



IMPORTANT

Heart Mountain Women

from

HISTORY

March is Women's History Month – an annual proclamation and celebration of the generations of women throughout history whose commitment to nature and society have proved invaluable to this planet. March is also host to the Smithsonian's Museum Day Live! – another annual event where museums and cultural institutions across the country open their doors to the public one day for free in order to encourage exploration and education of our country's heritage.

This year's theme for Museum Day Live! on March 12 is "Women of Color" and here at the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center, we wanted to

contribute to the celebration and help honor remarkable, inspiring and successful women of color—some of whom were Japanese Americans incarcerated at the "Heart Mountain Relocation Center" in the 1940s.

Despite the hardship, loss and betrayal these women faced, they each went on lead impactful lives following their incarceration experience. The six women we feature here are not alone in their stories, however, as each girl and woman who left Heart Mountain faced the same challenge to rebuild their lives with resilience and resolve. If there are any women we have missed, feel free to suggest them to us!



LOUISE SUSKI

(b. 1905 — d. 2003)

IN 1926, AT JUST 20 YEARS OLD, LOUISE

Suski was hired as the first English language editor-in-chief of the *Rafu Shimpō*. That year, the first quarter page of English appeared in the newspaper with Louise as the sole editor. Over the next four years, the English section became a daily feature, informing young Japanese American *Nisei* about Los Angeles area happenings as well as educating this generation about the traditional Japanese culture of their ancestry.

Louise was born in 1905 in San Francisco, the second daughter of Koharu and Sakae Suski (or Peter M. Suski as he was later known). Her father immigrated to the U.S. in 1898 and built a successful photography business and devoted himself to the Japanese immigrant community. As the Suski family grew (Louise was one of seven children), Peter pursued a medical degree in hopes of better supporting his family.

In high school, Louise was actively involved in church and *Nisei* youth clubs. In 1924, she graduated from Los Angeles High School and enrolled at the University of California, Los Angeles, with hopes of becoming a kindergarten or physical education teacher. When she was hired by the *Rafu Shimpō* two years later, she stopped pursuing classes in order to devote herself full time to this new career.

When the bombing of Pearl Harbor occurred in 1941, Louise was still working at the newspaper. Shortly after, however, the publisher was arrested and detained by the FBI for his role in the press. As the forced removal of Japanese Americans on the

West Coast became imminent, the *Rafu Shimpō* ceased publication that April. Louise, along with her family, were sent to the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” in Powell, Wyo., after a brief stay at the Santa Anita Assembly Center in California.

During incarceration, Louise continued her journalistic pursuits and joined the staff of the camp newspaper, the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*, as one of the only professional journalists. After the closing of Heart Mountain at the end of World War II in 1945, Louise moved to Chicago and renewed her journalism career, writing for Japanese American publications about the new challenges *Nisei* like herself faced in trying to establish themselves in the Midwest. She worked for the General Mailing and Sales Company, the Japanese American Evacuation and Resettlement Study (JERS) office, and helped edit at two Japanese American publications, *Scene* magazine and *Shikago Shimpō*. In 1978, Louise moved back to Los Angeles to live with her brother Joe and his wife. At the age of 98, Louise passed away in Cerritos, Calif.

Louise Suski was known by her colleagues at one time as the “Queen Bee” at the *Rafu* before World War II broke out. The *Rafu Shimpō* is a newspaper based out of Los Angeles still in print today.

Photo: Louise (left) and her sister Julia (right)



TOSHI ITO

(b. 1924 —)

TOSHI ITO GREW UP IN LOS ANGELES, CALIF.,

as the child of Japanese American immigrants, Seiichiro Nagamori and Kei Hiraoka Nagamori. Her father sold life insurance to Japanese and East Indian farmers in the Imperial Valley and her mother helped manage a Japanese language school in Brawley. When the family moved to East Hollywood, it was Toshi, as a *Nisei* and U.S. citizen, who was the owner of the land and their new house.

Toshi was a senior at John Marshall High School when Pearl Harbor was attacked. She continued to attend school until March—then she and her family were ordered to report to the Santa Anita Assembly Center in California. After four months, the Itos were relocated to the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” in Powell, Wyo.

