

“Service Unexcelled”:  
Seward’s Issei Business Leader, Harry S. Kawabe  
By  
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In hard times sparked by the Great Depression and World War II, one might think that intolerance and racism would have been more apparent in Seward. But it appears that the contrary occurred. Even though relations between Washington D.C. and Tokyo had worsened by the 1930s, one of Seward’s most prosperous and popular businessmen came from Imperial Japan.

Harry Sotaro Kawabe was born near Osaka in 1890. He grew up in a family of farmers, but Kawabe dreamed of success in America. He arrived in 1906 and worked as a houseboy in Seattle, Washington to learn English. In 1909, he traveled to Alaska, where he worked at a variety of locations, including Port Graham and Cordova. After failing to make money during the ill-fated Chisana gold rush, in 1915 Kawabe moved to the Alaska Railroad terminus town of Seward, a town promoted as a “gateway” to great things.

In 1916, Kawabe bought a lot on Fifth Avenue and started the Seward Steam Laundry. This was the start of Kawabe’s long and successful business career in Seward. In 1923, he traveled to Japan and married Toshiko Suzuki, who after years of poor health, died in 1930. A year later he married Tomo Kawano. The couple had no children of their own but they were generous to Seward’s younger generation. Kawabe, who had one of the few cars in town, delighted local children by driving them to picnics. Harry and Tomo’s generosity extended to help raise and educate numerous children, a legacy that continues to this day.

Throughout the 1930s Kawabe invested in a gold mining operation near Moose Pass and several Seward businesses, included the Bank of Seward, Kawabe’s Gift Store and Alaska Furs, the Seward Hardware Company, the Place Hotel and Bar, Moose Bar and Liquor Store, The Marathon Café and Seward Grill, and the O.K. and Miller Barbershop Company. His holdings prompted the local newspaper to declare Kawabe “one of the large property owners of the town.” He also invested in real estate, including the laundry buildings, the Northern Apartments, and Dreamland Hall. One of Kawabe’s properties is owned today by the National Park Service. In 1939, W.T. Yasutake sold two lots to Kawabe, who later built a housed used as a rental on the site.

On November 24, 1941, fire swept through downtown Seward, destroying much of the commercial district. Resident John Paulsteiner witnessed the disaster, and later explained that the local fire department made a significant effort to save Kawabe’s property. “When the big fire started in 1941,” wrote Paulsteiner, “Kawabe owned a small house below the Seward Hotel. When the fire jumped cross the alley to engulf the Seward

Hotel, the firefighters put a cable around Kawabe's house and dragged it down the street near the Railroad Depot at the time of the fire."

A few weeks after the devastating 1941 fire, Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Seward officials, like those in towns across the nation, were directed to relocate all residents of Japanese ancestry. Kawabe, the merchant whose business Sewardites had just tried so desperately to save, was ordered, along with his family, to be evacuated. Otis E. Hayes, who was ordered to "detain the laundry proprietor, Harry Kawabe," recalled the experience:

I dreaded the task. Accompanied by men from the provost marshal's office, I arrived at the laundry building in the early evening darkness. I found the proprietor whom as in the boiler room stoking the fire. He was alone. We stood in semi-darkness, the only light being the reflection from the firebox. I told him what had to be done. He sighed, hesitated, and then asked to go upstairs.

Tomo Kawabe, wide-eyed, met us at the top of the stairs. Her husband looked at her wordlessly and began collecting a few personal belongings. She turned and rushed to the kitchen. In an apparent state of shock, she hastily opened and heated cans of food and began to set the dining table. Catching my eye, she kept motioning to the table with her hands, "You must eat," she seemed to be pleading.

I asked her to stop. Tight-throated, I could not have swallowed the food—any food—at that time. Nevertheless, she continued almost frantically to motion to the laden table. I had to turn my back to her.

It was finally time to go. Her stoical husband walked down the stairs without a backward glance. Tomo Kawabe, one hand over her mouth, looked after him through the dim stair light. "Don't worry," I remember saying helplessly, "you'll see him soon," I had no idea that she really would. Whether she believed me, I didn't know. She just stood there and gave no sign that she even heard me."

Forty-eight hours later the government took the four other Japanese men in Seward, all of whom were connected to Kawabe's laundry, to Anchorage. Several weeks later their families were also evacuated to join the men. While in internment, Kawabe continued his leadership role, becoming a spokesman for the Alaskan Japanese internees at Fort Richardson. At the war's end, he returned to Seward for awhile, but eventually resettled in Seattle.

In the years after Kawabe left, Seward endured its own hardships, particularly the Good Friday earthquake in 1964 that led to an economic downturn from which the town never fully recovered. Like the town of Seward itself, Harry Kawabe continually encountered adversity, but he never faltered in his reach for the American Dream. In 1953, Congress

rewrote laws that had prevented Japanese from naturalization, allowing Kawabe to finally become a U.S. citizen. Despite losses endured during the war, Kawabe made investments and grew his business assets in the Pacific Northwest. Alaska, however, remained in his thoughts and he continued to give back to the community. In 1978, he used his prosperity to establish the Kawabe Scholarship. Awarded to Seward High School graduates, the scholarship not only reflects Kawabe's lifelong dedication to children and higher education, but reminds us that, Kawabe always believed that entire communities—not just individuals—are capable of great things.

**Sources:**

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**Photo Credits:**

*Seward Steam Laundry advertisement*, [Seward Gateway](#), December 5, 1925.

*Harry Kawabe from the postwar era*, Alaska Polar Regions Department, University of Alaska Fairbanks