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Elmer Ogawa After hours with Seattle's forgotten photographer

By Todd Matthews, Editor

One summer day in 1970, a sixty-year-old man named Herbert K. Ogawa arrived on the campus of the University of Washington, in Seattle, with a heart as heavy as his sense of duty. Ogawa would have preferred to be back home in a quiet suburb of Dallas with his family. Instead, he was in Seattle to bury his brother, Elmer (pictured), who had died of a heart attack that summer at the age of sixty-five, and settle his estate.

As he made his way across the campus, it was impossible for Herbert not to think about his brother. It was here that Elmer graduated in 1928, earning a bachelor's degree in foreign trade. Herbert retraced his brother's footsteps. He walked across the oceanic spread of red bricks that comprised the central plaza known to students and faculty as "Red Square." He slipped between rows of scented cherry trees and past the column of water that shot nearly ten stories skyward from the pond surrounding Drumheller Fountain, gorgeously framing Mount Rainier in the distance, refreshing those who passed by with a cool mist. And he passed beneath the Gothic facades of lecture halls that filled the leafy campus on his way to the university's imposing Suzzallo Library—a 1920s' building whose elegance is still contained in its marble staircases, reading rooms crowned by vaulted ceilings that arch like a ship's hull, and row after row of oak bookcases.

Once inside, Herbert headed toward the library's special collections division to make arrangements to hand over a cache of documents he discovered in his brother's small apartment in an old two-story, redbrick building just up the hill from Seattle's Chinatown. For Herbert, it would bring him closer to settling his late brother's affairs and boarding a return flight home. For two university librarians—Richard C. Berner, the library's curator of manuscripts, and Robert Monroe, head of the library's special collections division—it was an opportunity to build the special collections, which focused on Pacific Northwest history and had only been created seven years earlier, in 1963.

It's likely the name "Elmer Ogawa" wasn't immediately familiar to Berner or Monroe—or to any other local librarian, archivist, or historian. Ogawa was neither a famous man nor a scholar. He spent most of his life working itinerant and exhausting hard-labor jobs—first, in Alaska canneries as a teenager off-loading boats, gutting fish, and nailing together splintered boards to make shipping crates; then, on the East

Coast as a traveling salesman and milk delivery driver, before serving as an army sergeant during World War II; and finally, in Seattle as a pipe fitter and boilermaker right up until his death.

If anything about Ogawa were to possibly pique the interests of local historians, it was this: wherever he went, Elmer Ogawa almost always carried a camera. When Ogawa wasn't working in Seattle's noisy and dirty industrial yards from the late 1940s to the early 1960s, he was a freelance photographer and writer for a variety of ethnic magazines and newspapers that reached readers in Seattle and

was never nearly as famous. He seemed to appear on the scene (camera in hand) of nearly every automobile accident in the neighborhood—a gory-for-its-day photograph of a man bleeding from his head and lying prone in the street after being struck by a hit-and-run driver; the twisted remains of a light pole after it was mowed down by a bus that skidded along icy Jackson Street during a winter snowstorm; and a variety of fender benders that blocked busy intersections and drew the gawking attention of neighbors and passersby. His photos also accompanied stories about hardworking Asian American men and women who owned the neighborhood laundries, drugstores, restaurants, and taverns. Ogawa was the man on the street for his time, a neighborhood blogger before there were blogs.

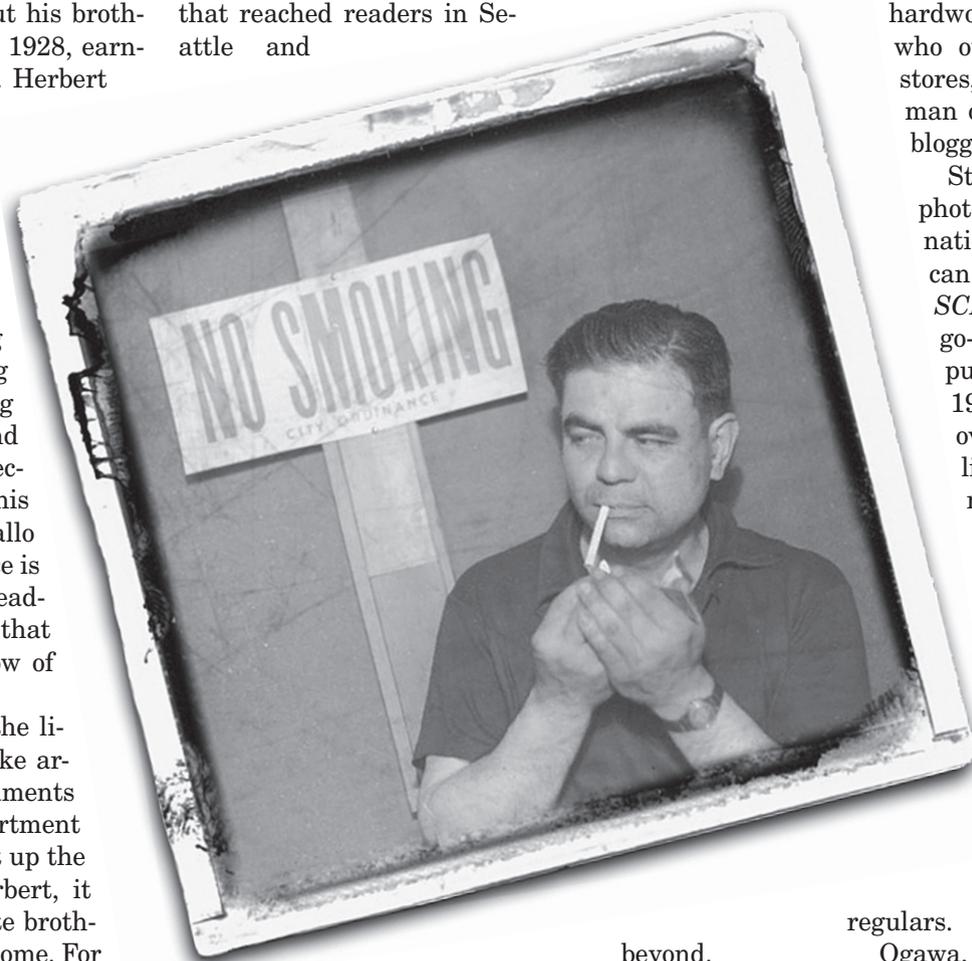
Starting in 1949, Ogawa was a writer and photographer for the *Pacific Citizen*, the weekly national newspaper of the Japanese American Citizens League (JACL). As a stringer at *SCENE: The Pictorial Magazine*—the Chicago-based, very popular Japanese American publication in the United States during the 1950s, boasting a "guaranteed" circulation of over 16,000—Ogawa documented the social lives and activities of Seattle's Nisei community.

Finally, when Ogawa wasn't on the clock, he could usually be found in one of Seattle's dive bars—Tim's Tavern on East Pike Street, Barney's Cafe on Seventh Avenue, Bamboo Inn Cafe on Maynard Avenue South, or maybe the Klondyke Cafe on South Washington Street—always with his camera nearby. Indeed, as his photographs candidly and charmingly depict, Ogawa loved to hang out in taverns, downing many frosty pints of beers and trading jokes with friends and bar

regulars.

