



KIMIKO OKANO MURAKAMI

A PICTURE OF STRENGTH

Story by John Endo Greenaway

When she died in 1997 at the age of 93, Kimiko Okano Murakami left behind a lasting legacy of perseverance and, ultimately, triumph in the face almost indescribable adversity. In her lifetime she claimed an extraordinary number of firsts: first Japanese Canadian to be born in Steveston; first woman to drive a car on Salt Spring Island; first person of Asian ancestry to have her image printed on a North American banknote.

She counted among her friends and admirers former BC premier WAC Bennett and broadcast legend Jack Webster, both of whom would regularly drop by her Salt Spring home to visit and seek counsel. Her photograph hangs in the National Archives in Ottawa. In January she will be the subject of a new TV documentary on channel m.

Born to Japanese immigrant parents in 1904, Kimiko developed her strength and independent streak at a young age. By the age of five she was piloting the family boat from the foot of Water Street in Vancouver—where they would go to sell fish—back to the family home on Salt Spring Island, waking her father up in time for him to pilot the boat to the dock. She also controlled the family purse strings—doling out money to her parents as needed.

THE OKANO FAMILY OWNED A HOUSE ON DUCK BAY, NEAR Vesuvius, in close proximity to other Japanese Canadian families. Japanese were among the first non-natives to settle on Salt Spring Island and the 1901 census shows 59 islanders of Japanese descent. The family—mother and father Kumanosuke and Riyo, Kimiko and younger sister Sayoko—owned a large fishing boat that provided their income.

Another daughter, Kazue, was born on January 1, 1910. She tragically drowned before her second birthday when she fell off the fishing boat. Forbidden to bury their young daughter on Salt Spring, the family was in Vancouver for her funeral when they got word that a suspicious fire had destroyed the family houseboat and part of the herring camp they were running at the time.

Following the two tragedies, the Okanos travelled to Japan aboard the Mexico Maru to stay with relatives. There, they lived in Takuma, Innoshima, with Kimiko's paternal grandmother, Karu, a 78-year-old widow. Once the two children were enrolled in school, their father returned to BC to continue working. Their mother gave birth to another daughter, Miyoko, shortly afterwards and when the baby was old enough, also returned to Canada, leaving the two older girls in care of the grandmother, who they did not care for. Kimiko, hurt and angry at being abandoned, became her sister's caretaker. It was a role that she would carry with her for the rest of her life and once she had her own children she was extremely protective of them.

Despite the less-than-ideal circumstances, Kimiko did well in and out of school, excelling academically, musically, athletically and socially, and was popular with classmates and adults alike.

AT FIFTEEN, KIMIKO GRADUATED from grade seven and, along with her sister, returned to Canada to re-join their parents, with whom they had lost all contact for six years. It was a terrible culture shock for the girls, who had become almost completely Japanese in the seven years they had been away. Unable to converse with non-Japanese, Kimiko used a dictionary to teach herself English again. By this time, their mother had given birth to a boy, Victor Masatoshi, and the two older girls kept house and looked after Victor and Miyoko while their parents fished. By this time, they owned five fishing boats and were doing well financially.

With the success of Japanese Canadian fishermen, however, there was a growing resentment on the part of white and native fishermen and the Fisheries Department began eliminating licenses for Japanese Canadians. So in December 1919, Kimiko's parents sold off three



Kimiko and Katsuyori in 1926 on Honeymoon

of the boats to buy 50 acres of land on Sharp Road on Salt Spring Island. They cleared the land, selling the logs for lumber. Kimiko and Sayoko raised chickens and grew produce for sale while their parents continued to fish. Kimiko invented an ingenious watering system for the chickens. Within three years the farm was producing enough eggs and saleable produce to support the family, and the last two fishing boats were sold.

In 1923, at the age of 19, Kimiko became the first woman driver on Salt Spring Island. She drove a Ford Model T $\frac{3}{4}$ ton truck purchased for \$800 cash from agent Gavin Mouat. She used the truck to deliver eggs to Mouats Trading Company and pick up feed for the return journey. She was, by all accounts, a fast and somewhat reckless driver, and passengers felt like they were taking their lives in their hands. By now the family was shipping strawberries, raspberries and vegetables to a wholesale house in Victoria. Their success enabled them to buy more land and expand the business.

In 1925 Kimiko and Sayoko returned to Takuma to celebrate their grandmother's 88th birthday. While there, a go-between arranged a meeting between Kimiko and a widower named Katsuyori. The couple married on January 17, 1926, in Shigei. Kimiko and Sayoko returned to Salt Spring that May and Katsuyori followed later after Kimiko's parents agreed to sponsor him.

