



Barbara Kawakami

Barbara Kawakami, on the Waipahu plantation experience:

After my father died, our lives changed completely. Mother was 39 years old and pregnant with her ninth child. There was no life insurance to depend on. Mother never had to work before, but now her first concern was how to keep her large family fed and clothed. She knew she could never leave her children in the hands of strangers, nor could she afford to pay for baby-sitting. The only type of work she could think of to keep her family together was to take in laundry from the plantation bachelors, who lived in nearby camps.

Every night after her household chores were done and most of her younger children were asleep, mother heated the heavy cast iron filled with hot charcoal from the hibachi to start her ironing. I would keep her company while doing my homework near her ironing board. Often-times when I awoke in the middle of the night, I would hear her sobbing quietly while she wielded the heavy cast iron back and forth.

Times like that I pretended not to hear her, and went back to sleep. One thing that left a strong impression was the fact that, no matter how difficult things were, my mother never showed her tears or weakness in front of her children. She always remained a pillar of strength for us. Without a father we didn't have much of material things, but we enjoyed a happy childhood on the plantation.

AN IMMIGRANT CHILD'S FIRST DAY IN SCHOOL

By Barbara Kawakami

How can I forget the first day
of school?
Okaasan unable to utter
a word of English-
enrolled me in first grade,
at August Ahrens School.

Okaasan in her best dress,
stiffly starched and pressed.
Lacquered hairpin with
pearls,
her only luxury, on silken
hair.
Night before, Okaasan stayed
up
late,
to sew me a brand new dress
of
lavender Indian head fabric-
to last me the year.

She learned Western sewing,
observing what others wore-
She cut my dress into A-line,
made opening for tiny head,
two holes slit for upper arms
to slide through.

Proudly, walking hand in
hand
Okaasan wore straw sandals.
Me? Barefoot like other
immigrant
kids.

Okaasan had left at home
mountains of laundry and
other
chores to take me to school.
What a special treat!
Okaasan all to myself...
Her face beamed with pride:
fourth child entering
American
School;
still four to go.

We walked two miles down
the road,
past the huge rumbling mill
reeking of molasses,
past whitewash houses-with
chickens
crowing and cackling in
coops.

The sprawling red-stained
school
house
filled with immigrant children
and mothers who stared
silently.
None could speak the
language of
the other.

Okaasan tried in vain to find
classroom,
poking her head from door

to door
trying to communicate
in sign language.
Finally, worn and confused,
Okaasan left me in second
classroom
with other immigrant
children.

They seemed as scared as I
was
in strange new surroundings.
Finally, big, big lady came in,
her hair so wiry,
her eyes pale blue and so
unreal!
I had never seen a "Haole"
before

She bent over, probably to
ask,
"What is your name?"
I shrieked, "Obake! Obake!"
(Ghost!)
Ghost!),
and ran out of the classroom
to the porch.
I grabbed the post
and held on with all my
might.

The more she tried to soothe
me,
the harder I cried.