

## Chojiro Fujii

The following article was written by Gary Iwamoto for The International Examiner, 30 August 2005

Note: Some of the information presented in official records such as the U.S. Federal Census and immigration records do not match information presented in this article. For example, the passenger manifest for the voyage of the S.S. Kashima Maru that departed Yokohama on 12 Jun 1919 and arrived in Seattle on 25 Jun 1919 lists arriving passenger Yoshihito Fujjii, age 18 years, 2 months, as the son of C Fujii living at 423 Maynard Street in Seattle and grandson of K Fujii living at 580, Yasu-mura, Asa-gun, Hiroshima-ken. Seattle City Directory records and the 1920 Federal Census list Chojiro's home address as 423 Maynard Street. Yoshito Fujii's application for U.S. citizenship states that he entered the U.S. on June 25, 1919 under the name Yoshihito. In the 1920 Federal Census, Chojiro, Kana and Yoshito are living together at 423 Maynard Street. Yoshito is listed as Chojiro's son.

However, Yoshito Fujii's death certificate lists his father as Kojuro Fujii and his mother as Kiku Shimizu.

In the 1930 U.S. Federal Census of Seattle Yoshito is listed as a lodger of the lawyer, Thomas Masuda, of 154 Washington Street. Masuda was a prominent lawyer in Seattle. More information about Thomas Masuda can be found at [Densho.org](http://Densho.org).

Yoshito Fujii (1901 – 1995) married Yukiko Shitamae (1907 – 1999). They had three daughters. During WWII Yoshito was the Chairman of the Minidoka Community Council.

According to Chojiro's WWI draft card his date of birth is 9 Jul 1878.

## The Article by Gary Iwamoto

<https://iexaminer.org/a-samurai-to-seattle-fujii-imm-1894-2/>

A Samurai to Seattle FUJII: imm. 1894

Kojuro and Chojiro Fujii played important roles as pioneers in the development of Seattle's Japanese American community. The Fujiis, father and son, were as instrumental as any individuals in encouraging the emigration of their Japanese countrymen to the Pacific Northwest. Chojiro Fujii paved the way for other Japanese in the local hotel/apartment field and played a major role in the formation of the Seattle Buddhist Church, which is still today one of the most prominent churches in the Japanese American community.

Kojuro Fujii, born in 1844, a native of Yasu Village, spent most of his life in the Hiroshima Prefecture. He was a sword maker by trade, catering to a samurai class that served the feudal lords. In the last half of the 19th century, Japan went through the Meiji Restoration (also often referred to as the Meiji Revolution). The Meiji Restoration brought tumultuous social and economic change. Many of the lords who ran Japan lost their power. With no masters to serve, the samurai class lost all of its privileges and was dismantled. It became against the law to carry swords. Kojuro Fujii found himself without the means of a livelihood.

The massive societal revolution took a toll on the large peasant class. Farmers were burdened by national taxes. In the early 1880s, there was a drastic drop in the price of rice as the government sought to control its production. Thousands of farmers and peasants lost their homes and lands. Kojuro Fujii, among others, was a leader in the revolt against attempts by the emperor to monopolize the production of rice in Hiroshima, incurring the wrath of government officials. A bounty was put out on Kojuro's life. Kojuro decided it was perhaps a good time to leave. For many rural Japanese, such as Kojuro Fujii, immigration to America seemed an attractive option. The promise of unlimited opportunity appealed for those who sought to work abroad for a few years, earn a great fortune, and return home to pay their debts.

In 1894, Kojuro Fujii came to the United States, accompanied by his second son, 17-year-old Chojiro Fujii, (born in 1877), arriving in Tacoma, Washington. Kojuro stayed two years then returned to Japan due to family responsibilities, leaving Chojiro in Washington state. But in the brief time he was in America, Kojuro learned there was a high demand for cheap labor in the Pacific Northwest. The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had cut off the supply of Chinese workers. Back in Japan, Kojuro urged his young Japanese countrymen to go to America. It has been reported that Kojuro may have persuaded as many as 500 young Japanese to come to the Pacific Northwest.

