

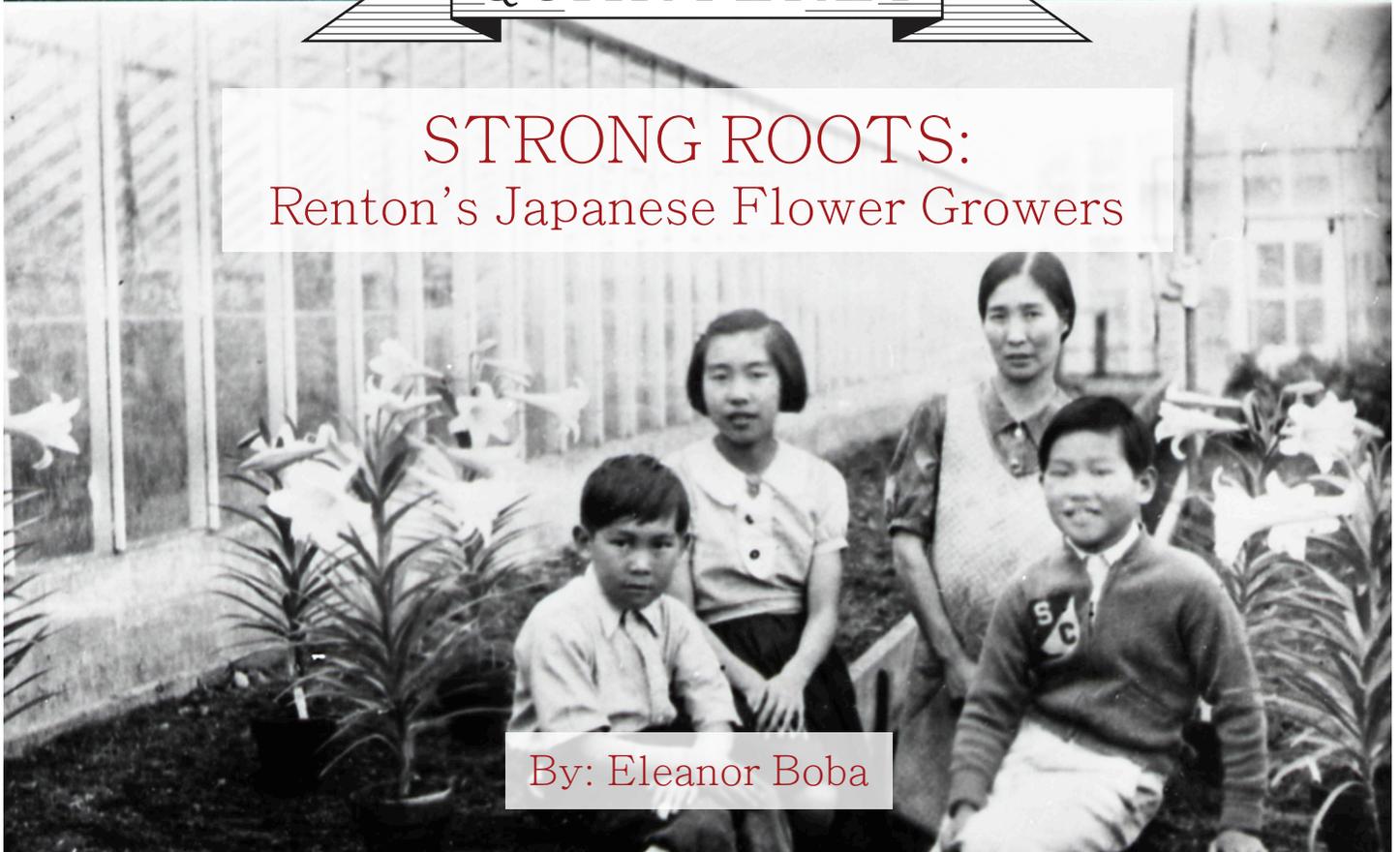
# RENTON HISTORICAL SOCIETY & MUSEUM

Spring  
March 2021

Volume 52  
Number 2

QUARTERLY

## STRONG ROOTS: Renton's Japanese Flower Growers



By: Eleanor Boba

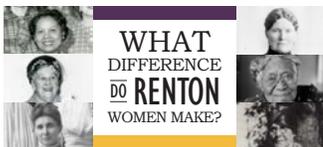
*In 2019, volunteers with the Renton History Museum's oral history program began an information collection project focused on the Japanese and Japanese-American communities of Renton and surrounding areas. One result was this essay, a version of which originally appeared online as HistoryLink.org Essay No. 21002. In quotes on pages 6 and 10, this article contains derogatory language from the 1940s directed at Japanese people. We think long and hard about it before we*

