

Famous People of Asian Ancestry

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Barbara J. Mitchell
President

November 3, 1993

Mary Jane Perna
Co-executor for the estate of Yoshiko Uchida
1859 Catalina Ave.
Berkeley, CA 94707

Dear Ms. Perna:

The first three volumes of our series, *Contemporary American Success Stories: Famous People of Asian Ancestry* are finally in print. It is being very well received in the schools, and I understand that volume II will be used in many social studies classes across the nation. I have enclosed a copy of volume II so you can see Yoshiko's story in print. Thank you so much for helping us with this project.

Sincerely,

Barbara Mitchell

Barbara Mitchell

A Contemporary American

S u c c e s s S t o r i e s

Famous People of Asian Ancestry



A Mitchell Lane Multicultural Biography Series

Volume II



YOSHIKO UCHIDA

Writer
1921-1992

“I feel that children need the sense of continuity that comes through knowing about the past. All of us must understand our own past in order to move ahead into the future. I feel it’s so important for Japanese American—and all Asian American—children to be aware of their history and culture, and to understand some of the traditions, feelings, and values of the early immigrants. At the same time, I write for all children, and I try to write about values and feelings that are universal.”

Yoshiko Uchida

AS YOU READ

- Yoshiko Uchida feels that it is very important for all children to understand the history of their nation and their own culture. When you read the story, see if you can tell why she feels this is so important.
 - Yoshiko’s parents grew up in poverty in Japan. But here in the United States, they enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle. What provided these comforts?
 - What event in United States history affected Yoshiko’s life significantly? Do you think this same event affected the lives of other Japanese Americans?
-

One policeman guarded the front door, and one positioned himself at the back door, essentially holding them prisoners in their own home.

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

On December 7, 1941, Yoshiko had been studying for her final exams at the University of California at Berkeley. While she was at the library, the FBI came to her house twice. No one was home. Her parents and sister had gone out to visit friends, not aware of how serious the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor had been. The FBI were very concerned that no one was to be found, so they broke into the Uchida home without a warrant. They were looking for Dwight Takashi Uchida, Yoshiko's father, who was a prominent Japanese American businessman. When her father returned home, he saw that someone had broken in, and believing that he had been burglarized, called the police. Two policemen and three FBI men appeared. Two of the FBI agents asked Mr. Uchida to come with them for questioning. Dwight Uchida went willingly. The remaining FBI agent stayed with her mother and sister to intercept any phone calls and to make sure that they did not contact anyone. One policeman guarded the front door, and one positioned himself at the back door, essentially holding them prisoners in their own home.

When Yoshiko returned home from the library, she found that her father had been taken by the FBI to the San Francisco Immigration Headquarters. She found her mother thoughtfully serving tea to the FBI agent who had remained. But Yoshiko could not be so gracious to the man who had taken her father away, and

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she stormed off to her room, slamming her door behind her. Little did she understand that this incident was only the beginning of the years of imprisonment that all Japanese Americans living on the west coast would face.

Yoshiko Uchida was born on November 24, 1921 in Alameda, California to Dwight Takashi Uchida and Iku (Umegaki) Uchida. She was the younger of two daughters. She had a sister named Keiko.



Yoshiko's father, Dwight Uchida (back row) with his mother (center front) and four sisters. Japan about 1902.

Because her father was well educated and held a good paying job as an executive..., Yoshiko and Keiko grew up with all the amenities that other American children knew.

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

Dwight Uchida was a first generation immigrant (issei), who had grown up in poverty in Japan. His father had died when he was ten, and his mother sent her five children off to live with various relatives. An uncle raised Dwight. He worked his way through Doshisha University in Kyoto by delivering milk in the mornings, working as a telephone operator at night, and later serving as a clerk in a bank. He came to California in 1906, when he was twenty-two years old. He had hoped to go to Yale to become a doctor, but he abandoned these ambitions when he found he enjoyed business. In 1916, Iku Umegaki, Yoshiko's mother left Japan and sailed to a strange land to marry Uchida, whom she had only met through correspondence. Iku had also been educated at Doshisha University (1914) although it was some years after Dwight had attended. She was twenty-four years old when she left her family in Japan and came to the United States to marry a man that her professors at Doshisha University had recommended. The arranged marriage proved successful and the Uchidas had two children. Because her father was well educated and held a good paying job as an executive at Matsui (a now defunct Japanese Corporation), Yoshiko and Keiko grew up with all the amenities that other American children knew. The family enjoyed many more comforts than most other Japanese American families in the early part of the twentieth century. Japanese immigrants could not become citizens nor own land at this time.