Ogawa, whose mother was German Irish and father was Japanese, was an easy figure to spot around town. At five feet, eight inches tall, and weighing nearly two hundred pounds, he had a husky physique, jet black hair combed back in a shiny slick, meaty jowls that hung beneath his eyes like saddlebags, cork plug nose, thin mustache, thickly forested eyebrows, and wide smile. Perched at a bar, Ogawa would have been impossible to ignore, and one can imagine a chorus of "Hey, Elmer!" when he stepped inside one of his favorite taverns. He was also a man with many nicknames: Yelmer, Pop, Bub, Beef, and The Count.

Shortly after Herbert Ogawa donated his brother's papers and photographs to the University of Washing-



beyond.

As a photographer for the Seattle-based newspaper the *Northwest Times*, Ogawa reported on everyday life in the ethnically diverse neighborhoods along a stretch of Jackson Street that ran from downtown Seattle past the Japanese- and Chinese-owned shops and restaurants, and into what was known to African American locals as the Central District. It was an easy enough beat, considering Ogawa lived for a spell in the six-story Bush Hotel, a bulky building that towered over the corner of Maynard Avenue and Jackson Street, the heart of Seattle's Asian American community. Ogawa was Seattle's own version of Weegee—the photographer who captured the gritty, workaday life of New York City—though he

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ton, library staff prepared a single-page, handwritten list—a back-of-the-napkin-type catalogue of sorts. Today,

it provides some insight into what the library felt was most significant: fourteen thousand black-and-white negatives and seven thousand black-and-white prints depicting a range of well-known people (Washington State senators Henry M. "Scoop" Jackson and Warren G. Magnuson; Vice President Richard M. Nixon; Mayors Pomeroy and Devin; Broadway performer Pat Suzuki; and artists George Tsutakawa and Paul Horiuchi), events (Seafair parades, the 1962 World's Fair, and annual memorials, such as Bon Odori and Memorial Day) and organizations important to Seattle's Asian American communities (JACL, Jackson Street Community Council, American Legion Cathay Post, Veterans of Foreign Wars, and the Nisei Veterans Committee).

One could imagine the UW Library's Berner and Monroe with each box they opened equally amazed by the photographs of Seattle history as amused by the photographs of drunk tavern dwellers. Staff eventually catalogued all the material, compiled an inventory list, and stored everything in archives. The papers and correspondence were contained in ten boxes filled with hundreds of file folders, and the photographs and negatives were stored in three dozen boxes and tucked away on shelves.

For the next four decades, everything—all the photographs, magazines, newspapers, and correspondence—would remain in these boxes, largely untouched and ignored.

I first learned of Ogawa in 1997 while conducting research for a book. I was looking for historic photographs of the Wah Mee Club, a bar and gambling hall that was part of the festive nightlife scene in Seattle's Chinatown during the 1940s and 1950s. The name Elmer Ogawa surfaced during my research, and I visited the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections to leaf through his photographs. It wasn't long before I landed on the photograph I wanted. It was a black-and-white picture circa 1950 depicting seven young Asian American men gathered at the club's curvy bar. Everyone is smiling, a drink in front of each reveler. A pack of Lucky Strike cigarettes sits upright among an array of ashtrays. Ornamental lanterns glow overhead. One young man wears a fedora, while



ABOVE: Elmer Ogawa captured the action as two men brawled in a 1950s-era Seattle tavern. BELOW: On October 16, 1957, Ogawa spotted a pristine, two-toned 1957 Chevrolet parked near the corner of Fifth Avenue South and South Jackson Street in downtown Seattle. BELOW RIGHT: Japanese American Seafair royalty pose in front of the Space Needle, still under construction, in Seattle on Nov. 18, 1961. (ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPHS / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

a few others sport leather bomber jackets. At the end of the bar, a waiter dressed in a white suit and black tie smiles alongside his customers.

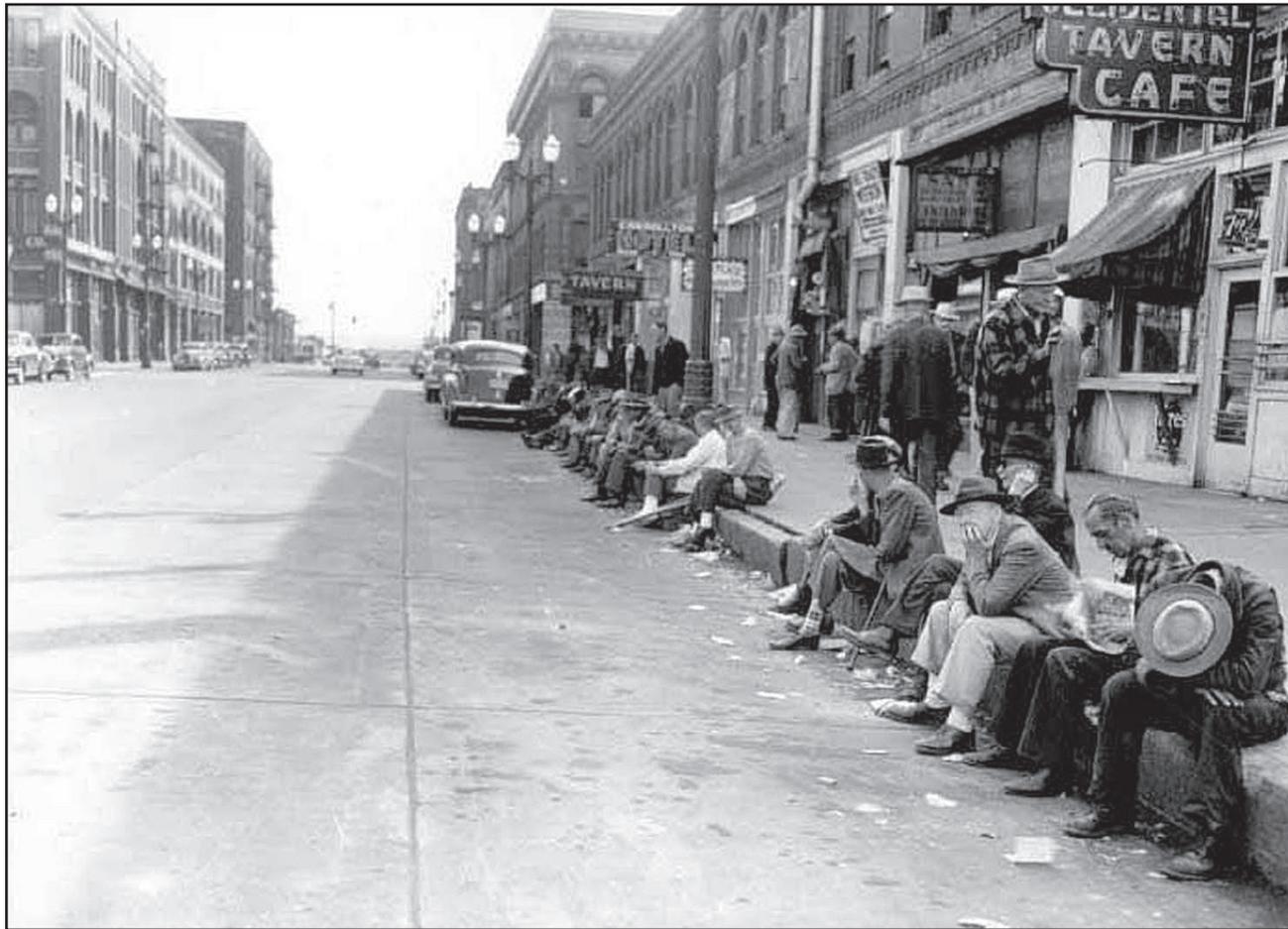
My research was complete, but I continued poring through Ogawa's photographs, one box after another, until several hours had passed and the library was closing. I was intrigued by Ogawa, but my first priority was the research for my book. If I wanted to learn

more about Ogawa, it would have to wait.

