

The Japanese Community in the Twin Cities

by Gladys I. Stone

The Japanese community in Minnesota began in the early 1900s. There is reason to believe that the chef of James J. Hill's special train for executives may have been the first Japanese person to settle here. Subsequently, cooks, waiters and butlers were also hired by the railroad. Even then, the Japanese were considered to be industrious and conscientious workers.

At about the same time that the railroad was hiring Japanese workers, Ary E. Zonne, manager and co-owner of the Nicollet Hotel, recruited Issei* workers from Portland, Oregon to work in his business. For example, Mrs. Kiyono Nomura and her husband were recruited and came to Minneapolis in 1903.¹ Her husband worked as a bellhop at the

*The term "Issei" refers to first-generation Japanese immigrants. "Nisei" refers to second-generation Americans of Japanese ancestry. "Sansei" is the term for third-generation Americans of Japanese ancestry.

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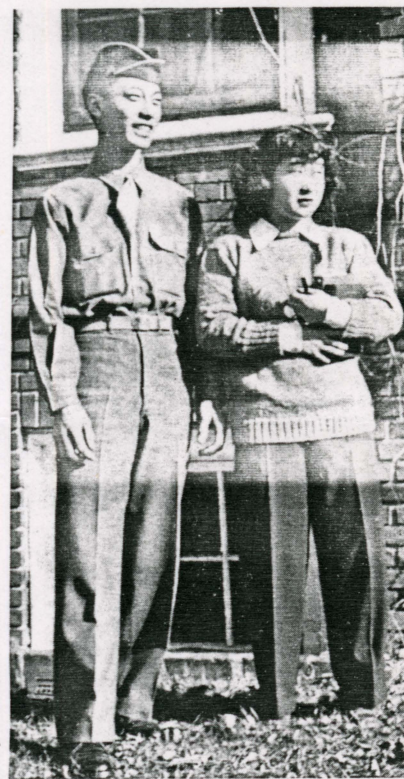
Nicollet Hotel, and she was hired as a domestic servant by a wealthy family. However, most of the early Japanese workers soon returned to the West Coast due to the harsh Minnesota winters. Mr. and Mrs. Nomura remained in Minnesota less than a year before returning to Oregon. After staying in an internment camp during World War II, they returned to the Twin Cities, and Mrs. Nomura lived here into her nineties.

Many of the early settlers were adventuresome, independent, well-educated entrepreneurs. Rokuro Konno, Tometaro Kitagawa and Jiro Akamatsu all operated Oriental gift shops during the period 1913-1970. Although Mr. Kitagawa had a civil engineering degree from the University of Minnesota, his first business venture was selling Japanese paintings; he continued this work until the Sino-Japanese War in 1937 when these goods were no longer marketable because of the American boycott of Japanese goods. Not even Chinese goods could be sold during that time because American consumers did not distinguish between China and Japan.

Another long-time resident was Dr. Kano Ikeda, a nationally known pathologist who came to the Twin Cities in 1914 after receiving his doctorate in medicine from the University of

Michigan. He served on the staff of the Minneapolis City Hospital until his discharge during World War II for being an alien.² However, during the war, Dr. Ikeda served on the faculties of both Macalester College and the University of Minnesota. He spent the latter part of his career engaged in research in pathology, publishing more than forty articles in professional journals.

Mr. Yoshinosuke Yamasaki was



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Esther (Torii) Suzuki, one of the first Japanese Americans to attend Macalester College, is pictured here with her boyfriend (now husband), who was at the Military Intelligence Language School, 1943.

also among the early Japanese settlers in Minneapolis. After experiencing the San Francisco earthquake of 1907, he decided to move to New York where he studied music. Eight years later, he enlisted in the U.S. Navy and served for two years at the Commandant's House in Portsmouth, New Hampshire and then he served as steward on the battleship *Maine*. Soon after his discharge from the navy, he worked as a steward on a yacht in the West Indies. In 1917 he came to Minneapolis and worked at the Mandarin Cafe. Five years later, he started his own restaurant and continued this business until the end of his life.

The pre-war Issei residents in Minnesota were few in number but obviously very colorful, adventurous and enterprising. They fulfilled the needs of the

labor market and provided new Asian gift items. Most of them came here from the West Coast or the East Coast because of friends or business and employment opportunities. Almost all of the early Issei settlers were men, and most of them married Caucasian women simply because there were no Japanese women here.³

Even by 1940, there were only fifty-one persons of Japanese ancestry living in Minnesota; thirty-seven of them lived in the Twin Cities. There was no substantial increase in the Japanese population of Minnesota until the Military Intelligence Language School (MILS) was established in 1942 at Camp Savage and later transferred to Fort Snelling. Although most Nisei were not fluent in Japanese, the army decided that it would be easier to teach the language to them than

to teach it to Caucasian Americans who had no background in Japanese. From 1942 to the close of the MILS in 1956, about 8,000 soldiers of Asian descent, mostly Japanese, received Japanese language training at Fort Snelling.

