

# ***Fall 2021 Japanese Hall Newsletter***

## ***This Issue***

Updates

Vickie's Celebration of life

George Behringer's Award

Nisei Event

Sioux Ordnance Depot

Notes on our Advisory Committee Members

## ***Project***

A Japanese Hall built in 1928 by members of the Japanese community and continued to function as a Japanese Hall until 2018 has been relocated to the Legacy of the Plains Museum (LPM) in Gering, NE. Here, the history of the Japanese and Japanese Americans from Nebraska and the High Plains will be preserved.



### **Construction Update from John Miyoshi**

Construction on Japanese Hall is nearing completion as we close out August. Items yet to be completed include: push bars on the three exit doors, a fire door at the bottom of the stairs, exterior grading, lawn sprinkler installation, lawn seeding, internet installation and painting the exterior trim. Our contractors have performed a remarkable job of keeping the look of our Hall very close to the original 1928 look.

Currently the basement cannot be open to the public due to no second exit (there is an egress window so staff can use the area). The newly finished basement looks great. A grant has been applied for that would put an addition onto the Hall. It combines a second basement exit to ground level and to the main hall in conjunction with an ADA lift that would make our building fully accessible. Because of the larger area open to the public the entire building needs to have a fire suppression sprinkler system installed.



***Photo Credits: Dave Wolf, Diane Sakurada Mercer  
and Vickie Sakurada Schaepler***

### **Exhibits and Displays Update**

Root House Studio has been hard at work on the initial phases of exhibit design. They have completed schematic designs for the first of a six-zone exhibition which will include: Sojourners to Settlers, Building of Family and Community, Gaman (meaning enduring the seemingly unbearable with patience and dignity), WWII, From the Camps to New Beginnings, Home in the High Plains, and The Legacy Continues. Contact: [japanesehall@legacyoftheplains.org](mailto:japanesehall@legacyoftheplains.org), [JHallNews@legacyoftheplains.org](mailto:JHallNews@legacyoftheplains.org) or the Legacy of the Plains Museum at 308-436-1989. Please contact us if you would like to participate. It is a lengthy process with many stories to cover and share.

### **Fund Raising Update**

The Japanese Hall Project continues to raise funds to complete renovations and exhibits. Our goal was \$135,000 to meet a \$300,000 challenge grant with Peter Kiewit Foundation to receive an additional \$50,000. That goal is now \$69,000. Thank you to all who have contributed to make Japanese Hall a reality. These funds are needed to complete our exhibits. In addition, we recently found out we need to construct an addition on the building to utilize the basement area for meetings and additional display space which will allow full ADA accessibility and two exits from the basement. We have applied for a “Shovel Ready Grant” but given the large interest in the program and limited funds we are not sure when or if this grant will be awarded. We will keep you updated!

## **Dreams Do Come True** by Vickie Sakurada Schaepler

In 2012 we celebrated the life of Cecile Yamada Ikeya at Japanese Hall in Scottsbluff, Nebraska. At the event, I began to hear stories about my grandparents, Sato and Tokuzo Sakurada, who farmed just outside of Scottsbluff and other Issei members of the Japanese community who in 1928 built the hall. There were stories of digging out the basement by hand, carting off dirt with a horse and wagon, Japanese school and remembrances of many activities. Told were stories of my parents, Shizuo and Marianne Sakurada and the Eagle Café they owned with Cecile and Fred Ikeya. Each family defined the Japanese concept of Gambari-hard work and determination. This project has taken a lot of Gambaru!

On the wall were pictures of the early Issei, not just my grandparents but the grandparents of so many. There were pictures of celebrations and events. Since then, I learned of Japanese movies, silent pictures using a piano, reciting a script of theater productions, poetry clubs and sports clubs including judo, baseball and so much more. Japanese school during the summer brought youth from Cheyenne and the surrounding area to attend; they used the basement for dorms. The hall also had a Buddhist Shrine brought in 1949. The shrine was protected and placed in a wall niche that could be closed when not in use. There were many special celebrations such as Hanamatsuri (Buddha's Birthday) or Obon, (a festival to honor one's ancestors).

One of the Yonsei (fourth generation) asked "what is going to happen to all of these pictures on the walls" as talk about selling the hall emerged. As I drove home pondering this dilemma, an idea or a dream arose in my mind: "we are going to save that hall".

I began to have conversations with relatives, friends, and others about the history of Japanese and Japanese Americans throughout Nebraska. We talked about the dilemma of where the hall was then located and how to share this history. We had the idea that the Legacy of the Plains Museum in Gering, Nebraska, would be the perfect place for the building. In 2015 along with members of the Western Nebraska Young Men's Association, Ian Kai, and Friendly Circle we presented the idea to the Legacy board, who agreed to accept our proposal. The move of the Japanese Hall occurred in December 2019 after a successful fundraising campaign.

