

## MY EARLY YEARS

### 1924-1942

I don't, of course, remember too much about my very early years. My birth certificate says that I was born on 2 January 1924 to Takaji Kawata, who was 36 at the time of my birth, and to Masano Asano Kawata, who was 31. For Color or Race the entry was given *Japanese*. That, you know, is not color or race, but that was a distinction made then. The address given was 52 1/2 N. 3rd Street in Portland, Oregon. [It was not uncommon in those days for street addresses to be a number and a fraction. That went out of use years ago.] I was *born alive* at home at 9 AM, delivered by Mrs. Takako Urakami, a midwife. The certificate records that I was the third child born to them. The first born was a sister who came two months early and died before I was born. My sister, Grace was born on 10 December 1922, but was reported as being born on 1 January 1923. The name given to her at birth was Chitose. She, later in life, changed it officially to Grace. I had no reason to change my name. It was my sister that gave me my nick-name, Kaz, when I was about 9 years old, and I have been known by my nick-name ever since.

My father was born in the village Nakaizumi in Okayama Prefecture in Japan on 8 April 1887. He came to the U.S. when he was 19 years old, arriving in the U.S. on 28 May 1906. Upon arrival he went to work on a section gang building railroads in Oregon and Washington. The West was young then, and laborers were needed to build the west. When he was disabled in the work on the railroad, he went into the kitchen and became a cook. My mother was born on 16 June 1892 in Ichinomiya, a town in the Okayama Prefecture. Her marriage to my father was arranged in Japan in June 1920. My father went back to Japan on 15 December 1920 for the wedding. They were married in March 1921 and came to the U.S. on 5 April 1921. Mother worked hard all her life. She worked even while she was carrying her first baby. But when the first born baby died, she decided that she would devote her time to caring for the children until all of us started school. All her children became very close to her.

My early life was a protected life in many ways. We lived in a community within a community. Since my parents were immigrants and spoke little English, their social world was the Japanese community. My father worked as a cook in a Japanese-owned restaurant cooking American food. The customers were from the general public. I can recall the beef stew he cooked which was delicious beyond words. His apple pies were the best I've eaten. In the restaurant he touched the outer world, but for the children our world was insular until we children started grade school. My sister is older than I by one year and she paved much of my way.

Early in my life we were taken to the Buddhist Church for Sunday School. In retrospect that was an interesting twist for Buddhists in the U.S. In Japan their house of worship would be called a temple and the idea for the Sunday School was borrowed from the Christian churches. What was in the minds of the issei was their desire to preserve their religious practices. For the same reason they opened the Japanese Language School. They were not too different from other immigrants who came to the U.S. One of the fun times was the annual

picnics organized by the people who came from the same prefecture in Japan. Since my parents came from Okayama Prefecture they were called *Okayamakenjin*. Simply translated it means "people of the Okayama Prefecture". The people who belonged to the group rented a farmer's field and staked out fields for all kinds of races. There were always good food and soft drinks and prizes for winning games. The New Year was celebrated over three days. Every family prepared their best Japanese food and they went visiting. Since my birthday is the 2nd of January, I always had great food to celebrate with.

In our early years there was no kindergarten. We started school at the age of six. We had no school buses which meant we walked to school every day. Portland has very rainy weather, and so we often walked in the rain. My primary school was the Atkinson Grade School. It was not called an elementary school then. It was located between 11th and 12th avenues in Northwest Portland. On one side of the school was the armory, on another side was the NABISCO factory making soda crackers, on the third side was the back of a storage building and on the fourth side were residential homes. The school was a wooden building and was probably a potential fire-trap. We certainly had a lot of fire drills so that we would be prepared. The building had three levels. The basement had a place where the students could eat their brown bag lunches, [There was no cafeteria.] and boys' and girls' rest room facilities. The first floor was for classrooms. The upper floor was closed off, because it had become redundant and not maintained. Atkinson was a segregated school with only Chinese and Japanese students. About 200 of them went to Atkinson from the Chinatown and the Japanese community. They lived in the zone between the school and the Willamette River. White students even living close just west of the school chose to go to a newer brick-and-mortar constructed school further north and west of Atkinson. It may be that their parents didn't want their children going to a school which looked like a fire trap. I also thought they didn't want their children having to compete with the Japanese and Chinese students who tended to be good students.

You need to know that in 1929 there was a big economic crash in the U.S. Many banks went bankrupt; businesses could not keep going; unemployment was a big problem. There was a "run" on the bank where my parents had their money. This means that large number of depositors wanted the cash they had put into the bank. Their bank could only pay out 10 cents on the dollar. Not knowing what the future might portend, my parents scraped up enough money to buy passage for mother and the four of us children to go to Japan for a visit. It was still 1930. With the depressed economy the boat passage probably did not cost too much. So, in the middle of my first year of school, we went to Japan and stayed there ten months. We visited my maternal grandfather's home in Ichinomiya, but spent most of my days in Nakaizumi at the home where my father grew up. For the time I was there I went to the village school. The first grade in Japan was nothing like the school in America. I wore the black uniform with a high collar. My head was not shaved, but it didn't have much hair.