*print such language. Why do we quote these sources directly? Because we believe it is important not to sugarcoat the racism of the past. But if you disagree, we want to hear from you.*

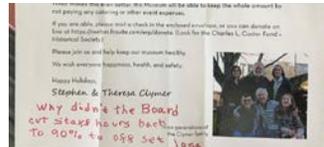
**J**apanese immigrants and their children in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century were deeply involved with agricultural pursuits throughout Puget Sound. From the Sand Point area of Seattle to Bellevue to the Green River, White River, and

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**3** | Museum Report by Elizabeth P. Stewart, Director.



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# WHAT DIFFERENCE DO RENTON WOMEN MAKE?



A lot, it turns out! We're celebrating the centennial of national women's suffrage by exploring the extraordinary lives of Renton achievers. Many Washington women gained the vote in 1910, just a few years after Renton became a city and a decade before women in the rest of the country. But women did not wait for the vote to make changes. Learn about these extraordinary Renton women's accomplishments in building and supporting hospitals, libraries, schools, and churches; pressing for civil and human rights; fighting poverty; and generally making Renton the city it is today. Check out the online portion of this exhibit on our website: [rentonhistory.org](http://rentonhistory.org)!

From  
OCTOBER  
27  
to  
MAY  
28

## MUSEUM RECEIVES KING COUNTY GRANT

In February, King County Councilmember Reagan Dunn stopped by to deliver a one-time King County Council grant of \$2000. The grant helped fund a 2020 project conducted by UW Museology M.A. candidate Brandi Mason to document the experiences of diverse Renton-area restaurateurs for an upcoming traveling exhibit titled *A Plate at the Potluck*. The exhibit explores how these local chefs share their home

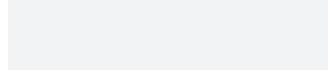
country's food traditions with Renton residents. During the project Brandi collected four oral histories for the museum's collection. We appreciate the ongoing support of the King County Council and Councilmember Dunn!



## MUSEUM PREPARES TO REOPEN

After almost one year closed due to COVID-19 restrictions, the Renton History Museum is planning to reopen in early March. We will begin with a short week—open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and Fridays, 10:00am to 4:00pm—and see how we can rebuild our staffing. The building will be limited to 25% or about 10–15 people at a time, so please call ahead. Masks and social distancing will be

required, and we'll be cleaning regularly. Come visit the *What Difference Do Renton Women Make?* exhibit during Women's History Month!



**Museum Reopening**

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**Call for Reservations**

# MUSEUM REPORT

by Elizabeth P. Stewart,  
Museum Director

As I write this, the Museum has been closed almost a year, with two months open in the fall. If we've learned anything from the COVID-19 lockdown of the past year, it's that we all bear some responsibility for our fellow humans. When we mask up, wash our hands, or stay six feet apart from others, we are protecting them; by protecting others, we create conditions that protect ourselves. By shopping with local small businesses, we help them stay afloat and ensure our local economy is strong. Our legislators at the state and federal level have passed extraordinary bills to help renters, homeowners, gig workers, and businesses large and small. We have never been more aware that a country is not a group of rugged individuals—it is an ecosystem in which everyone really does depend on everyone else.

The Renton History Museum is not only a nonprofit and a cultural organization, it is also an employer, with two full-time staffers and one part-time employee, all of whom depend on us for their livelihood. These staffers are highly skilled museum professionals who care for our historic objects and photos, conduct research into Renton topics, create exhibits and programs, and—in ordinary times—provide a welcoming educational environment for visitors and volunteers.

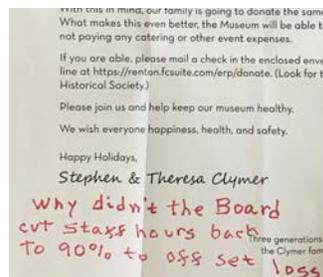
Without these vital staff members, the museum is a beautiful but empty historic fire station. And without the steady paycheck from the museum, these highly skilled staff members are on unemployment or off to another job. Maybe they stay in Renton, maybe they don't; either way, without a livable wage, their little chunk of the economy fails.

When we asked members and donors to help us replace some of our usual sources of income by making donations in 2020, you were generous. Some wondered why we didn't just cut salaries. When our Public Engagement Coordinator left in April 2020 to take another position, we did leave her job empty. But to cut salaries of these staff members who have given so much to the museum and to the community would have been the wrong thing to do, for us, for them, and for Renton. We're proud that the budget cuts we made did not harm our staff and we're thrilled that they continue to serve our city.

