

Earl K. and Ruth N. Tanbara Fund for Japanese American History in Minnesota

Resilience, Advocacy, and Community Service

In the wake of the attack on Pearl Harbor and rampant anti-Japanese sentiment on the West Coast, President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, issued on February 19, 1942, led to the forced removal of Japanese Americans and their native Japanese parents from their homes, jobs, and businesses. Approximately 120,000 men, women, and children, many of whom were American citizens, were abruptly relocated to concentration camps across the country.

In August 1942, Ruth Tanbara and her husband, Earl, were the first Japanese Americans to be resettled in St. Paul. Ruth's brother, Paul Nomura, was already living in Minnesota and assigned to Military Intelligence Service Language School staff at Camp Savage. Special circumstances allowed Ruth and Earl to receive government travel documents to St. Paul for the purpose of building an accepting community in Minnesota for Japanese Americans.

Once established, Ruth and Earl opened their home to Japanese American families and students relocating to St. Paul, found retailers and service providers who would accept Japanese American customers, and helped evacuees find jobs. Ruth was employed as a stenographer at the St. Paul YWCA. Ruth and Earl also volunteered with the St. Paul Resettlement Committee, providing ongoing community awareness programs to build understanding and acceptance of Japanese Americans.



In 1947, Ruth Tanbara (1907–2008)—seen here with husband Earl (1905–1974) in June 1973—led the first Japanese group participation in the Festival of Nations.

In 1945, their 10-year-old nephew, Tom Kurihara, whose family had been interned at concentration camps in Wyoming and Arizona, arrived safely in St. Paul with his parents. After graduating from St. Paul's Monroe High School, he was awarded a Naval Reserve Officers Training Corps scholarship to Stanford University.

While Tom was preparing to launch the next phase of his life, Aunt Ruth continued to define hers. In 1953, she earned a master's degree in home economics from the University of Minne-

sota and continued her 30-year career with the YWCA directing adult education classes and the world fellowship international programs. She helped establish the Saint Paul Council of Human Relations and the Saint Paul-Nagasaki Sister City Committee and served in leadership positions for the Festival of Nations and the Japan America Society of Minnesota. Her commitment to community service was never ending. Meanwhile, Earl started and ran his own business, Pyramid Trim Products, and was very active in the Japanese American Citizens League.

In 2010, Tom Kurihara established the Earl K. and Ruth N. Tanbara Fund for Japanese American History in Minnesota at MNHS to honor his aunt and uncle. The fund supports MNHS projects related to Japanese American history, including women's history, K-12 education, collections, publications, and exhibitions.

In addition to the Tanbara Endowment Fund, MNHS houses the Ruth Nomura Tanbara papers (1906–2008), glove making tools Ruth used to teach classes at the St. Paul YWCA (1950s–60s), and a commissioned biographical triptych by artist HIRO (2005).

The Earl K. and Ruth N. Tanbara Fund for Japanese American History not only celebrates Tom's beloved aunt and uncle but also aligns with MNHS's mission to preserve and share stories of all Minnesotans—including Ruth and Earl's enduring contributions.

If you would like to invest in the Minnesota Historical Society, please contact Jennifer Pogatchnik at 651-259-3116 or jennifer.pogatchnik@mnhs.org.

For more information about Ruth and Earl Tanbara, MNHS is home to the Ruth Nomura Tanbara papers (1906–2008), which include correspondence, biographical materials, photographs, newspaper clippings, speeches, diaries, and more.

MNopedia, the online encyclopedia of Minnesota history, includes an article about Ruth Nomura Tanbara, written by Krista Finstad Hanson. www.mnopedia.org/person/tanbara-ruth-nomura-1907-2008.



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