

**Portrait of One  
Japanese-American Family**  
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Immigrants to a new country have always faced some difficulties. This is an account of the experiences of one Japanese immigrant, her two eldest children and their respective families in America. It portrays some of these difficulties and their resolution. For example, upon the outbreak of war between the United States and Japan my informants experienced a dramatic incident. The first generation immigrants (the *Issei*) and their American born children (the *Nisei*) were transferred from the West Coast to a camp in Wyoming. None retained greater faith and loyalty to America than this family. Great changes occurred while they were interned, and the effects of internment influenced many aspects of their lives. This became particularly evident after the war, when they found themselves forced once again to accommodate to a new lifestyle. The children were soon married and began raising families of their own. Despite all the obstacles in their lives they all continued to show a great willingness and determination to establish an acceptable place in American society. The purpose of my interviews and research was to discover to what extent acculturation and assimilation had occurred within the three generations of this particular family.

#### Method

At the beginning of this project I encountered a major problem. Although I had several friends' families in mind as possibilities for interviewing, I found that permission for interviews from all family members was difficult to come by. I met Julie Sato (a pseudonym) for the first time as my dorm roommate three years ago while we were both freshmen. Thus after explaining my proposed project to her this spring, she said she would consent to have her family interviewed if other members and close relatives would agree. I had met Julie's parents often when they came to visit her in the dorms. Also, from our numerous close talks I remember her mentioning her uncles, aunts, and cousins. Since the names were already familiar to me, I was anxious to place the names with faces.

On Saturdays, I had the opportunity to observe and interview the Sato family who reside in the Bay Area. Members include a grandmother, her five children and their respective families (see diagram of their family tree). Also included in this project will be memories of their now deceased grandfather who played a major

role in all their lives. I spent an entire Saturday interviewing Naomi, Julie's *Issei* grandmother, when Julie and I paid her an informal visit. I twice interviewed and observed the family of June (Julie's mother) when I was invited over for dinners. Another prearranged Saturday afternoon was devoted to a casual interview with some of Julie's other maternal aunts, uncles, and cousins, though I am limiting my description to a single typical lineage of the family.

