

Part V: Baker's Japanese Community, 1900-1942

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Kajikawa/Kobayashi Family

In the April 1942 edition of Myrtle Lee's WWII newsletter, which was sent to Baker County men and women serving in the U.S. armed forces all over the world, Lee wrote, "There is, as you know, no race prejudice, nor war bitterness in our High School. Yukio Yano is vice-president of the Senior Class and rates high (academically). He plans to be a Chemical Engineer. The highest rated girl in the class is Grace Kobayashi and her sister, Ruth, is third. Martha Oxnard is a close runner up of Grace's place and, since the Japanese families are moving to a farm near Vale, it will leave Martha at the head of her class."

According to ninety-year-old Grace Kobayashi Shigeno, whom I've interviewed, her mother, Masako (1901-1992), was the driving force in seeing that her children succeeded in Baker's school system. And succeed they did! Within five years (1938 to 1942), Masako saw four children graduate from Baker High School: Haruko "Ethel" Kajikawa in 1938, Masaaki "John" Kajikawa in 1939, and Kiyoko "Ruth" Kobayashi and Toyoko "Grace" Kobayashi in 1942. During their senior year at BHS, Grace was President and Ruth Vice President of Torch Honor Club, to which their brother John had belonged earlier; sisters Ruth and Grace were co-editors of the BHS yearbook "Nugget"; and Grace was in first place and Ruth in third place in academic rankings in their senior year. Also during those five years, Masako gave birth to her last two children, Susumu "George" in 1938 and Sachiyu "Carol" in 1941.

Masako married twice. Her first husband, Tomokichi "Tom" Kajikawa (1883-1927) when he first came to this country worked for a railroad company, probably Northern Pacific, in Montana. He returned to Japan in 1918, married Masako, and came back to Washington with his bride. They settled in Fife, near Tacoma, where Tom had a job at a sawmill. The couple had four children: Ethel, born 1919; John, 1921; Ruth, 1923; and Grace, 1924. Their father, Tom, died of pneumonia in 1927.

Masako's second husband was Susumu "George" Kobayashi (1893-1970). He was 15 when he came to this country. He found employment in Seattle as a houseboy, working for a senator in the Washington State legislature. The senator sent him to high school to learn English and Spanish as he hoped to work for a railroad company. George found employment in Montana working for the same company as Tom Kajikawa.

Widow Masako married George in 1929. George had met Masako through his friendship with Tom. (George later adopted Masako's four children.) George moved Masako and children to La Grande, where he was employed as a railway section boss of an all-white crew, except for one Black worker. Grace says that she attended grades one through three in La Grande, although part of the third grade was spent in Japan.



John & Ethel Kobayashi

In December 1933, Masako took the children—Ethel, John, Ruth, and Grace—to Hiroshima, Japan, to visit their ailing maternal grandmother. "We ran all over the ship," Grace remembers. In Japan they attended a Japanese school. While the family was away, the Depression in the U.S. led to layoffs, which resulted in George being bumped to Telocaset, a desolate railway crew camp on the Union Pacific line about twenty miles south of Union, Oregon. When Masako and children returned from Japan, they joined George at Telocaset.

Grace says she loved living at Telocaset. Her family lived in company housing with a yard where Masako planted a big garden. Ethel and John rode the bus to Union High School and Grace and Ruth attended the one-room Telocaset elementary school. Grace says she loved her teachers, especially Mrs. Hays, who advanced her into her sister Ruth's class.

In 1937, George used his seniority to bump the section boss at the Pleasant Valley station located twelve miles southeast of Baker, so that the children would be closer to a bigger high school. Ethel, a senior, and

John, a junior, rode the school bus to Baker High School. Ruth and Grace attended eighth grade at Pleasant Valley School, a stone building, now a private residence, a half mile west of Pleasant Valley. The next year Grace rode the bus to Baker to attend Junior High School. Ruth went to Walla Walla, Washington, to be a companion to a Nisei girl whose parents operated a variety store there. (Nisei is a Japanese born in the U.S. of Issei parents, i.e., parents born in Japan.) About a year later Ruth was back with her family in Pleasant and attending BHS.

While living at Pleasant Valley, Masako had two more children, George in 1938 and Carol in 1941. George was born at St. Elizabeth Hospital in Baker, but Carol was not. As time for her birth drew near, Masako traveled from Pleasant Valley to Baker to stay with the Kuratas at the Crabill Hotel, located just a half mile from St. Elizabeth Hospital. As it turned out, the hotel was not close enough. Masako gave birth in the Kurata's hotel apartment with Kuni Kurata and her teenage daughter, Hod, assisting. Hod, after receiving instructions in English from hospital staff via phone, translated them into Japanese, and relayed them to Kuni and Masako, who spoke no English. The happy result was a healthy baby girl.

Grace says that in Baker there was no interracial dating. The Japanese students socialized together, including traveling to Ontario to play basketball with Japanese students and those students coming to Baker. Baker's adult Japanese residents also socialized together.

After graduation from BHS in 1938, Ethel Kobayashi went to Seattle to study sewing and tailoring. John graduated from BHS the next year and followed Ethel to Seattle, where he attended the University of Washington.

In February 1942, George Kobayashi lost his job as foreman of an all-white railroad maintenance crew, a position he had held at Pleasant Valley since 1937. The reason for the layoff, said management, was fear that Kobayashi's white crew members might harm him, due to racism toward Japanese that surfaced as soon as the war broke out. But Grace says her father had good relations with his white crew. And local farmers helped her mother when it came time to butcher her pigs. The more likely reason for George losing his job was the U.S. government's not allowing persons of Japanese descent to work around railway transportation.

