



**LEGACY  
OF THE  
PLAINS  
MUSEUM**

## Japanese Hall Newsletter

Welcome to the first 2025 edition of the Japanese Hall Newsletter. We've not published in a while so here's an update on exciting happenings and events at Japanese Hall. We continue to be grateful for the amazing turnout last summer for the grand opening and are heartened by continued interest in the Hall.

Vickie Sakurada Schaepler, project director ■ Kim Hachiya, newsletter editor

Volume 4, Issue 1

## May 6 Event Marks Nebraska Public Media Documentary Premiere

Plan to be in Scottsbluff Tuesday, May 6, 2025, when the Japanese Hall and History Project in partnership with Nebraska Public Media will present a special screening and discussion of a brand-new *Nebraska Stories: Rescuing Japanese Hall*, an episode focused on the preservation of the history of Japanese in Nebraska and the Japanese Hall. The event, which is free and open to the public, will occur at Scottsbluff's historic Midwest Theater. Doors open at 5 p.m. with exhibits and time to visit. The show premieres at 6 p.m. and a panel discussion will follow. (Note all times are Mountain Daylight Time.)



**JAPANESE HALL**  
AT LEGACY OF THE PLAINS  
GERING, NEBRASKA  
**6-8-2024**

*your stories are*

# Nebraska Stories

Nebraska Public Media producer Kay Hall has been documenting our project *and she and a crew were at the Grand Opening in June 2024.*

*We are grateful for their long-term interest.*

The Japanese Hall and History Project and Legacy of the Plains are planning events throughout the day at the museum with opportunities to see the Japanese Hall. Come for one or all events:

**9 a.m.** ■ MDT Japanese Hall will be open without charge to anyone attending one or all events throughout the day.

**10:30 a.m.** ■ Julie Ushio presents *Graves of Early Immigrants* in the LPM Great Hall; afterwards she will lead a walking tour of Fairview Cemetery. (Transportation on your own to the cemetery.) Meet at the parking lot nearest the cemetery office.

Lunch on your own

**1:30 p.m.** ■ Vickie Sakurada Schaepler will give a presentation "The Legacy of Japanese Immigrants in Nebraska including stories of WWII."

**2:45 p.m.** ■ Sharon Ishii-Jordan and Kim Hachiya will present on Japanese and Japanese American Incarceration Camps of WWII

**4 p.m.** ■ Dedication of a Nebraska State Historical Society Historical Marker at Japanese Hall.

**5-6 p.m.** ■ Meet and Greet at the Midwest Theater, 1707 Broadway, Scottsbluff

**6-7 p.m.** ■ Nebraska Stories Screening and Panel discussion.

**7-7:45 p.m.** ■ Lobby area open

# Japanese Hall Historical Marker to be Dedicated

As part of the May 6 activities, a History Nebraska/Nebraska State Historical Society Marker will be dedicated. This is a small marker and it will be placed on the west side of the hall near the sidewalk. The Japanese Hall Advisory Board worked with HN/NSHS to write the language for the marker.



## Updates for Fundraising and Japanese Hall Project

By Vickie Sakurada Schaepler

I am often asked what I am doing with my time now that we have opened the hall. There is lots to be done and our hope is to complete our major goals by 2028 when we celebrate 100 years of the Japanese Hall. We have been fortunate to have generous donors and a special economic development grant received during Covid helped us achieve our preliminary goals of moving the building, designing and installing the exhibits and celebrating the grand opening in June 2024.

We are thankful to the many individuals, foundations, businesses and organizations who have donated to the project. Our next major step is to complete an addition to the far east side of the building to allow our building to be fully accessible and give all visitors access to the basement. The funds are raised to complete the addition, if we come in on budget. We will not complete the exhibits, archival areas or determine costs for this area until we finish the addition. (See story by John Miyoshi elsewhere in the newsletter for more information.)