Fifteen years later, my mind finally circled back to the name Elmer Ogawa and that first visit to UW's Special Collections. In October of 2012, I made my way to the basement of the Suzzallo Library, where the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections is housed. Once inside, the setting is typical of a library research room—rows of wide desks for visitors to spread out old documents and pore over fine historic artifacts; a team of librarians perched on stools behind counters, waiting to search a computer database or disappear behind key-card-accessible doors to retrieve boxes; and a side room full of the university's rarest documents, maps, and collectibles. Yet, this library is different, and a visit is not a casual affair. You are unlocking a vault to Pacific Northwest history. The list of contraband is specific and clear. Bags or containers of any kind are prohibited. Cameras and laptop computers are allowed, but not their cases. Pencils and single sheets of paper are per-

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missible, but not notebooks or pens. You are encouraged to check in your coat or sweater at the front desk (if not, you have to wear them at all times during your visit).

When I arrived, a staff member at the front counter assigned a user number to me and I filled out a form in triplicate that included the collection name ("Elmer Ogawa Papers"), collection number (1383-001), and box numbers for staff to retrieve (#1 through #10: everything in the collection). I was buzzed past a waist-high swinging door and found an empty table at the far end of the library. A few moments later, a young woman arrived pushing a rolling cart stacked with narrow gray boxes. For the next six hours (and during subsequent visits over the next few months), I carefully uncapped the boxes, removed folders, and leafed through documents. There was original correspondence (once neatly typed out in blocky letters on clean white paper, but now aged to the color of coffee-stained teeth) to Ogawa from magazine editors discussing everything from future story assignments to payment schedules to feedback from readers. I found handwritten cards and letters from a range of local notables, like prominent immigration attorney Dan. P. Danilov, Seattle's first Asian American city council member Wing Luke, the Seattle mayor Gordon S. Clinton, and United States senator Daniel K. Inouye. There was even a colorful, handmade card from a Japanese American figure skater and member of the Ice Capades whom Ogawa photographed in 1967.

Judging by what Ogawa saved, it's tempting to assume he was a borderline hoarder. Some items he saved seemed mundane, banal, and insignificant, such as a back-and-forth correspondence between Ogawa and his landlord (Ogawa complained about roaches and trash bins that overflowed onto a nearby alley, while his manager eventually typed out an eviction notice); the blue copy of a triplicate estimate for repairs after he wrecked his automobile; a bright red cookbook published by famed Seattle restaurateur and politician Ruby Chow; and a receipt for twenty dollars, issued to Ogawa in 1957 at 7:45 a.m. when he bailed himself out of jail after he was arrested for being drunk in public.

He also saved things that, decades after his pass-

ABOVE: A scene outside Seattle's Occidental Tavern Cafe circa 1952. ABOVE RIGHT: Fans line up for a piece of cake to celebrate local boxer Eddie Cotton on June 15, 1967, in honor of his 41st birthday. BELOW: Elmer Ogawa developing photographs during the 1950s. (ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPHS / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON LIBRARIES SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

ing, help strangers and biographers piece together his life. There are pages upon pages of correspondence from magazine and newspaper editors discussing freelance assignments, such as the Nisei square dancing scene in Seattle; a matsutake mushroom hunt; a profile of Seattle artist George Tsutakawa; a portrait photograph of a veteran who survived the sinking of battleship Maine during the Spanish-American War and was now living on Yesler Way in Seattle; and Japanese American babies born on New Year's Day.

There are also letters outlining payment terms—usually three dollars per photo, ten dollars for cover

shots, as well as two to five cents per word if Ogawa wrote the articles. He also collected nearly every magazine and newspaper clipping with his byline. The magazines are well preserved, even down to the subscription mailers still neatly stapled inside. The newspaper clippings, though still readable, have the texture and color of dried leaves.

In addition to Ogawa's work as a freelance photographer, the archived boxes and folders also hold more clues to Ogawa's personal life: Christmas cards, family photographs, military records, and when Ogawa was hospitalized after a hernia operation, he saved the cards and letters that arrived, along with a cartoon from an illustrator friend, showing Ogawa in a hospital bed and asking a nurse for a cold beer.

Every box I opened, every file folder I spread open told Ogawa's story with a clarity that could only come from the personal documents he collected and left behind. Ogawa was a gifted photographer, adored by the editors he worked for. But, as the documents he left behind show, his life was also marked by its share of shortcomings. His photojournalism wasn't a part of Seattle's historical narrative. Some four decades following his death, I wanted to learn more about this overlooked Seattle photographer.

This article is excerpted from Elmer Ogawa: After hours with Seattle's forgotten photographer, a biography written by Tacoma Daily Index editor Todd Matthews. This is the first installment of three parts that will continue on Weds., Dec. 9, and Fri., Dec. 11. More information is available online at wahmee.com.



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Elmer Ogawa After hours with Seattle's forgotten photographer

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is excerpted from Elmer Ogawa: After hours with Seattle's forgotten photographer, a biography written by Tacoma Daily Index editor Todd Matthews. This is the second installment of three parts that began on Mon., Dec. 7, and concludes on Fri., Dec. 11. More information is available online at wahmee.com.

By Todd Matthews, Editor

In the fall of 1954, a twenty-two-year-old Japanese American woman named Pat Suzuki arrived in Seattle as an understudy for a touring production of Broadway's "The Teahouse of the August Moon" that was being staged at the Moore Theatre. Suzuki was a diminutive figure—two inches shy of five feet tall, just under one hundred pounds, childlike bangs, and a long, black pony tail that draped down her back. It was her voice, however, that was outsized and turned heads.

One afternoon, Suzuki and a friend poked their heads into The Colony, a new nightclub at the corner of Fourth Avenue and Virginia Street, on the bottom floor of the nine-story Claremont Apartment Hotel. The club wasn't open, and the owner, Norm Bobrow, mistook Suzuki and her pal for trespassers and nearly kicked them out of the club.

"What do you kids want in here?" Bobrow asked, annoyed.

"Just casing the joint," Suzuki replied sassily as her companion scampered out of the club. "And I'm no kid." Suzuki explained that she was with the touring production of "Teahouse" and looking for a side gig singing in a nightclub. Would Bobrow allow her to audition?

Bobrow reluctantly agreed. Five minutes later, he was floored. Suzuki had the gig.

What followed was the rise of the most popular Seattle nightclub singer during the late 1950s. Suzuki moved into a suite in the hotel and turned The Colony into a nightlife destination. Local columnists wrote rave reviews and adoring profiles of Suzuki. A *Seattle Times* columnist described her as "100 pounds of Nisei dynamite with a voice that could loosen the tiles on Broadway's towers." Famous musicians, actors, and bandleaders passing through Seattle made a point of stopping at The Colony to see her. Lawrence Welk heard Suzuki perform and phoned her personally to book her on his show. She flew to Hollywood to appear on a television show hosted by Frank Sinatra. Bing Crosby was at The Colony one evening and was so awed by her talent that he put her in touch with RCA Victor and guided her toward a recording contract. In 1959, Crosby, writing the liner notes for Suzuki's album *The Many Sides of Pat Suzuki*, recalled his visit

to The Colony to see Suzuki perform:

Halfway between the chatter and chateaubriand, the lights dimmed in their traditional theatrical fashion, the pianist played an arpeggio and a voice came zooming out of a half-pint gamin like the great locomotive chase. It roared up the trestle splashing its decibels against the walls, and I surrendered. I was surrounded. The voice had its own stereophonic sound.