Along the way there were setbacks, those who were skeptical about success and whether we could raise, what appeared to be, huge sums. On the day we moved the hall, JOY! I will be forever grateful to the many people who helped make this project a reality. There were many but our Nisei, became the greatest champions! Special thanks go to members of the Hara family who cared for the building and the history. Thanks also to the Miyagishima, Sato, Sakurada, Ushio, Kano, Miyoshi, Ishii, Ugai, Hachiya, Yamada, Nagaki, Kakuda, Kanno, Morimoto, Hagihara, Miyahara, Nochi, Yamamoto, Fukasawa Sugano, Sakaguchi, Sakurai, Tateyama, Tomei, Magaki, Hatasaka families, and so many others, including those from the incarceration camps, whose stories cried out for preservation.

There were others without Japanese roots but whose support and excitement aided our quest, like George Behringer whose ideas and contacts helped us tremendously. This project is for those who went before us, those who supported our families and others who left legacies to share for future generations. This project is for the Issei and their descendants.

Thank you to everyone who has believed in the project and donated funds to make it happen; thank you to the Legacy of the Plains Board for taking a risky leap of faith but also seeing the potential; This project has been volunteer-driven and one person's idea and goal, could not have happened without the many



that have come on board to push it to fruition. There is a board of advisors who is helping with many aspects – from the physical renovations to fundraising to communications to exhibits development. This is my life's passion, and I am so grateful to those who have contributed to its success. We cannot wait to open our doors in 2022.

## **George Behringer awarded Japan's Order of the Rising Sun**



Pictured is GEORGE BEHRINGER, the retired Omaha accountant being recognized for a decade of volunteer service honoring and advocating ties between Japan and the State of Nebraska. He received the country's , "Order of the Rising Sun" signifying achievement in international relations and promotion of Japanese culture from Kenichi Okada, Japan's regional consul general.

George, who grew up in Erie, Pennsylvania, worked 36 years as a certified public accountant. He has been involved in numerous trade and cultural events for the State. He stepped down last year after his second five-year term as an honorary consul general. He was replaced by Andrew Schilling, Vice President of the Omaha Sister Cities Association.

George continues to serve on the Japanese Hall Advisory Committee. Vickie Schaepler (Project Manager) stated "without GEORGE BEHRINGER this project would not have happened. His leadership made the difference in our fundraising, and we would have never made this project successful without him. I am grateful for his involvement and leadership!" Great job George.

## **Nisei Event**

On June 8, 2021, we invited members of the Nisei community in the Scottsbluff area to get a sneak peek of the Japanese Hall, see the renovations and hear about some of the history we hope to preserve. We

### Japanese Hall Newsletter – Fall 2021 Update

are excited so many attended along with some of the members of their families. It was a great time for fellowship, time to catch up with old friends and sharing of stories. There is still a lot of work to be done and exhibits to be finished but excitement by those who were able to enjoy the morning. A few people snuck out before we were able to capture them in a photo, but it was a fun time held by all. Thank you to all who attended.



Participants: Pete Okamoto, Wayne Nochi, Katy Sakurada, Diane Mercer, Nancy Sakurada, Nick Sakurada, Mick Hara, Vickie Schaepler, Ruby Nochi, Ruby, Sam and Anna Tomoi, Tosh Nanbara and Terry. Missing from the picture Dennis Morimoto, Fred and Leonard Sakurada, Tatsi and Crystal Sato.



## Sioux Ordnance Depot Story

On May 11, 2021, Vickie traveled to the city of Sidney with Dennis Morimoto and Sharon Hagihara Bartlett to investigate the Japanese Americans who traveled out of incarceration camps to work at the Sioux Ordnance Depot. Aided by research done by Heather Fryer of Creighton University, a historian on our advisory committee, we learned at least 80 Nisei had worked at the depot. A crew from “Nebraska Stories” who have been following our progress with Japanese Hall attended. Kay Hall, producer, Tyler Kersting, videographer and Dan Newburn, audio engineer followed our tour at the Cheyenne County Museum and on location at the Sioux Ordnance Depot with Tom Nightingale, as our guide.



11-28-44 War Relocation Photo courtesy of the WRA and Cheyenne County Historical Society and Museum, Sidney, NE



With 801 ammunition service igloos, 22 warehouses, 392 support buildings and housing for 225 families, the site operated for 25 years beginning in World War II to 1967. The depot personnel oversaw the receipt, storage and issue of ammunition from small arms to 10,000-pound bombs. They also provided hospital care for residents. Dennis' cousin, Richard Shiotani was born there, and had a birth certificate with Station Hospital, Sioux Ordnance Depot listed as his birthplace. His parents, Shigeo and Fumiko Shiotani came out of Poston Incarceration Center and eventually both worked at the depot.

