



## VOICES OF GRESHAM PODCAST

### Episode 1: A Japanese Pioneer in Oregon

#### *Transcript*

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Welcome to Voices of Gresham, a podcast about the history of Gresham told through the voices of those who have lived it. I'm your host, Stephanie Vallance, public historian at the Gresham Historical Society.

It was an August afternoon in 1978. Margaret Okrasinski was in the Gresham Pioneer Cemetery. Margaret knew almost everyone in town. Suddenly, though, she noticed a woman emerge from behind a large cedar tree. She didn't recognize her. The two women greeted each other. Akiko Sugioka was visiting from Sapporo, Japan and introduced herself. "I'm looking for my roots," Akiko told Margaret. Margaret was intrigued. The chance encounter would spawn an international friendship and a research project with historical implications that are still echoing four decades later.

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Akiko Sugioka was in the cemetery that day trying to find the grave of Miyo Iwakoshi, the early Gresham settler who arrived in 1880 from Japan. Akiko was visiting Gresham from Sapporo on a research trip. She worked at Sapporo City Hall in International Relations and had visited Portland before with the Sapporo Sister Cities Association. While in the Northwest on this trip, she visited with local Gresham residents, Sumiko and Frank Ando. In the car on the way to their house, Akiko's curiosity was piqued.

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"Mrs. Ando drove me by an area called Orient, which reminded me of somewhere and sometime in the past of Japan. When Akiko asked her why the town was called Orient, Mrs. Ando told her about Miyo came to a pleasant home, accompanied by Andrew McKinnon, supposedly her husband, and a small girl named Tama Nitobe."

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Local tradition said that Andrew McKinnon started a sawmill that he named the Orient Steam Sawmill in honor of his Japanese wife, thus giving the tiny town east of Gresham the name Orient. Akiko wanted to find out more about this early Japanese-American settler. Mrs. Ando showed her what she knew.

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Mrs. Ando took me to the Gresham Pioneer Cemetery to find the grave of Andrew McKinnon. His grave was found at the base of the huge cedar tree. The inscription said as follows:

In memory of Andrew MacKinnon  
A Native of Argyllshire, Scotland  
Who died at Pleasant Home on Dec. 9, 1886  
Aged 64 years

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There was no grave of Miyo Iwakoshi around.

Margaret Okrasinski, a retired teacher and Gresham Historical Society volunteer, offered to help. They found grave markers for other members of Miyo's family.

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Where was she buried? Surely Miyo, the first permanent Japanese settler in Oregon, would be buried in the Pioneer Cemetery. If she wasn't buried here, where was she? Akiko, Margaret, and others dedicated the next few years to finding out.

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When Gresham Historical Society received a grant to produce a podcast, I knew immediately I wanted to feature Miyo Iwakoshi in the first episode. As the first permanent Japanese settler in Oregon, she put down roots that have had incredible implications for the growth of the state. Even though I knew some basics about Miyo's life, it quickly became clear that this story was more than just an interesting family tree.

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What we found out when we dug in became a historical through-line for a much larger story, that of the Japanese American experience in Gresham. Miyo's presence in the state bridged a cultural gap that allowed many others to follow in her footsteps. She paved the way for a population of hardworking and successful Japanese Oregonians

that still thrives today. This larger story will be the subject of the first five episodes of this podcast.

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We will begin with the story of Miyo and her descendants, as it is foundational to the history of Gresham and to the history of Japanese Americans in Oregon. As we said in the beginning of the episode, we will be using this podcast to tell the story of Gresham through the voices of those who have lived it. For the most part, we will be able to use people's actual recorded

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voices. At Gresham Historical Society, we have built a rich collection of oral histories. Unfortunately, we don't have Miyo's own recollections, nor do we have her daughters, a chance to hear their own story in their own voices. Also, a lot of what we know we learned from written sources.

