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West Berkeley on an overcast day is spectacularly ordinary. Here, the utility poles stand erect over low apartment roofs and bungalows. Their overhead power lines carve up the sky. Vehicles decelerate at the intersection of Oregon and California streets, where there lies a miscellany of plants and signs that read “yield to traffic in circle”. Passersby are unlikely to spare a lingering glance or a curious thought at the taupe housing complexes that blend into the dour landscape. But something endures in that space, hinting at a tumultuous past as unique as the history of this neighborhood. It is an invisible legacy demanding to be visible again.

House number 1534 sits on the northeastern corner of the West Berkeley block delineated by Oregon, Russell, California, and Sacramento streets. The four digits are hammered onto a shingled triplex that was built in 1906 and stands today. It was first rented by Buichi Mayama, a middle-aged Japanese nurseryman who immigrated to Berkeley in 1890. The US Census collected in 1910 reports that he lived with his wife Niobe, his daughter Schizue, and his fellow workmen including Tito Saito, Kumataro Watanabe, and Hedatoro Kimuchi¹.

With the help of his co-investor, dry goods businessman Senshiro Kobayashi, Akiyama began building his nursery business with the nine greenhouses and two water towers spanning many lots of land adjacent to the house on the eastern side of the block. The infrastructure was presumably built by Frederick Aebi, a Swiss-born florist who owned 1603 Russell Street then moved to 1547 Russell Street, with records showing that the land supporting two-story undistinguished apartment complexes at 1550 and 1590 Oregon Street, as well as at 1527 and 1529 Russell Street today once supported sunlit buildings made with wood, reinforced with steel,

¹ United States Census Bureau, US Federal Census of 1910, Enumeration District 63, accessed October 25, 2021

topped with glass, and full of flowers². The southern lots on this block originally belonged to John Geiser, while the northern lots belonged to Anna Schreiber, wife of Frederick Aebi. And these greenhouses were once occupied by diverse species of flora imported from Japan, thriving and benefiting from Berkeley's Mediterranean climate. It is hard to believe that a century later, a lonely sum of three trees are the only growing things on that corner of Oregon Street.

Even though Buichi moved to Los Angeles following his divorce from Niobe in the 1910s, they had already established a culture and precedent for the Japanese American community in the San Pablo Park neighborhood. On the same block, many Japanese renters also worked in the flower or garden business, like Ryusuke Yusa on 1541 Russell Street, Noboru Morita on 1500 Oregon Street, and Tadao Ikeda on 1528 (now 1526) Oregon Street³. These immigrants carried the knowledge of plants and a desire for prosperity across the Pacific Ocean. They decided to establish roots in this community and subsequently beautify this foreign land. So as the Japanese American population in Berkeley surged in the later years, people sought out the social and religious organizations readily existing on this very block, including the Higashi Honganji Temple on 1524 Oregon Street.⁴

When the Roaring Twenties and the Great Depression swept through the Bay Area, many businesses changed hands or went bankrupt. This nursery was no exception. It was briefly held by a Japanese nurseryman named Yamato Shemawaka, who immigrated from Japan in 1905. Similar to his predecessor, Yamato employed his lodgers: Naoya Kawamura who immigrated in 1907, Sadao Yoshihara who immigrated in 1918, Tsuneo Kawaragi who immigrated in 1918,

² "Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Berkeley, Alameda County, California, 1911, Vol. 2," Sanborn Map Company, Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00419_003/>, accessed December 12, 2021, page 171.

³ United States Census Bureau, US Federal Census of 1940, Enumeration District 96 and US Federal Census of 1930, Enumeration District 280; accessed October 25, 2021

⁴ History, Berkeley Higashi Honganji Buddhist Temple, <<https://www.bombu.org/about-us/history>>, accessed October 25, 2021

and Toshio Nagata who immigrated in 1919⁵. Years later, by the 1930 US census, Yamato sold the nursery business to the Fujii family. The brothers, Kakichi and Maruo, were its last Japanese proprietors before the fate of Japanese Americans was permanently altered. Both in their thirties, Kakichi and Maruo Fujii were blessed with many children. Kakichi and his wife Tomoye had daughter Sumiko, and sons Yosheitoshi, Kakuo, and Takuma. Maruo and his younger wife Satsuki had sons Jiro and Tokumaru, and daughters Tomoko, Teruko, Kaoru, and Noriko⁶.