What do I remember of my ten month in Japan? I recall that the summer was very hot and there were many mosquitoes. We slept on the *tatami* on top of *futon*. In the sleeping room was a huge mosquito net hung from the four corner posts to protect us from being bitten. That was the biggest mosquito net I have ever seen then or since. The winter was cold for there was no central heating. What was there to keep us warm was a heat center in the main room. There was a pit in the center

part of the *tatami* and over it was a wooden frame. Over the frame was draped a light comforter. In the pit was placed a charcoal brazier. We would put our feet under the comforter and be warmed.

I can also recall in the fall after the rice harvest and excess straw was being burned the boys of the village taught us to throw sweet potato into the straw. After it had roasted, we would take it out, knock off the straw ash and eat it. Somehow it tasted so much better than sweet potato cooked or baked in the kitchen.

Ten months in Japan was a long time. By the time our stay was over, we were ready to return to Portland which was truly home to us. Mother asked me whether I would like to remain in Japan to attend school and return to the U.S. after I had finished the ten years through high school. I could not think of being separated from my parents and my siblings. We returned to the U.S. in 1931. I picked up where I left in the first grade.

There were few teachers at Atkinson Grade School. The first grade was taught by Miss Brodie, the second grade by Mrs. Kramer, the third and fourth by Mrs. Strout, the fifth and sixth by Mrs. Douglas, and the seventh and eighth by Miss Penny Singleton, who was also the principal. I am convinced that those dedicated teachers did not want to teach anywhere else. The students were all well behaved and were eager to learn. That was the cultural trait of the two communities from which they came. Mrs. Douglas became a good friend of my sister and kept in touch with her. Although the grade schools days were in the distant past, I still remember some things. Mrs. Strout one time gave me a grade of pluperfect on a subject in my report card. I had to look that up in the dictionary. I recall that when Mrs. Douglas thought that her classes needed a break, she would have us drop what we were doing and had us play the "I spy" game. It was a good relaxer for us. One time when my turn came, I said, "I spy something that begins with a "b". The students in the two classes guessed and guessed and they finally had to give up. I told them the "b" was for banner and pointed to the American flag in front of the room. The students thought I had taken the game to another level. At another time I picked "p" for pendulum in the school room clock that hung on the wall.

Mrs. Douglas had me do two years of class work in one, so that I was able to catch up the year I had lost going to Japan. When I got into the seventh grade, Miss Singleton made me the "chief" of the school patrol. I stayed the chief for two years. Miss Singleton was an excellent teacher. The one thing she taught me that I have been grateful for was diagramming sentences. That has stayed with me all my years.

Public school was not the only school I attended. When I started to attend the public school, I also started to attend the Japanese Language School. The public school went from 8:30 to 3:30. We had one hour to get over to the Japanese School which went from 4:30 to 6:30. We also went to Japanese School on Saturday mornings for two hours. That didn't give us much time for mischief, or so, we were reminded. The one hour between 3:30 and 4:30 to get to the Japanese School gave us some time to stop off at a public park where there were setups for gymnastics. A friend and I worked out on the horizontal bar, parallel bars, trapeze, and rings. We essentially self-taught ourselves to do various tricks. After some time I was able to do the requirements for the gymnastics letter when I got to high school. The requirements were

giant circles and walking on hand stand across the parallel bars.

The Japanese School went one extra month into the summer with two morning classes. Essentially our summer vacation from schools was, therefore, two months in the year. This affected summer jobs. When I was 10 years old, my father took me to the truck farm of Mr. N. Fujimoto to introduce me to farm work, because that was where we had an ideal arrangement for summer work. Mr. Fujimoto and my father came from the same village in Japan together to American, and our families were close. That time I did not stay the whole two months of the summer. From the age 12, however, with my sister who is a year older than I taking charge, we started to spend each summer working for Mr. Fujimoto. Mr. Fujimoto had a 40 acre farm on which he grew strawberries, cane berries and various kinds of vegetables. We were there to pick berries. We got there too late to pick strawberries, but we picked Logan, Young, Boysen, and Black berries in that order as the berry season progressed. We were paid by the number of crates of berries we picked. My sister had an incredible finger dexterity, and she could pick two crates to my one. By the end of the summer we would each earn from about \$300 to \$500, which was quite an accomplishment for us.

In 1938 I completed grade school and entered Lincoln High School in the fall of the year. That was another change for me, for Lincoln High School had a diverse student body. I do not recall any African-American students there, but the Japanese and Chinese students were well represented. The white students came from the West Hills and from places further to the south of the school. Near the high school was the Jewish area and Jewish students came from there. Going to high school and to the Japanese School daily took a great deal of time, and there was a lot of home work to do in the evenings when I got home. I seldom went to bed before 11:00 PM. Yet I made honor roll every semester in school, and graduated with an all-E record. When I completed 10 years of Japanese School and graduated, I felt free for I then had only the public school to attend in my junior and senior years. About that time I joined the judo club of Portland and practiced one evening a week. Taking time out to do judo meant I had to spend weekends in studies. This was worth it, for I truly enjoyed doing judo and going to tournaments with other clubs. I recall going to Gresham and to Hood River for tournaments and winning some matches for which I received pennants made of colored flannel with the club names on them. The pennants decorated my room at home. Unfortunately the silver fish liked the flannel as well, and they were lost at the time of our evacuation.