For Katsuyori, his arrival in Canada was a shock. Raised in an affluent family—he was a descendant of the seventh son of the 62nd Emperor—he was used to a life of leisure complete with servants. BC at the time was in some ways still an untamed frontier, with few of the amenities he was used to. The Okano's sponsorship obligated Katsuyori to work for them for three years, but in fact he ended up working for them for five years. It was backbreaking work—fishing, farming and building. To his credit, he threw himself

into the task at hand, building a fence around 50 acres, digging a pipeline from a water source up the mountain to the farm, and building two greenhouses.

IN 1932, KIMIKO AND KATSUYORI PURCHASED 17 ACRES on Sharp Road. Over the next nine years they cleared the wilderness, building a successful farm and producing berries, asparagus, vegetables, and eggs from 5,000 chickens. Katsuyori built a large home, six chicken houses, brooder house, incubator house, bathhouse, storage buildings, and a dormitory for workers.

By 1941 the couple was hiring women from Vancouver Island to help out with the harvest and others to watch their five children. As the 1941 harvest approached, the family was looking forward to paying off their debts, with plans to purchase more land and enlarge the farm. On December 7, Katsuyori was released from hospital following an appendectomy. The family's joy was short-lived, as that same day they heard the news that Japan had attacked Pearl Harbor. The 77 Japanese Canadians on the island were immediately apprehensive and their fear was justified as anti-Japanese feelings that had been simmering burst to the surface. Both children and adults faced daily harassment and even physical attacks.

On February 24, 1942, the Cabinet, under the War Measures Act, passed Order in Council 1486. A dusk-to-dawn curfew was imposed, and fishing boats, automobiles, homes, businesses and personal property were confiscated. Gavin Mouat was appointed as the agent for Custodian of Enemy Property for the Gulf Islands. On March 17, the RCMP took Katsuyori into custody, leaving Kimiko alone with five children, aged one to thirteen.

On April 22, Kimiko and the five children, along with the remaining Japanese Canadian islanders, were put aboard the *Princess Mary*. After stopping at the other Gulf Islands to pick up other Japanese Canadians, the ship took them to Vancouver, and then to the animal barns at Hastings Park. On May

1, the family was sent by train to Greenwood, where they were assigned a small cubicle in a filthy bunkhouse. Kimiko had no idea of her husband's whereabouts until she finally received a censored letter. Along with other prisoners, he had spent two nights in Hastings Park before being sent to a Road Camp to build the interprovincial highway between Jasper, Alberta and Blue River, BC. Ill health forced Katsuyori to leave the road crew and he became a kitchen helper.

In July, married men were released from the road camps and allowed to rejoin their families if they agreed to work on sugar beet farms in Alberta. The family was reunited in Magrath, Alberta where they were assigned to a farmer with a deep hatred of Japanese who told the townspeople to "treat the Japs like criminals." He followed his own advice and the family was given a 10'X15' shack right next to a pigpen. The inhumane living and work conditions led eldest daughter Alice to write to the BC Security Commission, who agreed to move the family to an internment camp. In November, they arrived in Slocan, to find it buried in deep snow, and were assigned a large unheated tent that they shared with three other families. They stayed in Slocan until they were sent to Rosebery at the end of Slocan Lake. They were given a small, unfinished 14' X 28' shack, which they did their best to winterize.

While in Rosebery, they learned that title to their land on Salt Spring had been transferred to "The Secretary of State of Canada, acting in his capacity as Custodian under Revised Regulations Respecting Trading with the Enemy" and then to the Director of Veterans Land Act for subsequent sale to a returning soldier. Kimiko and Katsuyori were unbelieving and devastated. Salt Spring Islanders they had considered friends had promised to keep their property safe until their return and were now profiting from the forced sale of their land. The family was informed that once the transaction costs were deducted, only \$500 remained from the sale of the farm, money that would be controlled by the government and used to pay for

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their own incarceration.

In September 1944, Japanese Canadians were given two choices: agree to be “repatriated” to a war-ravaged Japan, or move east of the Rockies. Hoping to return to Salt Spring Island one day, the family opted to move to Alberta where they once again found themselves on a sugar beet farm in Magrath. A variety of low-paying jobs enabled their survival over the next few years, including a stint running a restaurant owned by Kimiko’s father, who was deeply in debt. The family stayed in Alberta for six years, until they were finally able to pay of their debts and save enough money to return to BC.

