

Ruth Nomura Tanbara 1907 - 2008

Earl K. and Ruth N. Tanbara Memorial Scholarship Twin Cities JACL

Ruth Tokuko Nomura, was born October 15, 1907, in Portland OR, the daughter of Frank Jiro and Kiyo Takeda Nomura. Her family also included brothers, Paul and Howard, and sister Elsie.

In 1926, as a winner of an essay contest for Nisei students, Ruth traveled by steamship to Japan. This trip provided a foundation for her deep appreciation of Japanese culture. She used her typewriter to record the daily events during her time in Japan and forwarded them to the newspaper sponsoring the students. In 1930, she earned a Bachelor of Science degree from Oregon State University. She married Earl Kazumi Tanbara at the Centenary Wilbur Methodist Church, Portland on September 16, 1935. Ruth was the principal author of the *Japanese Food Recipes* published by the Japanese Wholesale Grocers Association in December 1940.

In 1942, Ruth and Earl relocated from Berkeley to a farm in Reedley CA along with Earl's parents in an attempt to avoid wartime internment. The bad news was that the boundary for relocating individuals of Japanese ancestry was moved further inland. As a result, they were facing relocation. The good news was that the U.S. Army officer who visited the farm to inform them of the need to move to an assembly center was a former high school classmate of Ruth from Portland. The officer offered them an opportunity to move anywhere East if they had friends who would accept them. They contacted friends in Minneapolis and they were placed on a military train headed for the Twin Cities. Earl's parents were not able to go with them and were subsequently interned in Camp III, Poston, AZ.

Earl and Ruth moved several times after arriving in the Twin Cities and eventually settled at 218 S. Avon Street, Saint Paul. When they moved into the neighborhood, a military officer from Fort Snelling made the rounds of the neighbors to inform them about Japanese Americans of their citizenship record and to avoid any misunderstandings when Nikkei soldiers, including Ruth's brother, Paul, were invited for dinner while on weekend passes from the Japanese Language Schools at Fort Savage, University of Minnesota, and Fort Snelling.

Earl and Ruth worked on their own to help evacuees as well. They assisted over 100 evacuees to leave camp and find a place in the Twin Cities. They also were active in placing many Japanese Americans in work situations in the Twin Cities during and after WWII. They housed as many people in their home as could comfortably fit, picked people up from the train, helped them find jobs and apartments on their own time in addition to their work with the resettlement committee. They also gave talks to community groups to help foster community acceptance of the new Japanese American residents in a state that only had 51 Japanese on the 1940 state census.

When Earl and Ruth arrived in St. Paul in August of 1942, Ruth had letters of recommendation from her former employers – the YWCA in Portland and the International Institute of San Francisco. Within a week of their arrival in St. Paul, Ruth was hired to be a secretary at the St. Paul YWCA. Ruth and Earl attended the first meeting of what became the St. Paul Resettlement Committee and became active members of this group. The St. Paul Resettlement Committee was formed in October 1942 by the International Institute of Minnesota, housed at the YWCA in downtown St. Paul.

The committee was made up of social workers, board members of the YWCA, the YMCA, the International Institute and Family Service Agency, church leaders, college faculty members, and interested community people who wished to assist Japanese Americans resettle to St. Paul from the 10 Internment Camps. The SPRC worked closely with the War Relocation Authority on this work. From 1945-1948, the St. Paul Resettlement Committee operated a hostel for evacuees from camp, and provided temporary housing, meals

and assistance adjusting to Minnesota winters. The International Institute of Minnesota helped with casework and job-search assistance for the evacuees. Warren E. Burger, St. Paul lawyer and later Chief Justice of the U. S. Supreme Court, was the legal counsel for this committee. Ruth was a member of the committee until it disbanded in 1953. The St. Paul Resettlement Committee was active in helping Rev. Daisuke Kitagawa establish the Japanese Community Center in Minneapolis in 1950. The remaining funds from this committee were disbursed to the Japanese Community Center when the committee disbanded in 1953.

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The St. Paul Council of Human Relations was organized in 1943 and established in 1945. Warren E. Burger was voted the first president of this committee but stepped down shortly thereafter. Both he and Ruth were active members of this committee later on in the 1950s and 1970s. This committee included community, college, and church leaders trying to solve problems of racial discrimination throughout the city. This committee disbanded in 1973. When they disbanded, they gave their remaining funds to the International Institute of Minnesota.

At the end of the war, the Tanbaras decided to stay in Minnesota. In 1953, Ruth received a Master's Degree in Home Economics from the University of Minnesota.

Ruth worked from 1942 to 1972 as adult education director and international YWCA program director for the Saint Paul YWCA. A Japanese garden at the former YWCA building on Kellogg Boulevard was created at her retirement and is named in her honor. The garden was refurbished in 2007 and she attended the rededication ceremony at the Elementary School.

Ruth directed the participation of the first group of Japanese Americans in the Festival of Nations in 1947, working with many volunteers. The Festival of Nations was established in 1932 by Alice Sickels, the Executive Secretary of the International Institute of Minnesota. The Japanese American group has participated in the Festival since 1947, and Ruth was a part of the food and cultural booths for many years.

Ruth and Earl were both founding members of the Twin Cities Chapter of the JACL started in 1946.

Ruth was a charter member of the Japan America Society of Minnesota in 1972 and served on its board of directors. In 1955, Ruth was asked by Louis W. Hill to help him start what became the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City (which was part of President Eisenhower's People to People Program). As part of her role in the St. Paul-Nagasaki Sister City, Ruth led 6 delegations from St. Paul to Nagasaki. Some of their trips included visiting and helping atomic bomb victims.

Ruth was very active in community service. She was a board member of the St. Paul Council of Human Relations, Family Service Center of Greater St. Paul, Minnesota Museum of Art, International Institute, and Unity Church – Unitarian. She was appointed to the Governor's Committee on Human Rights. She was an active member of the Japanese American Community Center, the Twin Cities chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League, Altrusa Club, and Japan America Society.

Ruth was awarded the Walter Mondale Award by the Japan America Society in 2001. She was recognized by St. Paul Mayor Randy Kelly with an honorary "Ruth Tanbara Day" on August 20, 2005. Ruth is honored and remembered by her family with a memorial bench at the Como Park Global Harmony Labyrinth in St. Paul. She was a longtime member of Unity Church – Unitarian in Saint Paul where she served on the board of trustees in 1955 and arranged flowers for Sunday services for more than 30 years.

Ruth enjoyed traveling and led six tours to Japan and other Asian destinations. Her other hobbies included photography, leather glove making, teaching flower arrangement, gourmet cooking, contract bridge, and various arts and crafts.

Her story, with that of 11 others in *Reflections - Memoirs of Japanese American Women of Minnesota*, was published by Pacific Asia Press in 1994. She organized the group and was instrumental in recording their autobiographical essays about their experiences on the West Coast and in Minnesota. The biographical painting by Japanese American artist Hiro, *A Life Time of Service*, was unveiled at the 50th Anniversary of the Saint Paul Nagasaki Sister Committee in 2005 and was contributed to the Minnesota Historical Society in 2008.

On January 4, 2008 Ruth passed away at age 100, 34 years to the day, after her husband Earl's passing.