



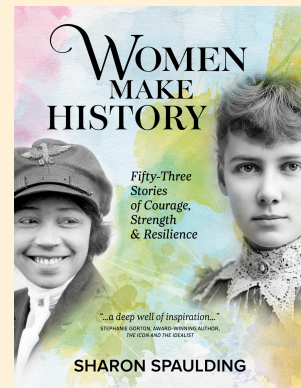
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Women Make History: Stories We Should Have Learned in School

Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength & Resilience is Available!

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Kuniko Terasawa: A Quiet, Persistent Strength



Picking type, Utah Nippo/Terasawa Family collection, Marriott Library

In 1941, when the US entered World War II, many Japanese Americans, especially those living along the West Coast, were forced from their homes and businesses and [imprisoned](#) in camps in rural areas. Kuniko Terasawa, a Japanese widow, mother of two, and owner of the Japanese-language newspaper, [The Utah Nippo](#), defied the odds. She convinced government authorities to allow her to continue publishing. *The Nippo* became

one of only three Japanese-language papers in the country and the only one to remain in private hands. *Described** by her grandson, Mikio Moriyasu, as "quietly stubborn and strongly opinionated," Terasawa endured censorship and uncertainty, but she kept the presses running and her community connected and informed.

An Auspicious Name [Born](#) Kuniko Muramatsu in 1896 in Iida City, Nagano Prefecture, Japan, she was the second of four children in a prosperous farming family. [According](#) to an essay by her daughter, Haruko Moriyasu, Kuniko came to embody the meaning of her name. In late 19th century Japan, children's names were selected by writing options on strips of paper, which were then placed on a high shelf alongside statuettes of the family's gods. The baby would be lifted up to grab one of the papers. The first one the child touched became its name. Terasawa touched "Kuni," meaning "country" or "nation." Later, she added "ko," meaning "child of." The name envisaged her future.

An Improbable Education Despite growing up in a strict, patriarchal society, Terasawa was among the first young women in her village to attend secondary school. She later persuaded her father to spend the money set aside for her wedding dowry on college tuition instead. Her degree from what is now known as the Tokyo Kyoritsu Women's University [paved](#) "the way for her younger sister and other women in the village." She later told her daughters, "Money and material things can be stolen or taken away, but an education will go with you to your grave."

After graduation, she returned to her village, where her skills in clothing design and embroidery, an art form in Japan, were highly regarded. For several years, she was chosen to embroider silk handkerchiefs for the Empress, and in 1918, her work was selected for exhibition at the World's Fair in New York.

By age twenty-five, Terasawa was regarded as an "old maid," a status that hindered her younger siblings' prospects, as tradition mandated that she marry first. In an arranged marriage, she wed a Japanese man, [Uneo Terasawa](#), who lived in Salt Lake City. He had established himself as the founder and publisher of *The Utah Nippo*, a daily Japanese newspaper circulated throughout the inter-mountain region. Although she had longed to study art in Paris, Terasawa didn't speak French and was apparently intrigued by the adventure of crossing an ocean to live in a foreign land. They married in Japan at the end of 1921 and arrived in Utah the next month.

New Beginnings Although Utah was one of the least ethnically diverse states in the country, Salt Lake City's [population](#) of 118,000 included 3,000 Japanese immigrants, most of whom had come for the state's railroad, mining, and farming opportunities. Considered the promised land of [The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints](#), Utah was overwhelmingly Mormon, yet the city had a [Buddhist Temple](#) where Terasawa and her husband practiced their faith.

Life beyond what was known as [Japantown](#) could not have been easy. In general, [Asians](#) were viewed as "exotic," their traditions and religions as "other" than American. Yet, Terasawa never spoke about the [racism](#) she must have encountered. Chinese immigration had been [banned](#) in 1882, and two years after arriving in her adopted country, the [Asian Exclusion Act](#) was passed, prohibiting Japanese immigration.



Terasawa family: L-R, Kazuko, Uneo, Haruko, and Kuniko, c. 1930, Utah Nippo/Terasawa Family collection, Marriott Library

Still, the couple stayed, had two daughters, and Terasawa settled into the traditional role of "good wife, wise mother." That changed in 1939 when her husband [died](#) suddenly. At age forty-three, Terasawa had to choose: return to Japan, where she and her children would be dependents of her brother, or assume full responsibility for *The Nippo*. Believing in the importance of community and bridging the gap between her native country and her adopted one, she chose the more difficult path.