Chojiro found work as a farm hand. Even as a youth, Chojiro exhibited the leadership qualities that would serve him in later life. Chojiro was hard-working and persistent. He quickly became a contractor, hiring groups of young Japanese men to farms in the White River Valley. In 1898, Chojiro returned briefly to Japan where he recruited many of his countrymen to go to America.

In 1899, Chojiro had saved enough money to invest in a dairy business in the White River Valley. He quickly parlayed his investment into leasing the Rainier Hotel in Seattle on the land, which is now Hing Hay Park, becoming the first of many Japanese to own a hotel or apartment business. Chojiro changed the name of the Rainier Hotel to the Fujii Hotel. The hotel was a two-story building with 15 cent beds, the usual rack beds could serve 50 or 60 guests. With the rising numbers of Japanese laborers finding jobs in mining, agriculture, logging, and railroad construction, Chojiro decided it was just good business sense to have a place for these laborers to stay as well as using his labor contracting experience to steer his countrymen to jobs. It was not a coincidence that Chojiro decided to lease the Fujii Hotel, with its close proximity to the then Immigration Building on Airport Way, as a way to help his fellow immigrants.

According to a survey in 1907, the Japanese population in Seattle was about 5,000 and there were 53 hotels run by Japanese. Six years later, 13 more were added. On January 30, 1910, 20 of these Japanese hotel and apartment operators gathered at the Uraume restaurant to discuss plans to organize as a group. On February 6, the Seattle Japanese Hotel Operators' Association held its first meeting. The record says that 45 members met at the Uraume Restaurant and chose Chojiro Fujii as its first President. The hotel/apartment management business proved to be a very lucrative career path for Japanese immigrants. Considering the fact that Japanese immigrants were prohibited by anti-alien laws to own land, all of the apartments and hotels involved in the Association were subject to lease agreements. At the beginning, many of the Japanese owned hotels and apartments catered to their fellow Japanese immigrants. Eventually, these Japanese owned hotels and apartments served non-Japanese as well. By 1925, there were 127 hotels and apartments totaling 8575 rooms owned by Association members. At its height, hotels and apartments owned by members of the Seattle Japanese Hotel and Apartment Operations Association added up to 250.

As Chojiro prospered in America, Kojuro sent three other sons to America. Yutaka started a fertilizer business in California. Yoshio spent part of his life in Seattle but eventually moved to California as well. Yoshito came to Seattle, attended and graduated from the University of Washington, and like his half-brother Chojiro, established a career in the apartment/hotel management business and eventually became a Japanese American community leader in Seattle in his own right. Kojuro died in Japan in 1921, having only gone that one time to America.

As the Japanese community grew, there was a call for bringing the cultural and religious traditions from the old country to Seattle. Chojiro was recruited to start a Buddhist church. In 1901, Chojiro Fujii, then 23, and Jiro Iwamura, 28, were leaders of a group of seven young Japanese men who organized the Bukkyo Seinenkai, the forerunner to what is known today as the Seattle Buddhist Church. The first service took place November 15, 1901 in a rental space at 624 Main Street. A board of directors was formed. Chojiro Fujii was one of the initial board members.

Soon, the small congregation wanted a permanent place of their own to worship. Fujii, Iwamura, and Rev. Gendo Nakai were given the task of raising funds for a new church. Their efforts were successful as temple leaders purchased land at 1020 Main Street, with a ground breaking in 1907, and the formal dedication of the church on November 15, 1908. The membership of the church continued to grow to 500. Eventually, the needs of the church outgrew the space. In 1921, Fujii became Board President for the Seattle Temple of Homba Hongwanji (which is the official name of the Seattle Buddhist Church), a position he held for 10 years. In 1926, Chojiro Fujii, as Temple President, began negotiations to purchase four vacant parcels of land centered at 1427 Main Street, the present site of the Seattle Betsuin. These negotiations took approximately five years, culminating in a purchase completed in 1931. When the construction of the Yesler Terrace took away the property of the Buddhist Church at Tenth and Main Street, church leaders took solace in the foresight that they had made the purchase of land to build a new temple.