#### Naomi

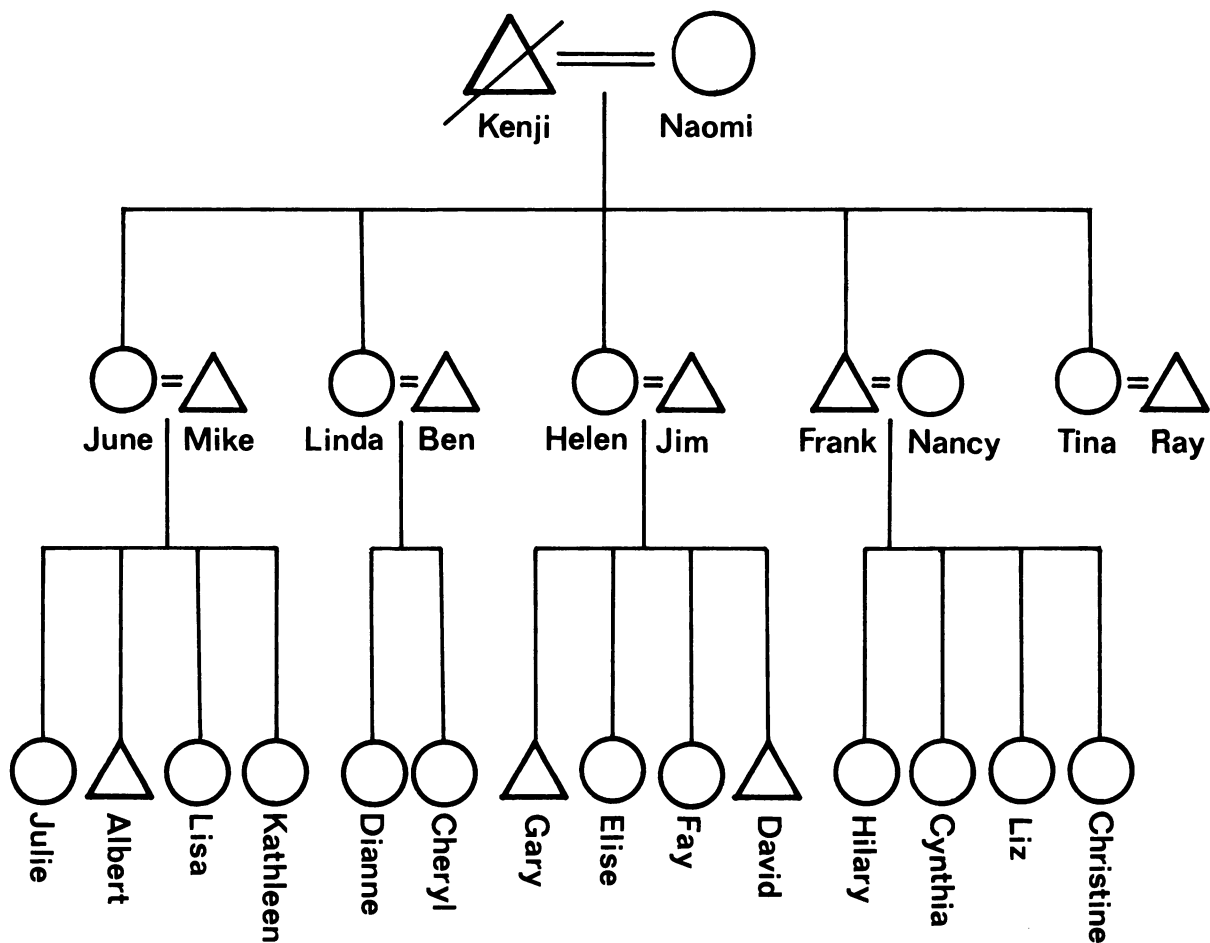
Naomi is a slender, petite woman who at the age of 76 looks amazingly young and healthy. Kenji, her husband, died five years ago at 85, so she now lives alone in a three-bedroom, two-bath house near a Buddhist Church.

When Julie and I visited Naomi, she was extremely friendly. She led us into the living room where we were told to be seated. Then she politely excused herself and left the room. I took advantage of that moment to look around the living room. There was an obvious blend of both Japanese and American cultures within this one room. Modern American furniture — a cabinet, a color T.V., and a stereo — were prevalent. Her album collection consisted entirely of Japanese recording artists. Hung upon the walls were many lovely Japanese artifacts. In particular, a hand embroidered scene was framed and hung above the mantle; it depicted a white crane with outstretched wings, swooping down upon a turtle.

Naomi entered the room carrying a tray with a teapot and teacups and some Japanese crackers (*arare*) which she placed on the coffee table. When I remarked how beautiful the embroidery was, she seemed pleased. She explained that she had made it many years ago while she was a high school student in Japan. I also learned that both animals signified good luck and a long healthy life. Although she spoke haltingly in broken English, I was able to understand her perfectly.

Naomi had grown up in a rural area which was on the outskirts of a city called Kumamoto on the Island of Kyushu in Southern Japan. She came from a small family, which consisted of her parents and younger brother.

Kenji, her husband, was also from Kumamoto, Japan. He came from a middle-class farming family which included his parents, younger brother and two



younger sisters. Kenji was a youthful teenager when he departed Japan in 1905 to avoid being drafted to fight in the Russo-Japanese War. He arrived in San Francisco with only thirty dollars in his pockets. He realized that his limited resources would soon be gone, so it was necessary to find work promptly. Fortunately, at the dock there was an employment agent recruiting cheap labor for building the railroads and doing agricultural work. Kenji's first occupation was working on the railroads for several years. It was there that he suffered a head injury which was to cause him severe problems later in his life.