When the building operated as Japanese Hall, the basement served many functions. It housed folks traveling from out of town

for Japanese school; many meals were prepared in the kitchen for celebrations; and many activities took place in the basement of Japanese Hall. Allowing this space to be open to the public lets us more fully tell the building's story. We also hope to add a project that recognizes our area veterans.

As we complete the addition we will learn more about what we will be able to do in the basement, and the exhibits we will need to tell those stories.

We also hope that we will eventually be able to hire at least a part-time position that will allow us to staff our Japanese Hall consistently so it can be open to visitors. Currently, we are relying on volunteers and hours are variable.

We appreciate those who have given to our ongoing maintenance fund and endowment. So far, our utility costs have been fairly reasonable with the remodeling adding energy efficient options.

Thank you for believing in our project and for helping us to preserve the immigrant story of Japanese in Nebraska and the High Plains.



Matt & Sudi Sakurada

## Thank You Matt & Sudi Sakurada

Since its creation in summer 2021, Matt and Sudi Sakurada have been the editors and the backbone of the Japanese Hall and History Project newsletter. We appreciate their hard work and diligence at creating our newsletter and keeping everyone informed about the project's progress. Alas, they have decided it is time to fully retire, enjoy their new Grand Lake, Oklahoma, home and to hand the newsletters over to a new editor. Kim Hachiya has volunteered as our new editor. Kim provided a lot of assistance to Matt and Sudi by writing articles and editing copy. Vickie originally asked Matt to do the newsletter because for several years he did a newsletter for the Sakurada family, which was well received and enjoyed by the whole family. Thank you, Matt and Sudi for a job well done.

Old Newsletter editions are available on the Legacy of the Plains website at this link: <https://legacyoftheplains.org/plan-a-visit/exhibits/outdoor-exhibits/coming-soon-japanese-hall> (Scroll to the bottom of the page to find Newsletter copies)

If you need to update your email address or contact us, please email [JHallNews@legacyoftheplains.org](mailto:JHallNews@legacyoftheplains.org)



Miyeko "Mickey" Hara

## Miyeko "Mickey" Hara *Remembered*

By Vickie Sakurada Schaepler

We do not usually recognize the passing of those who have gone before us in our newsletter, but we do want to recognize the passing of Mikeyo "Mickey" Hara, who died September 2, 2024, at age 99 in Gering, Nebraska.

Mickey was the unofficial historian for the Japanese American community in the region.

Throughout her life, Mickey was passionate about preserving the Japanese history and heritage in Western Nebraska and compiled a book she titled *Issei: the first generation, Japanese immigrants in Western Nebraska*. She was interviewed several times by the *Scottsbluff Star-Herald*, a local paper, about her work and presentations.

Mickey was active at the Japanese Hall, participated in many Friendly Circle bazaars, annually decorated the graves of Japanese immigrants in the area for Memorial Day, and worked tirelessly with many to preserve the Japanese Hall.

Mickey was recognized by History Nebraska (Nebraska State Historical Society) and the Consul General of Japan from Chicago in March of 2018 for her dedication.

We extend our sympathies to her family and friends, and mourn the loss of those who have contributed so much to preserving this history for our future generations.

## Japanese Hall Addition Update

By John Miyoshi

One of the most frequent requests at our June 2024 Grand Opening was to have the basement open to the public. This was part of our original plan, however the cost and time to meet state fire codes made this out of reach. Our Japanese Hall Committee has been working to make this a reality.

In the spring of 2024, we hired an architect to prepare a design only to once again have trouble coming up with a plan that would meet State Fire Marshal's Office requirements that would fit within our budget. In the end it was decided to hire an engineering firm to come up with plans and specifications that meet our needs and those of our regulatory agencies.

Jack Baker and Associates, the firm we have used in the past, has been purchased by JEO Engineering out of Wahoo (my home town). We are working with Jack and his crew on the plans as only the office sign and business cards have changed.