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The Uchidas rented a pretty three-bedroom stucco bungalow on Stuart Street in Berkeley. There were peach, apricot, and fig trees in the back yard. Dwight Uchida loved to garden and Yoshiko remembered there were sweetpeas that grew bigger than she was and chrysanthemums that measured seventeen inches around!



The house on Stuart Street.

But, despite the happy home, Yoshiko felt different in the outside world. She wanted to be like everyone else. She wanted to be viewed as an American. "When people saw me," she wrote, "they usually saw only my Japanese face." The prejudice and discrimination she faced was often open and hostile and hurt Yoshiko very much. One day a stranger on the street shouted, "Go back where you came from!" But Yoshiko was born in the United States and this was where

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she came from. Often, she and her sister were not invited to parties or other social events given by their white classmates. Yoshiko was made to feel different and foreign in her homeland.

Her mother and father made her feel safe and secure at home. The Japanese culture, values, and traditions were an integral part of their lives. Though the family had a predominantly Western outlook and lifestyle, the dominant language in their home was Japanese. All of Mr. Uchida's business was conducted in English, however, and Keiko and Yoshiko spoke English in school and to each other. Because their mother and father had known poverty early in life, they were very generous to others and very compassionate to anyone in need. When one of their neighbors on Stuart Street lost his job during the depression, and his wife sold homemade bread to try to make ends meet, Iku not only bought her bread to help her out, she arranged to take French lessons from her as well, to give her some additional income.

The Uchidas opened their home to many lonely students from Japan studying at the University of California. The students were always present on holidays, most Sundays, and they often dropped by uninvited. Yoshiko and Keiko did not always treat their house guests with the utmost respect and they often found them dull. But when Yoshiko looked back on these gatherings years later, she remembered the smell of

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

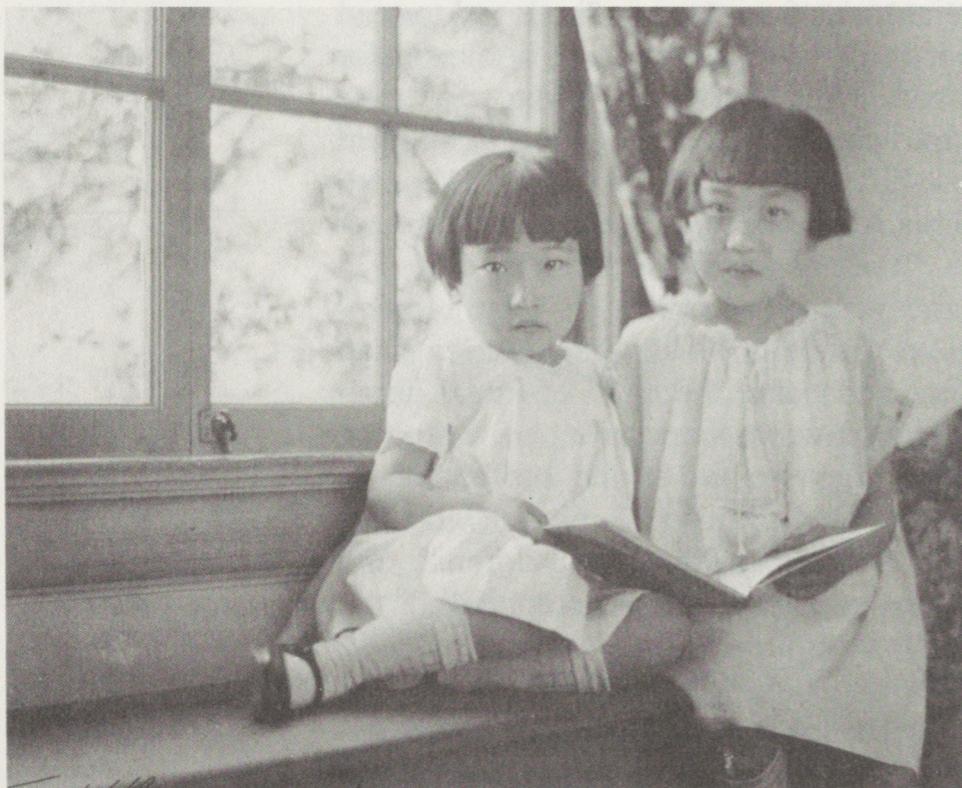
sukiyaki and the after-dinner singing around the piano, and she realized she actually had enjoyed these times. Of course, the students were not the only guests in the Uchida home. There were visiting ministers, alumni from Doshisha University, and sometimes the president of the university would drop by himself!