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Akiko's writing, for example, was instrumental in our research. But because Akiko still lives in Sapporo, with her permission, her written words are read today by Kumiko Read. We have, however, collected many voices of those whose lives have been touched by Miyo Iwakoshi. We'll be sharing those voices in the episodes to follow,

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as the story of Japanese settlement and the larger story of Gresham history unfolds. Despite not having written or audio recordings of her words, we worked hard to find Miyo's story, which had largely been lost, before Akiko, Margaret Okrasinski, and others took up the case 40 years ago. Okay, back to that story. Margaret and Akiko met in the cemetery in 1978, but they continued their

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research and friendship after Akiko went home to Sapporo. Eventually, they had more help. Akiko had connections with many first and second generation Japanese Americans in Portland. The Japanese name for anyone with Japanese ancestry is Nikkei, and Akiko was able to gather first and secondhand accounts from those Nikkei who knew Miyo and her family. People like Setsu Ueno, Lury Sato, Buddy Ikata, Sumi Ikata, and Kashu Hamada provided Akiko with invaluable resources. She then relayed her findings to Margaret. Sharon Nesbit, longtime Gresham Outlook reporter, found out about Akiko's investigation from Margaret.

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She had already been looking into the history of Japanese in the area and wanted to know more. She wrote a letter to Akiko, introducing herself.

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I am 39 years old, married and the mother of two children. I was born in this state and have always been fascinated with Oregon history. In 1975, I realized that our local history 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 of 1942.

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The three wrote to each other, sending letters by airmail, sharing their research, and asking each other questions. They were all extremely dedicated. When I started researching Miyo Iwakoshi for the podcast, I found the subject intensely compelling. When I encountered the letters written between Akiko, Sharon, and Margaret, it was clear I wasn't the only one. In a letter Akiko wrote to Margaret and Sharon in 1980, she explained the draw she felt to Miyo's story.

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I'm not religious, she wrote, but I should say that Miyo united the three of us. Forty years later, I felt the same. The three women, along with Akiko's many Nikkei connections, worked hard to fill in the blanks and tell the story of Japanese settlement in Oregon. Akiko conducted research in Japan, even visiting Hirosawa Farm in Iwate Prefecture,

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where McKinnon had worked. Meanwhile, Margaret and Sharon worked diligently using American sources, and Sharon published their findings in the Gresham Outlook. All three tried to dig up information that would tell them more about Miyo and her family. Much of what we now know of this unlikely family comes from the research work completed and documented 40 years ago by Akiko and her Nikkei friends, Margaret and Sharon. Ironically, Akiko couldn't find much about Miyo in Japan. Andrew McKinnon, however, was a well-known figure in Japanese agricultural history. A white man in Japan in the latter part of the 19th century was apparently more noteworthy

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than a young woman with a daughter of unknown parentage. What was clear was that before 1880, Miyo was living in the Aomori Prefecture in Japan. Life in Japan was changing rapidly at the time. Lifelong Gresham resident Jack Ouchida described the significant moment in Miyo's life and in Japanese history on a local talk show in the 1980s. Here he is on I Remember When with Gwenda McCall.

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And it's in the Meiji era, which is a revolution of the Japanese from the feudal to the present stage, and they're during the samurai period, feudal time, they have to give up a sword, trade it for plowshare.

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Oh, the samurai warriors?

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Samurai warriors.

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What year are we talking about?

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We're talking about the 1800s, mid-1800s.

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The Meiji era in Japan was incredibly significant. Beginning in 1862, Japan rapidly modernized, effectively opening its borders after hundreds of years of isolation, and reducing an entire class of samurai warriors to farmers. But life was difficult.

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And the soil was so poor they couldn't even raise weeds, according to the history.

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And the most unfortunate thing is that they ate dogs and frogs to survive. High-ranking officials were determined to bring more advanced cultivation methods using machinery and cattle. They brought in foreigners to consult. This is when Scottish-born Andrew McKinnon showed up in Japan.

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And he found a job with one of the warriors over there or a few of the people. Just imagine a foreigner in Japan and he taught farming.