Elmer Ogawa—a photojournalist who documented Seattle's nightlife scene between the late-1940s and the early-1960s, and passed away in 1970—also began turning up at The Colony with his camera to see Suzuki perform at the crowded club. His photographs show the two-story supper club as the nightlife hub that it was. Women dressed in sleek and shiny sleeveless gowns, their dates as impressively attired in tuxedos or fine suits and ties. Rows of tables topped with white cloths, sparkling drink glasses, tall wine bottles, and ashtrays. Many tables lined the wraparound balcony overhead where supper club diners leaned over the railing to watch the dancers on the floor below as Suzuki effortlessly beguiled her audience with the latest jazz standard.

"It's been awhile, but I can see [Elmer's] face so clearly," said Suzuki, who was eighty-two years old, retired, and living in Manhattan when I spoke with her by telephone in April of 2013. Suzuki recalled many photographers and press people visiting the club, but Ogawa was different. Although he was in his early fifties at the time, some thirty years older than Suzuki, he seamlessly meshed with a free-spirited band of characters and night owls that included a police detective, a former boxing manager, an advertising executive, and newspaper reporters and columnists. Suzuki fondly remembers joining them on trips to Von's Cafe, a twenty-four-hour diner on Fourth Avenue down-



Elmer Ogawa was at The Colony nightclub on Dec. 6, 1957, to photograph one of Pat Suzuki's sold-out performances. (ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPH / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

town, for drinks, or for late-night, post-show dinners at 3:00 a.m. in Chinatown.

Nobody in that clan of late-night revelers talked about families or careers or anything serious. Suzuki was just out of college and living what she described as a magical, bohemian lifestyle in Seattle. "Oh, God, I miss that town," she told me. "It was the easiest of times, you know. I didn't have any responsibilities."

As for Ogawa, Suzuki recalled, "I loved Elmer's droll humor and easy company.

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Elmer was this floating persona that came in and out of my life. I never took anything quite seriously. You don't

when you're in your twenties, I think. Elmer was just a very comfortable guy to me. He was a good fella. He was easy to be with. He was the nicest of people. He was friendly. He didn't interfere. He didn't project himself that hard."

Ogawa was fond of Suzuki, and followed her career even after she moved from Seattle to New York City. In the decade or so after Suzuki left Seattle, she appeared on Broadway as the brassy nightclub singer Linda Low in the Rodgers and Hammerstein original musical "Flower Drum Song." She was a guest on television shows hosted by Ed Sullivan, Jack Paar, Mike Douglas, and Red Skelton, and recorded four albums, one of which earned her a Grammy Award nomination. She appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine in 1958.

When I spoke with Suzuki by telephone, I mentioned the University of Washington recently uploaded to the Internet four of Ogawa's photographs of her performing at The Colony. Suzuki responded, "What was I wearing? I only had a couple outfits at the time."



I sent her an e-mail with links to the photographs. One photograph showed Suzuki in a long dress and heels rehearsing with the tall, thin, bespectacled Bobrow, and a young man with curly blond hair, a black beret, and striped sweater who she immediately recognized as "Rocky." "I was so chubby," she chuckled.

Another Ogawa photograph showed her dancing alone onstage in front of a cluster of bongo drums, a piano, and an upright bass leaned against a back wall. Suzuki is wearing a long gray, frilly dress cut angularly low across her chest. Her arms are covered in long white satin gloves, and a pearl necklace loops around her neck. A white feathered hat is perched on her head and her mouth is wide-open in a silly pose of faux shock. "Oh, my God!" she cried. "You know, I don't remember these dresses at all. I do not remember that

dress. This is hilarious!"

Another photo has her dressed in a khaki trench coat, white sneakers, and a fedora, with Rocky and Bobrow in zoot suits. Suzuki: "Oh, what a goof! It's us doing Guys and Dolls!"

Finally, she landed on the best photograph of the bunch. "I've seen this one," Suzuki told me coolly. It's showtime at The Colony, and Suzuki—wearing a long dress with short sleeves, crisp and stylish around her tiny frame—is alone at center stage. Her hair is pulled back in what television audiences nationwide would later recognize as her trademark long black pony tail, and her arms are outstretched, mid-song, her eyes pointed toward an unseen audience. Off to her right, well-dressed men gather around tables draped in white cloth. One striking man in particular sits with his legs crossed, eyes fixed on Suzuki, and smiling



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Tim's Tavern in Seattle circa 1952; bartender and customer at Seattle's Bohemian Club Tavern circa 1956. (ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPHS / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

wide as she expertly nails what appears to be a long and high note. He enjoys the show more than anyone else.

"Thank you for this," she told me, as she finished looking at the photographs. She paused for a moment as I imagined her reflecting on her brief career in Seattle at The Colony. "No kidding. Well, there it is.

"It isn't easy to remember about my long ago Elmer, other than seeing his face now clearly," she added. "He had a great face. I remember his personality. I loved his droll humor and easy company. It was lovely! Seattle was the sweetest of times, I promise you, and it's the last time I remember a loyal and close community of such characters!"

Ogawa's photographs at The Colony were evidence of Seattle's well-dressed, connected, and cultured nightlife scene. But there was another side to Seattle's nightlife that most people at The Colony probably never dared to experience. Most people, that is, except for Ogawa.

During most of the 1950s, Ogawa could be found at one of three places—working as a pipe fitter or boil-

ermaker at one of the plants in South Seattle, on assignment for one of the Asian American newspapers or magazines, or, finally, in one of Seattle's neighborhood dive bars.

Ogawa captured the gritty and blue-collar character of Seattle's taverns. The still, black-and-white photographs are deceptively rich. You swear your nose is tickled by a pungent, hoppy aroma. Frozen trails of cigarette-smoke-curls make you instinctively wipe your watery eyes. You can almost hear blues or jazz music blaring from a corner jukebox. Is that the warm clink of glasses as bleary-eyed and tipsy sots find yet one more reason to raise another pint of amber ale? His tavern photographs range from the festive (friends warmly celebrating birthdays, New Years' Eves, and countless happy hours beneath a cigarette haze and harsh lighting) to the odd (Seattle cops elbow to elbow with barflies, all perched at long wooden bars, or African Americans seated warmly next to white patrons at a time when that wasn't allowed in most parts of Seattle or the rest of the nation) to the occasional brawl (an old man, fedora precariously perched on his head, grabbing the throat of another man as they square off beneath a glowing sign for Olympia Beer) to the inevitable conclusion of someone passed out on a sidewalk at three in the morning.

At first, it's difficult to reconcile Ogawa's work as a credentialed photographer for that era's leading ethnic media with his almost double life photographing Seattle's rowdy bar scenes. Yet, one could argue the tavern photographs say more about the real Seattle during the 1950s than those scripted, well-orchestrated, ceremonial photos of politicians, beauty queens, and parade grand marshals that filled the pages of the *Northwest Times* and *SCENE*.

