

# Meriko Maida: Last Link to Japan

## 1. Her Japanese heritage

### Domotos from 1880s

The [Domoto brothers'](#) success was encouraging to those they knew in Japan. The brothers actively recruited workers from their home prefecture of Wakayama, and many friends and relatives eventually came to America to learn the business and follow in their countrymen's successful footsteps. The large number of Japanese trained by the nursery eventually earned it the nickname, "Domoto College".

Kumakichi Maida came to the US in 1900, probably. He is listed in the 1910 census with the immigration year 1900. Also, as living with his son, Eiichi, listed as 22 years old and with an immigration year of 1906. Kumakichi's wife (spelled Matsuye Maeda) and daughter—Kane—arrived in San Francisco in August 1912. Kane was listed as 15 years old; she would be naturalized in 1954. Matsuye died in 1935. Japanese immigrants were not allowed to become US citizens, until the 1950s.

The Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 had created a significant demand for other Asian labor, and the decade of 1891-1900 saw a ten-fold increase in Japanese immigration over the previous decade. The decade 1901-1910 saw nearly 130,000 Japanese arrive, and the decade of Matsuye and Kane's arrival—1911-1920—saw that number drop to some 80,000, as legislation against Japanese immigration began in 1917 and strengthened in 1924.

[Torayoshi Maida](#) (né Muraki) (1889-1978) arrived in the US in 1919. Married Kane, 8 May 1919.

Already 30 when he arrived in the US, Torayoshi was found in the Maida family province of origination: Wakayama. Like all but his eldest brother, Torayoshi "married out," agreeing to take the name of 'Maeda' (spelled 'Maida' in the US) upon marrying Kane. His family—named Muraki—would marry out (= [mukoyōshi](#)) into such families as Bando, Uranishi, and Nukui. Only Tomohei, the eldest, retained the Muraki name. Tomohei had one grandchild—Sanichiro Muraki, still living in Japan in 2015.

Torayoshi had become a teacher, upon his graduation from Tennoji Normal School (teacher's college). He taught at Daiho Elementary [Osaka Prefecture] and Nishinoda [today: "Nishinoda Kindergarten is a private elementary and secondary school in Osaka, Japan. The company is located at 3-17-5, Yoshino, Fukushima-Ku. With 626 other locations, the organization is a member of a large, complex corporate structure."]

In an interview, Meriko suggests that Torayoshi, who was obligated to the state to teach for at least seven years after his state-funded teaching college, loved the social life in Osaka. Certainly, his photo album from this time shows more than one woman labeled ‘lover’, although the exact meaning of this term is not clear. Perhaps, ‘girlfriend’ will suffice. He was certainly a handsome young man, and sported a rakish mustache.

But perhaps after his seven years service, life in Osaka was no longer as compelling, and family connections discovered the opportunity for marrying out to a Japanese-American woman in Richmond, California. He crossed the Pacific on the Persia Maru (1881-1926) in 1919.

Meriko was born in February 1920, obviously conceived minutes after the marriage of her parents. Her sister Asako followed in 1923, and the final child—Junko—in 1926. The desired male child never happened but perhaps the change of country, if not entirely of culture, lessened the blow this might have been.



The girls went to school in the Richmond, California area, and remembered the student body as being quite mixed racially. In a later interview, neither Meriko nor Asako recalled instances of prejudice. In that same interview, neither remembered their young years as working years. Of course they helped out in the floral nurseries when required and available, but that activity was not impressed upon them as their career.

The girls remembered well camping activities in summers growing up. Both Asako and Meriko also remembered that it was their mother who did all the work, and that said mother was nowhere near as excited about these trips as her husband. They also remembered their mother learning to cook from Japanese women’s magazines, although Kane’s own mother would live until 1935.