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Akiko found that McKinnon was mentioned in several historical accounts of the time, making an impression for his horse-whispering skills and inability to learn the language. Perhaps this led to his decision to leave Japan for America. His reasons are unknown, but in 1880, Andrew set sail for the United States. He was 58 years old. Sailing with him never to return to Japan was 28 year old Miyo Iwakoshi and her 5 year old daughter, Tama

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Nitobe. They settled near modern day Pleasant Home. McKinnon started a sawmill with several partners on Bluff Road and Orient Drive near where West Orient Middle School is now. The name of the sawmill was the Orient Steam Sawmill, and here brings up a very old controversy as to the name of the town of Orient itself. For generations, local tradition had

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it that Andrew McKinnon named the sawmill Orient in honor of his wife. However, in 1946, Miss Louise Maxwell, whose father was Andrew McKinnon's business partner, wrote about the history of the area and said that the town of Orient was named for the local school, which had been named Orient due to its location in relation to Portland. It was in the far east of Multnomah County and so became known as

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Orient. There does exist a list of Multnomah County schools from 1866 that includes Orient, meaning that the name did in fact predate Miyo's arrival. It's clear though that the fictional connection for local residents between Orient and Miyo became stronger than fact. It is certainly an incredible coincidence that the first Japanese settler in Oregon settled in a town already named Orient. Regardless, Miyo Iwakoshi and her family were indeed some of the earliest residents in the area.

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In a letter to Akiko, Sharon imagined what life might have been like for Miyo.

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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 she imported silkworms, that she was very attractive, and that her family introduced the first camellias in the community, which were then 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.

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She was indeed isolated from any part of her culture, and with the bad roads and difficult travel of the time, probably isolated from people in general. She was almost certainly lonely. Only six years after her arrival, Andrew died. According to many accounts, MacKinnon had asked his business partner Robert Smith

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to take care of his wife and adopted daughter when he was gone. Akiko Sugioka corresponded with a woman named Yoshiko Maeda, who had been friends with Miyo. Mrs. Maeda told Akiko that Miyo inherited property from Robert Smith. Unfortunately, just six years after arriving in Gresham, 34-year-old Miyo was a widow with an 11 year old daughter. Though often referred to as adopted, Tama was very likely Miyo's biological daughter, born out of

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wedlock at a time when such a thing would have been unmentionable. Miyo admitted this to her friend, Mrs. Maeda. "Miyo-san said she came from Aomori Prefecture with her daughter," Mrs. Maeda wrote to Akiko. "The daughter was born between a

minister of Daimyo and Miyo." Daimyo were powerful feudal lords prior to the Meiji era, meaning Tama's biological father was an influential member of the upper class. Miyo and her family made

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a new start in Multnomah County about the time Gresham was getting its start. Four years after her arrival, Gresham was officially established when a post office was named for postmaster Walter Q. Gresham. The town steadily grew and as the turn of the century loomed, more Japanese arrived in the Northwest. According to many sources, Miyo and her family provided much-needed support to many of these newcomers. Akiko Tsukiyoka

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described her influence. The first immigrants had a very hard time getting established in the U.S. but they had a strong pride as Japanese. Miyo's family helped Japanese immigrants in the beginning of the 1900s. They could understand English and that was very helpful to the immigrants.

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Miyo and Tama both learned English, probably out of necessity, given that for many years they had no other Japanese-speaking connections. That quickly started to change. In 1882, due to anti-Chinese sentiment, the Chinese Exclusion Act was passed, essentially barring Chinese immigration to the United States. Japanese immigrants filled the labor gaps. Between 1880 and 1900, the number of Japanese in Oregon rose to 2,500. In 1893, a Japanese minister founded the Epworth Methodist Church, and Miyo was one of its first members. The church was a refuge for Japanese immigrants who came with no money or job prospects. Miyo welcomed many of them into her home.

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This earned her the title Western Empress. Jack Ouchida and Gwenda McCall talked about Miyo's hospitality on I Remember When.

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And that place is a kind of a resort or a kind of a stop for immigrants coming into the United States. They always stopped over there. She always had a hot meal for the people and stay overnight. It's really a nice place.

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I suppose that the laborers coming into the country would be glad to find someone who

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spoke the language.

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Oh, yes. Yes. My father had many occasions stopped over and enjoyed the hot meal.