[left: Photograph of Noriko, Kakichi, Tomoko, Jiro, Satsuki, and Maruo Fujii. Original Caption: Kakichi and Maruo Fujii family photographs from the Flower Market album, 1940. ; California Flower Market collection, MS 6000; California Historical Society; right: Photograph of Maruo, Noriko, and Kakichi Fujii. Original Caption: Kakichi and Maruo Fujii family photographs from the Flower Market album, 1940; California Flower Market collection, MS 6000; California Historical Society.]

A couple of years later, the Fujii family business built momentum and was full steam ahead. In a “garden book” they published in 1932, the Fujii Nursery Co. lists a broad offering of a hundred varieties of field-grown plants, flowers, trees, seeds, fertilizers, gardening tools⁷. The descriptions demonstrate a thorough understanding of horticulture and local climatology. Business aside, the Fujii family members no doubt found a sense of belonging in the Berkeley neighborhood. They were active in the Higashi Honganji Temple down the street and became

⁵ United States Census Bureau, US Federal Census of 1920, Enumeration District 170, accessed October 25, 2021

⁶ United States Census Bureau, US Federal Census of 1930, Enumeration District 280, accessed October 25, 2021

⁷ “Fujii Nursery Co. Perennial Annual Rose Bush Garden Book” 1932, from Henry G. Gilbert Nursery Seed Trade Catalog Collection, U.S. Department of Agriculture, National Agricultural Library, accessed December 10, 2021.

close friends with the Morita family⁸. According to Karen Fujii, the granddaughter of Maruo Fujii, Kakichi and Maruo kept true to their Japanese heritage and never bothered to become fluent in English. However, they each adopted plain, single-syllable names, Fred and John, as they communicated with their non-Japanese-speaking neighbors. And evidently, their notable adjustment to American society was well-received by the neighborhood. In 1936, when Kakichi Fujii donated a thousand flowering cherry trees to beautify the city of Berkeley, the mayor of Berkeley at the time, Edward N Ament declared that Fujii’s name “will long be remembered for this generous, friendly gesture. It has been said that he who plants a tree plants love”⁹. So why was Fujii’s name not carved onto a plaque or plastered on a street sign in commemoration? Why instead was his name on the register of the Gila River internment camp just 6 years later?



[left: Fujii Nursery Garden Book 1932; right x2: Mayor Edward N. Ament statement regarding Fujii’s donation]

For those questions to be answered, the experience of the Fujii nursery must first be contextualized by the business of Japanese American nurseries and the events of World War II. The Japanese American nursery business followed the expansion of the economy and the development of the Bay Area in the latter half of the nineteenth century. The Domoto brothers

⁸ Karen Fujii, phone conversation, December 12, 2021

⁹ “1000 Flowering Trees To Beautify City of Berkeley”, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

were the first of many successful nurserymen who saw opportunity as wealth flushed into California, and they brought a diverse collection of Japanese plants to Oakland. Following suit, many Japanese American nurseries emerged around San Francisco, in the East Bay, and on the San Francisco Peninsula, where properties were less expensive for constructing greenhouses and reliable transportation was available for shipping equipment and orders. Unaltered by the 1906 fire, the 1918 influenza, and World War I, the flower industry suffered its first major blow with the rest of the country in the Great Depression and was dealt a crippling loss by the events following Pearl Harbor¹⁰.

President Franklin Roosevelt signed into action Executive Order 9066 on February 19, 1942. This order assigned military authority over the West Coast and inhabitants in that area, resulting in the forced evacuation of hundreds of thousands of people of Japanese heritage. At the time, Berkeley had a Japanese population of 1,319, 859 of whom were American born. They were given a week and up to 10 days to pack their belongings and take what they could carry. Many Japanese American nursery owners, just as most Japanese American business owners, had to arrange flash sales and find buyers or caretakers for their nurseries, for a period of unknown duration. Greenhouses, equipment, and land were sold at staggeringly low prices. Those who found caretakers were troubled by bad contracts, low accountability, and a nursery in disarray post-internment.¹¹ Since evacuation was right before Mother's Day, the day which "accounted for one-fifth of annual flower sales", many grown stocks were unable to see harvest nor profits¹².

