

Tsuyano (Aoyama) Sakai 1903-1998

Tsuyano Aoyama was born in Shigeyama, Wakegun, Okayama-Ken, Japan. She would tell you she was born in Meiji 36, meaning the 36th year of the Meiji Empire. According to her calculations, she said it would be about 1903.

She grew up in a small farm village of Shigeyama. Her parents were Bunzou and Komiyo (Edamoto) Sakai. Tsuyano was the oldest of three children. She had a younger brother and sister. Her family was rice farmers. They had no electricity or plumbing. The family kept their food cool in their well. She explained that they put a stick over the well and then using a rope over the stick to lower a net with the food, down into the well near the water to keep cool. Their home was one large room that was used for all things: eating, sleeping, socializing, etc. She did not grow up with toys like we do in America now; her typical free-time was playing outside. One memory of Tsuyano was that in her village there was a really great persimmons tree that bore lots of sweet fruit. Even the girls used to climb up this tree for the persimmons. Tsuyano fell off at times and used to get bumps on her head. Around the age of 12 she began working in the rice fields. If she was not working in the fields, she would be doing household duties. Playtime became a thing of the past.

The school she and all children in the area went to was Shizutani School. She walked 1½ hours each direction to school! It was about 3.5 miles away from her home. Of interest is the great importance of this school to the area. It is the oldest free public school in the world! The Feudal Lord at the time felt it was important to educate ALL people, not just the elite, so the school was open to samurai (the elite class), along with farmers, craftsmen, and merchants. The school was divided into a boy side and a girl side. Most children went through the 6th grade only, as it was free. Tsuyano was fortunate as she was able to go through 8th grade due to her family paying the extra fee required. She wanted to continue through 12th grade, but her family could no longer afford it and so her education ended, for the time being.

Tsuyano loved to read. Her family was the only home in the village that subscribed to the newspaper. She would read and read and read them. She wanted to be a school teacher and have further education but it was a long way to get to this special school and the family could not manage this for her.

When Tsuyano was 19 her aunt, Mitsu, died leaving her husband, Fusakichi, and son. The family decided Fusakichi must marry someone in Mitsu's family to raise the child. So, Tsuyano, at 19, was married to her aunt's husband. He was 39. Tsuyano thought the boy she was to raise was small and young. But, when she arrived in the USA, where her new husband had been living as a tailor, she found

the son to be 12 years and about as tall as she!! She became a tailor with her husband in Seattle, Washington and they added to the family 3 more children. In 1935 they moved back to Kobe, Japan prior to WWII. While there Tsuyano was a Matchmaker, bringing together couples! She lived there until after her husband died in 1967 and moved in 1969 to be near two of her children, who had returned to the USA and were living in Minnesota.

Tsuyano was a talented poet with many of her writings published in Japanese books! She became very involved with the Issei organization in the Japanese Church. Though she did not have the opportunity to go further than 8th grade, that didn't stop her from learning. Throughout her life she would buy and read various textbooks on all sorts of topics, and take classes through colleges. It is because of her strong belief in education that this scholarship has been created in her name so she can live on helping others move toward their dreams through education.