

SEATTLE POST-INTELLIGENCER

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Seattle's Japantown remembered**War disrupted vital community**

Monday, November 22, 2004

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The World War II internment of Japanese Americans wiped out an entire Seattle community, forcing the 8,000 residents of "Japantown" to abandon their homes and small businesses.

In recent years, the Densho Japanese American Legacy Project has collected the life stories of those who were torn from their schools, jobs and neighborhoods and incarcerated because of their ancestry.

One of those stories is of Dr. Ruby Inouye, now 84, the first Japanese American woman to practice medicine in Seattle. And her own legacy is of bringing life back to Japantown -- one baby at a time.

"Whenever I see somebody that I delivered, I say, 'Oh, you're my baby,' " said Inouye, who delivered more than 1,000 babies in her career. "I'm proud of my babies."

Inouye was one of the internees featured yesterday in a Densho-sponsored event commemorating the once-vibrant Japantown, centered at South Main and Jackson streets, and Fifth, Sixth and Seventh avenues South.

Before the war, the small community was closely knit. About 85 percent of the residents were involved in small businesses, including shops, restaurants and hotels, said author and researcher Stephen Fugita.

"Everybody was intertwined economically, which reinforced the social ties," he said at the event at Town Hall.

Although Inouye's family lived on the outskirts of Japantown, she recalled how her family frequently walked there to buy rice cakes and other Japanese specialties, attend festivals and visit their friends' shops and restaurants.

After Japan bombed Pearl Harbor in 1941, Inouye, her parents and her five siblings were among the 7,000 Seattle-area residents who were rounded up and shipped to an internment camp in Minidoka, Idaho.

At the time, Inouye was a 21-year-old student in the premed program at the University of Washington.

Her father was unusual, she said, in wanting his daughters to go to college. Even after he lost almost everything during the war, including the restaurant he had run at First Avenue and Madison Street, he managed to find the money for her tuition.

Also unusual, no doubt, was Inouye's return to college studies during the war.

Inouye said she was allowed to leave the internment camp because the University of Texas accepted her in its premed program. Then, at a time when female medical students were rare and Japanese students even rarer, she got into the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania.

"You know, with a Japanese face, it was almost impossible to get into medical school," she said.

The next struggle was to find a hospital internship. "Nobody wanted a Japanese woman," she said. Her medical school dean helped place her in a Pittsburgh hospital.

After the war, Inouye's parents returned to Seattle. And Inouye opened her first clinic in 1949 at South Jackson Street and Sixth Avenue South, the heart of Japantown.

"I wanted to practice among the Japanese people," she said.

At first she struggled to translate her English-language medical training into Japanese. She had to ask her patients, "What is 'heart' in Japanese? What is 'kidney'?" Inouye said.

Many of her patients were war brides from Japan. "I delivered a lot of their babies," she said.

She estimates that of the 1,025 babies she delivered from 1949 until the mid-1980s, about three-fourths of them were Japanese American.

Inouye and her husband built a clinic at 16th Avenue South and South Washington Street. After she retired, she donated the building to Nikkei Concerns, which runs a nursing home across the street.

Asked how many Japanese American women practiced medicine in Seattle before she did, she said, "I must have been the first one."

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