Upon arrival, Toshi applied for an educational leave permit to attend the Methodist’s National College in Kansas City, Mo. She was accepted in August 1942 and while applying for relocation, she met her future husband, Jim Ito, who was in charge of the leave applications at Heart Mountain. Toshi was one of the first incarcerated to leave on an educational leave permit. While at school she pursued religious courses and regularly attended chapel services. During her first summer vacation, Toshi returned to Heart Mountain to stay with her family. It was then that she forged a stronger relationship with Jim, and the following winter, he proposed and Toshi willingly accepted. They were married on July 14, 1945, shortly after Toshi’s family returned to Los Angeles with the formal closing of the camp.

Toshi remembers this time as agonizing for Japanese Americans, who struggled to find jobs and housing. She also discovered that many colleges and universities were not open to accepting Japanese American students. But, undiscouraged, Toshi applied and was accepted to Chapman College in Los Angeles to finish the education she had started, and in 1946, she earned a degree in sociology.

For the next 26 years, Toshi taught kindergarten and second grade at Elysian Heights Elementary School in Los Angeles. She also wrote a memoir, *Memoirs of Toshi Ito: USA Concentration Camp Inmate, War Bride, Mother of Chrisie and Lance Ito*. Her son, Lance Ito, is the Superior Court judge known for presiding over the O.J. Simpson trial in May 1995. Toshi was an active board member of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation, helping preserve and pass on the story of Heart Mountain to future generations. Recently, she was honored for her lifetime of social work at her alma mater, Chapman University.

“In my 83 years of living, naturally, I have learned many things... it took a long time to learn to get over hurt feelings, disappointments & fearing the unknown. Through these experiences I have tried to develop a positive attitude. I remember my mother telling me, *always look at the doughnut, not at its hole.*”



MIDORI KIMURA

(b. 1897 – d. 1996)

MIDORI KIMURA IMMIGRATED TO THE U.S.

in 1919 from Japan. She lived in the same house in San Jose, Calif., for her entire life—except for the years she spent as an incarcerated at the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” in Powell, Wyo., from 1942 to 1945.

Midori was born on May 31, 1897 in Nagano, and lived there with her family until she was 11 years old. That year, her family joined her father, who had moved to Seoul, South Korea to work for the railroad during the Russo-Japanese War. Following her graduation from a girl’s high school in Seoul, Midori moved back to Japan to attend the same mission school her mother had attended – the Kobe Jogakuin. Five years and a college degree later, Midori began corresponding with a Japanese man who was living in San Jose, Calif., Toshio Kimura. In November 1919, Midori moved to San Jose to marry Toshio, and begin a life and a family in America.

In 1942, like many Japanese American families, Midori and Toshio and their seven children received notice that they would have to report to the San Jose Depot, carrying only as much as they could by hand. From there, they were sent to the Santa Anita Assembly Center in California for three months before they were moved to the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” to live in a barrack in Block 29. Toshio took up work for the camp newspaper, the *Heart Mountain Sentinel*. Midori’s daughters worked as nurse’s aides and teachers and one of her sons served in the

442nd Regimental Combat Team in Italy. When Heart Mountain closed in 1945, the Kimura’s moved back to San Jose. A few years later, Toshio passed away suddenly and unexpectedly from a stroke, and Midori started domestic work to support her still young family and fund her children’s education. She continued to work well into her 70s, and even took up watercolor classes, becoming quite proficient.

At the age of 93, Midori was one of the few local Japanese Americans honored at a historical ceremony held in San Jose on October 13, 1990. There, officials from the U.S. government issued checks of \$20,000 and accompanying letters of apology from then-President George Bush to this first group of Japanese Americans. The check and the letter were symbolic compensations to the Japanese Americans for the injustices they suffered due to the relocation and internment during World War II. Midori passed away on May 31, 1996, just shy of her 98th birthday, in California.

“I was glad President Reagan expressed that it was the wrong thing to evacuate these nice people & their families from California. Receiving the apology is the most important thing in U.S. history... Otherwise, I would have always felt funny in my heart.”