Next he worked the sugar-beet fields and eventually moved on to seasonal work in the fruit orchards, strawberry and vegetable farms. Farmwork in Northern California appealed to him because of his gardening ability and willingness to work hard, long hours. Mainly, however, these were the only jobs available to him and he sought every opportunity for employment. Although the pay was low, he was able to save much of his wages. Kenji's perseverance was rewarded, for after thirteen years of hard work, he finally managed to accumulate enough money to raise a family. It was not until 1919 that he wrote home to his family in Japan, asking them to find him a suitable marriage partner. Kenji's family sent him a photo-

graph of Naomi, for they all agreed that she would make a nice match. He approved of her, requested her hand in marriage, and when she accepted he financed her voyage to America. Despite an age difference of fifteen years, they would prove to be a compatible couple.

Naomi was quite young, having just finished high school. There were several reasons why she consented to an arranged marriage. She was an adventuresome girl, though she needed her family's approval. Also she thought that in Japan there was no chance for social mobility: you remained in the class into which you were born. Like Kenji, she was from a middle-class farming family and, although she knew life would not be easy in America, she felt it was bound to be better than what she had in Japan. Naomi was impressed with the stories she had heard about the opportunities and freedom in America. Her marriage to Kenji would give her the chance to journey to America and begin a new life.

At first, America, the land of wealth and prosperity, did not meet her expectations. The early period in this young couple's life began with challenging problems and hardships.

Since they were unable to possess land — because they were aliens who were ineligible for citizenship —

they moved yearly and rented land in order to grow strawberries. This transient life was difficult for the couple and their young and growing family, because they were unable to set down permanent roots. Their temporary shelters were barely sufficient. To make matters worse, they had to endure curiosity, resentment and hostility from the Caucasian community because they were people of Japanese ancestry.

As they acquired the language and customs of their adopted country, they began to establish a family. Naomi and Kenji eventually had five children — June, Linda, Helen, Frank and Tina. A large family such as theirs required careful budgeting of their money. They therefore purchased food supplies in large quantities, since it was more economical, and ate only simple Japanese and American dishes.

When the children became older, they helped work in the fields picking strawberries after school. Homework was done in the evenings after dinner. Saturday mornings were spent attending Japanese school. The children's only treat was to go into town occasionally for an ice cream cone or to see a matinee. Values such as hard work, achievement and strong family unity were emphasized.

Life was routine for nearly a decade and a half, as Naomi and Kenji continued working in agriculture. Although the work was rough, it became profitable through the couple's careful financial management. Their children were attaining an education in the public schools and everyone in the family was healthy. Soon they had saved enough money to purchase land by registering it under their eldest child's name, since she was a citizen of the United States by birth. Life in America seemed to be improving for them.

Then came that eventful day when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, Hawaii — December 7, 1941. After hearing the news on the radio, Naomi was stunned. She remembers that day well. Thoughts and feelings of disbelief and dread filled her mind.

The pressure of the war between Japan and America affected her family's lives greatly. Within the White community the hostility and discrimination toward members of her family mounted. This period of her life was like a nightmare. She told me that her family lived in fear, since it was common for FBI agents to invade Japanese homes and confiscate Japanese objects as evidence to incriminate families for having ties with Japan. As a result of this policy, in order to substantiate their loyalty to America, they destroyed everything and anything Japanese. They gathered possessions such as Japanese language books, lacquered boxes, dolls and kimonos and either burned them or buried them. A particular sentimental item, a silk vest given to her by her family when she embarked for America, was difficult to give up. Therefore, she kept it. She honestly told me that she felt bitterness. America had become her home where she and Kenji had raised their family. They had se-

vered their ties with Japan when they left and they had no intention of ever returning there to live.

When the Executive Order was issued which authorized the removal of all persons of Japanese ancestry, she and her family were temporarily housed at the Santa Anita racetrack before being transferred by bus to a camp in Heart Mountain, Wyoming. Their land, home, and most of their belongings were sold cheaply or given away before moving. Only two suitcases per family member were allowed. They were also advised to pack warm, durable clothes.