The preliminary plans were reviewed by us and the regulatory community the last two weeks of February, and we are in agreement for the final version. Baker will have a first draft of plans and specifications completed in mid to late March for our final review.

These plans add a 23' 7" by 16' 8" addition on the east side of our building. The addition will house a stairway and lift that join the Main Hall to the Basement. It will include an exit door on the north side and fire safe doors

on both floors with automatic closers. The materials will match our existing building with a concrete basement and wood construction on the main floor. The roof line will match the current north side of the building with windows on the southside. A sidewalk will be poured along the north side of the building to meet the existing sidewalk. This addition will make all of Japanese Hall ADA Accessible.

While this addition is new, we strive to keep the same look and feel as the original hall. At the Grand Opening we received so many compliments how people recognized and knew they were in the original building. The entryway, stairs to the basement, original wood floors, original beadboard ceiling, globe lights even the windows (that had been upgraded) were where they should be and looked original. We were very fortunate to have Russ Reisig and his crews to complete the work and just as fortunate to have Upland Exhibits tell our stories. Keep the donations coming as there are many stories still to be discovered and added to our legacy project.



Anthony Esau (right) accepts the award.  
Photo courtesy of Mountains-Plains Museums Association

## Japanese Hall Exhibit Wins Award from Mountains-Plains Museums Association

The Japanese Hall Story Hub was honored with the 2024 Technology Competition Award in the Multimedia category by the Mountains-Plains Museums Association. The award was presented at their annual conference's awards banquet on October 8, held this year in Bismarck, North Dakota. Anthony Esau of Upland Exhibits, the company responsible for designing and building the main exhibits at the Hall, attended the event to accept the award.

If you haven't experienced it yet, the Story Hub is a discrete space featuring dozens of cards, each telling a unique story. Many of these cards are interactive, linked to related media. Simply tap a card on the reader, and the corresponding audio or video plays on the screen, providing an engaging way to delve deeper into the narratives. This innovative system not only enriches visitor experience but also allows for future expansion as more stories are shared and collected.

## Historical Marker Dedicated to Rev. Hiram "Hisanori" Kano

A new Nebraska State Historical Society historical marker was dedicated and blessed at North Platte's Church of our Savior Episcopal Church. The marker recognizes the Reverend Hiram "Hisanori" Kano (1889-1988), an Issei activist who dedicated his life to creating a better life for Japanese and Japanese Americans, who settled in the western area. He came to this country upon the urging of William Jennings Bryan, and he studied at the University of Nebraska, from which he graduated with a master's degree in agricultural economics in 1918. Afterwards, he bought a farm in Litchfield Nebraska.

In 1919 anti-Japanese sentiment was growing; legislation first introduced in California in 1916 to bar Japanese land ownership was introduced to a constitutional convention in Lincoln, Nebraska. Many came together to fight this legislation, and although it was not passed then, it was introduced in 1921 to the state legislature. This legislation would have, among many things, prevented "alien" ownership of land, and limited leasing of land to one year. There were many advocates and foes on both sides, though it eventually passed. It did allow aliens to lease land for up to five years and own homes in town.

Hiram Kano developed many contacts and advocates, including Reverend T.C. Osborne, who was representative for both Morrill and Scotts Bluff counties at the convention. Rev. Osborne was the grandfather of University of Nebraska football coach Tom Osborne. Kano was recruited by Episcopal Bishop George Beecher to become a missionary to the many Japanese immigrants in western Nebraska in both North Platte and the Scottsbluff areas. Kano was a champion for Japanese and Japanese Americans in



Steve Kay, Vickie Schaepler, Don Yoshida, Reverend Steve Meysing and Steve Shively

the region and he started the Japanese Americanization Society and preached in the area.