All this is to say that history shows us that in extraordinary circumstances—the Spanish influenza epidemic, the Great Depression, and now the COVID-19 pandemic—in the wealthiest country in the world, we are better off taking care of one another. Economic and psychic recovery takes less time, and we can *all* remain contributing members of a society in which all can prosper.



Elizabeth P. Stewart  
—  
Director



Anonymous letter received in response to our 2020 donation drive.

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# PRESIDENT'S MESSAGE

by Colleen Lenahan, President

What a crazy year we have all been through! Who would have thought when we closed the Renton History Museum on March 9, 2020 that the doors would be shut for most of the next year? Now as we take first steps toward reopening, the Board of Trustees is working with staff to plan for a safe and enjoyable future, still full of history!

In February, the Board met remotely on a Saturday to discuss what the future of the Museum will look like. This retreat gave us time to consider our Strategic Plan, approved exactly two years ago in 2019, and to evaluate which goals are still important and which ones might have changed because of COVID-19. The pandemic and the need to stay physically distant from one another has made many of our usual activities—face-to-face programs and events, for example—inappropriate for now, and probably for some time in the future. Our usual sources of revenue (admissions, programs, and our annual fundraiser) will also have to change for the Museum to be sustainable going forward. And the need for better and more versatile online tools going forward will be a challenge for us.

As a Board, we'll be exploring priorities in the following broad areas: strengthening and diversifying our sources of revenue to ensure the Museum has the resources it needs to provide excellent programs and exhibits; increasing our connections to the community, even remotely; centering inclusion and equity in all the work we do; and improving the Board's structure and ability to work efficiently (even on Zoom).

We're lucky that we have added two new trustees since the beginning of the year: Maryann DiPasquale and Daryl Delaurenti. Maryann is a recently retired HR professional, who lives in the East Renton Highlands. Daryl is a retired Boeing project manager with a passion for history. Both are already bringing their tremendous ideas, talents, and skills to the Board's work. When full, the Board has 15 members, so we still have a few more slots for people interested in contributing to the success of the Renton History Museum. We continue to meet safely via Zoom, and we've got a lot of important and exciting work ahead of us in 2021.

Board members are full of good ideas for new ways to cope with changed circumstances, and we'll continue to work on these in the coming months, as the world slowly comes out of our forced hibernation. One thing that has not changed—and won't change—is our commitment to ensuring that Renton's only heritage organization will continue to preserve, document, and educate about our city's diverse history for generations to come.

