

Japan Town Mukilteo – A Garden of Eden

For Japanese Americans in the Early 1900's

Above Japanese Gulch, Mukilteo in Centennial Park on 5th Street, stands a granite monument topped by a three foot origami crane with the words PEACE and HAPPINESS, inscribed in English and in Japanese on a bronze plaque.

Unveiled on Memorial Day, 2000, it's the only reminder left of the thriving Japan town of immigrant sawmill workers in the early 1900's which was called the best Japanese lumber camp out of the dozens that sprang up in the Northwest a long century ago.

Japan town was a Garden of Eden for us Japanese American kids with endless facilities to play and gad about. A creek ran down from large reservoirs high up the wooded hills along two rows of houses, then under a road to Everett and tracks of the Great Northern Railroad, to blue waves of Puget Sound. There were deep pools along its mile long course with hungry trout, eager for wriggling angle worms skewed by boys on hooks of their fishing lines. The surrounding forests were honeycombed with trails for exploration by adventurous souls and nature lovers.

A shallow, sandy beach, near the border with Everett, was a favorite place to frolic on warm summer days. We would bring food and drinks and hold picnics, roasting weenies, marshmallows, and other goodies. We enjoyed swimming, wading, and splashing each other, or making driftwood rafts to pole around. When the tide was out, we dug for clams or gathered crabs and other edible marine life to take home. We often fished off the sawmill docks for perch, cod, shiners, or netted shrimp off the pilings.

Our fathers built a large community center for programs, movies, games, and other recreations. They cleared off the playground for baseball, football, basketball, tennis, and other fun filled activities.

They made a grassy plot into a large park with seesaws and swings and high hump and pole vault stands to practice our skills. They erected a boys clubhouse with a large garden plot and a fish pond to hold the extra trout we caught. They encouraged us to develop initiative and good character, which served us well in the adverse years to come.

A Monument to Friendship



But what we Japanese American children appreciated most was the friendships of our Caucasian neighbors and of classmates at Rosehill School and Christian churches. We had fun together and visited each others' homes, often being treated to cookies, candy, fruit, and milk. We competed against each other and developed habits of good sportsmanship and fair play. We learned good race relationship, a dedication to the basic principle on which the United States was founded, conducting ourselves in accordance with our God given rights to freedom, equality, and the pursuit of happiness.

Examples of this can be found in our annual class plays to which the public was invited. Our third grade class of twenty-five students presented a comedy of a Chinese cook in a California gold mining camp. I was chosen to play Fat Sing, the lead role. The next year our class selected a long, two part play about a rascally Old Man of the Sea. Because the main part had much to memorize, the first half was given to my twin, Hiroshi, and the last half to me. Though children programs, this succession of feature roles exemplify how we JA's had been treated on equal terms in Mukilteo, and the attitude enable us to maintain our faith in America throughout the grievous years of the war with Japan, even when our basic rights as citizens were grossly violated.

During the Great Depression of the 1930's, the Crown Lumber Co. closed its doors; and there was a mass exodus of its workers. Japanese families all departed to find jobs, never to return, expect for occasional visits. And as countless years went, Japanese Gulch became a wilderness of bushes and giant trees. However long we JA's had been gone from our birthplace, the Mukilteo spirit still lingered in our hearts and minds. Wherever we and our children settled down, we never found another environment as perfect as our childhood homes in Mukilteo.

In the long lifetime since we moved away, little Mukilteo incorporated, annexed populous areas, and grew into an affluent city of 20,000. The newcomers are hardly aware that the desolate Japanese Gulch was once a neat settlement of immigrant sawmill workers. And that progenies of these laborers learned well, lessons of Americanism and had notable impact on our country's history.

They kept the FAITH through hard times of depressions and wars when they had been treated like second class citizens. And their deportment and unconditional loyalty earned for them the accolade of being called "model minority."



This creek ran through the center of town and had deep trout pools. Japanese Gulch, 2008, pictured above and below.



In the half century after leaving Mukilteo, we JA's encountered dramatic ups and downs of adversities and successes. The period of our greatest heartache began with the bombing of Pearl Harbor by Japan on December 7, 1941.

We JA's were labeled as national security risks, and everyone of Japanese ancestry living along the Pacific coast were evacuated to relocation centers in remote wastelands.