## **2. Meriko’s first trip to Japan**

Meriko graduated from high school in 1937, having skipped a grade during her education. It was decided, almost certainly by her parents, that she should go to Japan for a while. One presumes that the possibility of marriage was being entertained by those parents. Meriko was never a beauty (as were her two younger sisters) and was rather chunky. She had not, by her own admission, excelled in social activities through high school, although she claims to have been the organizer of several such occasions. Also, as the eldest child in a Japanese-speaking family, her language skills might have been considered sufficient to allow life within Japanese society. Certainly, the Japanese language abilities of neither younger sister would allow such a stay.

### Two years in Japan, first trip 1937

Osaka-area relatives found a high school that would accept Meriko, and she boarded the Chichibu Maru from San Francisco in October 1937. Incidentally, both the ship on which Meriko sailed to Japan and that which brought her back in the spring of 1939 would later be sunk by the American navy during World War 2.

Meriko's non-romantic social skills appear to have been exercised to the fullest on the two-week trip, as her album contains many photographs of her fellow passengers. One passenger was Ms Sumi Sakurai, and Meriko explains in an interview that it was Ms Sakurai's return to Japan that helped Meriko's parents decide that Meriko could go (in Ms Sakurai's company). A particular friend made on that voyage was Mitsuko (Mitzie) Neeno (later Nishimoto). Ms Neeno was also American-born and on a trip of similar nature to that of Meriko.

One memory was recalled several times in Meriko's later life. There were several Japanese-American males also making the trip, and they were full of hope. Evidently, their lives in the United States has been less than smooth, and they were convinced that when at last among people of their own kind, wonders would never cease. This memory was strengthened for her, because on the trip back to the United States some of those same young men were present and their bitterness at the treatment "their own people" gave them was palpable. Although they would have looked like the Japanese they were racially, their language skills and familiarity with customs would have marked them as foreigners. Japanese are not famous for their acceptance of foreigners.

One friend Meriko appears to have made while a student at Kokawa High School (in Wakayama Prefecture) was Kimiko Uchita, who is noted in Meriko's scrapbook as being from Seattle, Washington. A group photo of a school trip to Fukuoka has a touching aspect, as we see Meriko's hand on Kimiko's shoulder. It is probably easier to be female and foreign than male and foreign, but foreign is foreign, and these two native English speakers must have appreciated each other's company.

Among Meriko's memories of that first time in Japan were the arrogance of the increasingly militaristic males, already at war in China when Meriko arrived.

She remembers the girls at the school growing vegetables for the war effort. And she also remembered emptying outhouses to fertilize those vegetables.

She returned to the United States in May 1939.

### 3. The war comes to America

Presumably, Meriko worked at the nursery after her return to California. But it wasn't all that much longer before Pearl Harbor changed the lives of Meriko, her family, and anyone else of Japanese descent. The order for anyone of even 1/16 Japanese descent to vacate the west coast of the United States came early in 1942, and the relocation of those who did not comply (the vast majority of Japanese descendents on the west coast) began shortly afterward. Asako and Meriko remember staying with the nursery longer than the rest of the family, as a certain stage of production had not yet been reached at the time of the initial round-up. The family comprised Kumakichi Maida—the grandfather, his son-in-law Torayoshi, daughter Kane, and the three female children. Of course, they were in the company of dozens of other relatives and friends from the Richmond area.

The family was sent to Topaz, a camp created in desert Utah. In 2004, Meriko and Asako recorded their conversation while watching the 1990 film *Come See the Paradise*, which although ostensibly about an Irish immigrant also contains many scenes of life within the camps. They considered the depiction of the film quite accurate, and it gave them several opportunities to remember their experience there. In general, those memories differed in so much as their personalities differed.

#### [Conversation between Meriko and Asako](#)

Their stay in Topaz was shortened when the youngest daughter, Junko, received permission to attend Rochester School of Music in New York State. Meriko and Asako were sent along with Junko, although a 2013 interview showed that Junko lived separately from her sisters, who were household help for a wealthy Rochester family (with whom they maintained contact for years afterward). Additionally, Asako had met Shiro Tokuno while in camp, and when he was sent to Ft Snelling for Army training, Asako eventually married and joined him. Meriko stayed with the Rochester family until the end of the war, and then she and Junko (whose scholarship was just for one year) returned to California to help the family rebuild their life there.

