

Shiro Fujioka: A Life Lived for Others

by Kerry Cababa and John Nakaki



Mr. Fujioka at Heart Mountain

Shiro Fujioka was a man of many skills. He was a writer, a politician, a visionary, a historian, an organizer and a community leader. He was a witness to world events. He spoke in the political palaces of both the United States and Japan. He searched desolate, parched farmlands with a vision of better lives for Japanese immigrants. He rose up against the racist laws and legislative acts directed toward Japanese and Japanese Americans. And he suffered the indignities brought on by those same laws and acts.

Shiro Fujioka came to the United States in 1897, arriving in Seattle at the age of 18. He moved directly to San Francisco where he held odd jobs while he studied English and published a monthly Japanese magazine "Shintenchi" ("The New World").

His intellectual curiosity and his thirst for knowledge led him to the East Coast in 1900. He spent a year in Philadelphia attending Temple College, now Temple University. He then moved to New York where he enrolled in Economics at Columbia University. During this time he also wrote for the New York Shimpo.

In 1905 he was appointed special correspondent for the Nippon Shimbun to cover the Russo-Japanese Peace Conference at the conclusion of the Russo-Japanese War (1904-1905). He was the only Japanese correspondent that reported on the Treaty of Portsmouth. This was something that he remembered throughout his life.

He became editor of Seattle's Hokubei Jiji in November of 1905 where he would remain until February of 1912. Many things occurred during these years. In 1906 he helped raise relief funds and supplies for the victims of the San Francisco Earthquake. 1907 brought on an attempt by the school board of San Francisco to segregate Japanese students. Fujioka led the opposition to this move going so far as to take a delegation to Japan and speaking to both houses of the Diet addressing the problem and asking for support.

In May of 1909 Shiro Fujioka married Chiyo Hakamada in Japan and returned with his new bride to the United States.

The California Alien Land Act brought Fujioka south in 1913 in support of the affected Japanese farmers. He spoke in support of the farmers in speeches in San Jose, Sacramento and Los Angeles. The issues brought on by the Alien Land Act brought the Fujioka family south. The family settled in Los Angeles and Fujioka became a leader in several community organizations including the Southern California Japanese Association, the Southern California Central Japanese Association and the Japan America Society. During this time he helped establish the Japanese Consulate in Los Angeles and also founded the Daini Gakuen Japanese language school. He continued his opposition to all parts of the Alien Land Act.

1921 brought on a new position for Fujioka. He joined Los Angeles' Rafu Shimpo as editor. He would remain at this position until the end of the decade. He fought the Japanese Exclusion Act of 1924 and began to envision a better life for Japanese immigrants. Due to the restrictive laws against aliens in the United States, Fujioka envisioned establishing colonies of Japanese immigrants in Mexico where the government was far more racially tolerant. He visited Mexico in 1925 and discussed his ideas with the Japanese ambassador.

Ill health ended his vision and forced him to resign from his position at the Rafu Shimpo. It was a year before he could regain his health. The 1930's were unsettling times abroad. International tensions grew and Fujioka did his best to provide the truth to all who would listen. He founded a library with over 4000 publications in both Japanese and English that addressed the issues facing America and Japan. He encouraged the exchange of both American and Japanese students to help enhance positive international relations.

All efforts at improving relations between Japan and the United States ended abruptly on December 7, 1941 with Japan's attack on the American fleet at Pearl Harbor. That evening Shiro Fujioka was arrested by the FBI along with hundreds of other community leaders. They were all processed and then sent on to assembly centers or "relocation centers" (concentration camps) located in the most desolate and forbidding areas in the United States. Fujioka's processing and imprisonment took place in three locations: the Los Angeles Hall of Justice and the Men's Central Jail, the federal prison in San Pedro and the Tuna Canyon Detention center in Tujunga.

On December 16, 1941 he was transferred to the Enemy Detention Camp in Missoula, Montana. There he suffered a severe attack of gallstones which kept him bed ridden for five months. After that time with his condition not improving and seemingly near death, he was allowed to rejoin his family at the Santa Anita Assembly center in Southern California. There among family and being treated by non-military doctors, Fujioka made a full recovery. In October of 1942 the Fujioka family was transferred to Heart Mountain Wyoming where part of the family would stay until October of 1945.



Shiro and Chiyo Fujioka during the 1950's

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Upon returning to the family home in Hollywood, Fujioka completed his book on Japanese immigration to the United States, "Ayumi no Ato" or "Following the Footsteps".

For his efforts and his life's work of supporting the Japanese and Japanese American community and his work in enhancing Japan-American relations he was awarded a "Kunsho", an imperial award, by the government of Japan in October of 1957. He received the award in Tokyo. Shiro Fujioka passed away in December of 1957. He, his wife, and eight of their offspring are interred at Evergreen Cemetery in Los Angeles.



Poetry Club



Photos courtesy of the Fujioka Family