cocoon to show me how they wrapped themselves in silk. I can still see her dropping leaves into the jar to feed the worms." Gentle memories of good neighbors ended in 1942 when the war with Japan shattered the lives of Japanese-Americans.

Though Miyo Iwakoshi had died, Shintaro and Tama Takaki continued to live in Orient. When an Anti-Asiatic Association attacked local Japanese in 1940, the Takakis and their son, Bob, who owned a gas station at Orient, were pointed to as outstanding citizens. The Takakis were preparing to celebrate their golden wedding anniversary in 1941.

In May of 1942, Shintaro, Tama and Bob Takaki, were forced from their homes by a presidential order and sent to temporary quarters in the Portland stockyards. After that, they spent three years in an internment camp in Hunt, Idaho.

The Takakis never returned to Oregon. After the war they remained in Idaho. The chance to learn firsthand about their lives as pioneers to this state was lost.

Tama died at the age of 93 on Dec. 23, 1966, at Coeur D'Alene, Idaho. Only a few weeks later, on Jan. 2, 1967, Shintaro celebrated his 100th birthday. He died just 40 days after his wife on Feb. 2, 1967.

Writing from Idaho in 1973, Bob Takaki gave a few bits of information about his family to Dr. Homer Yasui of Portland, including a vital piece of information about his mother's birthplace.

He might have had more to tell, but a few years later he was shot to death in Caldwell, Idaho, the last in a series of family tragedies.