Sharon's mother, Annie Takamatsu, along with her sister, Erlene, worked at the Ordnance Depot. Her grandmother, Takino, a widower, traveled with the family, stayed in depot housing and may have helped at the school. Their brother Ben, served in the 442<sup>nd</sup>. The family answered the call from Amache Incarceration Camp to work at the Depot. Articles appeared in the camp newspaper, the Granada Pioneer, found through the Densho website, advertising opportunities at the depot.

The day proved fruitful, finding articles, pictures, and marriage certificates to tell more of the people who lived and worked there. Tom Nightingale and the museum are to be commended for the way they have preserved and displayed history!

## **Personal Statements from Advisory Committee.**

Additional statements will be included in future editions

**Kim Hachiya:** I am involved with the Japanese Hall project because it helps tell a uniquely American story of resilience, perseverance and success. My Nisei father came to Nebraska from California via an incarceration camp -- Heart Mountain, Wyoming. He left camp to attend the University of Nebraska, served in the US Army and returned to Nebraska where he was a doctor in Lincoln until his death in 2006. So, while his story was not related to Scotts Bluff County, he did come to Nebraska from "away" and he identified as a Nebraskan. This experience is similar to those who built Japanese Hall, those who built their dreams for themselves and their children around a Nebraska community. It's a story of hope and it has lessons for all who come to the State to work and live.

**Sharon Ishii-Jordan:** I am gratefully involved in the committee to bring the Japanese Hall back to life as a museum with historic value to the people of Nebraska and the high plains. My paternal grandfather settled in Omaha from Japan over 110 years ago following his elder brother, who eventually settled in Scottsbluff. Both men opened successful businesses that contributed to the economy of Nebraska, so my family of Japanese pioneers helped to merge the cultures of the east and west, both globally and statewide.

**Jane Fliesbach:** I have been excited about this project from the very beginning of the proposal to move the Japanese Hall to the to the Legacy of the Plains! It is an amazing accomplishment and has involved thousands of hours of work by those who initiated it. I have always loved history and think it is important and enriching to the next generations to have a better understanding of an area through the stories of the people and the land they inhabited. The Hall will tell this story through the building itself, the photographs, the fabrics, and the narratives that will be shown and told here. It is always illuminating, and we will all benefit from knowing this particular history of the valley.

**Roger Hara:** I was born in Scottsbluff and the Japanese Hall was always a big part of growing up in western Nebraska. There are many good memories from all the activities with extended family at the Hall and being part of the restoration is an honor. My father, Fred Hara, was very involved with the Hall and was one of the last officers of the WNYMA. He was very involved with the move and I hope to follow through on what he envisioned and continue the legacy of the Japanese Hall.

**Diane Sakurada Mercer:** My sister, Vickie, and I have shared an interest in our dad's family history for many years. Our grandfather helped build the hall, and it had a big role in the local Japanese history. When Vickie found out that the Japanese Hall was going to be sold, and probably demolished, she was determined to save it. During this time, we had many discussions about her vision. It was not only to save the hall, but also to preserve the history of the Japanese in this area. I was delighted to be able to help out from the beginning, and to participate in the actual move. Since I live in this area, I decided to volunteer at the Museum dedicated to Japanese Hall. I belong to a committee whose initial focus has been on documenting collections (artifacts, books, photos, stories, etc.) that are donated to the museum for Japanese Hall. For me especially the individual stories, are definitely the highlights of what we do.

**Stephen Kay:** I support the Japanese Hall project as I grew up in North Platte Nebraska and am a member of Episcopal Church of Our Savior. Many of the Japanese in Lincoln County were members of Church of Our Savior. They were very active in the parish. I went to Sunday school and public school with Japanese Americans. I have a Japanese aunt, Naomi Towika Larson, a native of Yugawara, Japan. I first met Naomi when she came to North Platte in 1964. She made an impression on me, and I have had an interest in Japanese culture since that time. In addition, I have been doing research regarding the Rev. Hiram Hisanori Kano and the Japanese in western Nebraska since 2009. I have been involved in numerous historic and heritage activities, including celebrations, displays, and presentations.

## **Newsletter Contact Information:**

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Please send us Email Addresses or Name and UPSP Address to add your family and friends to our Distribution List.



## Donation Information:

Checks may be sent to the **Oregon Trail Community Foundation (OTCF), Japanese Hall Project**, P.O. Box 1344, 115 W. Railway Street, Scottsbluff, NE 69363-1344 or the **LPM-Japanese Hall Project at 2930 Old Oregon Trail, Gering, NE 69341. Any size donation is appreciated.** The OTCF and LPM are 501 (C) (3). Checks must be written to: OTCF-Japanese Hall Project or LPM-Japanese Hall Project for us to receive credit. You may also contribute directly to the fund at the Oregon Trail Community Website at: <https://www.otcf.org/donate-to-a-fund> Thank you for your interest in preserving this unique part of Nebraska history!

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