¹⁰ Dana Ogo Shew, "The Japanese Nursery Industry in the Bay Area", *Growing a Community: Pioneers of the Japanese American Floral Industry*, Anthropological Studies Center, accessed December 10, 2021 <<http://www.janurseries.com/history/>>

¹¹ Dana Ogo Shew, "The Japanese Nursery Industry in the Bay Area"

¹² Kashima, Tetsuden. "Economic Loss." In *Personal Justice Denied: Report of the Commission on Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians*, 117–34. University of Washington Press, 1997. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnm2s.10>>.

This business and industry are emblematic of how property and value were appropriated and destroyed by those who, whether purposefully or incidentally, capitalized on the flight of their neighbors during afflicted and desperate times.

The day was August 8, 1942. On the records of the Wartime Relocation Authority (WRA) of the Gila Rivers internment camp in Arizona, the names Maruo and Kakichi appeared alongside those of their children¹³. The WRA form is similar to a regular census in that it records parental birthplace, occupation, marital status, ethnicity, and languages spoken. However, additional information on years of Japanese schooling, religion, and citizenship was also collected and scrutinized by the government to identify “enemy aliens”. Further surveys asked internees to renounce allegiance to imperial Japan while swearing allegiance to the United States and to serve in the US Army during the war. Those who responded negatively to both questions were put on a watch list, and many “watched persons” were eventually transferred to Tule Lake Segregation Center¹⁴. Interestingly, by September of 1943, the names Maruo, Kakichi, and their children appeared on the registry of Tule Lake, where they spent the rest of internment¹⁵.

The Fujii family mostly stayed intact through the physically and mentally grueling journey from racetrack assembly centers to the internment camps in peripheral Arizona and California. Testimonies, memoirs, and records later revealed that the conditions at the camps were inhumane and unAmerican, violating constitutional rights and basic human rights. But even under such mistreatment, their spirit remained unbroken. Attempting to lead normal lives under

¹³ Wartime Relocation Authority, family no. 40160, from Densho Digital Repository, accessed December 12, 2021 <<https://ddr.densho.org/names/>>

¹⁴ Gila River: A History of Relocation at the Gila River Relocation Center, Japanese American Relocation Digital Archive, UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library, Online Archive of California, accessed December 12, 2021 <<https://oac.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/kt8j49n9pt/?brand=oac4>>

¹⁵ “Persons of Japanese Ancestry Registered at Tule Lake Segregation Center (September 1943 through 15 July 1944)”, U.S. Army’s Western Defense Command (WDC), 1944, National Archives by National Park Services, 12, December 2021. <https://www.nps.gov/tule/learn/historyculture/upload/WDC_7-44_list_E-F.pdf>

abnormal circumstances, many camp members practiced their trades and attempted to recreate a pre-war lifestyle. Kakichi was once pictured working on his crops at the camp by WRA photographer Francis Stewart¹⁶. However, the conditions of southwest Arizona, characterized by sub-zero weather and snow-blankets in winter, so unlike coastal California, made agriculture a limited, seasonal activity¹⁷. During internment, Tomoko Fujii met and married Nobuo Matsumoto, and Raymond was born to Maruo and Satsuki Fujii



[left: Kakichi Fujii at Gila River 1942-43; right: Tule Lake Registry front page and entries September 1943 - July 44]

As people of Japanese ancestry were being rapidly evacuated out of the West Coast, the WRA was aware of the economic losses incurred. According to its *Quarterly Report* issued on June 30, 1942, the WRA stated that "in a movement of this kind ... it was probably inevitable that some mistakes would be made, and some people would suffer."¹⁸ Before the WRA was established in late March of 1942, an office of Alien Property Custodian was signed into action by executive order, and its authority was delegated to the Treasury and the Federal Reserve

