

April 25, 1979

Akiko Sugioka
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Dear Akiko:

My name is Sharon Nesbit. You must forgive me for addressing you by your first name. But I feel we are already friends because I have talked of you so often with Margaret Okrasinski. On Monday, Margaret and I had lunch with Ginna Deinem and we all agreed I should finally write you since we are both so fascinated with the story of Miyo Iwakoshi.

You see, I started my search for Miyo ~~Iwa~~ Iwakoshi at almost the same time you did. It is a wonderful coincidence that you met Margaret in the Pioneer Cemetery in Gresham because I had almost given up my search which began in September, 1975. Just knowing that you were doing the same thing was enough to inspire me to keep on and the information you shared with Margaret was a wonderful help.

(I must tell you right now that I am a newspaper reporter and newspaper reporters are not neat typists. If I attempted to re-type this letter until it was without errors, we would both be too old to read it. So I hope you can overlook the mistakes.)

First, I should tell you about myself. I am 39 years old, married and the mother of two children. I was born in this state and have always ~~be~~ been fascinated with Oregon history. I have lived in this part of the community for 24 years. About 13 years ago I realized that no one had taken on the task of collecting and preserving the history of the Gresham area so I helped to form an Historical Society in my small town of Troutdale which is about four miles from Gresham. Because I am a newspaper reporter by training I began to print stories using the historical material I had learned. In 1976, my newspaper, The Gresham Outlook, won second prize in an Oregon newspaper contest for the historical material we printed.

Through the years I have gathered a group of elderly people who will share their knowledge and experience with me. You must understand that our culture often does not listen to its old people. For many years I have traveled around the community visiting them and recording their stories. It is very frustrating to know that I will never find the time to get to all of them. When they die, so much information is lost.

In 1975, I realized that our local history ~~was~~ included very little information about Japanese residents. Though they had lived here for many years they were often apart from the rest of the community, a situation that was aggravated by the Japanese internment in 1942. The bitterness over that great wrong has lasted many years and it has only been recently that American-born Japanese are willing to talk about it.

It was then that I discovered a story in the Oregon Historical Quarterly by Barbara Yasui which told of the immigration of the Japanese to Oregon

and ~~xxx~~ spoke of Miyo and Andrew McKinnon. I contacted Miss Yasui's father, Homer Yasui, and he provided me with the information that started my search.

Perhaps the best way to approach this is to tell you what I know. Forgive me if it seems to repeat what you already know but perhaps it will help you to tell if I am correct.

Miyo Iwakoshi came to Oregon with Andrew McKinnon in 1880. I understand that you have not proved that they were married. If there is no record in Japan of a marriage, it is possible that the two were married on board the ship since that happened in those days. In any event, no one here ever disputed that they were man and wife, nor did the question ever come up. Many areas of the United States permit "common-law" marriages which become legal after the couple has lived together for a number of years. That might also have been the case, though I doubt it.

With Miyo was her adopted daughter, Tama. In letters to Margaret you indicate she was born in ~~18~~ 1873. All accounts I have found here say 1875. Tama was also known as Jewel McKinnon. So far I have been unable to find any mention of her in any of the existing Orient School records. Most of the old records were destroyed in 1957.

What is unclear to me, is exactly when Miyo's ~~brother~~ brother, ~~RIKA~~ Rikigo, came. Some accounts say he arrived in 1880 with McKinnon and Miyo. Others say he came later.

I must pause now to imagine what it must have been like for Miyo in the small town of Orient in 1880. The people who lived there were plain, hard-working people. To them, Miyo must have been as unusual as a butterfly in winter. I have been told that she imported silkworms. That she was very, very attractive and that her family introduced the first camellias in the community which were called Japanese roses. I gather that she was isolated from the rest of the people in Orient, probably because of problems with language and differences in culture.

Now I must explain why it is so difficult to learn anything about Miyo and her family. Though the city of Portland was only 20 miles away, the Gresham and Orient area was part of the wilderness. Roads were bad, transportation was difficult and the area was often isolated. It was a new country and records of births, deaths and marriages were not kept very well. In doing research in this area, I find that letters and the family Bible are often more accurate than those kept by the government. Unless we have a precise date, the records of the government are almost impossible to locate.

Since Orient never became an official city under the laws of the State of Oregon the only records of that community which must have existed were those of the school. As I have said, most of those were destroyed. I am still searching for any remaining records which might help us.

In any event, after the marriage of Shintaro Takaki and Tama in 1891 the couple had either five or six children. Of those, three daughters, Mamie (or Mary), Minnie and Margaret all died quite young. Mamie was murdered in 1905. Minnie died in 1920 and Margaret died in 1930. The remaining children that I know about were Robert and Max (who may have also been called Mike.) However, Miyo Iwakoshi's death notice in 1931 says that she was survived by three grandchildren. Other than Max and Robert, I do not know for sure who the third grandchild was.

My information from Homer Yasui gives the name of Jewel Takaki as a child of Tama and Shintaro. It is possible that they had a ~~xxxx~~ daughter named after the mother. I have not been able to learn anything more about her but will keep on trying.

As for Max, no one knows what happened to him. He married the sister of a local man named Jack Ouchida. Mr. Ouchida tells me that Max was an unusual man who did almost everything in excess. He drank too much, laughed too much and got in trouble too much. His marriage to Ouchida's sister did not last. They apparently had two children who are buried in the family plot at Gresham Pioneer Cemetery. One is Paul Takaki who died in 1927 at the age of five when he fell out of the family car. The other is Robert Takaki (he has only a memorial in the cemetery.) Mr. Ouchida tells me that Robert was in Japan at the time of World War II and was serving in the Japanese military when he disappeared in the South Pacific. There is a possible error here because the cemetery records give Robert's age at the time of death as 12. I'm inclined to believe that is a mistake and that he was born in 1923 and not 1933 as the records say.