Kano was arrested the day of Pearl Harbor on the steps of his North Platte church. He would become the only Japanese person from Nebraska who would remain incarcerated. He was held for more than two years in Department of Justice camps due to his leadership, family connections and work on behalf of Japanese living in Nebraska; he was never charged with any crime. He returned after the war and continued his ministry and was a strong advocate for the Japanese and Japanese Americans in the state. In 1952, Congress finally passed legislation that would allow Asians to become American citizens. Kano would lead citizenship classes in both North Platte and Scottsbluff, and he achieved his greatest goal to become an American citizen along with many other Japanese in Western Nebraska. (VS)



## Nebraska Forms New Commission on Asian American Affairs

On May 20, 2024, Nebraska Gov. Jim Pillen signed LB1300, approved by a 46 to 0 vote in Unicameral, to create the commission of Nebraska Asian American affairs. In attendance at the signing ceremony were many members of the Japanese Hall advisory council and others who supported the initiative.

Appointed to the board were the following: Maureen Brase, Raymond; Weysan Dun, Omaha; Deepak M. Gangahar, M.D., Elkhorn; Maorong Jiang, Ph.D., Omaha; Tram Kieu, Lincoln; Joanne Li, Ph.D.; Omaha, Yunwoo Nam, Ph.D., Lincoln; Arunkumar Pondicherry, Lincoln; Rebecca (Jueyezi) Reinhardt, Lincoln; Vickie Sakurada Schaepler, Kearney; Ryo Suzuki, Kearney; Hiep Vu, Ph.D.; Lincoln; Carol Wang, Omaha.

According to the enabling language, “the purpose of the commission is to join representatives of Asian Americans in Nebraska to do all things which the commission may determine to enhance the cause of Asian American rights and to develop solutions to problems common to all Asian Americans residing in Nebraska.” (VS)



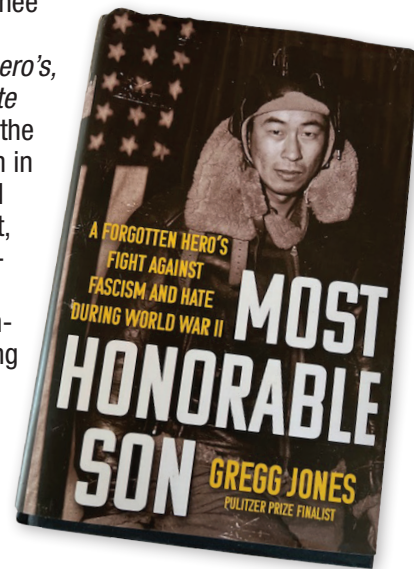
## Author’s Biography of Nebraskan Ben Kuroki Celebrates our Most Honorable Son

Gregg Jones, a Pulitzer nominee and author of the book *Most Honorable Son: a forgotten hero’s, fight against fascism and hate during World War II*, came to the Legacy of the Plains Museum in summer 2024 and presented a lecture on the development, research and historical background related to his book. Over 50 people were in attendance, enjoying his interesting presentation.

Jones was touring Nebraska and gave presentations at the History Nebraska museum in Lincoln, Lincoln County historical museum in North Platte, and at the Legacy of the Plains. He was on his way to Heart Mountain confinement camp in Wyoming.

This book is a comprehensive look at the life of Ben Kuroki, who was from Hershey, Nebraska. It documents Kuroki’s fight to remain in the Air Corps during WWII and fly over the South Pacific. Several Japanese Americans from Nebraska volunteered for the Air Corps but were removed and sent to the regular army.

When the average gunner flew just 25 missions Ben Kuroki flew 58, both in the Europe and in the South Pacific Theater including bombing raids over Japan. (VS)





## Unmarked Japanese Graves in Kearney, Nebraska

*By Nathan Tye, Associate Professor of History  
University of Nebraska at Kearney*

In Kearney's cemetery at least two Japanese men rest in unmarked graves. Dating to 1917 and 1930, both men died under tragic circumstances. All but forgotten, the few fragments of their life culled from local records and newspaper reports further document the Japanese presence in Nebraska during the early twentieth century.