¹⁶ Original Caption: Fred K. Fujii, former owner and operator of the Fujii Nursery Co., of Berkeley, California, where he has had 20 years of experience in the nursery business. Fred is pictured with Stocks, which are ready to be harvested for their seed. These plants were grown for experimental purposes. April 24, 1943. Gila River Relocation Center. Rivers, Arizona. Photo by Francis Stewart. WRA call no. B-462. Collection of War Relocation Authority Photographs of Japanese-American Evacuation and Resettlement. Courtesy of UC Berkeley, Bancroft Library. <<http://oac-upstream.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft7870076g/?order=1&brand=oac4>>

¹⁷ Gila River: A History of Relocation at the Gila River Relocation Center

¹⁸ First Quarterly Report, March 18 to June 30, 1942, War Relocation Authority, Washington, D.C., as cited in Taylor, Sandra C. See footnote 19.

Bank. The former froze all bank assets of aliens, including Kakichi Fujii's \$3342.97 in cash¹⁹. The latter institution established the Evacuee Property Division in San Francisco, responsible for safeguarding property during the period of internment. "Wartime handling of evacuee property is a sorry part of the war record" concluded the WRA in its *Final Report*. The responsibility of handling evacuee property bounced from agency to agency while people were already being evacuated.²⁰ And to this day, the specific figure of how much value was appropriated, vandalized, or destroyed during internment is still heavily contested. Some say \$400 million, but others claim that figure to be a gross underestimation of the actual billions incurred. The facts are elusive due to a lack of bank records and the destruction of tax records. Today, the \$400 million figure has been disavowed by the Federal Reserve and scrutinized by the bipartisan Commission of Wartime Relocation and Internment of Civilians (CWRIC), which began investigating that figure in 1981²¹.

The land the nursery rests on never belonged to the Fujii family, and very little information exists about the Fujii nursery business between the years 1942 and 1948. During that time, the business could have been handed over to caretakers, or sold to subsequent owners. The US Census of 1950 to be released in April of 2022 may provide more information regarding the transfer of business ownership. In the 1948 Sanborn maps created after the war, the nursery is once again renamed. No longer the original "B. Mayama Nursery", or "Yamato Nursery" and

¹⁹ "In re: Debt owing to Kakichi Fujii", document 48-8582, filed September 22, 1948, in Federal Register, volume 13, part 9, The National Archives of the United States; July- September 1948, accessed December 12, 2021

²⁰ United States Department of the Interior, *The Wartime Handling of Evacuee Property* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1946), 3-4, as cited in Taylor, Sandra C. See footnote 19.

²¹ Taylor, Sandra C. "Evacuation and Economic Loss: Questions and Perspectives." in Daniels, Roger, Sandra C. Taylor, and Harry H. L. Kitano, eds. *Japanese Americans: From Relocation to Redress*, 163-67. Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1986. Revised edition. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1991, accessed December 12, 2021. <<http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvcwnbcj>>.

“Fujii Nursery”, it has become “Victory Nursery”²². Victory gardens were a part of an active war effort to simultaneously increase agricultural production and express patriotism. But seeing this change must have felt like a betrayal for the Fujii family, as well as the rest of the Japanese population in Berkeley who returned to the streets where they had raised families, built businesses, and made contributions to the community.



[Nursery property throughout the years on Sanborn Fire Insurance Maps, left to right: years 1911, 1929, 1948]

Instead of returning to Berkeley, the Fujii brothers split up. Kakichi, as the older son, went back to Japan to take care of the family estate. Maruo Fujii’s family relocated to Richmond, California to continue their nursery business with the help of friends and fellow nurserymen²³. When the 1948 Evacuation Claims Act was set up to redress economic losses incurred by Japanese Americans, only \$37 million was distributed to some of the 60,000 survivors of internment camps²⁴. This underserving process reflected the Justice Department’s attitude which “balanced protecting the interest of the United States with trying to give claimants such liberty”²⁵. With however much money they had left, Maruo and Jiro set up their greenhouses on

²² "Sanborn Fire Insurance Map from Berkeley, Alameda County, California, 1948, Vol. 2," Sanborn Map Company, Library of Congress, <www.loc.gov/item/sanborn00419_003/>, accessed December 12, 2021, page 171.