NAOKO ITO

(b. 1926 —)

NAOKO YOSHIMURA ITO WAS RAISED IN

San Francisco's Japantown, where her father owned and ran the Hokubei Hotel. Her family was one of the last to leave the city in 1942, following U.S. government orders for all Japanese Americans to report to relocation centers. They were sent to the "Heart Mountain Relocation Center" in Powell, Wyo. As a teenager living at Heart Mountain, Naoko attended school and graduated from the Heart Mountain High School.

When the camp closed, Naoko and her family returned to San Francisco to resume operating the hotel, lucky that their personal property had not been vandalized, stolen and left for disrepair during their incarceration. Naoko married Takeshi "Peter" Ito a few years later and the couple went on to raise three children in Berkeley, Calif.

During this period of her life, she worked as a secretary for the Berkeley Unified School District and developed an avid interest in quilting. Naoko is one of the founding members and former president of the East Bay Heritage Quilters. In 1983, she was instrumental in organizing the first United States/Japan Quilt Symposium in Tokyo and Kyoto, and continued to coordinate the cross-cultural event for four years. For over 17 years, she also taught quilting at the Japanese Cultural and Community Center of Northern California.

Her own quilt work has been exhibited in quilt shows and featured in books such as *Making Home from War*, *Story Quilts: Telling your Tale in Fabric* and *From Our Side of the Fence*. Her most well-known quilt was completed in 1990 and is entitled "Letting Go." The quilt is a visual memory Naoko remembered from life at Heart Mountain.

Not only was the quilt's image used for a civil rights poster produced by the Southern Poverty Law Center in 1996, but it now hangs in the special exhibit gallery at the Heart Mountain Interpretive Center. At the 2015 Pilgrimage, Naoko presented the quilt to Executive Director Brian Liesinger, entrusting the Center with its care. "Letting Go" is a prominent part of the Center's current textile arts exhibit, "The Fabric of Memory," and Naoko will be honored in person at an artist's reception in April.

"[The quilt] is a metaphor of my own imprisoned teenage years... One day my brother & I found a small bird & captured it. Soon after we had Father make a cage for it. For one week, we noticed that the mother bird... brought her baby bird a worm each day. Since we could no longer stand separating the mother & baby, we let our pet go."



AMY MASS

(b. 1935 –)

AMY IWASAKI MASS WAS BORN AND RAISED

in Los Angeles, Calif., with a life she remembers as comfortable and secure. That is, until she and her family were sent to live at the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” as part of the U.S. government’s forcible removal of all Japanese Americans on the West Coast. Mass was seven-years-old at the time and called barrack 1-9-B home for three years. From what she remembers of her childhood at Heart Mountain, she and her friends from Block 1 passed the time in school and playing: in the snow in the winter and kick-the-can in the summer months.

Following her childhood incarceration, Amy went on to pursue a career in social work, inspired by a Caucasian American social worker whom she had met at camp, Elizabeth Kersey. Amy remembered Kersey as overwhelmingly kind and friendly to her, her family and her neighbors during that time of struggle.

Amy received her B.A. from the University of California, Berkeley and was the recipient of a number of awards, including a Fulbright Teaching Award, Irvine Foundation Grant, and Institute of American Cultures Fellowship. In addition to her B.A., she also holds a M.S.W. from the University of Southern California and a Doctor of Social Work from UCLA. She has been a practicing social worker since 1958. She continues to present and publish today, mostly in regards to

the profound psychological impact of the concentration camp experience on the well-being of Japanese Americans.

On August 6, 1981, Amy testified as part of a panel of mental health professionals at the public hearings held by the Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians in Los Angeles. For two days, she listened to over 750 personal testimonies that described humiliation, trauma, and economic and social disruption.

Amy is currently a Professor Emerita at Whittier College, where she has taught for 25 years, and a member of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation Advisory Committee.

“I also love America. I get goosebumps when I sing the Star Spangled Banner. I believed what our teachers taught regarding what a great country America is... We were told that we were being put away for our own safety...that this was a patriotic sacrifice...The truth was that the government we trusted, the country we loved, the nation to which we had pledged loyalty had betrayed us, had turned against us.”