At the time they entered camp, Naomi could recall feeling confused and frustrated because of the turmoil. The barracks which were constructed of wood and tar paper were only partially completed. No cooking or plumbing facilities existed in them. The family was assigned to a mess hall for meals, and shower and laundry facilities were shared with other families. The next three years of their lives were spent in this center which was enclosed by barbed wire fences and watch towers for the military police. Naomi and her family occupied a one-room barrack. Since the family lacked privacy, it took some time to make adjustments. Also many conditions within the camp — such as food, housing and sanitation — were substandard. Natural drawbacks such as the weather were troublesome, since the Wyoming temperatures fluctuated to extremes. The days were hot and the nights were cold most of the time.

However, the family made the best of the situation. Soon the camp became a small community. Naomi was paid twelve dollars a month for working in the kitchen and Kenji was paid nineteen dollars a month for cleaning poultry. Furniture was made from discarded orange crates, curtains from scraps of old material. Instead of sulking and being idle, they were active, creative and helped improve conditions within the camp. Since the desert soil was barren except for tumbleweeds, rock gardens replaced the conventional gardens, enhancing the area in front of their barracks.

The five children regularly attended the school which had been set up in camp. They also participated in recreational activities which were led by some of the adults. Lasting friendships with other families were formed. Naomi felt, however, that psychologically the experience was humiliating and degrading. Self-worth was lost and they were isolated from the rest of the nation and world. One advantage in this situation was that she had enough leisure time to learn hobbies such as knitting, sewing, and crocheting. It was a rest from the hard work she had grown accustomed to.

A major event in the camps was the loyalty questionnaire. Many young men who desperately wanted to prove their loyalty to America volunteered for combat. Naomi said she was thankful that her son Frank was too young at that time. Many of her friends were tearful over the loss of their young sons.

The day they were scheduled to leave camp, Naomi

felt apprehensive, for she was afraid that there would still be bad feelings toward her family. "War always instigates hatred," she told me. Three years in camp had left her with feelings of a bleak, uncertain future. As always, her main concern was for the welfare of her children.

When Naomi and Kenji returned to their former home, they found that it was necessary to start again from the beginning. They were penniless and were too old for productive labor. They had incurred considerable material losses. Their children were now old enough to strike out on their own. For awhile Naomi and Kenji lived with friends and did light work to pay for their room and board. They worked as dishwashers, did catering and performed odd jobs, such as, housework for wealthy families.

The Oriental Exclusion Act had prevented Naomi and Kenji from becoming citizens. However, the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1952 enabled them to become among the first naturalized citizens and thus allowed them to buy a home with their savings. Misfortune struck shortly after, however. Kenji suffered a stroke and was in a comatose state for nearly a month; it was a relapse from the blow on the head he received years ago while working on the railroads. Doctors had not expected him to survive. Naomi told me that discrimination still prevailed as late as the 1950's, for Kenji was not given much attention or care from the nurses. Members of his family, especially Naomi, visited the hospital daily to care for him. Due to his strong will to survive and the loving nurturing from his family, Kenji recovered. However, he was to remain bedridden for the rest of his life, due to paralysis of the right portion of his body.

Naomi continued doing housework in order to support the two of them. Additional support came from their son and daughters who were married by now and had families of their own. Again, the ethic of family unity and of striving together to overcome hardships was successful in a time of crisis.

Naomi's time was spent caring for her invalid husband who died in 1971. Today she lives alone in a large house and rents the vacant rooms to college students. She is now retired and has lots of leisure time. She enjoys participating in church activities with other senior citizens. Also, five days a week for two hours her time is spent attending a special high school class for foreigners who want to learn English. Here she has met people of diverse national origins for the first time. She showed me her workbooks proudly, and continued talking as I thumbed through them. Naomi decided to enroll at the insistence of her children who felt she needed to improve her English.

Naomi struck me as a very remarkable woman. She formulated her own cultural pluralism, adapting well to certain American values and norms yet keeping important aspects of Japanese culture. She is still healthy and has traveled extensively, including a tour of

historical sites throughout the United States and several trips to Japan, as well as weekend trips to such places as Las Vegas, Yosemite, Lake Tahoe and Disneyland. She remains an active woman. Around her home she does the gardening. In her spare time she likes to crochet, sew, and knit. At present, she is taking a flower arrangement class that is offered by her Buddhist church.

