

Mukai House and Garden

By Bruce Haulman

Just west of Vashon Town, down a small side road, sits a house and garden that are unique in the United States. The house is a fairly typical suburban home from the late 1920s, but the garden is a fine example of a traditional Japanese hill garden. Together they represent a blending of two cultures, the Americanization of a Japanese immigrant in the house designed and built by B.D. Mukai, and the retention of their Japanese heritage in the garden designed by Kuni Mukai.

The Mukai house and garden along with the neighboring Mukai Cold Process Fruit Barreling Plant became a King County Landmark in 1993 as the Mukai Agricultural Complex. The next year the house and garden were placed on the National Register of Historic Places. In 2000, the house and garden were purchased by Island Landmarks, a nonprofit, with the intention of restoring the house and garden and developing interpretive exhibits and hands-on programs about the Japanese on Vashon-Maury Island.

Earlier this year, a group of Islanders came together to form a new board and to breathe new life into Island Landmarks. The issue of which board controls Island Landmarks is now pending in court.



Mukai House @ 1930 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

The Mukai House was built in 1926 and 1927 by Denichiro Mukai, who was born in Japan in 1870 and immigrated to the United States in 1885. From the start, he was committed to making America his home., quickly Americanizing his name to Ben, then to B.D. In 1910 he married Sato who

was born in Japan and came to the U.S. as a picture bride — an arranged marriage organized through a marriage broker in Japan. Sato experienced poor health, so they moved to Vashon (“the country”) to grow strawberries and get Sato into a healthier environment. Their son Masa was born in 1911.

In 1915 Sato died and B.D. married Kuni, Sato’s sister. Kuni had come to Seattle with Sato and worked as domestic in Seattle until she married B.D. and moved to Vashon to become a full-time wife and mother. In 1924, after years of success as a strawberry farmer, B.D. began a barreling business to process strawberries through a newly developed cold process of freezing them for shipment. At its height the business employed 400 to 500 seasonal workers and packed 200 tons of strawberries per season.

In 1926 B.D. and Kuni began building the house and garden on land purchased in the name of their 15-year-old son Masa. Because Masa had been born in the United States, he was an American citizen and, unlike his parents, who weren’t citizens, could legally own land. The house and garden became representative of two adjacent cultures, Japanese and American, existing together. The garden is a significant achievement by a Japanese woman and an issei, a first-generation Japanese immigrant. The garden and home became the first Japanese-American site in the county to qualify as a historic landmark.



Kuni's Garden @ 1940 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

The farm and packing plant continued to prosper. During the 1930s the plant brought in more than \$500,000 a year and featured a bunkhouse that housed 250 workers during the season. In 1934 B.D. retired and he and Kuni divorced. B.D. traveled extensively, ultimately returning to Japan to purchase his family farm and live out his life, thus coming full circle and dying in Japan in 1973 at age 93.



House and Barreling Plant @ 1937 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

After B.D. retired, Masa ran the business, increasingly focusing more on the freezing process and less on growing berries. In 1939, as anti-Japanese sentiment increased, Mukai changed the name to Vashon Island Packing Company on the advice of his agents. With the beginning of World War II and the internment of Japanese citizens, Masa, his wife Chiyeko and their son Milton became voluntary evacuees, moving to Dead Ox Flats, Idaho, outside the exclusion zone, and thus were not interned as were the other Japanese families on Vashon.

During the war, Morris Dunsford ran the farm and packing plant for the Mukais. After the war, Masa returned to the island and during the 1950s opened two more plants, one in Ferndale, the other in Forest Grove, Oregon. He sold the packing business in 1969 and changed the name Vashon Island Packing Company to VIPCo and operated it as a septic and contracting business until he retired in 1979. Kuni died in 1957, Chiyeko died in 1994, Masa died in 1999, and Masa and Chiyeko's son Milton continues to live in the Seattle area.

The history of the Mukai house and garden since its sale by the Mukais is as interesting as the story of the Mukais themselves. The house and garden became one lot, the barreling plant another, both of which were owned by several different parties over the years until the house and

garden were purchased in 2000 by Island Landmarks, a nonprofit dedicated to “preserve significant architecture and historic landscape” on Vashon-Maury Island.



Mukai House @ 2000 – Vashon-Maury Island Heritage Museum

An impressive fundraising effort resulted in more than \$469,200 to purchase the house and garden for \$327,806. Funds for the purchase came from the National Park Service, the Washington State Legislature, the Casteel Family Foundation, the King County Office of Historic Preservation, the King County Office of Cultural Resources and individual gifts and loans.

The provisions attached to these funds included restoring the garden, developing interpretive public exhibits, pro-actively implementing facilities maintenance, providing programs and educational opportunities, free or reduced costs of admissions, and an annual review with funding agencies.

— Bruce Haulman, an Island historian, is a member of the group that is attempting to establish itself as the new board of Island Landmarks.