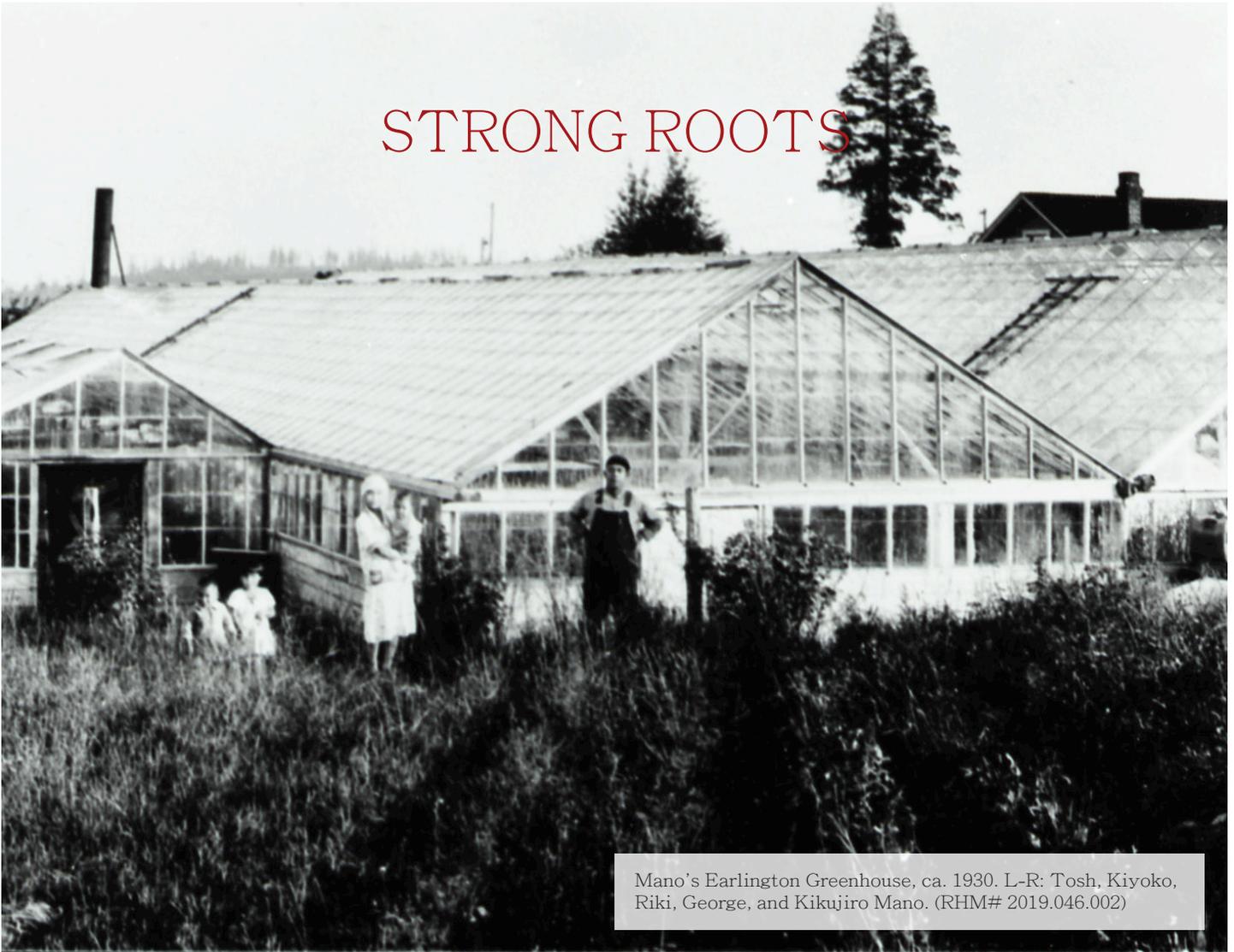


Colleen Lenahan  
—  
President



Board of Trustees at our annual History-Making Party fundraiser, 2019. This was the last time our board was together in person.

# STRONG ROOTS



Mano's Earlington Greenhouse, ca. 1930. L-R: Tosh, Kiyoko, Riki, George, and Kikujiro Mano. (RHM# 2019.046.002)