The family had to leave company housing immediately, Grace says. For a while they stayed with the Hayashis and Kuratas in Baker, while their father went to the Vale area to find a farm to lease, which he did with the help of a farmer for whom son John had worked during summer vacation from college. Then Masako and Grace followed him. Ruth remained in Baker until graduation in May staying with the Francis and Elaine Schmidt family, for whom she had been working as nanny and housemaid. (The Schmidts owned The Bootery, a women's shoe store.)

In 1943 Ethel Kobayashi (1919-2003) married Ben Tsukamaki (1919-1996). Ben was born at Orillia, Washington. After returning to Japan for a while, in 1936 Ben's family moved to Caldwell and Notus, Idaho, where Ben farmed with his father and brothers growing onions. Later for many years Ethel and Ben operated Ontario Market in Ontario. Ethel and Ben had three children: Carolyn, Ethel Ann, and William Ben.

The connection between the Kurata and Kobayashi families continued twenty-three years after Carol Kobayashi's birth in the Crabill Hotel (see Part IV). In 1964, thirty-eight-year-old Haruyo "Hod" Kurata Koda, who had married William Koda (1923-1996) in 1949, was fatally injured in a car and train collision that took place on the way to Vale after the birth of their last child, Julie. All occupants were injured, but Hod arrived back at Holy Rosary Hospital in Ontario in the worst condition and died three days later.

Coincidentally this was the first day on the job for newly-registered nurse Carol Kobayashi. Carol found herself attending to Hod, who had assisted at Carol's own birth, as related above. Julie Koda Clark, fifty years after surviving the car accident that killed her mother, is today owner-operator of the Outdoorsman store in Ontario. Her husband, Mark Clark, is chief of police of Payette, Idaho.

In the spring of 1942, when John was attending the University of Washington in Seattle, he avoided internment by returning to Baker to help his family move to Vale, where he farmed for several years. Toward the end of the war, John was drafted and was stationed in Tokyo working in a quarter-

masters unit. After discharge from the army, with the assistance of the GI Bill, John continued his education at the University of Washington, from which he graduated with a degree in marketing. He ended up in California working for Northrop Corporation (later Northrop Grumman) in the purchasing department. He and his wife, Masako, had one son, Kelly. John Kobayashi died in 2007 at age 86.



Cecilian Ensemble: Sonoya Hirata, Ruth Kobayashi

After graduating from Baker High School in 1942, Ruth Kobayashi (1923-2013) attended Boise Junior College in Boise, Idaho. In 1946 she married Thomas Tanaka (1924-2014). Thomas was a 1941 graduate of Jefferson High School in Portland. From 1942-1945 he was interned with his family at the Minidoka Relocation Center for persons of Japanese descent. Ruth and Tom settled in Seattle, Washington, where Tom earned a chemical engineering degree from the University of Washington. Ruth and Tom owned and operated apartment houses and other businesses in Seattle, while raising two sons, Thomas, Jr., and Kenneth. In 1983 Ruth and Tom moved to Redlands, California, where they purchased and managed Carriage Barn Antiques for twenty-four years. In 2011 they retired to Cottonwood, Arizona, fifty miles south of Flagstaff. Ruth died in 2013. Tom passed away in 2014.

In 1948 Grace Kobayashi married Charles K. Shigeno (1924-2007), whom she met when he was working for her family driving tractor after discharge from the army. In 1942 Charlie was living in Auburn, Washington. As a Japanese resident he was sent to the assembly site in Puyallup, Washington, followed by internment, first at the Pinedale and then the Tule Lake relocation camps in California. From there he volunteered to work on a farm in Montana. But soon after arriving in Montana he was drafted into the army and ended up in Italy in the famed all-Japanese 100th Battalion/442nd Regimental Combat Team.

After they married, Grace and Charlie found work in Boise, Idaho, then in Denver, then back to Boise, where they raised two girls, JoAnn and Rosemary. Charlie worked for the Northrup-King Seed Company and Grace worked in law offices and at home typing transcripts of court reporter recordings. In 1976 they moved to Manson, Washington, near Chelan, where they raised apples, until selling their orchard in 2001. Charlie died in 2007 at age 83. Today Grace, age 90, resides alternately in the homes of her daughters in Kent, Washington, and Redmond, Oregon.

George and Masako farmed in the Vale area, then in about 1948 moved to Payette, where they farmed. Their two youngest children, George and Carol, finished their schooling in Payette. In 1966 the parents moved to Ontario, where George died in 1970 and Masako in 1992.

George Kobayashi, Jr. (1938-2010), graduated from Payette High School in 1956, then attended the University of Washington, where he earned a PhD degree. He spent his whole career working for Boeing. George and wife, Frances, had one child, Sheryl. George died in Seattle at age 72.

In interviews of Carol Kobayashi Winger (1941-), the youngest of the Kobayashi children, she says her earliest memories are of living on a farm near Vale helping her mother tend the garden. Carol graduated from Payette High School in 1960, then obtained a nursing degree in Spokane, Washington. After several months as a nurse in rainy Seattle, Carol returned to Eastern Oregon, where she spent her whole nursing career at Holy Rosary Hospital (today St. Alphonsus Hospital) in Ontario, and retired in 2014 after fifty years as a nurse. Today Carol volunteers at Four Rivers Cultural Center and Museum, Presbyterian Community Care Center, and Children's Relief Nursery, all located in Ontario. Carol has two children, son Jeffrey and daughter Nicole.

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