In 1942, the War Relocation Authority (WRA) began preparations for resettling Japanese from the various relocation centers, and the National Council of Churches established a committee to assist in the resettlement effort. In November 1943, George Lunquist, executive secretary of the committee, and a representative of the WRA came to the Twin Cities to ask representatives of the Minnesota Council of Churches, church women's groups, YM-YWCA's, PTA's, Rotary Clubs, labor unions, and other community organizations for their cooperation in helping the



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Nisei women in their kimonos for the Festival of Nations, 1947.

evacuees to resettle here. Many prominent citizens—including Warren Burger (subsequently chief justice of the U.S. Supreme Court), Arthur Foote, Irving Clarke, Phillip McNairy and Wallace Robbins—served on the Committee on Resettlement, which sought justice and fairness for the Japanese.

By the summer of 1943, several hundred Nisei had moved from relocation centers to the Twin Cities to study in local schools. They anticipated financial assistance from the National Youth Authority, but Congress did not approve the funding. As a consequence, many Nisei were in desperate straits. Some received assistance from older brothers and other relatives at the MILS. Religious and human services agencies assisted others in finding schools to attend and jobs.

Many Issei parents followed their children to this area. At first they intended to stay temporarily until an auspicious time to return to the West Coast. The Nisei soldiers at the MILS had laid the groundwork for a favorable reception of these evacuees. Negative stereotypes of the Japanese were not as prevalent in Minnesota as on the West Coast. Thus, the Japanese generally had a friendly welcome during the relocation period.

Hostels were established in Minneapolis and St. Paul where the relocatees could stay temporarily at minimal cost. For instance, in 1944 a Lutheran group under the direction of Martha Eckhardt opened a Resettlement Hostel at 127 Clifton Ave. in Minneapolis. This facility housed twenty-two people at a time, serving two meals a day at a cost of one dollar per un-



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Mrs. Tomoko Yamamoto of Des Moines, Iowa (seated) performing Japanese tea ceremony at the International Institute in St. Paul. Standing: Mrs. Ruth (Earl K.) Tanbara explaining the steps in the ceremony. Guests (seated): Miss Hiroko Ogata, Mrs. June (Sam) Okamoto Rokutani, and Mrs. Michi (George) Rokutani.

employed person. Those who were employed were charged a dollar and a half.

Finding permanent housing was a problem for many Issei and Nisei. Because Minnesotans had very little experience with the Japanese, landlords were leery of renting or selling to them. Good apartments were not easy to find, and purchase of adequate homes was also difficult.

As the Japanese community stabilized, the Minneapolis Council of Churches became concerned about the Issei's spiritual and religious needs. They called a meeting of Issei ministers, Nisei seminarians, and representatives of the various Protestant denominations. This meeting resulted in the organization of the Twin Cities Area Christian Union—an interdenominational association that held Sunday services in Japanese for Issei Christians. The Nisei Christians, however, were encouraged to attend the churches

in their neighborhoods.

In July 1944, Reverend Daisuke Kitagawa, a bilingual minister, was sent to the Twin Cities by the National Council of the Episcopal Church. Paul Rausch, who was a lieutenant stationed at Fort Snelling and a former lay missionary in Japan, was a friend of Reverend Kitagawa. Both of these leaders provided help to Nisei soldiers stationed at the MILS.

Three years later, in January 1947, the Twin Cities Japanese Christian Church was organized in Minneapolis with Reverend Minoru Hayashi, a Methodist, as its first pastor. He was soon succeeded by Reverend Kitagawa. At this point, the church had a membership of a hundred.

At about the same time, Mrs. Junsai Terakawa, widow of a priest of the Nishi Honganji Temple in pre-war Portland, Oregon, organized the Twin Cities Buddhist Association with the help of Reverend Kitagawa.



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Issei-Nisei dinner gathering, 1947.

The opening ceremony was held in 1945; it was officiated by Reverend Gyodo Kono of the Midwest Buddhist Church in Chicago. The members met in a number of locations until the Twin Cities Community Center became available in 1949. Since the Community Center closed in October 1965, the Buddhists have been meeting at various locations.

