

Satoru Tsuneishi and the Tsuneishi Family

Ah, tis New Year's Day!
It reminds me that with me
A new lineage starts.

By Shisei Tsuneishi
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THE EARLY YEARS

Satoru Tsuneishi was born on 30 May 1888 in Kochi prefecture on Shikoku Island in Japan. He was the oldest son of a small farm family. At age 19, his best friend said, "Let's go to America," and they did. Satoru was one to embrace opportunities. That's the beginning of the Tsuneishi lineage in the Los Angeles area.

Satoru disembarked at Santa Monica Pier in 1907 and came to Little Tokyo on the Pacific Electric car. The very next day, he was picking strawberries in south Glendale. He converted to Christianity after a house meeting in downtown LA, and was baptized by Dr. H. H. Guy at what became West Adams Christian Church. As he aimed to join the ministry, Satoru thought to get some education first. He found opportunity after meeting the principal of the Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte (MAD) High School. The principal tested the young Japanese and found his math and science knowledge appropriate. Satoru became the first Japanese American to graduate from MAD in 1914. It was the same year that Julian Fisher, an African American, also graduated from MAD. In the 1980s, Satoru was invited to participate in a Monrovia Day Parade as the oldest living graduate of MAD. Satoru went on to complete one year at USC. While at USC, Satoru explored pacifism in an essay he wrote opposing World War I (1914-17).

Satoru returned to Japan to marry Sho Murakami (1891-1952) also of Kochi. Sho had completed normal school in Japan and was a schoolteacher. They settled on Euclid Avenue, an unincorporated area south of the Santa Fe tracks in Duarte. The couple grew chicken and children. In a 2002 interview, their son Paul Tsuneishi said,

"My brother, Hughes (1916), was named after Charles Evans Hughes [Supreme Court justice who ran against Woodrow Wilson for president]. My oldest sister, Florence (1917), was named after Florence Nightingale. I don't know about my sister Frances (1918). Arthur (1920) was named after Arthur MacArthur, Douglas MacArthur's father. Warren (1921) was born on the 4th of July and named after Warren G. Harding. And I (1923) was named after the apostle Paul. Noel (1924) was born on Christmas. James was born in 1928 and Rosie in 1930. There's nine of us plus a baby brother, Henry, who died of pneumonia in 1932 and is buried in Monrovia Cemetery,"

Satoru built a four-room house on Euclid next to the Monrovia Wash. Their landlady was Rose Maxwell, the daughter of Duarte pioneers, Dr. A. S. and Jenny Talbot Maxwell. Paul said,

"There was no indoor plumbing and we had an outhouse. There was a separate little building where we had a traditional ofuro tin tub. There was a hole underneath that led to the outside. I remember we would build fires to heat up the bath water. You would wash and soap yourself, rinse, and then get into the tub for a soak. That was a traditional Japanese bath. We had no heating. We had overhead light bulbs. In the front room, there was a galvanized round tub with sand in it. We'd build fires in there for heating. Later, we had a rectangular stove with iron legs and stove pipe. We had an icebox. We'd go to Monrovia in the pickup truck to get a block of ice. Later, Dad built a separate two-room building where all the boys slept."

But Satoru always subscribed to the *Los Angeles Times*, kept a radio, and kept a set of encyclopedia in the house.

The chicken and egg business suffered a setback when the Monrovia Wash overflowed. Satoru tried selling real estate stock to other Japanese. The family relied on the truck farming business during the Depression years. The family planted rhubarb, strawberries, boysenberries, raspberries, and other vegetables. On the busy Route 66 or Huntington Drive, the family had a stand selling fruits and vegetables. The older boys helped work Maxwell's orange orchard.

THE WAR PERIOD

Pearl Harbor and Executive Order 9066 brought chaos to the Tsuneishi family. Franklin Roosevelt's order – supported by racist elements and economic opportunists – forced Japanese Americans on the West Coast into ten concentration camps for the duration of the war. 120,000 Americans lost their constitutional rights, their homes, and their property. Most Monrovians of Japanese descent were temporarily evacuated to the Pomona Fairgrounds – and not Santa Anita Racetracks. They were then transported to their permanent camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. However, the United States did not hesitate to recruit and draft soldiers from these camps, mostly into the segregated 442nd Regimental Combat Team.