He is not the same Robert Takaki who wrote to Dr. Yasui in 1973. That man was the son of Shintaro and Tama, the brother of Max. Robert ~~Takaki~~ X Takaki was murdered in Idaho in 1974 or 1975 at the age of 75.

Max is probably dead also but no one knows for sure because he disappeared. I have been told that he was convicted of x war crimes in San Francisco during World War I. I have also learned that he made and drank a great deal of rice ~~xxx~~ whiskey and the older people still laugh about the fights he used to get into.

Shintaro and Tama were still living in Orient in 1940 when they were interviewed by the Oregonian newspaper just prior to their golden wedding anniversary. I have not yet been able to find that interview but will continue to try.

In 1942, they and all Japanese were interned and moved to camps. I am sure the Takakis went to Hunt, Idaho. It is apparent that they never came back to Orient and lived out the rest of their lives in Idaho. The book "Issai" says that Tama died in 1966 and Shintaro died in 1967. I have friends and relatives in that area who might be able to find more information for me from the Idaho records and I will try.

It is another curious coincidence that I was born very near Caldwell, ~~xxxx~~ Idaho. As a small child, I remember the interned Japanese coming to work on our farm. I will probably never forget the faces of those men who had to work on other men's farms. How sad for them when they had farms of ~~thxxx~~ their own.

Perhaps the most curious question is how the town of Orient got its name. Most people insist that it had nothing to do with the fact that Miyo lived there. They say the name was given to the community as a kind of joke long before Miyo arrived. I am not satisfied with that and ~~xxxx~~ still continue to seek old records that use the name prior to her arrival in 1880. So far I have found none. It seems more likely that people were ashamed that their community was named for a Japanese and thought up another story to explain the name.

It is very hard for me to understand why we ~~x~~ Americans distrusted the Japanese immigrants so much. At first I believe they expected the Japanese to be like the Chinese, people who came to the United States to work for a few years and then went home. Americans were caught by surprise when the Japanese men sent for wives and began to make homes in the community. They were also jealous because the Japanese took poor land and produced splendid farms from it. Because they did not understand the Japanese, ~~xx~~ they feared them.

In your most recent letter you asked Margaret some questions that I may be able to answer. Regarding the land affidavit of Mr. Powell: That document was filed at the time the first pioneers to Oregon were applying for free land given by the government called Donation Land Claims. A man was entitled to 160 acres. If he had a wife he got 320 acres. Andrew McKinnon did not have a Donation Land Claim. By the time he came to Oregon, all the free land was gone. He bought his land ~~x~~ from William Maxwell. Maxwell was a partner with McKinnon and Smith in the Orient Saw Mill. Even if we could find the documents of McKinnon's purchase of the land, they would probably not mention Miyo.

You also asked about the history of the United States during the period. Americans began moving west seeking free land in Oregon in the 1840s. That movement increased with the discovery of gold in ~~Californi~~ California. For instance, Mr. Maxwell, McKinnon's partner in the sawmill, came west in 1852. However he spent many years in California before he moved to Oregon where he bought land in Orient in 1875. While Americans had been involved in a great Civil War in the East, the effects of that war were not very ~~noticab~~ ~~noticab~~ prominent here because the East Coast was such a long distance away. The question ^{of} ~~was~~ slavery was not much of an issue here because there were so few black or colored people and none were slaves.

From 1840 to 1860 was a period of new development...a time to clear deep forests to make farms, to organize schools and churches and to create a government which was recognized in 1859 as a state of the United States. The worst perils the people faced were those of the wilderness. Perhaps the most important thing~~x~~ to happen was the coming of the railroad in 1880s which linked the east and west coasts of the continent. It was this time that Miyo and McKinnon came. However, as I have said, they chose to live in an area that was still very isolated. Though quite a number of people in Orient had arrived thirty years before them, they still lived secluded farm lives. It was not until the 1890s that Orient had a post office. The nearest town of any size is Gresham. I expect McKinnon was buried there because it had an established cemetery.

He and Miyo probably went to Gresham to do their shopping. Only occasionally would they make the trip to Portland which took most of the day. I gather that Tama and Shintaro traveled more since a picture in the book ~~XXXX~~ "Issei" shows her in Spokane in 1907.

That just about concludes what I know of Miyo and her family. I hope to learn more and will continue to try. As always, I will share that information with Margaret. What I would like to do with it is to write a newspaper story of your search for Miyo Iwakoshi. You probably know of our fascination with "Roots" written by Alex Haley. You are doing the same thing for the Japanese. It is a ~~compellit~~ ~~compellit~~ compelling story that people should read. However, I will not do that until you are satisfied with your own research. If you would prefer to publish your own information first, that is fine. I believe my story would compliment yours.

I would like to know more about Andrew McKinnon and Miyo and their time in Japan. I would also like to know your own feelings and why you have worked so hard to find this information. I believe I know how you feel but it would be wonderful to have it in your own words.

Forgive me for writing such a long letter. It will take you days to read it, but I thought the best way to do it was to start from the beginning.

My very best wishes,

Sharon Nesbit

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P.S. I do not mean to imply that I
learned all this information alone.
Margaret has spent many hours tracking
down clues. What this is is a
Cooperative effort.