The death certificate records his name as Rakunukse Omachi. He was single and approximately fifty years old. Born in Japan, he was living in Scottsbluff and working as a cook as of July 1917. Exactly where he worked is not recorded on his death certificate, The Eagle Café opened in 1912, so that is one possibility.

He was admitted to the State Tuberculosis Hospital in Kearney (now the West Campus of the University of Nebraska at Kearney) on July 21, 1917, according to his death certificate. He died of tuberculosis there on September 2, 1917. Both Rakunukse's arrival and death appeared in the Kearney Hub, under the "Hospital Notes" column. Curiously, the paper reported his name as "Lou Omachi," and that he was from Grand Island.

How the paper ascertained this is unclear, casefiles from the tuberculosis hospital are still restricted to researchers. His death

*Rakunukse Omachi is buried in the unmarked plot, lower right.*

certificate lists his infection as chronic, suggesting he suffered from tuberculosis for quite some time. It may have even brought him to Nebraska, where the air was purportedly better for treatment than other locales.

Also, we do know, from the death certificate that Omachi was acquainted with others in the Japanese community. All his vital information was received from Adolph Kato, residing at the YMCA in Lincoln. Hiram Kano recalls in his history of the Japanese in Nebraska that the YMCA's cafeteria was run by two Japanese, Itoh and Kawakami, both from Fukuoka. He also identified other Japanese restaurants, including N&S Café, the Sunshine Café, Little Mints, Joy's Café, and Togo Restaurant. Given Kato's knowledge of Omachi, we can reasonably assume he worked at the YMCA or one of the other Japanese restaurants in Lincoln at some point in his life. Access to his patient casefile may shed further details on his life. We do know that he was buried three days after his death in Kearney's cemetery, alongside other indigent patients from the hospital. His grave, plot 176-6 East, is located in the northeast corner of the cemetery.

## Seyejiro Omiya is buried in the unmarked plot at right.

The second unmarked burial belongs to a Japanese-American traveler who died while passing through the area. Seyejiro Omiya died on October 4, 1930, of a ruptured liver, according to his burial record. This stemmed from an automobile accident two miles east of Kearney on October 2. Omiya was traveling from Chicago to Los Angeles with a friend, Tasuji Tamaka (the Hub also gave his name as Pakuji Hosokawa and Tatsiyi Tanaka in later accounts), when their car hit loose gravel and hit a telephone pole according to the Kearney Hub account.

Omiya's funeral was held on the morning of October 8 in the Kearney cemetery. A short notice appeared in the Kearney Hub announcing the time and location, but little else. It is unclear if his traveling companion attended his burial. Like Omachi, Omiya was buried in an unmarked grave, plot 26-8 East. The grave sits on the furthest eastern edge of the cemetery, nearly at the boundary fence.

Omiya has a marked grave in Nuuanu Memorial Park cemetery in Honolulu, Hawaii. His name is included between those of his parents on their tombstone. Whether his body was transferred from Nebraska to Hawaii is unknown, but he was commemorated and remembered by those he left behind.

Both these stories, fragmentary and incomplete, nevertheless document the life and labors of Japanese in Nebraska. Omachi was known to the Japanese community in Scottsbluff and Lincoln. Chronically tubercular, his health was assuredly weak, but he still found work in Scottsbluff (and possibly Grand Island) restaurants.



Yet, we also know his family relations were unknown to his friends. His exact birthdate and birthplace were not given by Kato on the death certificate. We do not know if any family in Japan learned of his death.

Omiya, on the other hand, was remembered on his parent's tombstone. Yet, his body in Kearney remains unmarked. We do not know why Omiya and Tamaka drove across the country, but their trip points to the importance of the transcontinental highway and Nebraska's central geographic location. The pair were traveling between Chicago and Los Angeles, two major Japanese community hubs. Numerous Japanese certainly traveled this route as they made their way east or west and in doing so encountered Nebraska. These two lives are small stories, but important stories. Hopefully, time and funding permitting, tombstones can be placed at both graves.