JEANETTE MISAKA

(b. 1931 –)

JEANETTE MISAKA WAS BORN IN JUNE

1931 as a third-generation Japanese American—a *Sansei*. Her grandparents had immigrated to the U.S. in the late 1800s and settled in San Jose, Calif., becoming, like many Japanese Americans at that time, farmers. Her parents continued to farm as well, planting and harvesting fields of beans, carrots, broccoli and sugar beets. But in 1942, Jeanette and her parents, along with her three sisters, were forcibly removed from their Mountain View home and sent to live at the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” in Powell, Wyo.

After two years of life within the confines of barbed wire, Jeanette’s father was able to secure a farming job in the rural town Sigurd in central Utah. Jeanette attended school in a neighboring town, finished high school there and went on to attend the University of Utah in Salt Lake City. She majored in English and History, and also pursued an elementary education teaching certificate, hoping to find a career in which she could affect and impact people in a positive way.

Jeanette has taught for over 30 years both in elementary schools and at the university level in the Salt Lake City area, in addition to receiving an M.A. and a Ph.D. She’s also married and has had three children, two daughters and a son. In July 2013, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Japan honored Jeanette with

the Japanese Foreign Minister’s Commendation, for her contributions to the promotion of mutual understanding and goodwill between Japan and the U.S. This is only one of many awards Jeanette has received for her work over the years. She remains active in the Japanese American and Salt Lake City communities, has served on boards and held leadership positions within organizations as the Council for Exceptional Children, the Intermountain District Council and the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL).

She is currently an emeritus clinical associate professor of special education and an education specialist with the Utah State Office of Education in Salt Lake City. She is also a member of the Advisory Council of the Heart Mountain Wyoming Foundation.

“My dad was always really proud of being American, he told us that we were Americans & that things would work out fine. I always felt safe because I had my parents with me in the camp. It was only after I grew up that I realized what we had gone through & what my parents had to endure. It was quite a big sacrifice on their part.”



ESTELLE ISHIGO

(b. 1899 — d. 1990)

THERE IS ONE THING THAT SETS ESTELLE

Peck Ishigo apart from the rest of the women featured in this exhibit. Unlike the others, Estelle was not Japanese American. She was Caucasian and married to a *Nisei*, Arthur Ishigo, which explains how she ended up behind the barbed wire of the “Heart Mountain Relocation Center” in 1942 with her husband.

Born in Oakland, California, Estelle grew up surrounded by art and music. She excelled at painting, singing and the violin at a young age. As a college student at the Otis Art Institute in Los Angeles, she met and became close to her future husband, Arthur. They were married in 1928 in Mexico, strategically avoiding the anti-miscegenation laws in California at the time.

After Pearl Harbor was attacked, both Estelle and Arthur were fired from their jobs and Arthur was subsequently ordered to report to the Pomona Assembly Center for forced relocation. Not wanting to leave his side, Estelle traveled with him. They were eventually sent to Heart Mountain for the duration of the war.

Within the confines of the camp, Estelle continued to pursue her artistic talents and produced hundreds of poignant drawings and paintings depicting confined camp life. When Heart Mountain closed in November of 1945, Arthur and Estelle were two of the last incarcerated to leave, having nothing to return to. They moved back to southern California and lived in a segregated trailer park

camp alongside other incarcerated. They struggled for years to make ends meet. Following Arthur’s death in 1957, Estelle continued to live in extreme poverty.

In 1972, her artwork was featured in an exhibition at the California Historical Society and she published her memoir, *Lone Heart Mountain*, which chronicles the years she spent in incarceration. Just prior to her death in March 1990, she was the subject of the Academy Award winning documentary, *Days of Waiting*, produced by Steve Okazaki. According to Estelle, she had been waiting for the opportunity to tell her story. The documentary is a vivid recreation of Estelle’s life and legacy, drawing most of its inspiration from Estelle’s own words, her paintings and sketches and her heartrending experience.

“Strange as it may sound, in this lonely, desolate place, I felt accepted for the first time in my life. The government had declared me a Japanese. And now I no longer saw myself as white—as a *hakujin*. I was a *nihonjin*—a Japanese American. My fellow Heart Mountain residents took me in as one of their own. We all shared the same pain, the same joys, the same hopes, & desires, & I never encountered a single act of prejudice or discrimination.”