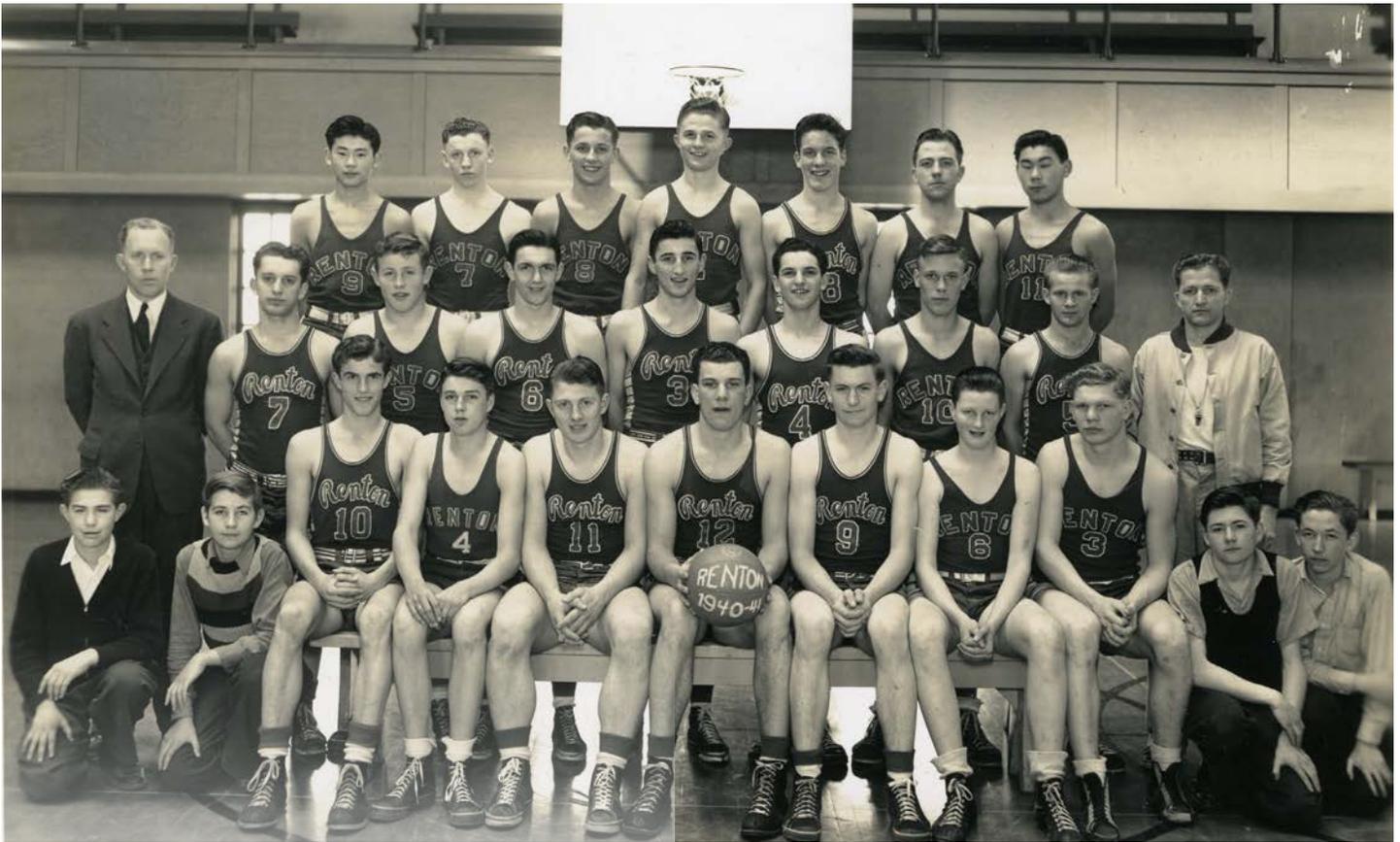
Continued from page 1

Cedar River watersheds, Japanese families took up vegetable and dairy farming.

In the more urbanized Renton area, a number of Japanese turned to growing flowers and ornamental plants in greenhouses, as well as vegetables. In the 1920s and 1930s, the Iwasakis, with 11 children, operated the Bryn Mawr Greenhouse on 17 acres; the Maekawa family (sometimes spelled “Mayakawa”) had a nursery nearby. George (1906-1993) and Irene Ichino (1914-2010) Kawachi founded Floralcrest Greenhouse in Skyway, specializing in new varieties of poinsettias.<sup>1</sup> The Manos called their business the Earlington Greenhouses, after the hill west of Renton where it was located. As a young man, Robert Mizukami learned the trade from the Hirai family at their Maplewood Gardens along the Cedar River east of Renton; he went on to establish a greenhouse of his own in Fife and to serve as mayor of that town.<sup>2</sup> The Nakashima family ran the popular Renton Greenhouse and Florist shop in downtown Renton. And just over the Seattle city line, in the Rainier Beach area, Fujitaro Kubota began laying the groundwork for his famous garden, nursery, and landscaping business.

Subtle and not-so-subtle racism existed throughout this period; by and large, however, Japanese families in

Cover photo:  
Mano family in Earlington  
Greenhouse, ca. 1938. L-R:  
George, Kiyoko, Riki, and Tosh.  
(RHM# 2019.046.009)



Renton High School boys basketball team, 1940-41. Brothers Ted (left) and Hiroshi Nakanishi (right) are in the back row. Their father Matsuoru was a truck farmer in Orillia who died in 1934. Their eldest brother Satoru Frank took over farming to provide for his widowed mother and nine siblings. The family was incarcerated at Tule Lake, CA during WWII. (RHM# 1992.084.3500)

Renton lived in relative harmony with their white neighbors. Children attended the same schools and played together. The older generation had more difficulty fitting in, largely due to language barriers.

The younger generation (Nisei) was expected to help out with the family business, working in the nurseries and helping truck produce up to Seattle for sale at the Pike Place Market or to brokers. Unlike the larger vegetable farms in the outlying areas, which shipped some of their produce out of the area by train, the nurseries sold locally.

The Japanese families maintained close ties with one another, socializing at cultural associations and religious events. The Japanese Greenhousemen's Association, founded in the late 1920s, provided networking, as well as social occasions, such as picnics.