Even with his six-pound Crown Graphic 4x5 camera, popular among newspaper photographers, and conspicuous with its wooden frame, stainless steel case, leather strap, hood, and a shiny lens plate attached to a crinkled, accordion-like neck that jutted outward, Ogawa wasn't intruding on some secret society of misfits and alcoholics. Ogawa *was* one of those misfits and alcoholics. If you accepted Ogawa, you accepted his camera too. It was a rule that many tavern owners welcomed. In the backgrounds of most of his photographs, Ogawa's black-and-white glossy prints of drunken revelers can be seen crudely taped to the tavern walls.

Ogawa proved to be just as interesting as his photographs. In one photograph, Ogawa, chomping on a cigar, is joined at the bar by two white police officers in crisp black uniforms, a slightly tipsy African American couple, and a brunette barmaid (a cord runs from the camera to Ogawa's right hand, where he has remotely clicked on the shutter). In another photograph, taken at Tim's Tavern in 1952, Ogawa appears to have had a rough day (or he's mugging for the camera; it's hard to tell, as Ogawa was a ham). He sports a pinstriped suit and dour frown as he holds a schooner of pale ale and stares off in the distance, an entire pitcher of beer resting on the bar in front of him. One more photograph shows what appears to be Ogawa, completely blotto, on New Year's Eve—he's at the bar, wearing a cheap foil crown, and sharing a raucous laugh with an old Caucasian woman who is about to blow into a paper party favor. In front of him is an oversized goblet of beer (it's comically larger than any pitcher). A similar goblet appears in another tavern photo, this time with Ogawa staring longingly into it. A plaque on the side of the glass reads "BET YOU CAN'T" (drink the whole thing, it's assumed).

Flipping through Ogawa's tavern photographs is like a virtual pub crawl. At the Maynard Cafe, Ogawa photographed the action, as a group of people peered over a man's shoulder, his tattooed

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arm following through after releasing a shuffleboard puck. In another photograph, a bartender in suspenders takes

a break, his apron still tied and folded down at the waist, to play shuffleboard as a woman in a light floral print dress, her purse dangling off one arm, follows the puck.

Ogawa was also familiar with the bartenders who poured beers and mixed cocktails at the Banquet Tavern, a bar near the corner of Twelfth Avenue South and South Jackson Street, where the eastern border of Chinatown merged with a neighborhood that consisted mostly of African Americans. The Banquet Tavern looked like most bars at the time—a Bally's Lexington pinball machine in one corner; signs for Rainier, Olympia, Budweiser, and Heidelberg beers; and packs of cigarettes stacked and for sale behind the bar, right next to a bulky cash register. But it also included scores of Ogawa's photographs taped to the walls throughout the tavern, proof that he was a regular, welcomed customer.

Ogawa clicked the shutter on his camera as a black man with thick, shaggy sideburns and mustache posed on the sidewalk. "BANQUET TAVERN" is painted on the windowpane behind him, and he's holding a porcelain statue that includes a stein of beer resting on a wide base that reads "HAVE A HEIDELBERG." In one print, the bartender—a fit, older man with a flat nose, greased black hair combed straight back, and a loose button-down long-sleeved shirt with a wide collar and an apron—strikes a boxing pose, crouching slightly with his fists clenched. He is standing in front of a framed photo of himself in his earlier years as a shirtless, toned young man and sporting tight shorts, boxing gloves, and tightly laced boots. In another photograph, the same man is at the end of a long wooden bar, head whipped back, hat barely on his head, chugging a glistening schooner of beer. One picture shows an Asian American bartender serving ten people lined up side by side at the tavern's L-shaped bar—three African American men, one African American woman, three Caucasian women, and three Caucasian men. Everyone smiles beneath a neon Budweiser sign as they freeze to pose for Ogawa's camera. It's a similar milieu in other photographs, where blacks, whites, and Asians crowd into small booths to drain fat bottles of Rainier Beer and tap out cigarettes into overflowing ashtrays.

A few blocks west of Chinatown and farther along Jackson Street, in Seattle's historic Pioneer Square neighborhood, Ogawa could be spotted at Our House Tavern, where he photographed what appears to be members of the Salvation Army—including a man in all black clothing, hat in hand—explaining their services to a group of midday tavern regulars standing outside on the sidewalk. At the Occidental Tavern Cafe, he photographed two dozen rattily attired men—perhaps homeless or unemployed—sitting under a blazing sun on the curb, the bar's prominent neon sign hanging above the tavern's front door. At the Klondyke Cafe, he snapped a late-night photograph of a heavysset woman in a flower-print dress, a wool coat perhaps a size too small, and white midrise heels singing and playing the banjo to a group of men dressed in suits and fedoras, gathered on the sidewalk outside and looking impossibly bored by her performance.

Ogawa's best tavern photos in this neighborhood were taken at the Bohemian Club Tavern, located in the heart of Pioneer Square, near the corner of First Avenue and Yesler Way. His photographs show a comfortable, casual neighborhood bar festooned with signs advertising "roasted and toasted" sandwiches, pizza, hot dogs, beefburgers, barbecue, and Rainier and Olympia beers. One photograph shows a large, jolly woman with curly blond hair, her face painted heavily

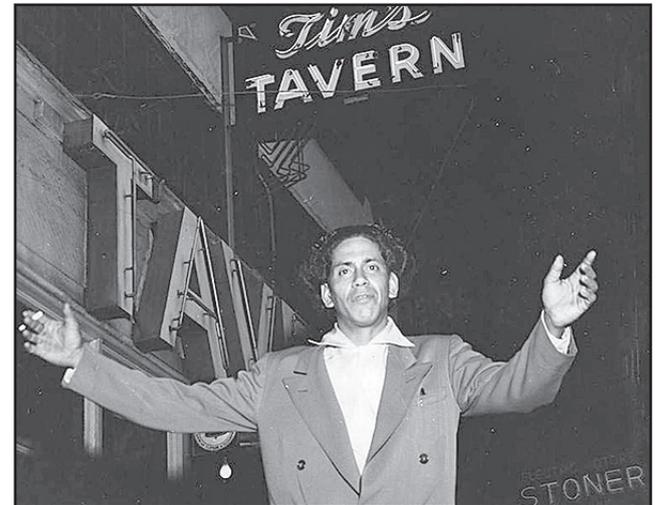
with makeup and lipstick smeared thickly around her mouth, as she uses a meaty fist to pull the handle on a tap and pour a pint of beer. Another picture shows a young man with black locks twisting out from beneath the brim of a cowboy hat precariously perched atop his head. He's seated at the bar and firing a toy gun off in the distance. In another photo, Ogawa gathered five men for a group portrait in front of the club's curly-scripted neon sign. One old man is hunched over and clutching his cane. Another is tall and heavysset, his belly just slightly poking out from the bottom of his short-sleeved button-down shirt. Another man pinches a cigarette between his lips as he smiles for the camera.

Ogawa could also be found in the bars east of downtown, in a neighborhood known as Capitol Hill. His

has opportunity to observe various little things which no doubt happen at any tavern or in any community.

Take for example the good burghers of the tight little community who pass by and peer in the window. Slowly, slowly they traverse the full length of the front window, and when the further edge is reached, some are in danger of losing their balance from leaning backward. Sometimes, we're in a mood to shout, "Come in, come in, you're welcome to look around!"

