

Masahara Kunugi

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Masahara Kunugi was born on April 19, 1924 in Mukilteo, Washington,¹ to parents Toyo, his mother, and Kuzo, his father. His parents were first generation immigrants from Japan, and their 4 children were first generation Japanese Americans. Mashara had 1 older brother, Kazuhito, and 2 sisters, Heida (older) and Fuji (younger).² His family moved to the island in the 1920s³ and owned a loganberry farm around Quartermaster in Burton.⁴ Mashara went to Vashon Island High School and played tennis for all 4 years of his high school career. He also played basketball where he was the infamous forward, a great offensive and defensive player. He played baseball and participated in clubs like letterman's club, Hijinks (the school newspaper), and honor society.⁵

Masahara was supposed to graduate in June 1942 but he, along with all of the other Japanese American families from the island, was relocated on May 16th of 1942 under the 68th Exclusion Act. The Japanese and Japanese Americans were removed from the island by armed guards and took hot, crowded trains to Pinedale Assembly Center located in Fresno, California.⁶ The assembly center was unfinished when they arrived. There was limited space and furniture, food was eaten in the main hall and there was little to no privacy for the residents.⁶ The Kunugi family stayed in Pinedale until the 18th of July when they were moved to Tule Lake.⁷ Tule Lake was located on a dry lake bed in Northern California. The location had long cold winters and hot summers. Tensions at Tule Lake were high and instances of labor unrest like strikes happened often, mainly due to broken promises over goods and salaries.⁸ Later on, in the spring of 1943, loyalty questions were asked of the internees. The questioning was mismanaged at Tule Lake which created a lot of tension in the camp and led to a very high number of "No" answers from the internees. The results of the questionnaire turned Tule Lake into a segregation camp for people who were considered unloyal. Those who answered "yes" to the most vital questions

were allowed to leave.⁸ The Kunugi family was able to leave and was transferred to Minidoka, a camp located on desert land in Idaho in September 1943 but sadly, Masahara's father, Kuzo, passed away while they were still at Tule Lake.⁹ Minidoka was known as the "good camp" due to their high percentage of yes's to the loyalty questions. 1,500 Japanese Americans were relocated there in the fall of 1943. Minidoka had very cramped living quarters, "There were six apartments which housed 20 people. There was a family of 9 in a one-room apartment, size 20 ft x 20 ft..." The added fact that Minidoka was located in the desert of Idaho made the summers scorching hot and the winters very cold.¹⁰

Masahara finally left Minidoka on January 10, 1944.⁹ He was finally free of the camps. Masahara and his brother moved to Cleveland, Ohio for work. Where he met and got married to his wife, Pauline Kunugi. Masahara worked for military intelligence from 1944-1946. While in Cleveland, he and his wife had 2 children, Barbra Jean, and Allen Kunugi. Barbra Jean was born around 1949¹⁴ and Allen was born in 1950.¹³ In 1967 Masahara and his family moved back to his birthplace, Seattle, where he owned a dry cleaning shop until his death on May 10th in 1973.¹¹

(Pauline and



Masahara's wedding Photo)

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