Satoru wrote in July of 1981,

“When World War II started, I was engaging in farming, mostly raising strawberries. In April 1942, it became clear that all Japanese will be forced to evacuate from the Pacific coast. Selling my strawberry crop at \$700, and on the 15th of May, I went to Pomona Assembly with my wife and seven of my children; the eldest boy had already been in the army. We stayed in Pomona Assembly Center exactly for 3 months, and then we were sent to Heart Mountain Relocation Center, Wyoming by a train, arriving there on 18th of August 1942. As soon as we settled down in Block Two of the center, the Administration told us to select Block Heads from each block. I was chosen as the Block Head of our block, and I served in that position for one year. After serving for one year as the Block Head, I retired and I took care of a Japanese Language Library.”

Satoru and Sho's eldest son, Hughes, had attended Pasadena Junior College. He was drafted before Pearl Harbor into the Army's secret Japanese language training program at San Francisco's Presidio. This was the beginning of the Military Intelligence Services (MIS).

Warren was a junior at Berkeley and forced to evacuate separately from his family. In an excerpted interview from the Veterans History Project, Warren said,

“I graduated at the top of my class in Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte High School, a community about 20 miles east of Los Angeles. There are 225 students in that class. And I and two twin neighbors of ours, the Densmoors, we three graduated at the top of our class. In 1939, you could go to the University of California without paying a penny of tuition as a state non-grant college. And all you had to do is come up with 27 dollars in school student fees. And, of course, you had to pay for your room and board. I worked for my room and board as a houseboy. I worked in the summer of 1939 at a food stand to save some money so I would have some pocket money and paid my 27 dollars and started my education... My major was political science. My minor was English. I wanted to be a journalist. I wanted to focus on Asian studies... And I was hitting the books on December 7 when the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor, and I was so upset. I was so angry that the Japanese had the temerity to attack us. But I was deeply distressed and depressed because I knew what was coming -- going to happen to us. California, after all, has had a long history of anti-Asian discrimination, prejudice.”

Warren was forced to Tanforan Racetracks before joining his family at the permanent concentration camp at Heart Mountain, Wyoming. He stayed about two months before transferring out to Syracuse University in New York. He explained, "Syracuse had an enlightened chancellor [William P. Tolley] who was of Irish descent, second generation like me... And he thought that Japanese Americans had been given a raw deal and he accepted us, a small contingent of us. And that's where I finished my college education." From Syracuse, Warren volunteered for the Military Intelligence Service Language School, now at Camp Savage in Minnesota. This was at the urging of his brother, Hughes, who wrote, "The Nisei in the infantry are being put into a unit called the 442nd. They are going to be cannon fodder."

Younger brother, Paul, said,

"When I was in high school, my teachers would say 'Why can't you get grades like your older brother?' I was very democratic in that I got everything from A's to D's (laughs). But three or four of my siblings were straight A students... I asked Warren once, 'Why did you work so hard? You knew no one would ever hire you.'"

Florence received a teaching credential from UCLA in 1939. Arthur majored in aeronautical engineering at Pasadena Junior College, but had difficulty finding employment; he worked at John Grayson's small repair shop in Monrovia before the war. Paul continued,

"I graduated from Monrovia High School in 1940 and went to Pasadena Junior College. I didn't know what else I was going to do. I didn't finish the second year... After Pearl Harbor, the PJC superintendent [Harbeson] wanted to talk to each of us Japanese Americans individually, but I never went to that meeting. I didn't show up. I wasn't interested."

Paul said that while he was at Heart Mountain, he was always on work leave such that he didn't really know what was going on at Heart Mountain camp or with his family.

"I volunteered to be in the first contingent to go prepare Heart Mountain. That was the first time I was more than thirty miles from home; it was my first train ride. We went by Las Vegas and I remember the lights. We prepared the mess halls. That was high desert. I never saw anything like that. We cleared the chaparral and it was so dusty. I was nineteen and everything was new to me."

At Heart Mountain, I was kitchen help in the mess hall. But most of the time, I was on work leave. I worked on the railroads in Montana; I worked on a farm topping sugar beets; I tended hot houses in Thermopolis, Wyoming; I volunteered to harvest crops at Tule Lake. At the time I didn't know there was a strike at Tule Lake. After that, I got another work leave to go to Chicago in a small machine shop near Wrigley Field. I took my physical in Chicago. I returned to Heart Mountain and then went to Denver for a few weeks to work in the wholesale market before I was drafted in 1944."

Satoru and Sho would have four sons who volunteered or got drafted into the World War II military: Hughes, Warren, Paul, and Noel. Warren was a recipient of the Bronze Star for his service in the Philippines and Okinawa. Arthur had physical disabilities and was exempt. Sisters Florence and Frances were civilian employees of Allied Translator and Interpreter Section (ATIS) in Tokyo. Younger brother, James, would serve in the Korean War and was on disability for the rest of his life.

