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Picture Brides

The term picture bride comes from the practice of picture marriages. Picture marriages were popular in the early 20th century and was practiced by the Japanese immigrants in the United States. The peak time for picture brides was from 1908 through 1920 and more than 10,000 picture brides arrived to California during this time. Picture marriages came about mainly for two reasons. The first being a way to avoid the Gentlemen's Agreement of 1907. This was an agreement between the Japanese government and the United States that stated laborers from Japan could no longer immigrate to the United States because of the growing population already in California and the growing sentiment against the Japanese there. In return President Roosevelt would have the California schools stop their segregation and allow the Japanese to attend those schools. The second reason was because of the Japanese bachelors' behavior in the community. The community leaders thought that with wives around, the men would no longer have the free time to gamble and see prostitutes, which was hurting the community's reputation and appearance.

The process of picture marriages was very straight forward. Most men could not afford to return to Japan to find a bride and so usually a relative or middleman would take a picture of the men and show it off to other families. Background information would be given to the families and prospective bride. A picture of the prospective bride would also be sent to the man waiting in America. Most of the bride pictures had westernized background displays and influences, such as chairs or curtains, and the women themselves would wear kimonos but with westernized hairstyles. Once they accepted each other, a ceremony would be performed in Japan and the

marriage license would be signed and registered in Japan. Then the bride would travel by boat to the United States and meet her husband for the first time upon arrival.

Many picture brides were from farming and fishing families and hoped that life in America would bring them better circumstances, but a few women were from middle class families and were daughters of teachers and shop owners. Some women did not have a choice in the matter of marriage, because their families pushed them into it. A major influence on the entirety of picture marriages was westernization. When Japan opened to the rest of the world, a lot of western culture was introduced to Japan. Photography being one of them and also western ideas about romanticized love, marriage, and life.

Unfortunately, many times the bride would not be happy with what she found upon arrival. The men usually were older than their pictures and the letters they sent had romanticized life in the United States. They often spoke of better living conditions than they actually had. The women would arrive to find that their husbands were not wealthy and that life in the United States was a lot harder than they thought. Many marriages ended in divorce or separation because of these unhappy beginnings and lies, but not all of them had bad endings. Because of the expectations that the picture brides had upon arrival, it gave the brides a bad reputation and they were called “vain women”. They were considered vain because of their hopes for a better life with material goods and the hope that they wouldn't have to work as hard, especially because they came from poor families. Women would also have affairs with other men once they were in the united states and found the terrible conditions unbearable.

The Japanese community newspapers would write articles about these women stating that the innocent husbands were betrayed and these women were terrible and should be shunned by society and the community. “Articles reporting adulteries and notices in which husbands

searched for their missing wives, which included photographs of missing lovers, appeared in Japanese-language newspapers every day during the peak period of picture marriage.”(Tanaka, 129).

The women were expected to uphold feminine Japanese beliefs and traditional housewife duties while in America. There were even schools like Rikko Jogakko (Rikko women’s school) that taught them to be good housewives and obey their husbands. They were to be subservient to their husbands and take care of the family and any future children they might have. In poorer families not only did they need to take care of the house and family but also work for wages themselves. For women who married farmers, they had to work in the fields alongside their husbands as well as take care of the home and cook. In Hawaii, the women worked in the sugar plantation fields alongside their husbands, but they got paid less for the same amount of work. For women who lived in the cities, they too had to work jobs as waitresses or servants and take care of the home.

In 1912, a few women got together to create a safe space for other Japanese women immigrants. They created Joshi Seinen Kai which was a boarding house in San Francisco. This boarding house also taught English, sewing, and American- style cooking. One woman who was such a huge support was Yonako Abiko. She married her husband in 1909 and then came to America where her sister already was. Yonako soon became involved in her local church and was known for her services in helping her community through educational services, fundraising, and more. She wanted to be actively involved in the Young Women’s Christian Association (YWCA) but because she and her friends were Japanese they could not. And so, they set out to create the Japanese Youth Women’s Christian Association (JYWCA) so that all the women in the community could be involved.

It took many years of fundraising but in 1921 they obtained enough money to purchase a piece of property in San Francisco. A female architect, Julia Morgan, helped design and build the place free of charge. The building contained dorms, a kitchen, meeting rooms, offices, an auditorium with a Noh stage and tea ceremony alcove too. This building hosted many classes that taught women ikebana, American law, swimming, economics, and music. These places allowed for picture brides arriving in the United States to learn the language and assimilate more to the new culture. It was a place that would feel familiar and safe for the women and to continue practicing their culture like tea ceremonies and ikebana, which is a traditional art of flower arrangements.