#### WAR CLOUDS

The coming of war with Japan shattered the social dynamic in Renton and elsewhere. Families in the relatively unobtrusive business of raising vegetables and flowers for the public suddenly found themselves in the crosshairs of suspicion. Racism triumphed, as many called for the immediate ouster of all ethnic Japanese from West Coast communities. An editorial in the *Renton Chronicle* railed against the possibility of delaying evacuation to accommodate Japanese growers in hateful and sarcastic terms:

*"A news story in a Seattle paper yesterday morning outlined the new 'plan' – to keep the Japs raising*

*cabbage as usual within a stone's throw of many defense plants.... Now that's very nice and thoughtful of the produce exchange, the seed merchants and those boys holding the notes and mortgages of the Japanese. If and when the signals of the local Japs bring a cloud of bombers on us from Japan, the Nips will be moved. But until the bombs begin to fall, profits as usual from the lettuce and the cauliflower and new, fresh arrogance from the insolent Japs in our midst!"<sup>3</sup>*

#### THE "EVACUATION"

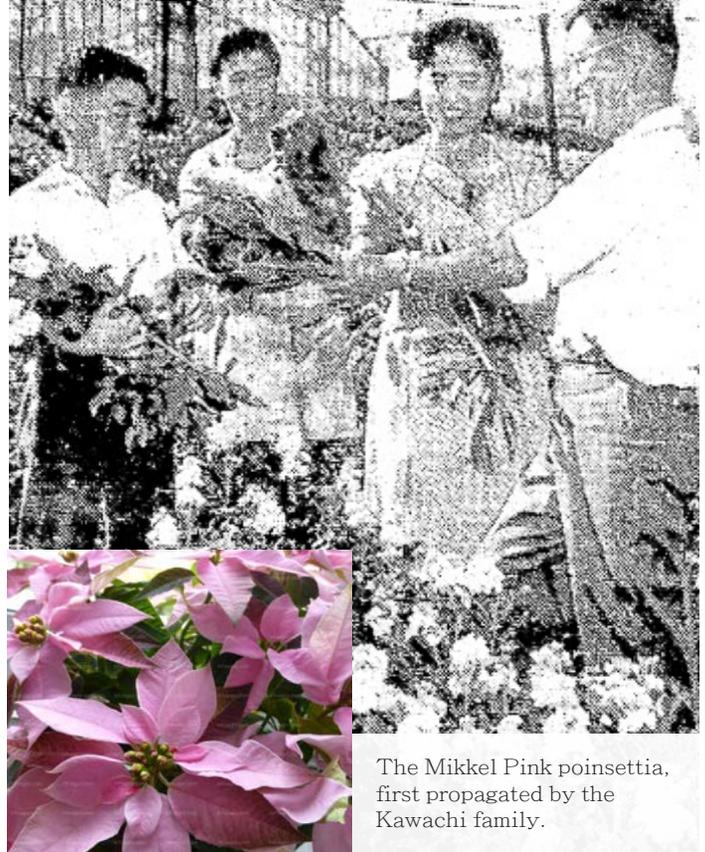
On May 5, 1942, the United States War Defense Command announced the forced removal of Japanese and Japanese-American families from Exclusion Area No. 39, a large semi-rural region of King County, Washington, between the Seattle city line and the Green River and extending east to the Kittitas County line. The region included the towns of Renton, Tukwila, and Kent, as well as many smaller farming communities. Civilian Exclusion Order No. 39 was one of 108 staggered orders issued throughout the spring of 1942 in response to the attack on Pearl Harbor and President Franklin D. Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066.

The exclusion order had been long expected; once it came down, events unspooled with lightning speed. Japanese and Japanese Americans (the edicts made no differentiation) in Area 39 were to register within two days at the Lonely Acres Skating Rink in a park (long gone to make way for Interstate 405) on the border between Renton and Tukwila, dubbed the

George and Irene Kawachi at a Rotary event, 1990. The Kawachis owned and operated Floralcrest Greenhouse. (RHM# 1999.071.409)



The Kawachi family back at Floralcrest Greenhouse after WWII incarceration, 1945. L-R: Gary, Irene, Jean, and George. (Seattle Times, 15 Jul 1945)



The Mikkel Pink poinsettia, first propagated by the Kawachi family.

Renton Junction Civil Control Station. About 1,000 individuals in the zone were affected.

This was only step one. Families were then given just a few days to wind up their affairs and dispose of their property before reporting to the Renton Depot on March 11 for the long train ride to the Pinedale Assembly Center, near Fresno. (Evacuees from Seattle were taken to the Puyallup Assembly Center.) From there they would be dispersed to various “relocation centers,” sometimes referred to as “internment camps,” or, even more euphemistically, “projects.” Here they would wait out the war.

