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**Masaji George Tokiwa fonds
Accession 2023.05**

Elizabeth Carroll, 2023

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Biographical note

Masaji George Tokiwa was born in Kagoshima Prefecture, Japan, 5 February 1898. He moved to Canada with his brother Tsunesuke Tokiwa (1891-[1971]) in 1917, settling in Ocean Falls, B.C. He worked in the lumber industry there but soon went to Vancouver to receive his Barber License. Around this time Masaji returned to Japan to marry Horiko (Hori) Alice Tokiwa (1902-1970), bringing her to Canada. Both were from farming families, and both had received education, Masaji had completed high school, Hori completing middle school. He returned to Ocean Falls where he became a prominent member of the Japanese Canadian community.

At the time, the workers at the sawmill in Ocean Falls were almost all Japanese Canadian single men. The Tokiwa family were one of the first to settle there as a family. Masaji and Hori had four children: Helen Sachiye Tokiwa (1925-2014), Paul Yoshiharu Tokiwa (1927- 1994), Samuel Mitsuo Tokiwa (1929-2014), and Lily Yasue (nee. Tokiwa) Gibson (1932-). Though the town was segregated, Masaji was respected by both the Japanese Canadians and the white settlers. He worked as one of the three barbers there. No longer working in the sawmill, many of the men there came to Masaji to discuss their problems. As he interacted with all the men in the mill by cutting their hair, he became a leader figure and helped many of the men out with their problems.

When the province of British Columbia began to forcibly remove Japanese Canadians from the coast, Tokiwa decided to move to Kelowna with his family to work on a farm. The government quickly pushed against this decision and Hiro and the two girls moved to Vancouver to stay with an Aunt, leaving Masaji to work on the farm himself. Previous to the war, both sons had been sent to Japan for education. Masaji was concerned that if they were to stay in Canada, they would not receive adequate education due to discrimination against those of Japanese descent. Masaji and Hori had planned to eventually retire to Japan, but the war completely upturned this. In Vancouver, Hori, Helen, and Lily were moved to Hasting Park. From there they then went to live in Tashme, B.C.

The family was told Masaji could rejoin them if they all moved out of the province. With the help of a Minister in Tashme, the Tokiwa's reunited in Beamsville, O.N. to work on the Prudhomme's farm in November of 1942. They were one of the first Japanese Canadian families to be sent there. Both Lily and Helen were musically inclined and continued their studies there. Helen practiced the piano and organ at the local Church, and Lily sang in school recitals. Masaji's leadership and intelligence was quickly perceived and the Prudhomme's soon moved him to work in their greenhouse instead of the farm fields. Tokiwa was a strong believer in education and began to search for a new home for the family that would have more education opportunities for his eldest, Helen.

In 1948, the family moved to Toronto, O.N. The brothers, who were in Japan during the war, returned to Canada to join the family in 1950. In Toronto, Masaji took up the business of barber again and quickly grew a loyal customer base. Hori worked in a garment factory along Spadina Ave. for a few years, Lily went into nursing, and Helen began to train at the Royal Conservatory of Music.

Even in Toronto, Masaji continued to be a leader for the Japanese Canadian community. He is noted to have been a fantastic speech maker and was an integral member in the creation of the Japanese Canadian Cultural Centre (JCCC). He was an elder in the church. The family had converted to Christianity early in their time in B.C., and continued to practice in Toronto, following Rev. Shimizu. After the passing of Masaji in 1978, his son Paul took over his spot on the board of the JCCC.

References: Conversation held with donor Lily Gibson, April 5, 2023.

Scope and Content

Extent: 90cm of textual records (8 boxes)

The majority of the records are handwritten letters (written in kuzushiji) received by Tokiwa from Japan and friends across Canada. They are assumed to be from pre-WWII to after the war and his time in Toronto. Some photographs of the people of Ocean Falls, B.C. are also included. Due to the language skills needed to read these letters, no further or detailed descriptions have been created.

Arrangement: Any original order there may have been has been lost. It is unknown the classification and arrangement the previous person working on the records used. Any notations, and notes made by this person have been left in with the records. Their arrangement and description was never completed. To make these records available, the archivist has placed the records in unmarked folders in no discernable order. Future arrangement and description will be needed to best make these records accessible.