²³ Karen Fujii, December 12, 2021

²⁴ Taylor, Sandra C. “Evacuation and Economic Loss: Questions and Perspectives.” 163-67

²⁵ Kashima, Tetsuden. “Economic Loss.” 117-34

Davilla Road, between Kawai Nursery and Fukushima Nursery, and began growing roses.²⁶ By 1953, records reflect that they had \$57,000 in assets and more in liabilities.²⁷ Business began to wilt in the 1990s with the passing of the Andean Trade Preference Act as South American flower exporters gradually priced out domestic flower growers²⁸. Today, although the business is nonoperational, the parcel of land in Richmond still belongs to the Fujii family.



[Now and Then, Fujii property in East Richmond. Left: see footnote 28; Right: Google Maps aerial view]

The original Fujii nursery business was never restored to the Fujii family, and their West Berkeley neighborhood had changed beyond recognition, both physically and demographically. But the story of that original property continues. In August of 1954, Mason McDuffie Co. the real estate company that developed the San Pablo Park area and most of the Northbrae neighborhood in Berkeley negotiated an agreement with real estate developers Gerson Bakar and Morris Wallock for the purchase of their land. That land is the original nursery lots. By February of the following year, Mason McDuffie had already taken the initiative to demolish the greenhouses that had been there for the last fifty years²⁹. Three months later, \$10,000 of

²⁶ Northwest El Cerrito and East Richmond Nurseries, in “Remembering Our Local Japanese History: The El Cerrito and Flower Growers, by El Cerrito Historical Society, accessed December 12, 2021 <<http://www.elcerritohistoricalsociety.org/ecprintfiles/MemoryBook.pdf>>

²⁷ Hearing of Subcommittee on the Trading With the Enemy Act, of the committee of the Judiciary, US Senate, Volume 1, February 27, 1953, accessed December 12, 2021

²⁸ Dana Ogo Shew, “The Japanese Nursery Industry in the Bay Area”

²⁹ “Letter to American Trust Company from Mason McDuffie”, February 1, 1955, Mason McDuffie Co. Records 1904-1983, Mason McDuffie Co. Records 1904-1983, Ctn. 22, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Ctn. 22, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

promised \$69,000 was transferred from one party to the other in exchange for the specified rear 25 feet of Lot 10, and all of lots 11, 12, 13, the northwestern 155 feet of lots 14 and 15, all of lots 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25 in Block 29 as described in the “Smith’s Subdivision Part of Matthews Tract” filed in 1887.³⁰ Another three months later, \$500 of a promised \$36,000 was transferred to Jordan & Reed Construction Co. for the building of apartments on that land³¹.

Of the many Japanese American businesses and families affected by internment, the Fujii Bros Nursery on the corner of California Street and Oregon Street was a loss that was never fully recovered nor commemorated. Karen Fujii said that her grandparents didn’t talk much about the camps, and this story has mostly been lost to their family. So it is about time that this story, which includes the passionate history of the nursery business, the traumatic repercussions of war, and the road to redress, is recovered and commemorated. Regardless of what history chooses to record versus ignore, the Fujii family’s entrepreneurial spirit, strong sense of community-building, generosity towards their neighbors, hard work, and resiliency in the face of calamity are characteristic of the immigrants who built West Berkeley.



[1527 Russell Street and 1590 Oregon Street, November 8, 2021, photographed by Annie Ren]

³⁰ “Purchase Agreement between Mason McDuffie Co. and Gerson Bakar and Morris Wallock”, May 11, 1955, Mason McDuffie Co. Records 1904-1983, Mason McDuffie Co. Records 1904-1983, Ctn. 22, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Ctn. 22, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley

³¹ “Purchase Agreement between Mason McDuffie Co. and Jordan & Reed Construction Co.”, August 10, 1954, Mason McDuffie Co. Records 1904-1983, Mason McDuffie Co. Records 1904-1983, Ctn. 22, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, Ctn. 22, folder 40, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley