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CIR's Corner

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Hello everyone! "CIR's Corner" is my monthly article about international exchange and cultures around the world. I will introduce a variety of interesting international topics.

This Month's Topic: Miyo Iwakoshi

In December, I visited Ebetsu's sister city, Gresham, Oregon. I was a chaperone for a group of junior high school students participating in a homestay program there. The host school, West Orient Middle School, is a small school located about 8.5 km east of downtown Gresham. The community of Orient is rather rural, with many fields and Christmas tree farms.

The school principal copied an article from a history book for me about a local historical figure. Her name was Miyo Iwakoshi, and she was a Japanese pioneer. I found her story very interesting, so I would like to share it with you this month.

In 1880, Miyo Iwakoshi was the first Japanese person to settle in Oregon. However, her grave in the Gresham Pioneer Cemetery had been left unmarked for many years. One day in 1978, in that very cemetery, Margaret Okrasinski, who had been researching Gresham pioneers, had a chance

encounter with a woman from Sapporo, Japan, named Akiko Sugioka. Sugioka had served as an interpreter when Ebetsu and Gresham became sister cities, and she had a strong interest in Japanese-American history. When she met Okrasinski, she had been searching for Iwakoshi's grave. She had

found the graves of Iwakoshi's husband and some relatives, but Iwakoshi's grave was nowhere to be found. Both Okrasinski and Sugioka thought this was very strange, so Okrasinski decided to put her own research on hold and join Sugioka in uncovering the mystery of Miyo Iwakoshi.

Their first question was why Iwakoshi came to Oregon, and the answer was Andrew MacKinnon, Iwakoshi's husband. MacKinnon was originally from Argyllshire, Scotland, but he had migrated to Australia and farmed there for 12 years. Due to droughts and epidemics, he did not have much success, so he decided to try his luck in a new land. At that time, Japan was in the middle of the Meiji era, and the government was actively hiring foreigners to introduce new farming techniques. MacKinnon was one of these foreigners, and he found a job in the Tohoku region teaching former samurai how to farm. Records say he was a good teacher, but perhaps because he never learned Japanese, he did not remain in Japan. When he was 58 years old, he brought his 28-year-old Japanese bride, Miyo Iwakoshi, and her 5-year-old daughter, Tama Nitobe, on the long journey to Oregon. Iwakoshi and Tama never set foot in Japan again.

It is a mystery who Tama's biological father was. It was believed that Tama was a full-blooded Japanese child, so MacKinnon couldn't have fathered her. According to Sugioka's research, Tama was most likely the illegitimate child of a high-ranking official. Her Japanese name meant "jewel," so she was also known as Jewel MacKinnon.

After the family's arrival in Oregon, MacKinnon and a



Iwakoshi (center), her brother Riki (left), and her daughter Tama (right) (Gresham Historical Society)

few business partners founded a sawmill near what is now West Orient Middle School. Legend has it that he called it the “Orient Steam Sawmill” in honor of his Japanese wife and daughter, who hailed from the Far East. The town that sprang up around the sawmill was also called Orient.

Six years later, on December 9, 1886, MacKinnon passed away at the age of 64. Iwakoshi then married one of her late husband’s business partners, Robert Smith, but he also died a short time later.

Iwakoshi inherited the properties of both MacKinnon and Smith, which made her quite wealthy. However, aside from Tama, she had no family left and must have felt quite lonely. Her younger brother, Riki, joined her from Japan. He became a skilled gambler and was locally known as “Riki the Centipede.” In 1885, 18-year-old businessman Shintaro Takaki moved from San Francisco to Portland. He had heard a rumor that a beautiful Japanese girl lived in the forest out



Iwakoshi (left), Tama (right), and Tama's children (Gresham Historical Society)

east, so he went to Orient to see if it was true. There, he met 11-year-old Tama. In 1891, Shintaro and Tama got married, marking the first Japanese marriage in Oregon. They had six children and raised them in Orient. Finally, Iwakoshi had a family in America.

From the 1890s

through the early 1900s, many Japanese people immigrated to the West Coast in search of riches. Iwakoshi and her family could speak English and were well-established in their community, so new arrivals from Japan often sought their help. Iwakoshi and Tama provided food and shelter, while Shintaro used his connections as a businessman and labor contractor to secure railroad jobs for them. Iwakoshi was so well-known in the Japanese-American community that she gained the nickname “Empress of the West.”

Even empresses experience tragedy. Of Iwakoshi’s six grandchildren, only three survived to adulthood. Tama and Shintaro’s oldest daughter, Mamie, was shot and killed by a rejected suitor. Their second daughter, Minnie, died at the age of 13, and their third daughter, Margaret, also passed away in childhood. Their fourth daughter, Hannah, married a

few times but had no children. Their oldest son, Robert, ran a gas station in Orient. Their second son, Max, had four children, but divorced his wife and moved to California, where he passed away several years later.

Iwakoshi passed away in 1931 at the age of 79. In 1942, her three remaining family members in Gresham—Tama, Shintaro, and their oldest son Robert—were sent to a Japanese-American internment camp in Idaho. Even after the war ended, they never returned to Gresham. Tama passed away in Idaho in 1966 at the age of 93, and Shintaro died 40 days later at the age of 100. Robert was shot and killed in Idaho a few years before Okrasinski and Sugioka began their research on Iwakoshi’s life. Apart from a few elderly residents of Orient, no one who knew Iwakoshi was still alive.

MacKinnon, Tama and Shintaro’s daughters, and Max’s two sons rest in the Gresham Pioneer Cemetery. The reason that “Empress” Iwakoshi’s grave could not be found alongside those of her family was pure racism. When she died in 1931, anti-Japanese sentiment was on the rise, and the citizens of Gresham opposed her burial in the cemetery. So instead of a gravestone, a Japanese cedar tree was planted to mark her burial site. Forty-seven years later, it had grown into a magnificent tree, and it was under that tree that Okrasinski and Sugioka decided to research Miyo Iwakoshi. If the two had not met, Iwakoshi’s story might have been forgotten by history. In 1988, the city of Gresham finally placed a memorial for Iwakoshi under the cedar tree. Iwakoshi’s great-granddaughter (one of Max’s daughters) attended the ceremony from California.

Learning about Miyo Iwakoshi, I felt an even stronger connection between Japan and Gresham. When I visit Gresham next year, I would like to visit Iwakoshi’s grave.



Nesbit, Sharon. “Forgotten Pioneer.” Gresham Outlook, May 18, 1988, 1B.
Nesbit, Sharon. “First Japanese Immigrant Had Life of Tragedy, Loss.” Gresham Outlook, May 21, 1988, 4A.
Nesbit, Sharon. “Cemetery Plot Tells Story of First Japanese Family.” Gresham Outlook, May 25, 1988, 6A.

Iwakoshi in the 1920s (Gresham Historical Society)

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