Ogawa goes on to describe some of the bar regulars whom he considers friends—an amateur chef named Jim, who liked to cook fried angle worms sautéed in butter, olive oil, garlic, onions, lemon, and paprika; a wino and World War I veteran named "Shoofish," who scraped together a living by running errands for the neighborhood dry cleaners, drugstore, and pool hall;



CLOCKWISE FROM TOP: Outside Tim's Tavern in October 1956; a typical scene in 1955 at the Banquet Tavern near Seattle's Chinatown; a bartender (and former boxer) at Seattle's Banquet Tavern circa 1952; Ogawa often appeared in his own photographs, and often at one of his favorite neighborhood taverns. (ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPHS / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

photographs seem to show that Ogawa's favorite place to drink in this part of town was Tim's Tavern, near the crest of the long and steeply sloped Pike Street. In one snapshot, an African American man in a crisp white shirt and oversized double-breasted suit jacket poses beneath a neon sign announcing TIM'S TAVERN, his arms outstretched like an enthusiastic preacher, a cigarette smoldering in his right hand. Finally, another impression, taken in 1952, shows a beautiful blonde dressed stylishly in a long skirt and sleeveless white blouse perched on a bar stool. She clutches a fish-bowl-sized stein of beer and brings it to her lips as her dark eyes fetchingly peer over the rim.

Elmer loved beer so much, he once wrote an article (arguably a paean) defending Seattle's taverns and their regular customers. "There Is A Tavern In Town" was published in the *Northwest Times* under the byline Elmer "Burp" Ogawa:

Anyone who has ever parked himself in a tavern, and is thus in position to be on the inside looking out,

and Katie, a "slender sprightly little gal who is frequently cute as a bug in a rug, and never looks or acts as old as we suspect," who stops by the neighborhood bar on her way home from working at a laundry for a stiff drink (Ogawa added cheekily, "Almost forgot to mention the reason for mentioning Katie in this piece. She wears falsies made of crumpled up newspapers. Could we be facetious and call Katie a newspaper woman?").

Ogawa's article ends with a toast of sorts to his friends: *Perhaps this is enough to make the 'peering in window' types who are maybe thinking only of depravity realize that so many of our friends are interesting imaginative people and we love them all.*

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Elmer Ogawa After hours with Seattle's forgotten photographer

EDITOR'S NOTE: This article is excerpted from Elmer Ogawa: After hours with Seattle's forgotten photographer, a biography written by Tacoma Daily Index editor Todd Matthews. This is the final installment of three parts that began on Mon., Dec. 7, continued on Weds., Dec. 9, and concludes today. More information is available online at wahmee.com.

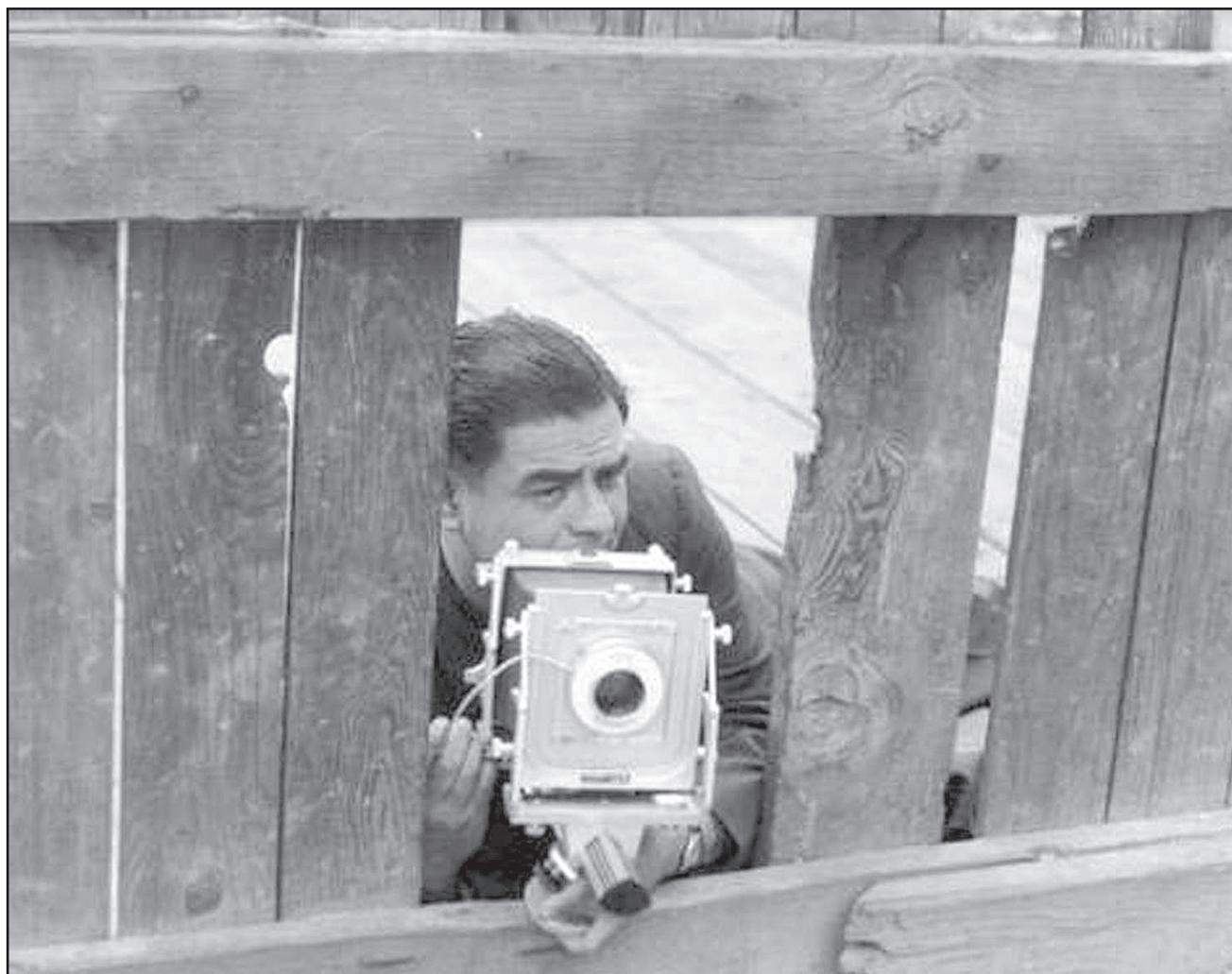
By Todd Matthews, Editor

Elmer Ogawa's Seattle doesn't exist anymore.

The taverns and dive bars Ogawa frequented and photographed are long gone. It's the same story for the mom-and-pop laundries, jewelers, ice cream stands, and appliance shops that Ogawa—a freelance photojournalist who was most active between the late-1940s and the early-1960s, but passed away in 1970 at age 65—photographed as a way for newspapers and magazines, such as the *Northwest Times*, *SCENE: The Pictorial Magazine*, and *Pacific Citizen* to tell the stories of Seattle's hardworking Asian American community. Much the same way that it is difficult to find Ogawa's friends and cohorts still alive today, many of his former haunts have also disappeared.

Tim's Tavern on Pike Street is now a gourmet cupcake shop located on the ground floor of a very modern and sophisticated condominium building. The Klondyke Cafe in Pioneer Square is now a parking lot. The building that was once home to Barney's Cafe near the corner of Seventh Avenue and Pine Street in downtown Seattle was razed long ago, replaced by a massive city-block-sized building that includes a Hyatt Hotel, Starbucks, Cheesecake Factory, and parking garage. Perhaps Ogawa would recognize the former home of the Bamboo Inn Cafe in Chinatown. Although it looks completely different today, the address is now home to Bush Garden, a sukiyaki restaurant with a bar popular among Seattle's karaoke crowd.