#### THE HIRAI FAMILY

On the east side of the Renton area, in the Cedar River Valley, the Hirai family operated a greenhouse called Maplewood Gardens located just across the highway from the Maplewood Golf Course. The seven children of Gisuke (1887-1983) and Tami Hirai (1891-1945) helped raise vegetables and flowers which they trucked to Seattle to sell. The nursery also provided landscaping plants for the golf course. Two other Japanese families raised vegetables in the same area, the Mizukamis and Serizawas.<sup>4</sup>

The disruptions occasioned by the attack on Pearl Harbor, December 7, 1941, hit the Hirai family hard and fast. Before the next day dawned, father Gisuke Hirai had been arrested, swept up in the FBI’s initial response to the crisis.<sup>5</sup> That agency had kept watchful eyes on a number of suspected enemy agents for some time. Many of these were targeted simply for being part of Japanese cultural associations. In a

time of paranoia, it wasn’t long before gossip ran rampant. Bob Aliment (1931-2019), son of golf course manager and later Renton Mayor Frank Aliment (1908-1976), played with some of the Hirai children. Nine years old at the time, he recalls lurid stories of the Hirai family collecting money from the Japanese community and smuggling it over to Japan by the suitcase-full. *“I’ll tell you, when the war broke out on December 7<sup>th</sup> – on the 8<sup>th</sup>, three fellows came into Maplewood Golf Course and wanted to see Frank Aliment. That was my father. He was the manager. They said, ‘we’re from the FBI and we’re here wanting to know what you know about the Hirai family.’ And my dad said, ‘The man and wife never spoke English, so I have nothing to do with them. But the kids, a couple of them worked on the golf course and they caddied and my son went to school with a couple of them.’ And they said, ‘Well, we’ll tell YOU something: The old man [Gisuke Hirai] had a shortwave [radio]. He knew exactly what was gonna happen [at Pearl Harbor].”*<sup>6</sup>

As a result of such flagrant rumor-mongering, Gisuke Hirai, along with several other suspects, was taken to the immigration center in Seattle on Airport Way and interrogated. After three weeks, they were shipped off to Fort Missoula, Montana, where they were held for six months before being allowed to rejoin their families—at another concentration camp!<sup>7</sup>

Declassified documents from the Department of Justice show that the FBI relied on informants to build their case against Hirai and other “enemy aliens.” A number of patriotic-minded Americans had called or written to provide

Continued on page 10



# COLLECTIONS REPORT

by Sarah Samson, Curator of Collections & Exhibitions



Sarah Samson  
—  
Curator

For many museums, official gifts help recreate the priorities of a particular time and place; this is particularly true of some special donations relating to the Renton Sister City program. In 2019 Renton celebrated the 50th anniversary of its Sister City relationship with Nishiwaki, Japan. A textile manufacturing town, Nishiwaki had roughly the same population size as Renton (~40,000) when a delegation from the Renton Lions Club first visited

there in July 1969, just days before the first moon landing. Renton’s Mayor at the time, Don W. Custer, did not travel to Japan with the nineteen-member delegation, but Renton delegate Wyman Dobson briefed the Mayor after the trip and shared gifts from Japan.

The following year Renton had a new Mayor, long-time City Councilmember Avery Garrett. In May he became the first Renton Mayor to visit Nishiwaki during a twelve-day trip. These visits were the first of many between delegations and exchange students. The visits always included an exchange of gifts, usually gifts specific to Renton and Nishiwaki or Japan and the U.S.

At the end of 2020, we received a donation of some of these gifts. Glenn Garrett, son of Avery Garrett, donated two lacquer abacuses and three paper fans. All were given to Mayor Garrett as gifts from Nishiwaki. We’re not sure when



Avery Garrett and Mayor Charles Delaurenti, Sr. with a representative from Nishiwaki, Japan, ca. 1978.

Above: Gifts given to Mayor Avery Garrett by Sister City Nishiwaki, Japan. (RHM# 2020.023.001-004)

Garrett received the gifts, but it is possible they were from the 1970 trip and they surely date from sometime between 1970 and 1976, the time he served as mayor.

Children are still taught how to use abacuses (*soroban*) in Japanese schools. Japanese foldable fans (*sensu*) are made of paper with bamboo frames. They can be plain or beautifully decorated. One of the fans Mayor Garrett received is made with paper that has a metallic sheen: gold on one side and silver on the other. Another of the fans is lilac-colored and has cherry blossoms decorating it.

The Sister City program seeks to promote understanding and cultural awareness while also focusing on humanitarian efforts. These visits focus on providing cultural opportunities for the delegations, and the Renton History Museum has often been a stop on the tours in Renton. We are excited that the museum now has some of the early gifts that were exchanged during this important relationship with a city located over 5,000 miles away.