Meanwhile, Chojiro married Kana Inaba and both ran the hotel. The hotel business continued to prosper. After the Jackson Street Regrade (which flattened the steep hilly inclines of the streets near the hotel), Chojiro expanded the hotel by building a third floor. Hisato Fujikoge worked alongside Chojiro and the two men became close friends. Chojiro thought highly of Hisato, so much that he decided his friend would make a good husband for his younger half sister, Shige. Chojiro took Hisato back to Japan to meet his sister. Hisato and Shige eventually married and Shige came to America in 1924. Hisato and Shige had two sons. Minoru, the older, was born in the Fujii Hotel in 1925, and Isayoshi, the younger, was born in 1927.

Chojiro developed a fondness for the two sons of his half sister, spending time with them at family outings. Minoru remembered Chojiro as a husky man with a booming voice. "Eat

your rice,” Chojiro would say to him, “and your stomach will be as hard as your forehead.” According to Minoru, Chojiro made a strong impression on all who knew him. With his dark bushy mustache and penchant for fancy clothes and fancy cars (he drove a Packard), Chojiro stood out in the crowd. He was an avid fisherman and enjoyed the outdoors, frequenting the local parks such as Lincoln Park with friends and family. He participated in kendo tournaments. Minoru described Chojiro as a “Japanese American Teddy Roosevelt,” someone who got things done by charging full steam ahead.

Chojiro suffered a stroke in 1932 and he and his wife returned to their home in Hiroshima, Japan. Hisato Fujikoge took over the management of the Fujii Hotel. In 1935, Chojiro wanted to see his nephews and requested that Minoru and Isayoshi come to Japan. Minoru and Isayoshi went to Japan where they attended school and were raised by their benefactors. Hisato and Shige stayed in Seattle. With no male heirs to succeed him, Chojiro decided to take an unusual step — an unusual step by American standards, perhaps not as unusual by Japanese standards. He decided to “adopt” Hisato Fujikoge, his younger half-sister’s husband as his heir. The Fujikoge family changed their name to “Fujii.” In 1937, Chojiro Fujii died at the age of 60. As hostilities grew between the governments of Japan and the United States, Minoru and Isayoshi could not leave. Tragically, Isayoshi was a victim of the atomic blast in Hiroshima in 1945.

When the war broke out between Japan and the United States, Hisato Fujii lost his lease of the Fujii Hotel. He was picked up by the FBI and, because he was considered to be a Japanese community leader, sent to an enemy alien camp in the American Southwest. Shige was interned at Camp Minidoka. Management of the hotel changed hands. The new management, determining it was prudent to eliminate any identification of Japanese with the hotel, changed the hotel to the Beck Hotel. After the war, the Beck Hotel gradually deteriorated. At the base of the hotel was Duke’s Place, which was first a jazz club but later a place where go-go girls danced. The Beck Hotel was eventually torn down in 1971.

When the Fujiis returned after the war, they did not resume the management of the hotel. Hisato, however, did resume his career in hotel/apartment management, leasing an apartment building at Thirteenth and Pine. Both Hisato and Shige were very active in the affairs of the Seattle Buddhist Church. Like his benefactor, Chojiro Fujii, Hisato Fujii also served as President of the Board of the Seattle Buddhist Church. Minoru returned in 1947.

He too eventually entered into the hotel/apartment management business in which he is still active today.

Today, there is no trace of the Fujii Hotel, except in historical photographs and in the memories of the old timers who were alive before World War II. But Chojiro Fujii's legacy can still be seen in the form of the Seattle Buddhist Church, which celebrated the 100th Anniversary of its existence in 2001. Every summer, the Buddhist Church is home to the very popular Bon Odori celebration where Japanese and non-Japanese alike participate in traditional Japanese dance.

Some of the background on Kojuro Fujii and Chojiro Fujii were provided by Minoru Fujii and Iko Fujii.