



Reminders of an ancient culture are the many Japanese articles, useful and decorative, found in homes of the Valley's Japanese community. Among those in the Yoshio Hata home in Wapato are a sakura kamado (Japanese barbecuer) demonstrated by Carmen Hata. On the wall is a dyobu (wind screen) and on the chest a bowl, a vase and a statue of Kwanon Bosatsu (Buddha or goddess of love). These and other family treasures will be displayed during the sukiyaki dinner to be presented Sunday, March 6, in the Wapato Buddhist Church. (Staff photo by Dean Spuler)

## Heritage to share:

# Sayonara to tradition? Not Valley Japanese

By CAROL HILTON FEB 27 '77

It was a thriving community once, made up of descendents of pioneers who came to the Valley from Japan at the turn of the century to carve gardens of vegetables out of the then wild sagebrush country.

Their numbers are fewer now, much fewer.

During second world war years they were relocated inland and many never returned.

Those who did, however, have not lost sight of the traditions of their ancestors, and take pains to keep them alive despite the encroachment of time and the bustling, melting pot culture in which they live.

It's a heritage they're proud to share, as they do each spring when they invite the rest of the Valley to join them for their annual sukiyaki dinner in the Wapato Buddhist Church, center of the Japanese community here.

The 16th annual sukiyaki dinner's coming up Sunday, March 6, and will be served in two-hour time periods from noon to 7 p.m.

Members of the 13 families who now comprise the church's congregation, with an assist from a few members of the Moses Lake Buddhist Church, will spend all day Saturday preparing ingredients for the sukiyaki.

"It used to take much longer," says Ken Inaba who, with Mas Wada, has served as co-chairperson of the event since its beginning. "But we've perfected the system over the years."

Deciding on a theme for the decor, then making it a reality, however, takes more time and thought.

For the sukiyaki dinner is more than a meal, it's a journey into another culture and sponsors each year try to bring something of the Japanese way of life into the church hall to share with visitors.

In years past, "cherry trees" with crepe paper blossoms have "bloomed" for the delight of diners. There have been displays of many Japanese arts and crafts, re-creations of parts of traditional Japanese homes or gardens and displays and demonstrations of Oriental flower arranging.

And always, hosts and hostesses greet guests in Japanese kimonos or happi coats.

And always, there's the question of what to do for an encore.

This year church members and friends are

sharing their personal treasures for a display of art objects, home furnishings, family heirlooms — whatever they have which they think may be of interest.

Some are old, many are not.

Many families lost most of their possessions at the time of relocation, although a few managed to store some things safely.

But since returning in 1946, most have again begun collecting things Japanese, to continue to surround themselves with reminders of their heritage.

And they continue to maintain a sense of community by doing things together.

Not as many as they once did, says Yoshio Hata, another leader of the community.

"Prior to 1941 there were a great many activities," he recalls. "The organization did much more. Now it's a very loose-knit group."

The sukiyaki dinner is one of the more recent community efforts, which began in 1962 to help raise funds to support the Northwest Buddhist League convention meeting here.

To the astonishment of the sponsors, 1,100 persons turned out for that first dinner.

And a new tradition was born.

"The public wouldn't let us stop," says Inaba.

And what began as a fund-raiser has continued mostly as a cultural event, and one to which Valley residents look forward each year.

While the sukiyaki dinner is a time for sharing with their non-Japanese neighbors, members of the Japanese community have another traditional gathering which dates back much, much farther.

It began in 1924, when a Japanese-American girl was named valedictorian of the Wapato High School graduating class.

The Japanese community held a dinner in her honor, and the gathering became an annual event.

The tradition was discontinued during the war years, but has been resumed since.

And each year Japanese families — grandparents, great-grandparents, parents and tiny tots — get together to honor high school and college graduating seniors among them.

This is the time when the Japanese community assembles in greatest numbers, and along with honoring the young graduates, members also elect officers for their community organization.

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The whole family helps seven-year-old Trina, adopted daughter of the John Mosers of Ellensburg, get into the traditional red and white costume sent to her at Thanksgiving from her native Korea. From left are David, 4; Mrs. Moser and Bret, 14. David and Bret are the Moser's natural children.

## Sukiyaki dinner's a tradition

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Wapato is the center of the Japanese-American population here, but the annual banquet attracts persons from Grandview, Prosser and other parts of the Valley.

"It's one of the inherent characteristics of the Japanese culture," says Hata, "that we like to do certain things as a community. But we all have extracurricular activities, too, and there isn't as much as there used to be. But the strongest thing is the interest of parents in their children, so everyone turns out for the banquet."

There's an annual picnic, too, each summer. But otherwise, the community, of which Wada is president now, convenes only if there is a request for a meeting, which seldom occurs.

Until a few years ago community members each year built a float to enter in the Wapato Harvest Festival. But interest has waned and families have scattered so the sukiyaki dinner

alone remains, for most of us, as a chance to become better acquainted with the Japanese traditions in our midst.

To facilitate serving the 1,500 or more who turn out each year for the event, advance tickets are available for seating during specified time periods.

These are available in Yakima at Marg II Beauty Salon, The Hobby Haven, Lee Semon Men's Wear and Kurbitz Pharmacy No. 2.

In Union Gap they are available at Bow Distributing Company and they are sold at Johnny's Clothing and Reid's Variety Store in Wapato.

Fred Mutch Drug Store has them in Toppenish and they are available in Granger at Bill's Pharmacy, in Sunnyside at Lee Semon Men's Wear and in Grandview at Johnson's Pharmacy.

Tickets are \$4 for adults and \$2 for children under 10.