### 4. Life after the war

Meriko appears to have begun working in the business world, probably in clerical positions, soon after the war. But she also made at least two extended trips to Japan, probably at least partially in pursuit of marriage. A scrapbook she kept of the 1953 trip shows extensive contact both with Wakayama relatives

of her father and also of much contact with her new relatives by Asako's marriage. Asako joined her husband in Japan, shortly after the war ended, and her first child, Ken, was born in Tokyo in 1947, after which she returned to the US. Shiro stayed on as a civilian employee, and worked in particular on land reform (providing the opportunity for Japanese farmers to own the land they had previously rented from large landowners). He was joined by various relatives from his own family. His sister Haru features in several photographs with Meriko, and his sister Tei was also part of the occupation.

The 1953 trip (which lasted until May 1954) probably involved investigations into the possibility of marriage. Meriko did marry at one point, but it was quickly over. She made another trip in 1957, this time by air.

### [Meriko goes back to Japan, 1953](#)

One event that happened in the 1950s would have a life-long effect on Meriko. She had befriended the young diplomatic couple from Japan that she met at some gathering. I believe the United States was Mr Nishiyama's first foreign posting. Their friendship lasted the lives of the participants, and as Mr Nishiyama became ambassador to first one country, then another, Meriko would travel to their new location and share in that special experience. I remember Canada and Switzerland in particular, and a special experience in Taiwan.

## **5. The modern era**

Meriko was employed for nearly thirty years by a small insurance company in the Richmond area. The owner and some of the other office workers became close friends to Meriko, and it was probably sad for her that she outlived them all! She told me more than once that she retired as much because computers were coming into the office and she didn't know how to use them.

We visited, on average, every couple years, and she made an extensive trip to Washington, DC in 2002. There, I showed her how a computer can even show and create text in Japanese. Giving her a computer for which I no longer had any use gave her a chance to try this for herself, and she became a proficient advocate of the computer for the next fifteen years. Entering Japanese can be rather tricky, as you must know a thing or two that is not spoken but must be written. She figured this out all by herself. She carried on correspondence with Japanese friends and relatives first through computer-generated letters, then through email. Relatives used her email account to inform those correspondents of her death, so in a sense her computer usage exceeded her lifespan.

### [A few photos 1973-2012](#)

After many years living in Richmond, Meriko had a couple different living situations with her sister Asako, with whom she lived until Asako's death in

2015. She lived her last year in San Diego under the care of her nephew Bruce and his wife Kim.

## Saying goodbye

Meriko—known as ‘Auntie’ by the family, but when I was no longer in the family, she let it be known that she was now “Meriko, my friend.” And friend she was. She was welcoming even before I formally joined the family in 1970, and she visited Shira and me in all our locations, and then me after 1989. She visited Seattle as well as Washington, DC, and I returned the favor whenever I could.

So, she was both of the Maida family and also apart from it. As the only non-married sister, she had a truly broad experience of the world apart from family, and her friendships had few of the vagaries of family relations. Never the charmer like her sister Asako, neither was she cowed by Asako’s easy way with people. If she liked you, she became your friend. If she didn’t, she felt no need to please you.

She was my go-to resource for various questions about Japanese culture, especially over the last twenty years of her life. I kept her supplied with films of a Japanese nature, and she helped with photo identification and backgrounds for a web project involving contact with her Japan relatives. In retrospect, her language abilities, especially with the written language, were remarkable. As the ladies discuss in the video interviews, they attended Japanese school on weekends, but so did countless others, and few ever gained proficiency in the spoken language much less the written.

This memorial is to say that I once knew Meriko Maida and appreciated her friendship. So let it be known.

Michael Broschat, October 2017