Yoshiko described her mother as a giving and deeply caring person. She would tell her daughters stories from Japan. She loved to read and the house was filled with books. Her mother was also creative and liked to write; she often wrote poems on scraps of paper. Her main devotion, however, was to her family. Yoshiko learned her love of reading and writing from her mother. "It seems to me I've been interested in books and writing for as long as I can remember," wrote Yoshiko. "I was writing stories when I was ten, and being the child of frugal immigrant parents, I wrote them on brown wrapping paper which I cut up and bound into booklets... The first is titled, 'Jimmy Chipmonk and His Friends: A Short Story for Small Children.'" She also kept a journal where she recorded all the significant events in her life.

Dwight Uchida had a railroad pass that enabled the family to take many trips. Often, Mr. Uchida combined his business trips with family trips. One summer when she was ten, Yoshiko and her family took a trip across the country to Connecticut. "We visited several eastern cities,"

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she recalled, "but most important to my mother was a special trip we made to the small village of Cornwall, Connecticut, to visit one of her former Doshisha instructors...and to meet for the first time two white women pen pals with whom she had corresponded since college. Both my mother and father were great letter writers and kept up voluminous correspondence. They cherished their many friends and I don't believe



Yoshiko, about 3 years old, with Keiko, about 7

either of them ever lost one for neglect on their part.

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"We were probably the first Asians ever to visit Cornwall and one of its residents, an elderly white woman, patted me on the head and said, 'My, but you speak English so beautifully.' She had looked at my Japanese face and addressed only my outer person, and although she had meant to compliment me, I was thoroughly abashed to be perceived as a foreigner..."

It was numerous incidents like this one that taught Yoshiko to be quiet and cautious to the outside world. The rejection she experienced so often affected her sense of personal worth and reinforced her own feelings of inferiority. Many times she was accepted by her friends as an equal, and then an incident would occur that would remind her that she was not quite perceived as "equal." When Yoshiko was in junior high school, she was the only Japanese American to join the Girl Reserve unit at school. All the other girls treated her the same as everyone else and Yoshiko had fun with this activity. One day, the unit was to be photographed for the local newspaper. The photographer kept casually trying to ease Yoshiko out of the picture, but one of her friends kept insisting she be in it.

In elementary school, Yoshiko remembered being singled out by her teachers for her excellent grades. But, by the time she was in high school, she remembered being singled out by the other white students and excluded from all their activities. She was so unhappy in high school

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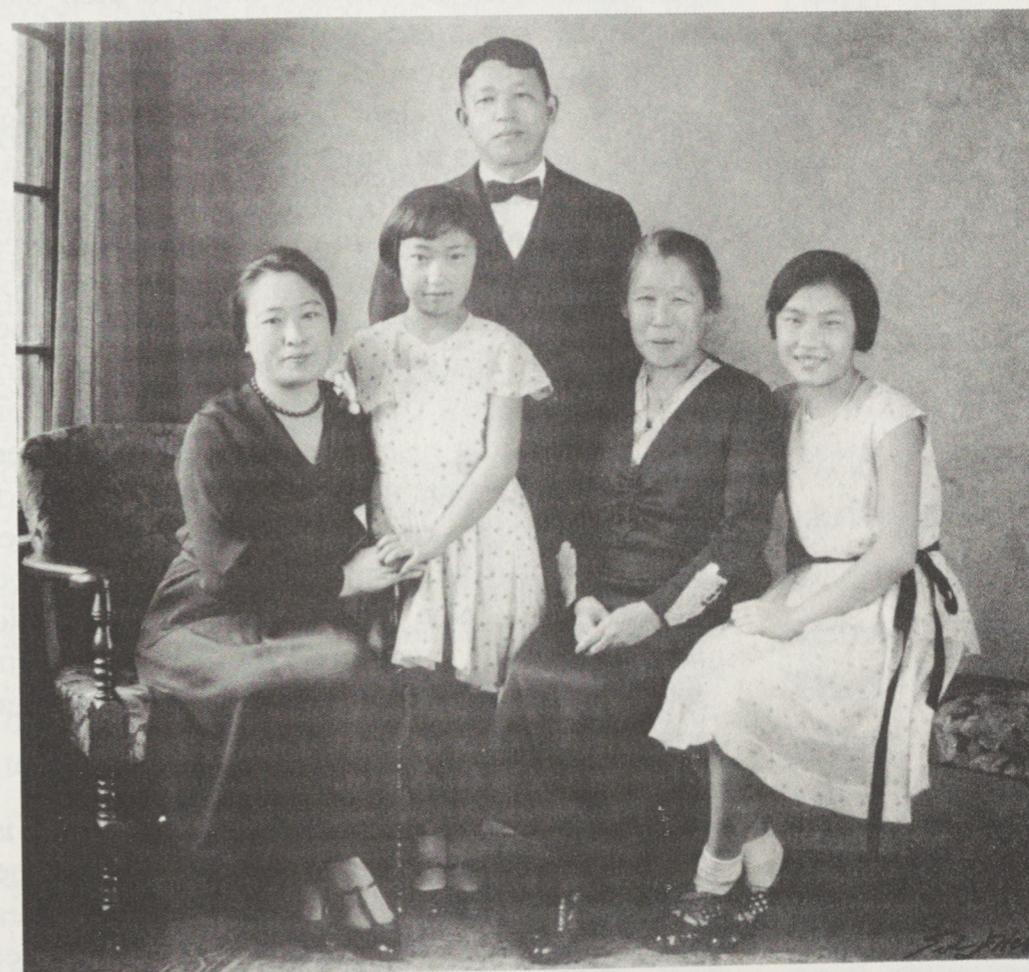
that she couldn't wait to get out. She increased her class load, and graduated in two and a half years. She entered the University of California when she was only sixteen. But, college was even worse than high school. Asian Americans were not invited to join sororities or fraternities, which in the late 1930's was an integral part of campus life. There were two Japanese American social clubs on campus, the Japanese Women's Student Club and the Japanese Men's Student Club. They had their own dances, picnics, and special events, and these became the only social events that Yoshiko could participate in.

