

Kimonos tell story of first-generation American Kiyoko Tsuboi Taubkin

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On Sept. 21, the Willamette Heritage Center opens our fall exhibition, "Art and Tradition of Kimono." The history and customs surrounding this style of dress reach back more than 1,000 years, and the kimono remains culturally relevant today. Kimono are an important element of Japanese and Nikkei (Japanese American) culture.

Many of the kimono that will be on display are from the collection of one woman, Mrs. Kiyoko Tsuboi Taubkin. They were donated to the Portland-based Oregon Nikkei Endowment in 2009 upon her passing. The kimono are from Taubkin's personal and family collection. Taubkin's family story is probably similar to many early Issei (first generation) and Nikkei experiences in the Pacific Northwest.

Masaichi Tsuboi, Kiyoko Tsuboi Taubkin's father, first came to Portland from Okayama City, Japan in 1897. Between 1897 and 1913, Masaichi took several trips between Japan and the United States. During this time, while in Portland, Masaichi worked at the Hachiya Watch Store. In 1912, Masaichi married Yukino Omori in Japan and she returned to Portland with him in 1913.

In 1907 after graduating from Okayama Prefectural Commercial High School, Masaichi's younger brother Teruo Tsuboi joined Masaichi in Portland. He too worked at the Hachiya Watch Store. In 1913,

Masaichi and Teruo opened their own watch store on Burnside Street in what is now known as Old Town in Portland. The store, first called S. Tsuboi and then Tsuboi Bros., attracted customers from the local Japanese residents and among the city's wider community.

Before coming to the United States, Yukino Omori Tsuboi had been a teacher and seamstress. Because of her skill and prolific production of kimono, it is likely that Yukino sold the kimono she made while in Japan.

Masaichi and Yukino raised five children in their home in SE Portland: Tadashi (1914-1920), Toshio ("Tuso," 1915-1944), Kiyoko ("Kiyoko," 1917-2009), Yasuko (1920-) and Haruko (1922-2007). A stepbrother, Hiroshi (b.1903), came from Japan in the 1910s.

Masaichi and Yukino Tsuboi both passed away in March of 1961 in Japan. In 2009, Kiyoko Tsuboi Taubkin passed away in Portland and left a large collection of the family's and her personal kimono and other objects to the Oregon Nikkei Endowment.

Keni Sturgeon is the Willamette Heritage Center curator and museum director. This information was compiled by Eleanor Sandys from information found in the Oregon Nikkei Endowment archives and from a phone interview with Yasuko Tsuboi Fukano in 2012.