Despite our shock and resentment at the injustice, when our eligibility to serve in the army was restored, thousands of JA's enlisted in the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, or the Military Intelligence Service in the Pacific Theater.



Minidoka Relocation Center, Idaho



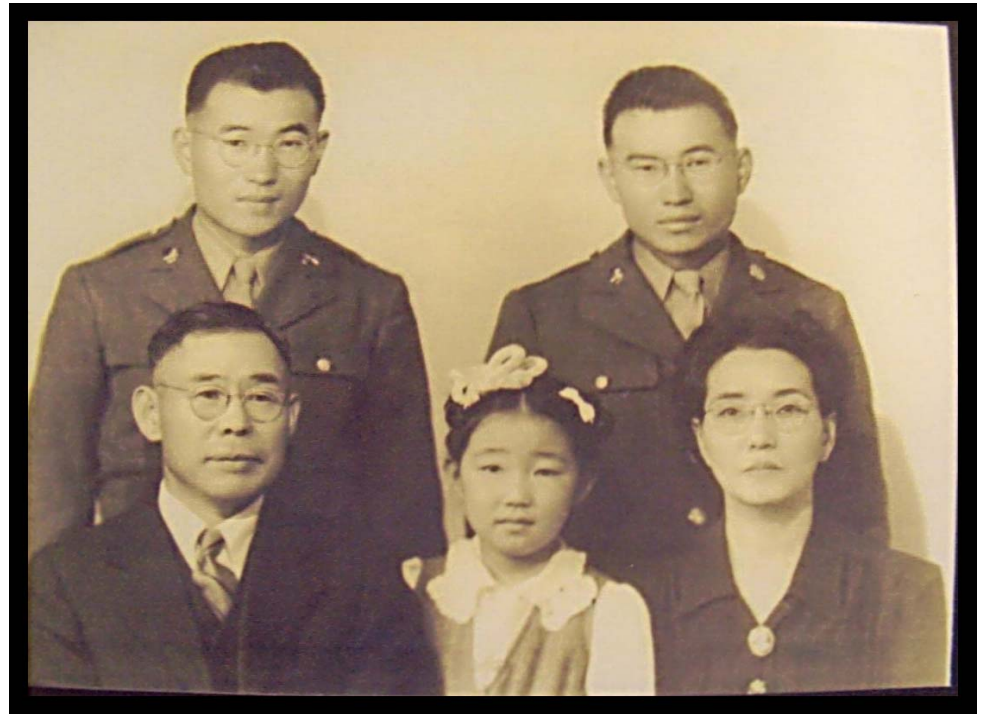
JA Servicemen from Minidoka

Four JA boys who once sat together in a 1929 third grade class picture were now serving in World War II. My twin, Hiroshi and I fought in Europe with the 442nd R.C.T. and helped in small ways to make it “the most decorated unit of its size in the United States Army.” As 100th Battalion citation clerk, Hiroshi successfully wrote up the Congressional Medal of Honor for Pfc. Sadao Munemori, the only CMH won by the 442nd R.C.T. during wartime after it had been rejected by the Fifth Army as “unacceptable.” It validated our reputation as “most decorated unit.”

Shigeo Takeuchi and Bright Onoda joined the Intelligence Service. Other Mukilteo JA's also fought in World War II. We are not recorded on the local register, because we had enlisted from other cities.

Our unconditional loyalty made the American people aware of the injustice of their wartime mistakes; and they atoned in millions of ways, rescinding anti-Japanese laws and customs and opening wide the gates of opportunity in every field. In 1988 the redress bill, HR 442 was enacted, that awarded \$20,000 to every living JA evacuee along with a Presidential apology.

We Mukilteo JA's had been scattered from coast to coast by World War II and its aftermath. But many of us went to college and developed thriving careers in various professional and business fields. The best examples include: A pharmacist, who had an activist son; a noted community leader, and two talented daughters, one a famous telecaster and the other an actress and dramatist. A son of a Mukilteo JA sang lead roles in operettas in New York and London. Other JA's accomplished much in less publicized ways.



Mas and Hiroshi Odoi with Parents. Taken while in Minidoka Relocation Center, December 1944.

Thank you Mukilteo for friendships that helped us find happy endings beyond our fondest expectations!

Written by: Mas Odoi, 1920's Mukilteo resident