

# Not All Picture Brides

By Laurie Mengel

Honolulu, Hawaii 1910

The soft breeze caresses the hem of the young girl's *montsuki* as she waits on the docks of the Honolulu Harbor. In one hand she holds a suitcase. The other clutches the well-worn tattered photograph of a face she has studied, but never seen.

She dutifully follows the man in the photograph when he comes to claim her as his wife. *Shikata ga nai*, (it cannot be helped) she whispers to herself as she enters the plantation shack which will be her home. By the next day, her *montsuki* is packed away, traded in for clothing more practical for the heat, razor-sharp leaves, and centipedes that accompany *hoe hana*, cutting cane. When the babies come, she stresses values of *on* (obligation to others), *haji* (shame), and *oyakoko* (filial piety). She looks the other way when her husband overindulges in too much *sake*. She remains faithful to her husband, diligent in her work and dedicated to her children. She is hindered by her inability to speak English, is isolated, and socially confined to a few Issei women when she has time for socialization. She finds her strength, endurance, and comfort by repeating the words, "*Kodomo no tame ni*," for the sake of the children.

This image has come to represent most Issei women. Some women came through Honolulu Harbor, and others through Port Townsend or Angel Island. Some worked *hoe hana*, others as tenant farmers or shopkeepers in Japan towns. Before the Asian Exclusion Act



Picture brides, San Francisco. Courtesy of Japanese American History Archives.

of 1924, the image of all foremothers that immigrated from Japan was that of summoned, subservient, passive, hard-working, and dutiful women. While many women did indeed come as picture brides, this profile does not allow for those who used other avenues of migration. It does not explain how, or why women migrated before the family reunification clause of the Gentlemen's Agreement in 1906 that resulted in picture brides. More importantly, it dismisses the complexities of the lives of those women who left their country for a better life and did not just accept what was presented to them. These women are no longer able to tell their stories. Their voices have been lost to history and have been kept

silent by the picture bride stereotype. I have recovered some of their voices in the divorce records of the Hawai'i Circuit Court. I focused on the women who came to Hawai'i between 1886 and 1907, as these were the first of the Japanese women to immigrate. The testimonies given by the women demonstrate instincts for survival, abilities to cross social boundaries, and the tenacity to fight for their lives in a way that was anything but passive.

brides. Women came in many capacities such as nurses, laborers, and merchants. Women migrated as unmarried people, daughters, sisters, and wives.

Life in early plantation days was very difficult for both men and women. Back breaking plantation work, racist laws, and inhumane living conditions took their toll on many. Many men sought relief in sake and gambling. Some beat their wives in frustration. Marriages broke up. In the plantation communities

In 1885 the ship *City of Tokio* presented its first legal load of Japanese contract workers to the Hawaiian shores. Out of 859 workers, 159 of these workers were women. Because census reports, immigration records, and passenger manifests were grossly incomplete, an accurate count of arrivals was impossible. Thus, it appears that about as many women came before 1907 as during the "picture bride era." Additionally, more than half the women who entered Hawai'i after 1907 were not, in fact, picture



Okinawan women. NJAHS Archives. Beatrice Shiroma Collection.

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of Hawai'i it was not uncommon for women to leave their husbands. The population of Japanese men always exceeded the Japanese women. This resulted in some women leaving a marriage to live with another man. Sometimes a man would sell his wife. It was also not uncommon for people to marry informally without benefit of legal or religious ceremony.

It is impossible to know exactly how many of these informal marriages or divorces



The traditional bride and groom picture in Westernized clothing. NJAHS Archives, Freya Hirasuna Collection.

occurred. What is surprising however, is the number of women who filed for legal divorces from their husbands. Between 1885 and 1907, 833 divorces were filed by people of Japanese ancestry in the Circuit Court of Hawai'i. If one uses the demographics of the 1896 Hawaiian census, this amounted to 20 percent of Japanese marriages. The majority of these divorces were filed by the women. As some men drank, gambled and beat their frustrations away, often losing employment in the process, their wives moved off the plantations and into domestic service to gain financial and physical independence. They enlisted the aid of others, male and female, Japanese and *haole*, to enable them to recreate their lives and to secure legal divorces from their husbands.

One woman's story presents facts only alluded to in previous historical records, but this time in her own words. When she is allowed to tell her story, rather

than a tragic and passive girl oppressed, we see a young woman emerging, in control and orchestrating her life. Iwata Mine was a seventeen-year-old woman in Kau, Hawai'i when in 1900 she filed for annulment against her husband, Tomimoto. Her testimony follows:

“I live at Kau; I last lived at Olaa with Tomimoto; we were married in Hilo February 20th this year by Judge Hapai; I know Iwata Mitsuzo of Kau; I was married to him in Japan; he is still living. My husband Iwata told me; I have received money from Tomimoto; we lived at Olaa when married; we both worked at Olaa, and my husband licked me, so I went to Volcano House and worked for Mrs. Waldron about 12 or 13 days, then a police officer arrested me and took me to Hilo to jail, and I got out in nine days; Tomimoto then had me arrested on the charge of polygamy, to which I plead guilty. Tomimoto came to me and told me to pay him \$250 dollars or he would send me to a whorehouse in Honolulu; he went to one of my friends and got a hundred dollars; I also gave him a hundred dollars; I gave him a note for \$250, paid one hundred and a hundred fifty balance; Tomimoto and I did not have any children.”

Mine's friend, Mr. W. S. Wise, Esq. testified in her behalf:

—“I was employed by Mrs. Waldron to defend this woman on a charge of deserting her husband Tomimoto; I cleared her; Tomimoto then brought charge of polygamy against her; she plead guilty and was fined fifty dollars and costs; she went to jail three days, friends raised the money and got her out. I then began this



Cane Workers. Courtesy of Hawaiian State Archives.

proceeding. I was informed a few days after Tomimoto said that was a fact, he gave the mortgage on his team and stage for \$150, due in one month. He gave the mortgage to me; went to get the one hundred dollars, but did not return; he took a sailing vessel for the coast. I gave the mortgage to the man who gave it.”

Like many others, Mine found work off the plantation. After being sold, beaten, jailed, and threatened with prostitution, she then obtained employment as a domestic servant with Mrs. Waldron. Domestic service was not demeaning because racism and sexism left women no other alternative. It became a vehicle of emancipation as women left their oppressors, became economically independent and rebuilt their communities.

It is at this point we see the strong network Mine built for herself. Mrs. Waldron, her employer, retained an attorney, Mr. Wise, in Mine's behalf on the desertion charge. That a *haole* employer would provide funds and advice for legal counsel for a young, imprisoned, minority girl, clearly demonstrates the bond there must have been between them to prevent Mine from being sold. Her friends rallied to her aid by producing funds and mortgaging their livelihoods. The fact that Mine's friends were men and women, *haole* and Nikkei, workers and planters, refutes common perceptions that immigrant women remain confined to isolation. Mine enlisted the aid of loyal friends, from a racial and class structure far beyond what Issei woman are commonly portrayed as having. In spite of being