Shizue Iwatsuki (1897-1984)

A humble wife, mother, and public servant in Hood River, Shizue Iwatsuki was also an internationally recognized poet. Born in Okayama, Japan, in 1896, Shizue immigrated to the United States in 1916 with her new husband, Kamegoro. Eager for a promising life in America, she was unprepared for the primitive lifestyle in Hood River—living in a cramped hut with a wood stove, kerosene lamp, outside toilet, and no running water—the taxing manual labor, and the loneliness that came from being apart from her family.

Iwatsuki struggled to earn a living by growing strawberries and apples while raising three children. She also assisted her husband as he survived pneumonia and suffered the failure of his first two orchards.

Recognizing the rising wave of anti-Japanese sentiment in the Hood River Valley, Iwatsuki helped organize the local Japanese Women's Society. She was intent on helping other Issei women—the first generation of people who emigrated from Japan to the U.S.—learn American customs.

Iwatsuki was the first Issei woman in Hood River to get a driver's license, and she ran errands and made deliveries to help others. In 1926, the Iwatsukis became founding members of Hood River's Japanese Methodist Church.

When West Coast Japanese Americans were forced to leave their homes for concentration camps during World War II, the couple was incarcerated at Pinedale Assembly Center, then Tule Lake in north-central California and Minidoka in southern Idaho. During those years, Shizue took a home-nursing course and dedicated herself to volunteer work as a nurse and a teacher of needlework. She was also a member of the school board, church, and women's society.

When the Iwatsukis returned to Hood River in 1945, Shizue continued her volunteerism, even while running a twenty-acre orchard after her husband became paralyzed from a fall. She organized the Japanese Christian Women's Society in 1948 and served as president of the Northwest Women's Society. Earning her Master's Certificate in flower arrangement in 1965 from Kyoto's Saga School, she founded the Hood River Saga School, where she taught classes and demonstrated the arts throughout the Columbia River Gorge.

A self-taught poet, Iwatsuki began writing tanka—poetry whose form is five lines of thirty-one syllables. In 1974, Emperor Hirohito recognized her as an award-winning poet, and the Japanese government honored her with the Sixth Class Order of the Precious Crown for her cultural achievements and community service. She was the first woman and the first Japanese American to be so honored. Also that year, Hood River County named her Woman of the Year.

Shizue Iwatsuki died on July 7, 1984. Her poetry appears on granite boulders along the Vera Katz Eastbank Esplanade, at Portland's Japanese American Historical Plaza in Portland, and on a marble column along the Columbia River at the History Museum in Hood River.

Written by Linda Tamura

Further Reading:

Tamura, Linda. "The Making of An American: A Woman Ahead of her Time." *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 103, no. 4 (Winter 2002): 510-29.

Tsutakawa, Mayumi, and Alan Chong Lau, eds. *Turning Shadows Into Light: Art and Culture of the Northwest's Early Asian/Pacific Community*. Seattle: Young Pine Press, 1982.

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