ON APRIL 1, 1949, FOUR YEARS AFTER THE WAR ENDED, the wartime restrictions were lifted and full rights of citizenship, including the right to vote and move freely throughout Canada, were given to Japanese Canadians. In September 1954, on Kimiko Murakami’s 50th birthday, the family returned to Salt Spring Island, the only Japanese Canadians to return to the Gulf Islands. For many of the islanders, it was an unwelcome return. The family faced a hostile reception and resistance from individuals, businesses, the RCMP, and even from the Anglican Church where the Murakami children had been baptized. Unable to buy back their old land, they had to settle for scrubland on Rainbow Road—property the family owns to this day.

After all they had been through, the Murakami family was not about to quit now. Against all odds, in the face of hostile islanders, vandalism, threats, theft, obstructive officials and difficult terrain, the family once again persevered, clearing the land and creating a new farm where they

grew berries, asparagus and other vegetables. On their return, they found that the Japanese cemetery had been used as a garbage dump and many of the grave markers had been destroyed or stolen. Sundays were spent cleaning the cemetery and Katsuyori made cedar posts on which he carved the names of the deceased from memory. Today these graves are the only signs that remain of the thriving pre-war Japanese Canadian community on Salt Spring Island.

Through perseverance and hard work, the family rebuilt their life on Salt Spring Island, earning the respect of many, even if lingering racism continues to this day within some island families. Katsuyori died in March 1988, and Kimiko died in July 1997. As daughter Mary Kitagawa points out, her parents were a real team, and one of the lessons they passed on to their children was the importance of loyalty, pride and integrity. Her mother in particular was a force to be reckoned with. She had a magnetism that drew everyone to her. “The rich, the famous and powerful came to seek her friendship. She offered them personhood, honesty, strength, intelligence, wisdom, courage, optimism, compassion, generosity, selflessness, perseverance and determination. They continually returned to see her as if to recharge their batteries. She always showed a proud face to the community, never a face of defeat.”

In 1992, a portrait of Kimiko Murakami was featured in photographer Barbara Woodley’s book *Portraits: Canadian Women in Focus* alongside Canadian luminaries including Prime Minister Kim Campbell and the late Governor-General Jean Sauvé. In the photograph, she is framed by gourds grown on the family farm. It is a photograph im-

bued with the strength and character of its subject. The original print hangs in the permanent collection of the National Archives of Canada.

In 2001, the Salt Spring Island Monetary Fund began issuing its own currency for use on the island. The money is legal tender only on Salt Spring and is sold at par with the Canadian dollar. The face of each bill honours a Salt Spring Island pioneer. On January 8, 2003 the \$100 bill was unveiled, featuring on its face the Woodley portrait of Kimiko Murakami, and on its back a painting by Salt Spring resident Robert Bateman. According to CoinWorld.com, the note is the first in North America to feature a person of Asian ethnicity.

ON JANUARY 15, 2006 AT 9.30PM channel m will air the BC premiere of *Mother Tongue*, a 13-part documentary series by Toronto filmmaker Susan Poizner. The premier will feature the episode *Kimiko Murakami: Triumph Over Internment*.

Poizner’s goal in the *Mother Tongue* series is to tell the stories of the unsung heroines from Canada’s diverse ethnic communities and to dispel the myth that Canadian history is really just the story of the English and the French.

The stories Poizner uncovered were wide ranging, from the tale of a Finnish suffragist and a Chinese civic rights activist to that of a Black runaway slave and freedom fighter from the 1850s. Poizner asked a Vancouver-based researcher to find her a story of a remarkable woman from the Japanese Canadian community and one of the stories that reached her desk was Kimiko Murakami’s.

“I loved the story because it was one of determination—the unwillingness to cave in when faced with great adversity,” says Poizner. “To me Kimiko Murakami is the epitome of the *Mother Tongue* heroine: she knows what’s right and doesn’t give up until she reaches her goal. She inspired her family with her bravery, and she inspires those who see the film to face their challenges head on.”

Broadcasters Canadian Learning Television and SCN commissioned the series and Poizner found the rest of the funding from a small department in Canadian Heritage. After a first run on digital TV this fall, Vancouverites will be able to watch the series on Sunday night at 9.30 on channel m starting from January 15.

Readers are invited to the Vancouver premiere of two episodes in the *Mother Tongue* TV series at the Vancouver Museum on January 12, 2006 from 7:30 - 9:30pm. After the screening of *Kimiko Murakami: Triumph Over Internment* and *Mary Lee Chan: Taking on City Hall* there will be a question and answer session with the producer and participants in the shows. The museum is located in Vanier Park on the south end of the Burrard Street Bridge at 1100 Chestnut Street. RSVP to info@mothertongue.ca. For more information call the museum at 604.734.7368 or visit www.mothertongue.ca.

reference: *Ganbaru: the Murakami Family of Salt Spring Island* by Rose Murakami