Rare Japanese American 16mm home movies, ca. 1925 – 1960, now available for viewing online via Oregon Historical Society Digital Collections

“There’s no such thing as a bad home movie. These mini-underground opuses are revealing, scary, joyous, always flawed, filled with accidental art and shout out from attics and closets all over the world to be seen again.” — John Waters

Portland, OR – August 4, 2020 – The Oregon Historical Society is excited to announce that fifteen reels of 16mm home movies, shot by the Tsuboi family, are now available for viewing on the Oregon Historical Society Digital Collections website.

Teruo Tsuboi ran, with his older brother, the Tsuboi Brothers store at 315 Burnside Street, Portland. The store sold Western style clothing, jewelry, and after World War II, added an optometrist exam room. The films document the day-to-day activities of a Japanese American family living in the Pacific Northwest over multiple generations and contain rare scenes of family life both before and after World War II.

Films include, in part: family visits to the Pendleton Round-Up, drives through the snow in downtown Portland, Rose Festival parades, a Japanese baseball team at Civic Stadium, family members posing near Mt. Hood, trips to and from Japan via ship, a brief glimpse of the ruins of the Minidoka incarceration camp, a trip to Los Angeles in 1931, and various Pacific Northwest vacations and scenes from family life.

The Japanese American Museum of Oregon has been instrumental in identifying and promoting these films. Director of Collections and Exhibits Lucy Capehart notes, “The Tsuboi films provide a magical window into Portland’s past. The films also show that Japanese Americans have been part of Portland’s social fabric for generations; participating in the Rose Festival parade, riding a bike down a neighborhood street, and playing baseball.”

Teruo (1889–1965) and Suma Tsuboi (1889–1977) emigrated from Okayama, Japan, to Portland, Oregon, in the early twentieth century. They had four children (called Nisei, or...

When 16mm film first hit the consumer market in the late 1920s, it was available mainly to those who could afford the relatively high cost of film and camera. As 16mm became more affordable, with the added ability to shoot in color, it became the main method of documenting twentieth century family life, before being displaced by 8/S8mm, magnetic videotape, and digital video.

For more information on efforts being made to preserve the experiences of Asian Americans through home movies, please visit the Memories to Light project by the Center for Asian American Media.

The Center for Home Movies is another great resource that documents the importance of collecting and preserving home movies.


For more information on this collection, please contact: Matthew Cowan, the Oregon Historical Society’s Archivist for Moving Images & Photography at matthew.cowan@ohs.org.

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About the Oregon Historical Society

For more than a century, the Oregon Historical Society has served as the state’s collective memory, preserving a vast collection of artifacts, photographs, maps, manuscript materials, books, films, and oral histories. Our research library, museum, digital platforms & website (www.ohs.org), educational programming, and historical journal make Oregon’s history open and accessible to all. We exist because history is powerful, and because a history as deep and rich as Oregon’s cannot be contained within a single story or point of view.

About OHS Digital Collections

In 2015, the Oregon Historical Society embarked on an ambitious two-year project to build a digital infrastructure to create, collect, preserve, and facilitate online access to materials from our vast historic collections. Behind the scenes, these digital files are safeguarded using a series of digital preservation workflows, systems, and storage we call the OHS Digital Vault.

OHS Digital Collections provides online public access to a rich variety of materials from the OHS Research Library collections, including items from our manuscript, photograph, film, and oral history collections. Through OHS Digital Collections, we aim to enhance and promote the use of our materials for teaching, learning, and research. Materials can be accessed online at digitalcollections.ohs.org.