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Miyo continued to not only provide a refuge for the state's growing Nikkei population, but also to make her new home reflect her own culture. In 1911, she imported silkworms from Japan. Several newspaper articles at the time made note of this fact. She has produced several hundred cocoons

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from which the butterflies are emerging. Mrs. Iwakoshi has reeled several hundred yards of pure white silk thread, which she proposes to show at the Gresham Fair this fall as an illustration of what may be done in silk production in Oregon.

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Some recent arrivals had heard of the Japanese woman living deep in the forest east of Portland. In 1885, one young textile merchant made his way to Orient to meet Miyo and her daughter. Shintaro Takaki fell in love with 17-year-old Tama, and in 1891, they married. It was the first Japanese-American wedding in the state of Oregon. Shintaro became a Japanese labor contractor, creating opportunities

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for many hopeful new arrivals. Their influence, along with the many children they had, established a root system of Japanese Americans that would grow over the next decades. Their impact will be the subject of our next episode. Miyo died when she was nearly 80 years old, on January 19th, 1931.

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Children in the area remembered her as a small, gray-haired lady who taught them about camellias and raised silkworms. She was the first Japanese woman to permanently settle in Oregon and one of Gresham's earliest residents.

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Her life here tells a more nuanced story of the area's early pioneers. Her influence on early Japanese settlement and the Gresham area is undeniable. This much was clear to Akiko Tsukiyoka after discovering details of Miyo's life. So standing at the foot of Andrew

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McKinnon's grave and looking around, she was puzzled. Where was Miyo's grave? At that moment, Margaret Okrasinski emerged, introduced herself, and the rest, as they say, is history. Along with Sharon Nesbit, the women would not only uncover the mysteries surrounding Miyo's final resting place, but also introduced the world to the incredible story of Oregon's first Japanese immigrant family. We'll find out more



about the discovery of Miyo's grave in the final episode of this series. In the meantime, we'll trace what

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happened in Gresham in between Miyo's arrival in 1880 and Akiko's arrival in 1978, two Japanese women in Gresham separated by nearly a hundred years. As a student, Akiko had heard of the melting pot metaphor used to describe the diversity of American cultural life. However, she explained that learning about Miyo Iwakoshi connected her to this understanding of the United States.

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America has been presented to my mind as a place where the people are my close friends, but never are they my relatives nor sisters. It is also true that I never thought consciously that Japanese at the early period of development of the country was a part of the element of the melting pot. The country always consisted of the Hakuujins or Caucasians. The sort of somewhat alien feeling towards America was reduced when I learned that a Japanese woman had settled in Gresham a century ago.

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Akiko wrote those words more than 40 years ago. Jenny Yamada, a fourth generation Japanese American, only recently learned about Miyo's impact on Oregon and her own family. Jenny's great-grandfather, Bukichi Fuji, was an early Gresham farmer.

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Just learning more about the first person that was here in Oregon, like from Japan, that's pretty crazy that I didn't know that she existed, you know. I just feel like learning about her story and her daughter's story would have been nice to know when I was a kid, because it would have helped shape me more, like helped me with my identity. When you grow up somebody that's not 100% European settler, like, and that's all you learn the history of, it can you just feel like kind of no,

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not important. There's nothing to connect with in Oregon state history, or nothing to connect with in the past. Jenny hopes that Miyo's story will continue to be more accessible to young people. I mean, I think it would just give them more of a connection to Oregon history, Oregon State history, and more of a connection to the past and seeing themselves reflected in this area's past, just knowing there were other kinds of pioneers in general, not even just Nikkei.

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I think it's important for other people, anyone to learn this history and other histories and just get more background and knowledge and a lot of different people.

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Voices of Gresham is a production of the Gresham Historical Society, supported by a grant from the Oregon Heritage Commission. I'm your host, Stephanie Vallance, and I produced this episode with support from Melissa Bevency, editing support from Silvie Andrews, Charlotte Becker, and Theresa Squires Osborne. A very special thanks to Akiko Sugioka for her generosity, dedication, and support.

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