



HARDIN-SIMMONS

U N I V E R S I T Y

**Historical Narrative by Mary Burke, Hardin-Simmons University
Watanabe-Kimura Apartments Dedication
November 13, 2021**

Today we recognize Grace Watanabe Kimura and her husband Eugene Tatsuru Kimura, but our story begins before them, with Grace's father Paul Yorishige Watanabe.

Paul Yorishige Watanabe was born in Gifu, Japan in 1886. After losing his parents to an earthquake when he was only six, Paul was raised in a Christian orphanage. It was through interactions with missionaries that he was encouraged to come to the United States to study.

Paul initially lived in San Francisco, where he stayed for two years. He indicated that due to the large number of Japanese-speakers in the city, he was unable to effectively learn English. So, he deliberately left the West Coast and found himself in Texas.

He graduated from Simmons College in 1919 and went on to Yale for some graduate classes. After preaching throughout Asia, he returned to California and was ordained. He settled in Los Angeles, where he and his wife grew their family of three daughters, Grace, Jessie, and Ruth.

During the 1920s and 1930s Reverend Watanabe had ties to both Japanese Baptist Churches in LA, which later became the Evergreen Baptist Church and the Fundamental Baptist Mission to the Japanese. Both of which are still active today.

His sermons are in the Japanese American National Museum's archives in LA.

Throughout the years, Paul stayed in touch with his alma mater, sending prayer requests and updates.

It was said of him, "As to his Christian character, I wish to say that I have never met anyone who possessed more of the spirit of humility and meekness, gratitude and appreciation than our friend and brother, Paul Watanabe."

On February 19, 1942, two months after the bombing of Pearl Harbor, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066 ordering all Japanese Americans to evacuate the West Coast. This resulted in the relocation of over 100,000 people to internment camps located inland.

The Watanabe family was not immune to this notice. When the evacuation order was received in the spring, the family had one week to find a way to store their sentimental items and sell their furniture and appliances for next to nothing. What wasn't sold, was abandoned.



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At this time, Paul was ill, hospitalized, and unfit to travel. As a result, he was left behind while his family was boarded onto an old troop with only what they could carry and taken away to a camp in Poston, Arizona.

Of the camps, Grace shared:

We were placed in hastily built tarpaper barracks with no insulation. Some of the barracks were built during the rainy season and the lumber used was not completely dry so when they became dry they shrank and caused the boards on the floor and walls of the barracks to shrink. During the frequent dust storms the sand would blow into our rooms from the floors and walls and no matter how often we tried to sweep them away it was a losing battle. It seems there was always one inch of dust covering everything.

The barracks were divided into 4 small rooms or apartments roughly 20' x 20'. Imagine 6 people living in one room! The room had to serve as the bedroom and living room with 6 cots and a table. If a family had 5 members, they got one room. Since there were only 4 people in our family at the time, we were told we could not have 1 room. We shared the room with a man and his wife who were complete strangers and had to hang a blanket across the room to give us privacy.

25 days after the Watanabe women arrived in Arizona, Paul passed away, separated from his family. Before he passed though, Paul wrote to his friends at Hardin-Simmons asking if the university would sponsor his daughters to get them out of the camp.

23 years had passed since Paul was a student at Simmons College, now Hardin-Simmons University, but he was still remembered and cherished on campus. The administration agreed to sponsor Paul's two older daughters, Grace and Jessie. Five months after arriving in the camp, Grace and Jessie left their mother and sister, and headed to Abilene.

Jessie was 16 and Grace was 17 when they boarded a train to Abilene. In an interview, Grace shared of this trip, "Texas was segregated in those days and when the train stopped at stations along the way we saw signs that read Black, White, Black, White at the drinking fountains and rest rooms. We wondered where we fit in - we were not part of either category and guessed we were somewhere in between."

When the girls arrived in Abilene, they were separated between two host-families. Grace with the Charles Atkinson family and Jessie with the Harry Hayes family. Grace and Jessie worked for the families for room and board. Ironing clothes, preparing meals, doing the housework, and more.



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Both Grace and Jessie were heavily involved on campus. The sisters both majored in Business Administration and minored in Spanish. They were both members of Alpha Chi (a club founded by Dr. Julius Olsen to recognize the top 10% of the junior and senior classes), the Spanish Club, California Club, and Business Administration Club.

Grace shared, “My sister and I took our studies very seriously because we could not let my father and the University down. Fortunately, we were both graduated with honors. I shall be forever grateful to Hardin-Simmons University for the scholarships given to my sister and me. We belonged to the University Baptist Church and attended many services and meetings including those of the Young Women's Association and we made many lasting friendships.”

Grace graduated in 1946 with the Julius Olsen Medal and Minter Medal. She won the literary contest “How Can I help Improve Race Relations” in 1945 and Jessie won in 1946. Grace’s essay is in the university’s archives and is referenced every year in first year seminar courses.

After graduation, Grace moved to Chicago with her mother, and younger sister, Ruth, and that is where she met her husband, Eugene Kimura. Jessie remained in Texas, where she met her husband Edward Saibara.

Over the years, Grace and Jessie gave back to the school, financially supporting scholarships to help students, just as they were helped with scholarships. Grace and Eugene were very generous to HSU, too, including the University in their estate plans.

As we read the Watanabe name on this building and remember the family story, we are reminded of the core foundation of our university, given to us by James Simmons: “to bring young men and women to Christ, to teach them of Christ, and to train them for Christ.”