I concluded this interview with questions about her feelings when she revisited Japan. I also asked her if she ever regretted leaving Japan and if she ever thought about how life could have been had she remained there. She told me that she did not regret leaving Japan, for at that time it had nothing to offer her. In her opinion, Japan has changed immensely since then, but so has America. As America grew, she had to grow with it. For these reasons, Naomi thought that she would never really feel comfortable living in Japan. She realized this when she revisited the country. Her family and home are here, her husband Kenji is buried here, and she has never given much thought as to how things might have been.

#### June's Family

I received two dinner invitations from Julie's family. Both meals served were typically American with the exception of hot, steaming rice. Conversation at the dinner table was minimal and focused mainly upon me. After dinner, while coffee and dessert were served in the living room, I was given the opportunity to interview.

June, Mike and their family reside in a lovely, large four-bedroom, two-bath house in a middle-class suburb. The long rectangular living room was beautifully decorated and immaculately clean and the furniture and golden wall-to-wall carpeting were well-coordinated. A large mirror hanging above the fireplace reflected the many fishing trophies that were placed upon the mantle. In one corner of the room there was a mahogany-colored piano. Occupying the other corners of the room were a stereo and console-color T.V. The only Japanese ornamentation visible in this room was a porcelain flower vase. A notable characteristic of this room was a large picture window facing the street.

June is the eldest child of Naomi and Kenji. She was born in 1925. After release from camp in 1945, she forfeited her dream of attending college because she could not afford it. Instead she worked as a secretary for a university on the West Coast before marrying Mike in 1949. Soon after she terminated her job at the University and during the early years of her marriage she studied to become a hair stylist.

Mike's background is dissimilar to June's. Although he was born in America, his family returned to Japan when he was only two years old because they succumbed to the hardships and were disillusioned with the life here. He was reared and educated in Japan

during his formative years, but since he was an American citizen by birth, he was permitted to re-enter the United States. Thus Mike is a *Kibei* — a Japanese-American born in the United States but raised and educated in Japan before returning again to America. Mike is the second child in a family of eight children. When he was thirteen years old, his family sent him back to America in order to help support them. At this young age he performed strenuous physical tasks on farms. He had problems adjusting to American life because his thinking was more Japanese than most of the *Nisei's* who were born and educated in America. Today Mike's family still remain in Japan, although he chose to stay and raise his own family in America.

June no longer feels bitterness over her internment. At one time she did. Today she reflects that the experience toughened her and reinforced her determination to do well in life. As a child, however, she and her sisters and brother were torn between two distinct cultures. At school her environment and culture were that of the majority (American), but at home they were that of the minority (Japanese). June was active at school and participated in after-school sports. There was a point in her life where she felt that the Japanese half of her was inferior. Today, she feels that she is the product of the best two cultures. The importance of doing well or better than others in all fields of endeavor, pride, honesty, strong family unity, are traditional Japanese values she retains. Although she is bi-lingual, her English is far superior to her Japanese.

Mike and June have faced a life full of challenges in order to get to where they are today. They have worked hard and feel that the urban way of life provides footholds for upward social mobility. They are proud to say they are Americans for they have been given the opportunity for self improvement. They admit that none of their four children has ever suffered hardship. The children have never had to work. June and Mike have sacrificed a great deal for the sake of the children in order to give them the best they could afford. They have lavished them with luxuries they themselves would have loved to have had but were deprived of. For example, June had all four of her children take piano lessons, for piano was something she wished she had learned. At times, June feels that they have sheltered the children too much from the realities of life. They remain a close-knit family. Like other American middle-class families, they dream of sending all their four children on to college.