"For many years I never spoke to a white person unless he or she spoke to me first," recalled Yoshiko. "At one of my freshman classes at the university, I found myself sitting next to a white student I had known slightly in high school. I sat silent and tense, not even turning to look at her because I didn't want to speak first and be rebuffed. Finally, she turned to me and said, 'Yoshi, aren't you going to speak to me?'"

All during her college years, Yoshiko dated only nisei (second generation Japanese American). All of her girlfriends were almost exclusively nisei, too. Though she had always wanted to be accepted as an American, she felt most comfortable in the company of other Japanese Americans. "We nisei were, in effect, rejected as inferior Americans by our own country and

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rejected as inferior by the country of our parents as well. We were neither totally American nor totally Japanese, but a unique fusion of the two..."



One of the many Uchida family portraits taken when Yoshiko's grandmother came to visit from Los Angeles.

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

Then came the bombing of Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, and Yoshiko found her life completely uprooted and disrupted. Her mother and father were classified as enemy aliens and Mr. Uchida was sent to a prisoner-of-war camp in Missoula, Montana. The government blocked their bank accounts, and there was total confusion as to what the family could withdraw for living expenses. Since Dwight Uchida could no longer work, there was no more income. On February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed executive order 9066 that relocated all Japanese Americans living on the west coast. Even before this order was signed, the FBI had imprisoned nearly all the first-generation Japanese Americans, which were most of the leaders in the community. The young nisei from the Japanese American Citizens League met in an emergency session to try to decide how to best handle the intolerable situation and unprecedented act of our government. Not wanting bloodshed or violence, the JACL leaders decided that the community should cooperate with the government under protest.

On April 21, 1942, removal orders were issued for the Uchida family as well as all other Japanese Americans living in the Berkeley area. They were given ten days to dispose of their homes and personal possessions. The Uchidas lost nearly everything they had. By May 1, Yoshiko and her family were imprisoned in the Tanforan Racetrack. Dwight Uchida was even-

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tually released from the camp in Montana and allowed to join his family in Tanforan. The family lived for the next five months in a ten-foot by twenty-foot horse stall. The entire camp was surrounded by barbed wire. "Dust, dirt, and wood shavings covered the linoleum that had been laid over manure-covered boards, the smell of horses hung in the air, and the whitened corpses of many insects still clung to the hastily white-washed walls...Living in our stable were an assortment of people—mostly small family units—that included an artist, my father's barber and his wife, a dentist and his wife, a group of Kibei bachelors (Japanese born in the United States, but educated in Japan), an insurance salesman and his wife, and a widow with two daughters..." Yoshiko wrote. The Japanese Americans organized schools, churches, and recreation areas. Yoshiko taught second grade and decided she might like to teach later on. She and other Japanese American classmates had missed their graduation by two weeks, and her diploma was sent to her in the mail at the internment camp.