## Japanese Hall and Japanese Community Featured in the News

Since we last published, a number of stories about Japanese Hall or Japanese-related themes have been in the news media. Here are a few of them:

### August 2024

Kim Hachiya interviews Vickie Sakurada Schaepler for a program called Live and Learn, produced by Lincoln's Aging Partners. The segment airs 42 minutes in. ■ <https://youtu.be/n6iBswdwlXc?si=T2qHzwo-dAwTT4gx>

### August 2024

A "Consider This Episode" with Cathy Wyatt of the University of Nebraska at Omaha aired on Nebraska Public Media. Cathy interviewed Sharon Ishii-Jordan, Vickie Sakurada Schaepler, and David Wolf of the Legacy of the Plains Museum in Gering Nebraska.

<https://nebraskapublicmedia.org/en/series-media/consider-this-video/season-27-video-16392/nebraska-japanese-american-history-50024552/>

### October 2024

Two different news organizations report on the 50th anniversary of Kawasaki Manufacturing Co., in Lincoln. The first Kawasaki motorcycle dealership in the United States was in Gering, and that company and Kawasaki both have been donors and supporters for Japanese Hall. Kawasaki's Lincoln plant president, Mike Boyle, spoke at the grand opening of the hall in June.

1011 Lincoln ■ <https://www.1011now.com/video/2024/10/25/kawasaki-manufacturing-plant-celebrates-50-years-success-lincoln/>  
KETV Omaha ■ [https://youtu.be/V\\_NveK\\_2adk?si=LycKqYpNLSiTb\\_ZQ](https://youtu.be/V_NveK_2adk?si=LycKqYpNLSiTb_ZQ)

### January 2025

National Public Radio produced a piece on the contributions of immigrants to Nebraska and it notes the work of Father Hiram Kano in the 1920s. ■ [https://www.npr.org/2025/01/17/g-s1-42134/immigration-trump-mass-deportation-nebraska-economy-workers?fbclid=IwY2xjawlHgVVeHRuA2FibQixMQABHa4Bf6PYqWL\\_DA-VisCIFIY6YJpZEORLgTfsFrqz-Gpps7T4crYaWmrfb8w\\_aem\\_M3TI-WQPYAM-6wZ2aZbuc2A](https://www.npr.org/2025/01/17/g-s1-42134/immigration-trump-mass-deportation-nebraska-economy-workers?fbclid=IwY2xjawlHgVVeHRuA2FibQixMQABHa4Bf6PYqWL_DA-VisCIFIY6YJpZEORLgTfsFrqz-Gpps7T4crYaWmrfb8w_aem_M3TI-WQPYAM-6wZ2aZbuc2A)

### February 2025

The Kawasaki Reading Room at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln celebrated Mamemaki, a ritual that takes place during Setsubun, an annual Japanese festival that celebrates the close of winter and dawn of spring. The purpose of the ritual is to symbolically drive away evil spirits and bad luck. ■ <https://news.unl.edu/article/bean-tossing-ritual-helps-huskers-open-door-to-good-luck>



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[www.legacyoftheplains.org](http://www.legacyoftheplains.org)

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**Links of Interest**

- Legacy of the Plains Museum – Japanese Hall and History Project
- Find all the Japanese Hall Newsletters and other items about the hall at [www.legacyoftheplains.org](http://www.legacyoftheplains.org). You may need to click on the tab for Japanese Hall in the upper right and scroll down.
- Newsletter contacts: to change your email address, USPS Address, your name or to add friends to the list, email [JHALLNews@legacyoftheplains.org](mailto:JHALLNews@legacyoftheplains.org)
- We are interested in items such as personal stories or links of interest regarding Japanese history in the High Plains.
- To donate to Japanese Hall, contact the Legacy of the Plains Museum. Be sure to designate your donation for Japanese Hall.

*Thank you for your interest in preserving this unique part of Nebraska History.*