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Continued from page 7

vague evidence. One woman recalled a conversation she had had with Gisuke's wife, Tami, more than two years prior to the February 1942 hearings, in which Mrs. Hirai had told her that her husband was visiting Japan and that she was pleased that two of her children were living in that country. In contrast, Frank Aliment provided an affidavit on behalf of Hirai: "... *affiant has always considered said Gisuke Hirai as a good resident of this country and believes that he has always raised his family – all his children having been born in this country – to be good, loyal American citizens.*"<sup>8</sup>

By that time, the rest of the Hirai family had also been forced off the land they had tended for years. They never returned to the Renton area after the war. Neglect caused severe damage to the greenhouses.<sup>9</sup> In addition, squatters had taken over the property. According to records of the Minidoka Relocation Center Legal Division, son Roy Hirai appealed to authorities to help evict a man who "has not paid a single cent as rental."<sup>10</sup> Despite assurances of help, it does not appear that any action was taken.

Nor was this the only tragedy the family faced. Tami had been released early from Minidoka in 1944 due to health issues. She passed away a year later. It is likely that the strain of incarceration contributed to her death at 54.<sup>11</sup>

Gisuke and Roy were able to establish a greenhouse in Kent after the war. In 1954, after passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1952, Gisuke Hirai applied for U.S. citizenship, something that had been denied him and other Issei (first generation Japanese immigrants) until that time.

## THE MANOS

Meanwhile, on the west side of Renton, the Mano family established a more enduring institution, the Earlington Greenhouses. Kikujiro (1896-1971) and Riki (1903-1940) Mano immigrated from Japan about 1930 and leased a small greenhouse in the Bryn Mawr neighborhood. A few years later, about 1937, they moved to the "sunny" side of the hill, a neighborhood called Earlington which was annexed to Renton in 2009. They were able to take possession of an existing nursery on a lease-purchase arrangement. Here they built a Dutch-style greenhouse, with large glass panels on sloped sides. With sons George (b. 1930) and Tosh (1928-2017) and daughter Kiyoko (b. 1926), they began by growing tomatoes and cucumbers in the greenhouse. Soon they added flowers and bedding plants outdoors. Easter lilies became a specialty.<sup>12</sup>

In an oral history, George Mano did not recall any trouble with neighbors prior to the outbreak of war. As a child, he played with white neighbor children; together they built a basketball court in a vacant yard. After Pearl Harbor, however, things changed quickly and drastically. George recalled the curfews that affected only Japanese, Italian, and German families, as well as the "No Japs" signs in shop windows. When the family had to pack up and leave, it was devastating. The nursery was just beginning to break even following the economic depression of the 1930s when they had to walk away, leaving it with a caretaker lessee.<sup>13</sup>

## THE RETURN

As the war wound down, incarcerated Japanese were gradually released from confinement, most with a one-way train ticket

and a small grant of cash to get them resettled. Many from the Renton area did not return, but chose to move closer to family in other parts of the country. Those who did return often found their homes and businesses in shambles. For those in the horticulture industry, starting over meant more than replacing stolen equipment and repairing greenhouses. Crops had to be reestablished, supplies obtained, and customer bases rebuilt, all during a time of lingering resentment. In 1991 a reporter recounted George Kawachi's difficulty in picking up his business: "*He started knocking on doors to sell his first crop – 'all old friends,' he said. And the answer he heard: 'I can't buy your flowers, they'll boycott me.'*"<sup>14</sup>

Unlike many other families, the Manos did return to the Renton area and were able to reclaim their business after waiting for the caretaker's lease to run out. The Alien Land Laws still prohibited Issei from owning land in the state, but the family, at last, was able to purchase the property outright in the name of their oldest child, daughter Kiyoko, who was born in the U.S. In about 1950, son Tosh and his wife, Tomi, took over management of the business and ran it until 1995. Looking to retire, the Manos sold the popular nursery to faithful customers Ron Minter and Paul Farrington, who ran it for another twenty years under the name Minter's Earlington Greenhouse and Nursery.<sup>15</sup>

In 2001 Tosh Mano spoke to students at Renton High School about his experiences during the war. Following the talk, he was presented with his high school diploma.<sup>16</sup>

While some growers were able to resurrect their nurseries following incarceration, the heyday of small market growers was passing quickly. Squeezed by development and outpaced by large-scale commercial grow operations, many of the family-owned nurseries faded away in the last decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today housing occupies the former land of both the Hirais and Manos.

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## END NOTES

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# FACING THE INFERNO

*The Wildfire Photography of Kari Greer*

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## IN HINDSIGHT...



Tosh, Kiyoko, and George Mano at Earlington Greenhouse, ca. 1950. (RHM# 2019.046.010)