By September 1942, the Uchidas and others were sent to Topaz, a camp in the Utah desert. Dust storms were so severe that the families could not keep their barracks or clothes clean. The weather was so harsh and changeable that the interns were constantly ill. Yoshiko's experiences along with those of other Japanese Americans in the internment camps during World

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War II were later retold in her books, *Journey to Topaz* (1971) and *Journey Home*, (1978) which she wrote for children. *Journey to Topaz* tells the story of twelve-year-old Yuki, a second-generation Japanese American girl in Berkeley, California, and what happens to her family after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. The story follows Yuki and her family to an internment camp in the Utah desert. In *Journey Home*, Yuki and her family return to California after the war to rebuild their lives. She also wrote *Desert Exile: The Uprooting of a Japanese American Family* (1982) for adults, which chronicled much of her life through World War II.

Yoshiko waited a long time to write these stories about the Japanese American experience during World War II. She was afraid that before the late 1960's, most people were not ready to listen to the story of the Japanese Americans. She was afraid that no publisher would accept it. But later, there was a greater acceptance of the events of this time, and Yoshiko felt she had to write these books to make sure that such events would never again be repeated in United States history. In the 1970's and 80's, she often got questions from third-generation Japanese Americans as to why the issei and nisei did not rebel against the World War II internment. She wanted them to understand that the world was a very different place in 1942 and at that time, most Japanese felt that the only way to demon-

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strate their loyalty to the United States was to cooperate with the government.

Yoshiko did manage to leave Topaz in May 1943 with the help of the Student Relocation Committee. She obtained a fellowship to do graduate work at Smith College in Northampton, Massachusetts. The Student Relocation Committee eventually helped over three thousand students leave the internment camps to enter some five hundred institutions of higher education throughout the country.

"I left Topaz determined to work hard and prove I was as loyal as any other American. I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to make good, not just for myself, but for all Japanese Americans," she said. Yoshiko received her master's in education from Smith College in 1944.

Unfortunately, Dwight and Iku Uchida were not permitted to leave Topaz until the end of the war. When they did, Dwight Uchida had no job to return to and the family had no home. Work for issei after the war was difficult to come by. For many years, Mr. Uchida attempted work as an unskilled laborer, never lasting long in any one job. It was ten years before they were able to buy a home again, this time with the help of their daughter, Keiko.

Yoshiko taught in a small Quaker school in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania for a year after she

"I left Topaz determined to work hard and prove I was as loyal as any other American."

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graduated from Smith, but she found she had no time for her writing. So she and her family moved to New York City and she took a nine-to-five job as a secretary. Her parents eventually returned to California to try to rebuild their lives. In 1952, she was awarded a fellowship to study in Japan and she spent two years as a Ford Foundation Foreign Area Fellow. In Japan, she met friends and relatives that she had never seen in person. Though she went primarily as a writer to collect more Japanese Folktales, she came home aware of a new dimension to herself as a Japanese American.

When she returned to America, she wrote many books for children. She published three collections of Japanese Folktales and numerous stories about Japanese children and their experiences. Beginning in 1970, Yoshiko wrote about her experiences as a Japanese American. *A Jar of Dreams*, published by Atheneum in 1982, is typical of Yoshiko's many books for young adults. She tells the story of Rinko, an eleven-year-old Japanese American girl made to feel different and left out, and not as good as her classmates. The story takes place during the Depression when Aunt Waka arrives from Japan for the summer. It is Aunt Waka that helps each family member discover their inner strengths and by summer's end, Rinko knows how special her Aunt Waka is. Two very popular books were published as sequels: *The Best Bad Thing* (1983) and *The Happiest Ending* (1985).

YOSHIKO UCHIDA

Yoshiko traveled extensively in the United States and abroad. She lectured at conferences on children's literature and participated in many programs for Japanese Americans. She wrote and published 27 books for children from 1949 to 1991 for which she won many awards and honors.

"Although all my books have been about Japanese people, my hope is that they will enlarge and enrich the reader's understanding, not only of the Japanese and the Japanese Americans, but of the *human condition*. I think it's important for each of us to take pride in our special heritage, but we must never lose our sense of connection with the community of man. And I hope our young people will, through the enriching diversity of the books they read, learn to celebrate our common humanity and the universality of the human spirit."

In June 1992, Yoshiko Uchida died from a stroke at the Alta Bates Medical Center in Berkeley, California. She was seventy years old.

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