

Mariko's Life Narrative

Mariko was born on August 31, 1920, the second oldest child of Masakichi and Noshi Nishinaka. She grew up on her parents farm in the hills above San Pedro, and was the last surviving member of her family that included siblings Tom, Masami, Ben and Lily. After graduating from San Pedro High School, she went to finishing school in Japan for two years.

During her high school days, she met her brother Tom's best friend, Chikao Robert Ryono. A lot transpired between Mariko's return from Japan in 1940 and 1947 when she and Chikao were married. Plenty of romance, of course, but Pearl Harbor would mean huge disruptions in Issei and Nisei lives on the West Coast.

In February, 1942, with the threat of internment, Mariko helped drive her family from San Pedro to Utah where they would find work on farms. With her father in a detention center in Tujunga, California, and her elder brother Tom in Japan, she must have felt a tremendous amount of responsibility at this treacherous time for all Japanese-Americans.

During most of World War II, the Nishinaka family lived and farmed in the Utah towns of Aurora, Gunnison and Murray. In addition to farming, Mariko also worked briefly in two hospitals in Denver, Colorado. Over time her life became increasingly involved with Chikao Ryono (Uncle Bob).

In March of 1946, Mariko took a train from Utah to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, where Chikao was in dental school. There she met the Ryono family for the very first time. The Ryono's had settled in a part of Philadelphia called Germantown after their release from the Manzanar internment camp. By September, there was an engagement ring and in July, 1947, the wedding.

The married couple returned to San Pedro where they began establishing Chikao's dental profession and raising three boys, Denis, Jim and Bobby. However, the Korean War intervened and Chikao was drafted and shipped overseas to serve as an army dentist in Japan. It next fell upon Mariko to load herself and the three kids onto a train to Oakland, and then onto an army transport ship to Yokohama, Japan. Something about all this traveling must have seemed familiar to her by then.

In 1954, the family returned to Southern California and eventually a home and dental office in Mar Vista. The dental office was to be Chikao's until his retirement. The family home moved to Playa del Rey in 1960 where Mariko lived for the next 56 years, her traveling days thankfully over at last.

Over the years, Mariko fulfilled her many roles – wife, mother, auntie, grandma – responsibly, with kindness and often with skill. In the totally un-prejudiced opinion of her sons, she was a great cook! She was very good at knitting. She enjoyed collecting – stamps, souvenir spoons, models of lighthouses like the ones you see on the program. She was passionate about her photo albums documenting her immediate and extended families.

As she and Chikao achieved empty-nester status, she resurrected her farming origins with a successful backyard vegetable garden. Of course, those later years brought the exaltation of admiring and spoiling her six grandchildren. Seven great grandchildren followed to spoil and admire, but by then Mariko found herself under much different circumstances.

Unfortunately, as many of you know, after Chikao's passing in 1999, Mariko began to show signs of increasing dementia and her living alone began to present problems. Caregivers began to be engaged and family members began to live with her, ending most recently with her son Jim, who lived with her since 2007. Thus, Mariko was able to stay in her home and sustain her happy and playful demeanor to the end of her days. Despite the dementia, she could suddenly be very much "in the moment" and even deliver an occasional cutting remark that could really surprise and be very funny.

Mariko's dementia spared her the extreme sadness she would have felt when Debi Ryono, her youngest son Bobby's wife, passed away in 2012. One year later, she would also lose Bobby, who succumbed to Lewy Body Disease after 10 years of struggle.

In the end, we are grateful for the entirety of Mariko's long life. For her kindness and for her generosity in all the roles life presented to her. She faced life's challenges and responsibilities squarely and firmly, and in her own quiet way she has left her mark and she will be deeply missed.