Following the permanent resettlement of the Japanese Americans in the Twin Cities, the various groups needed a place to meet. Reverend Kitagawa, therefore, consulted with the Bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Minnesota, who was extremely compassionate in the affairs of Japanese Americans. The bishop then approached the National Council of the Episcopal Church, which granted \$10,000 for an Issei meeting place. That amount plus a loan of \$8,000 from the local diocese made it possible to purchase a mansion at 2200 Blaisdell Ave., Minneapolis in

1949. However, after all the arrangements were completed, the Issei group rejected these plans; they felt that they were too old to undertake the responsibility of managing this building. Therefore, the Nisei leaders undertook the responsibility and designated it as the Twin Cities Japanese American Community Center. The facilities were made available to all Japanese American organizations regardless of religious affiliation. Several groups, such as the Native Americans, Rainbow, Twin Cities Buddhist Church, United Citizens League, Credit Union, and Japanese Wives Club, held their meetings and social events at the Center.

The nondenominational Japanese American Church faced difficulties as the university-educated Nisei acquired well-paying jobs and moved to the suburbs where they joined local churches of several denominations. The movement of Nisei led to a decline in financial support and in

attendance at the ethnic church and the Community Center. By 1953, the Twin Cities Japanese Christian Union Church was compelled to face this crisis. Some of the most devoted Issei members complained about the ecumenical aspect of the church presided over by an Episcopal minister. After much agonizing discussion, the congregation split into two groups in 1953. The Japanese Christian Union Church continued with Reverend Kitagawa, succeeded by Father Andrew Otani. The other group organized the Twin City Independent Church and eventually bought a Methodist church building at 1835 Polk St. N.E., Minneapolis, holding its dedication service on July 7, 1957.

When the Japanese American Research Project conducted a nationwide study of the Issei in the early 1960s, and later of the Nisei, the Twin Cities were included in the sample. The study showed that in 1963 the Issei population of the Twin Cities was 115—thirty Issei couples and fifty-five unmarried Issei women, most of them widows. (The total Japanese population of the Twin Cities, including Issei, Nisei and Sansei, was, of course, much larger.)

At that time, forty percent of the Issei women were in the work force. Although the Issei women who settled here were past their midyears, many were ten to fifteen years younger than their husbands and they were relatively healthy. Many of these women returned to the labor force, taking unskilled jobs at St. Mary's Hospital or the Nicollet Hotel, or working as domestics. Others operated power sewing machines at Munsingwear. Although very few had

young children, some did have children in college. These mothers gladly helped their children financially, because education is an important value for the Japanese. Others helped their families to purchase homes. Some reported that they had to work because their financial resources were exhausted after spending several years in War Relocation Centers. Thus, the Issei women faced situations that were far different from their pre-war, West Coast situation. They had to mingle with non-Japanese co-workers and, in spite of their limited facility with English, most of them adjusted quite successfully to their new lives in Minnesota.

Although the main role models available for Nisei daughters were their Issei mothers, Nisei women tended to be somewhat less self-sacrificing than their mothers and they were much more likely to have interests that extended beyond their families. Yet, being a good mother is an important source of personal fulfillment for both generations of Japanese women. Many Nisei mothers stayed home with their young children, but returned to work after their children were in school. Many achieved prominence in various professions. For instance, one became a television producer, another became associate director of the Minnesota Nurses Association, and a third became an editor in a publishing company.

Generally, Nisei women had little difficulty finding employment; they were considered model employees—conscientious, efficient, neat and quiet. In 1943, many of the early arrivals among the Nisei women were employed as domestic workers.⁴ Temporar-

ily, this arrangement provided a job as well as housing. Within a year or two, they worked themselves into skilled or semiskilled clerical or sales positions. Others attended the colleges and universities in the area to acquire skills and an education. Issei mothers did not discourage their daughters from attending schools of higher learning; rather, they gave them psychological and financial support.

By 1961, there was a considerable increase in the number of Nisei working in the professions as university professors, medical doctors, dentists, lawyers, corporate managers, nurses, etc. Certainly, the support of Issei parents and the completion of college degrees have resulted in tremendous changes in the labor characteristics of this ethnic group within a period of less than two decades.

Appreciable numbers of Nisei women serve as Sunday school teachers, choir members and

youth fellowship leaders. They are well-integrated into their church communities. Many of these women are also very active in a variety of volunteer organizations; they serve on the boards of directors of the YWCA; Family Services, Inc. in St. Paul; International Institute; Minnesota Museum of Art; Japan American Society of Minnesota; Women's Association of the Minnesota Symphony Orchestra; Altrusa; Quota Club; etc. During their forty years of residence, these women have become part of the Minnesota landscape; they have warm hearts in spite of the harsh winters. ☆

Footnotes

1. Interview with K. Nomura, Feb. 13 and 27, 1963.
2. Although Dr. K. Ikeda immigrated to the United States in 1904, U.S. immigration law prohibited Japanese from becoming U.S. citizens until 1954.
3. California law prohibited marriages between Issei men and Caucasian women; Minnesota law permitted such marriages.
4. D. Kitagawa. *Issei and Nisei: The Internment Years*. New York: The Seabury Press, 1967, pp. 51-53.



Members of Twin City Independent Church, 1957.