Mike and June downplayed most Japanese traditions. June felt this was necessary because from her own experiences she knew what problems could arise from having a bicultural background. She wanted to raise them in an atmosphere where they would not be ashamed of their cultural heritage, yet still lead lives similar to those of their friends. American customs and the English language are dominant in this house-

hold. However, the religion of Buddhism was retained. Church is the only place where the children socialize with other Japanese-Americans. Even though the family is Buddhist, they celebrate the Christmas Holidays by giving gifts as do their Christian friends. They do so, however, without any religious connotations. Japanese food is reserved for New Year's Day when all the relatives gather to wish each other a prosperous, healthy New Year. *Mochi* (a special type of rice cake made from pounded sweetened rice), *sake* (rice wine) and *sushi* (another type of rice cake) are among the delicacies. June said that it is a nice occasion to begin the New Year acknowledging pride in your heritage.

Julie, who is my friend and their eldest child, is a junior at U.C. Berkeley majoring in bio-chemistry. She has the same aspirations that most college students have — to do well and get a good job. She feels that she is more pressured to achieve than other students since her parents strongly emphasize the values of a higher education. As a child she was taught that education and industry were the indispensable passports to social success. She does not have any financial problems because her parents are paying all her college expenses.

Julie feels that she retains little if anything of traditional Japanese culture. She and her brother and sisters have never learned how to speak Japanese, so they communicate with their grandmother in English. Naomi still speaks Japanese at times but only to her children.

Julie's younger brother Albert is 17 and is still a high school student. He participates in school sports and is doing well in his studies. He intends to enter college. He feels that being Japanese-American has not affected him much because he is accepted by his friends. They do not think of him as a Japanese but as an American.

Lisa is 15 and is also a high school student. Currently, she belongs to an explorer club which consists of high school students who plan to make a career in the dental health field. Her goal is to become a dental hygienist. She is very active in school activities. She belongs to several clubs and is also a letter girl. She has encountered no problems about being Japanese-American. She feels this is because attitudes have changed and now there is more of an understanding of what a Japanese-American is. In her parents' time, however, she feels that the war with Japan induced identity conflicts. Although her parents looked physically Japanese, in heart and mind they were American. It was hard for people to understand this, and since her parents looked Japanese they were considered to be just that.

Kathleen, the youngest child, is only eleven years old and attends an elementary school. She enjoys playing with her school friends. Apparently she doesn't feel different in being Japanese-American.

Mike and June, like most parents, are proud of their

children. Through their accomplishments, happiness and success, they feel their hard work and love have been worthwhile. Today, Mike continues to work as a self-employed gardener and June works in an electronics semiconductor firm. They both work long hours in the day but devote the evenings to the family.

#### Conclusion

In doing this study I felt that all three generations of this family felt a need to be accepted by the American society. Naomi, who represents the first generation, still retains many Japanese artifacts around her home. She is able to take pride in her old culture as well as integrate it with American culture. She has taken the best of two cultures.

June and Mike, who represent the second generation, felt the need to suppress their cultural heritage in order to be accepted within the American norms. They had grown up believing that Japanese culture, which was extremely different, must be inferior or deviant from the American norm. Thus they all tended to suffer from a dual identity and wanted to spare their children this problem. They felt that assimilation was the only solution. Japanese language and customs were dropped. Socialization processes guided by American values and standards were followed.

Julie, Albert, Lisa, and Kathleen feel no adverse effects from being Japanese-American. They have been educated in America and have had a typically American lifestyle; they remain Japanese in physical appearance only. This third generation does not suffer from any overt discrimination, possibly due to changing attitudes and because mixed marriages — which were once unacceptable — are now common. They feel no loss of cultural heritage because of the simple fact that they were hardly exposed to it.

#### Evaluation of the Method

All of my information was gathered through informal interviews with members of this family. They were very open and helpful to me, and I owe my thanks to Julie Sato and her relatives for their time and enthusiasm. I feel that I benefited from informal interviewing because I was able to form impressions by observing the way my informants lived, and by listening to their life histories. Interviewing enables the researcher to better understand the individual's life and values, because it is based upon a direct, face-to-face relationship. A friendly rapport usually develops between the interviewer and the subject as a result. The only inadequacy I can cite in this method is a lack of documentation. In the end, the interviewer must trust and believe his or her informant's account.