Before I finished grade school, we had moved to South Portland and this made it closer for me to get to Lincoln High School. My parents had bought into a hotel business catering largely to the laboring class. There were, therefore, many chores for me to do. During the week day my job was school(s); on Saturdays I helped my mother with sundry jobs around the hotel. On Sundays my siblings and I were sent off to the Sunday School at the Nichiren Buddhist Church. This was not the Buddhist Church we attended earlier. The Nichiren Church was established later. Every Sunday we would walk about two miles to get there. The minister was from Japan, and he spoke almost no English. He could not communicate with us. What we had to endure was his chanting. I must say that we were very polite and sat through the chanting quietly. My parents felt that the act of attendance was important and that the understanding would come later. [Years later

when I studied comparative religion I thought about the importance of form over content to the people of the East.] I also became active in the Young Buddhist movement. This was arranged by our Buddhist parents. One time when there was a West Coast conference of Young Buddhists and our church was the place for the meeting, somehow I was made the vice-president of the movement and as a host, I was to give the welcoming address. My mother wrote out my speech in Japanese, I memorized it, and I gave it at the opening session. The parents who cooked and served the banquet heard my speech and complimented me on how good it was. The problem was that I did not understand a word I said. It was a good acting job. It was little wonder that I was destined to leave Buddhism. In my spiritual life I needed content, not simply form.

The high school years opened many new opportunities for me. I made many friends outside the Japanese circle, I joined several academic clubs and was selected to be a member of the top honorary, the Hi-Y. I ran for Assistant Treasurer of the student body in my junior year and was elected. In the senior year I was the Treasurer. I felt fortunate having excellent teachers. I was in the honors class in English taught by Miss Maureen Brown. She later married Richard Neuberger, who was elected to the U.S. Senate from Oregon. When he died she became Senator Maureen Neuberger. Miss Arbuckle was one of my math teachers. She selected me to compete in the inter-scholastic math competition. That was fun. Mr. Baldwin was another math teacher who also advised the Treasurer of the student body. When I was a junior in his class he had me teach freshman algebra class one time. Mr. Foulk was our biology teacher. I remember doing a dissection of a bull's eye. He had bought from a slaughter house an eye for each student in the biology class. We were to dissect and lay out the different parts of the eye on a white sheet of paper and label them. We were to find ten parts. I could only find nine. It took me and the rest of the class a long time to realize that the tenth part was the pupil. Mr. Green was my chemistry teacher who trusted us to conduct experiments on our own, within limits. I learned that being almost right in chemistry was not good enough. I made a miniature fire extinguisher with glassware. I put a thistle tube and a bent glass tube through a two-hole rubber stopper and fitted the assembly onto a flask. In the flask I put water and soda and when I thought I was ready, I poured acid down the thistle tube. The jet of water propelled by carbon dioxide formed was to go out the bent tube. It did, but the fluid also came right back out of the thistle tube and gave me a shower. Not soon afterwards, my sweater was full of acid holes. In Latin class I was a terror to substitute teachers. I liked Latin because it is a very logical language. One substitute teacher had placed a Latin sentence of the board, but since I looked at it quizzically, she asked "What's wrong?" I replied, "You left off eight long marks." She handed me the chalk and I added the long marks for her. In my junior year in English we studied poetry. In a final examination the teacher asked the question, "Whom do you prefer, Elizabeth Barrett Browning or William Wordsworth, and why?" That was a toughy for me and I slaved over the question. Then I heard another student get up (it seemed too quickly), hand in the paper and walk out of the room. The teacher confessed the following week that the student answered the question, "I have no preference." and she added, "I've given him full credit for the answer." Our vice-principal was Mr. York and the principal was Mr. Gunn. They were good men. Mr. York succeeded Mr. Gunn shortly after I graduated. He was the person who went to bat for me to get the School Board to give me the award money for the T.T. Davis Award which I won as the top student of the

1942 graduating class. There was another happening that I remember well and that took place during the 1941 spring fair. We, who were student body officers, put on a skit and danced in a chorus line. For this I wore my sister's blouse and skirt. We sang and danced to:

*Walking through the park one day,  
In the merry merry month of May ....*

I have put my most embarrassing moment to the last. That happened when I was a very new freshman. Somehow the school office, unable to decipher from my name whether I was a male or female student, assigned me to the Girls' Guidance class. The teacher took a chair out of the room, placed it in the hall and had me sit there till after her class was over, so she could have the error corrected.

My world at the high school, with the exception of the above incident, was all sunshine and roses, but that was soon to change.