Ogawa was buried at Resthaven Memorial Cemetery. The cemetery's history dates back to 1884. Perhaps most notably, it's where Seattle's first and only female mayor, Bertha Knight Landes, was buried in 1943. More than forty years after his death, I visited Ogawa's grave on a warm spring afternoon. I drove through the cemetery and toward the property's eastern boundary past a squat and weathered marble mausoleum that was built for the late and prominent attorney and judge Thomas Burke, who opposed an anti-Chinese movement in Seattle during the late 1880s and later started a railroad company. Around



the sloped hillside of Veterans Memorial Cemetery, the grave sites are dotted with pristine white marble headstones and a couple imposing cannons from "Old Ironsides" sit nearby. I drove along a narrow access road that winds between towering and lushly green poplar trees and parked at the foot of a row of graves and headstones where Ogawa is buried. After a short walk over soft grass, some ten rows in from the road, I stopped at Ogawa's grave. Atop a thin, flat slab of granite, the following was inscribed on a sturdy bronze plate:

†
**ELMER OGAWA
WASHINGTON
SGT CO D 58 INFANTRY
WORLD WAR II
NOV 9 1905 - JULY 1 1970**

But Ogawa's legacy isn't buried beneath that tombstone. His legacy is captured in the more than ten thousand photographs his brother donated to the University of Washington more than forty years ago. Whether that legacy ever becomes part of the narrative history of Seattle remains to be seen. Most people have never heard of Elmer Ogawa. His contemporaries have passed away, and his photographs have

**Elmer Ogawa in Seattle circa 1950s.
(ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPH / COURTESY
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL
COLLECTIONS)**

been stored in a basement at the University of Washington—overlooked, untouched, and ignored.

One person who knows Ogawa's photographs well is Nicolette Bromberg, the visual materials curator at the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections. Bromberg has worked as a photographic historian and archivist for nearly thirty years. Before she was hired at the University of Washington in 2000, she was the visual materials curator at the Wisconsin Historical Society, as well as the photo archivist for the Kansas Collection at the University of Kansas. She has co-authored two books on Pacific Northwest history, including one about a group of Japanese immigrant photographers who founded a camera club during the 1920s and went on to earn national attention for documenting the natural beauty of the Pacific Northwest.

One afternoon, I meet Bromberg in the main research room at the University of Washington Libraries Special Collections. Bromberg appears every bit the archetypal historian and

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curator—a small woman in her sixties with curly grayish-brown hair and reading glasses—and has an almost giddy enthusiasm for helping visitors navigate the library's vast collection.

Bromberg has been fond of Ogawa ever since a colleague pointed her toward his work shortly after she first arrived at the University of Washington. She pulls up the photographs that have been digitized so far, and starts clicking through a collection of Ogawa's tavern photographs that have been uploaded to the UW Libraries Special Collection Web site.

"When he's in the bars, he's in there," Bromberg says in low tones, so as not to disturb other library visitors. "You know, there's two kinds of photography. There's outside and inside. You're either outside photographing the act of something. Or you're photographing something from within. Elmer was always photographing from within." Bromberg smiles as she thinks about Elmer tucking into a local tavern, setting his bulky camera on the bar, and ordering a cold pint of Rainier Beer. The bartender would pull pint after pint, and Elmer and his drinking buddies would kick back, tap cigarettes into ashtrays, and tell jokes and stories. At some point, Elmer would say, "Hey! Let me get a picture!" and everyone hollered, "Yeah!"

"Look at his photos," Bromberg excitedly exhales, as she continues to click through the images. "They are participating. They aren't scowling at him. Just looking at him, he must have been an effusive character. He must have just drawn people to him. Black, white, or Japanese—they're all having a good time. And he's having a good time. They're relaxed. They're not upset he's taking photographs. Maybe he was charismatic. He probably got people going when they were drinking and having a good time. He could have been an actor!"

Bromberg pauses a moment before she clicks

RIGHT AND BELOW: Ogawa in Seattle circa 1950s.

(ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPH / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

through more pictures. She lands on a series of self-portraits.

"I've always just loved his goofiness and quirki-ness," she says, giggling softly as she clicks on a photograph of Ogawa, who leans against a wall and prepares to light a cigarette with a NO SMOKING: CITY ORDINANCE sign hanging on the wall above him. It's Ogawa channeling James Dean.

It's not the only example of Ogawa turning the camera on himself. He appears in scores of his own photographs alongside fellow revelers—smoking cigars, chugging frosty pints of beer, and trying his luck at a game of dice—and just as gleefully intoxicated.

An interesting "Ogawa at Work" series of four photographs taken during the 1950s shows him working as a photographer. In one picture, Ogawa stands in an empty field in front of his bulky camera, which is mounted atop the sprawled legs of a tripod. A boxy suitcase that carries his equipment lies open on the field nearby. Ogawa, whose dark,

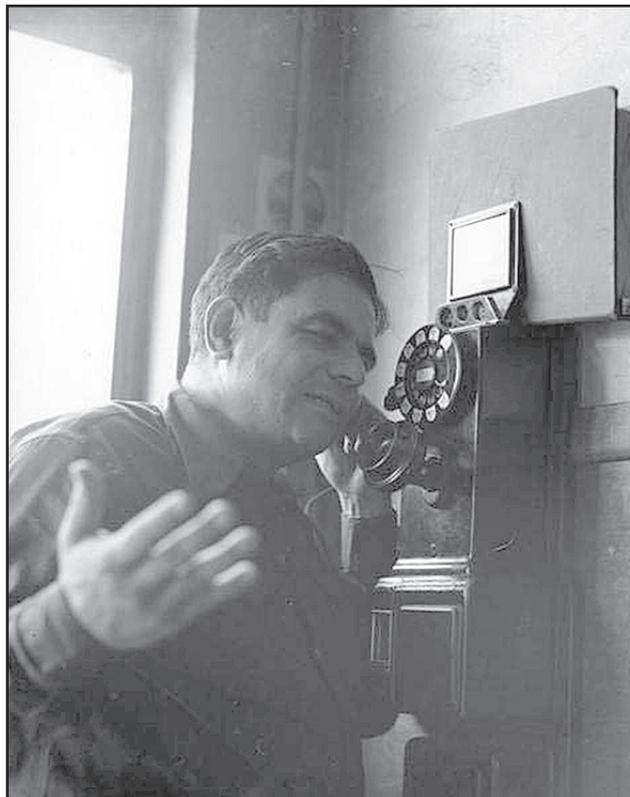
rumped suit covers his tubby frame, prepares to load film into the camera. In the next image, Ogawa is bent at the knees, a cigarette pressed between his lips, and peering from behind the camera to set up his next shot. In a third photograph, Ogawa lies on the ground—still dressed in his suit, his black hair still slicked back like the grooves on a record—and positions the camera between the broken slats of a wooden fence. Finally, the last shot shows him standing in front of a wall of frosted glass windowpanes in what appears to be a ground-floor studio or warehouse. Soft light pours through the windows as Ogawa—now comfortably dressed in a dark short-sleeved polo-style shirt and khaki slacks, a rolled-up newspaper poking out of his back pocket—holds up one of his glossy photographs for closer inspection. Clipped to a post behind him are nine prints of his most recent photographs.