Another woman who helped the community and other picture brides was Tome Yasutake. Her story starts as a young girl when her mother died at a young age. Her father remarried and unfortunately the stepmother did not like Tome. She left to pursue a nursing and midwifery career against her brothers wishes. She also served in the Russo-Japanese War as a red cross nurse. After the war she followed her families wishes to marry and married Mokuji Yasutake in 1909 and joined him in Seattle. Tome had hoped that she would not experience the restrictions on women's choices and life.

Once in the United States she continued her work as a midwife and nurse. She helped deliver many babies in the Japanese community and even women of other ethnic backgrounds. She wanted to help the women most in need and in vulnerable situations, like having children out of wedlock, hard pregnancy, and abusive relationships. She soon began doing the work of a social worker and helped other picture brides. Many times, she helped these women for free.

Many of these brides had ran away from their homes because of abusive relationships and other circumstances. Tome would even house these women in her own home until they found a

way back to Japan or found another living situation. These women would often help with the housework and watch Tome's children while she was away delivering another child. Tome taught her daughters to rely on themselves and to help others in their community. "Toshi remembered that her mother drew on the example of the picture brides' difficulties to warn her daughters about the dangers of financial dependence on men." (Smith, 98). This would lead to a new generation, the Nissei, to be more independent.

In the film *Issei: The First Generation*, the women who were interviewed were picture brides. They spoke about their family arranging the marriage for them, another spoke about the hopes of becoming wealthy in the United States. One woman's family owned a business but was swindled and lost a lot of money, so they sent their daughter to the United States in hopes that she would earn money and be stable. They all spoke about arriving and not knowing anything and how hard it was both culturally and language wise. On the trip to the United States, they talked about the illnesses that would be on board and how some woman died from the flu before they reached America.

Yasuka Karumura immigrated to the United States as a picture bride in 1919, just 20 years old. She moved to Walnut Grove, California to manage a barbershop with her new husband. She talked about how confused she was upon arriving at her house because there was a bar next door and other unsavory places and she thought everywhere in the United States had nice architecture and places. She felt very lonely where she was and wanted to return to Japan. Her husband then complained about her wanting to return, not understanding her homesickness, and saying that he took great expense to get her to the United States. Yasuka learned to cut hair from her husband and helped in the business. During the depression of the 1930's they had a

hard time staying open, but she said if they had one or two customers they could still manage. She still lives in the same town at the time of the documentary, which was made in 1984.

Taka Washizu talked about working as a seasonal worker on farms where she would carry a bedroll to different farms and offer her services. She too became homesick for her family and life back in Japan. Miki Adachi also lived in Walnut Grove when she moved to the United States in 1922. She and her husband operated and owned a Japanese bath house. She too carried a bedroll to different places where there was work. Masa Kobaiyashi immigrated to the United States in 1916, where she and her new husband settled in Watsonville to work as sharecroppers. They lost money and had to move to a smaller farm growing cantaloupe. She also did housework for the stationmaster in Watsonville to help bring in money for her family.

Another woman talked of how she felt about the home she arrived at, which she said felt like a barn with all the wind blowing inside through the walls. She had second thoughts there because in her hometown in Japan, they had electricity since she was young but at her new home there was only gas lamps. They all talked of helping other people in the community during hard times, like the depression of the 1930's. They would share whatever food they could spare to those that desperately needed it. They also spoke on the executive order 9066 and how that affected them. When the posters were first put on poles to notify everyone, one woman had to have her children read it to them because they could not read English.

They spoke of selling their homes and property for "dirt cheap" in order to go to the internment camps. They all feared what was happening to them when they arrived at the camps. They saw bayonets greet them at the gate and had no idea what was going to happen to them. One woman said they were so poor that when they arrived and had sandwiches and milk in the cafeteria they were happy. She also thought that if they were feeding them so well then, the

government wasn't going to kill them. These women persevered and worked alongside all the Japanese interned to help the community survive the years there.

In conclusion, picture brides went through many hard experiences such as being forced into an arranged marriage, coming to a new country where the culture and language was different, being lied to by their new husbands and so many other experiences. These women still contributed to their communities by establishing boarding houses where men and women could go to and also learn about the new culture and language. These places also gave sense of familiarity and safeness because they kept Japanese roots. They also helped their husbands with work and adding income to the family, cleaning and cooking for the family, and raising the next generation of children to learn traditional Japanese culture but to also embrace their American life.

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