And yet it was Satoru who openly supported the conscientious draft resisters that were headquartered at Heart Mountain camp, the Fair Play Committee. These Japanese American young men refused to join the military while their civil rights were being violated by the U.S. government. This stance remained highly controversial in the Japanese American community for decades. Satoru wrote,

“Since I am an alien enemy, I am not in position to express my opinions on the policy of the war of the U.S., but when I was young I went to the American schools for several years and learned about American history, as well as Constitution of U.S. I know why the colonists revolted against England. The Niseis also know about them. I can understand why some of them refuse to be loyal to U.S. and refuse to serve American army, while rights of citizenship have been denied to them and put into the concentration camp without doing anything wrong.”

REBUILDING

In the early 1970s, Pastor Paul Tsuneishi joined the San Fernando Valley chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). On his own, Paul interviewed about fifty draft resisters including fellow Monrovia, Yosh Kuromiya. He writes, “I am my Issei father’s son, and identify with the draft resisters.” Paul also worked with the NAACP, anti-war movements, redress and reparations movement, and many other civil rights causes. He was on the National Board of the JACL and District Governor in 1978.

After World War II, the nine siblings dispersed and started building their own careers and families. Hughes established Tsuneishi Insurance in 1948, and was one of the 22 founders of Western Pioneer in 1949, one of the first insurance companies serving Japanese Americans. Florence became a schoolteacher and a piano teacher. Frances was a bookkeeper for Hughes. Today, Tsuneishi Insurance in Torrance is under the guardianship of Arthur’s children. Arthur graduated from UCLA and California Baptist Theological Seminary, and spent most of his pastoring career with the Los Angeles Holiness Church. Warren Tsuneishi earned an MA in 1948 and an MS in 1950 from Columbia University. He completed his PhD in Political Science at Yale in 1960. Dr. Tsuneishi began working in the Library of Congress in 1957 and retired in 1993 as the Chief of the Asian Division. Noel Tsuneishi retired as a bacteriologist from the City of Hope.

And Satoru would rebuild himself too. After Heart Mountain camp, Satoru and Sho returned to Monrovia where they lived next door to the family compound of Louis and Lucinda Garcia on the 500 block of Almond Ave. Satoru planted strawberries again and warned the Garcia children that they could eat all the strawberries they wanted on the first row, but only from the first row. The Garcias also remember fondly the mochi rice cake that the Tsuneishis would share.

Satoru and Sho moved to East Los Angeles, and Sho died in 1952. Satoru spent more time focused on his love of poetry and literature. Using the pen name, Shisei, Tsuneishi wrote haiku and promoted haiku in the Japanese American community. Paul said, “My dad had a lifelong interest in the writing of haiku poetry and other poetry. He’s quite well known for that. In the 1920s, he started a haiku magazine in America among the Issei population. He became an honorary member, or “Donin,” of *Hototogisu*, a haiku magazine in Japan. His goal was to have three haikus published in that magazine, but he didn’t quite make it.” In 1977, Shisei (pen name) Tsuneishi was honored by the Japanese government with Kunsho, sixth class, Order of the Rising Sun, a special award for his lifetime promotion of haiku in the United States. Satoru Shisei Tsuneishi died in 1987. His papers are held at UCLA’s Charles E. Young Library’s Special Collections.

Main Sources:

- Email conversations with Mark Tsuneishi in March 2015 and August 2018.
- Interview with Paul Tsuneishi by Susie Ling at Little Tokyo Centenary Church, 30 October 2002. Japanese Americans of San Gabriel Valley Project.

- Interview with Warren Michio Tsuneishi by Sarah Rouse and Jurreta Heckscher in 2001. Library of Congress' Veterans History Project. <https://memory.loc.gov/diglib/vhp-stories/story/loc.natlib.afc2001001.02153/>
- "Satoru Tsuneishi. Testimony Prepared for the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Interment of Civilians, Los Angeles, CA." *Amerasia Journal*: 2007, Vol. 33, No. 3, pp. 102-109.



Satoru and Sho Tsuneishi with Hughes and Florence. Photo courtesy of Mark Tsuneishi.



Tsuneishi family's fruit stand on Huntington Drive in the 1930s. Photo courtesy of Mark Tsuneishi.



On left, Sho Tsuneishi with a four Blue Star flag at Heart Mountain Concentration Camp. Photo from US National Archives.

Written by Susie Ling, 21 August 2018