Bromberg continues to sift through Ogawa's work, landing on more self-portraits. There is a studio-quality photo of Ogawa: clean-shaven, hair combed, and wearing a gray suit, gracefully leaning in toward the camera. Two 1956 prints show Ogawa dressed as some sort of private detective straight out of a pulp crime novel (fedora, heavy trench coat, neatly trimmed mustache) and holding a camera near his face as he waits for the next surreptitious shot. Another photograph presents Ogawa curled up on a sofa, dressed in dark pinstriped slacks and a long-sleeved dress shirt, presumably napping, yet holding a drink in his left hand. And, finally, a candid shot displays Ogawa in what appears to be an intense conversation at a pay phone at one of the local bars, waving his right hand, cupping the earpiece with his left hand, and speaking into the phone's snoutlike microphone.

Typically, Ogawa made little effort to hide the fact that he was taking a picture of himself. There's almost always a conspicuous cord snaking its way from the camera to one of Ogawa's hands so that he can click the shutter. But that element is missing from most of these self-portraits. It's not clear who the photographer was.

Most of Ogawa's self-portraits as a photographer are refined and carefully crafted—attired in a clean suit, hair neatly combed,

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carefully setting up his next shot, and thoughtfully considering each photograph he developed. A 1952 self-portrait working his "day job" as a boilermaker in Seattle's industrial yards was just as carefully composed. In one image, Ogawa appears sweaty and tired and grease stained, a clean white cigarette dangling between his lips. He wears grimy coveralls, a white T-shirt visible from behind the dirty fabric, and a small cap with an upturned visor. Beside him is a massive eight-ton, cast-iron metal shearing machine with a "CINCINNATI" logo stamped on its side. The machine is imposing and looks like it could do some real damage at the hands of an amateur. Indeed, a large, dented sign posted to the side of the machine reads, "See your foreman before shearing stainless or other alloys."

Bromberg has studied photographs for decades, and written books and articles about some of the most prominent photographers in the United States. But I had a sense that there was something about Ogawa's lack of artistic pedigree and abundance of DIY spirit that she appreciated in his work. It was almost like comparing a classical orchestra performing in the finest concert hall to a jazz trio ripping it up in the corner of a run-down coffee shop.

In spring of 2008, the University of Washington Libraries devoted a page of its quarterly newsletter to announce a call for donations. "Your help is needed to preserve a collection of unique photographs documenting Seattle life and communities," read the announcement, which included two classic, warm Ogawa photographs: five Caucasian and Asian American teenagers wearing blazers, collared shirts, and khaki pants, hoisting a youth league football trophy during a banquet dinner in 1954; and a Japanese American man, Joe Nam Kun, posing with his wife and two daughters in their Seattle living room in December 1952. "Many of [Elmer] Ogawa's negatives have vinegar syndrome, meaning that the negatives have buckled and the emulsions have begun to bubble and curl so they can no longer be printed. Please help to preserve Elmer Ogawa's photographs. With your support, we can save this important collection documenting the individuals and communities who have helped to shape Seattle's history."

During my visit with Bromberg, I asked if any progress had been made to save his photographs. The only way she knows how to answer that question is to take me on a tour. Bromberg leads me away from the main research room and down a short and dimly lit hallway, where she swipes a key card and pushes open a heavy door to reveal a behind-the-scenes look at Special Collections—a room that appears to stretch out endlessly with islands of low desks piled high with archived boxes, binders, and computer terminals. We zigzag between desks for a bit before arriving at a far corner of the room in front of a cheap, aluminum-framed bookcase whose five shelves sag with the weight of Ogawa's loosely boxed and uncategorized negatives. Some negatives are filed in small shoe-box-sized cases, the way a young boy might file his baseball cards. Other negatives consist of thirty-five-millimeter film loosely coiled on bulk-loaded rolls, like old movie reels, now barely protected by their dented and damaged tin cases.

In total, there are just over eleven thousand Ogawa negatives here; just over one thousand have been lost to acetate deterioration. "There's probably



Customers crowd into a booth at the Banquet Tavern near Seattle's Chinatown in 1955. Ogawa's photographs are posted on the wall above the booths.
(ELMER OGAWA PHOTOGRAPH / COURTESY UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON SPECIAL COLLECTIONS)

more by now because they are going fast," Bromberg tells me as she begins to open boxes and hold negatives up to a bank of overhead lights to check their images. "Here's one of him in a bar, of course, holding a puppy," she says, peering into the translucent film. The damaged negatives are bubbled and curled, and Bromberg encourages me to smell some of them for that sour, potent signature whiff of vinegar that gives this type of deterioration its namesake "vinegar syndrome." The damage vinegar syndrome afflicts on film—cracking brittleness, buckling, shrinking, and bubbling—can't be undone, and leaves negatives looking like blistered scales.

Beyond the physical damage, there is a fair amount of organizational chaos. You might find a cache of Ogawa's negatives clearly labeled and in chronological order until, suddenly, they're not. "We have a lot of work to do," Bromberg explains. "We would need to go through the negatives and identify them." That's one reason Ogawa's work has been overlooked and ignored by Seattle historians—it's

never really been accessible. "I've been working here twelve years and the problem with Elmer's photo collection was that you couldn't get to it because it had never been worked on," Bromberg adds. "It was just the negatives in boxes. Really, you couldn't use it."

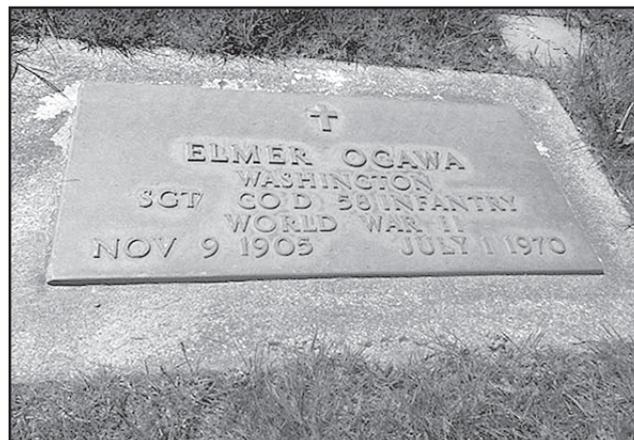
Like most archive projects, this one boils down to time and money. The call for donations in 2008 brought in a single check for one hundred dollars. The library was awarded a grant for \$500, which helped to organize and label negatives and prints. Bromberg landed another grant for \$20,000 to work on the photo collections of Ogawa and two other photographers. The money was used to put scores of Ogawa's negatives in protective sleeves as well as to print some of the film.

Lately, University of Washington students have worked to digitize the images whenever time allows. Seated at workstations equipped with computers and scanners, students open boxes and leaf through photographs, looking for the more interesting photographs that might appeal to a broad audience. After each photograph is scanned, students type in whatever information they can find—date of the photograph, where the photograph was taken, or what kind of event the photograph depicts (usually found on the negative sleeve)—and upload the information to the Web.

"We will not put up all the photos because there are about twelve thousand and some are similar views of the same thing or completely unidentifiable," Bromberg explains. "Someday, we will get a finding aid done for the collection. The finding aid will describe all of the images in the collection, and have hyperlinks to all the photographs that are digitized. That is, if we get a grant or some funding to help get it done."

At the end of our meeting, Bromberg pauses to reflect on Ogawa. "His photos are interesting," she says. "They have this kind of cool feel to them. I just love them."

Perhaps one day more people in Seattle will love them too.



Ogawa is buried at Resthaven Memorial Cemetery, ten miles north of downtown Seattle.
(PHOTO BY TODD MATTHEWS)