The Driverless Car Until this point, her involvement with the paper had been limited. Now, she had to assume responsibility for every aspect, including selecting and setting type, a painstakingly slow process as there are some 5,000 characters in written Japanese. Each letter was set within a frame to form words, then sentences, and so on. She also learned to run the printing press, wrote and edited articles, and added a small English-language section.

She also became company president, a rare position for any woman at the time, and she managed a staff of Japanese men. Terasawa [learned](#) to drive a car to be able to visit clients, sell advertising, and generate revenue. She was so tiny, however, that once behind the wheel, her head was barely visible above the dashboard. Her arrival at meetings was often announced as "the car without a driver" is here.

World War II When Japan [bombed](#) Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, the U.S. declared war. Fearing that spies were living in Japanese communities, more than [120,000](#) Japanese Americans, two-thirds of whom were U.S. citizens, were forced into camps, including one in [Topaz, Utah](#), that housed up to 8,300 people. Within four days of the bombing, the FBI closed all Japanese publications, including *The Nippo*.



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Buddhist Temple, Salt Lake City, 1938, Utah State Historical Society

How Terasawa convinced authorities to reopen the paper is a mystery, even to her family. Later, under the [Freedom of Information Act](#), they [sought](#)* answers by requesting federal documents related to *The Nippo*. Unfortunately, the documents didn't contain new information, and much remained redacted.

According to Terasawa's daughter in *Worth Their Salt*, the FBI questioned Terasawa at her home. However, Terasawa's impression was that the FBI considered her a "relatively insignificant person...and not important enough to detain." In addition, the head of the [Japanese American Citizens League](#), a Japanese American civil rights organization, suggested that there had been "testimony in her favor." Said her grandson, "It may have been that simple." Less than three months after the paper was closed, it was reopened.

Initially, each issue was reviewed by government censors, and Terasawa was only allowed to reprint what had already been published in American papers. As the war progressed, restrictions loosened, and *The Nippo* included essays by incarcerated Japanese Americans. It's hard to imagine how much the Japanese American community would have craved accurate information. The importance of keeping the Japanese community informed is reflected in its circulation. Pre-war, it was less than 1,000. During the war, it

rose to about 10,000. Following the war, circulation dropped to 4,000 as camps closed and the Japanese population dispersed.

In 1966, Terasawa faced another [hurdle](#) when Japantown, where *The Nippo* was located, was demolished to build a convention center. Again, she chose to keep the paper operating and moved it to a new location. By 1977, the last of the original employees had died, and the paper became entirely family-run. Gradually, she stopped publishing daily and then switched to once a week or so.

Bridge Between Two Worlds Throughout her adult life, Terasawa was a conduit between two worlds: her Japanese community and the country in which they lived. She remained very active with the Buddhist Temple, helped to build the Peace Garden in Salt Lake City, and when Japanese dignitaries traveled to the U.S., she often served as a de facto ambassador, facilitating their stays and cultural exchanges. On one such visit, she greeted Crown Prince Akihito, now Japan's Emperor Emeritus.



Receiving an award. Utah State Historical Society.

In the 1980s, Terasawa was [recognized in](#) both Japan and the U.S. for her many efforts. Always a believer in education, she used a monetary award from the Avon Josei Bunka Center in Japan to fund a [scholarship](#) at the University of Utah. She also helped to establish a [sister-city](#) relationship with Matsumoto, Japan. A biography about her was published in Japanese, and stories about her appeared in local and national print and broadcast media. She was even featured in a Japanese docu-drama.

Although Terasawa never returned to Japan to live, she [joked*](#) that she would become an American citizen when she was fluent in English. That day never arrived. Terasawa operated the paper until the day before she died in 1991. She was ninety-five. Terasawa was so highly esteemed in her native country that news of her death was [reported in](#) Japan before it was covered in the U.S.

**Note: Hyperlinks are included for several sources, but I relied heavily on a conversation with Terasawa's grandson, Mikio Moriyasu, 2/15/2026, and on her daughter's essay in [Worth Their Salt, Notable but Often Unnoted Women of Utah](#), edited by Colleen Whitley, Utah State University Press, 1996. I learned of this amazing story on a walking tour with the [Utah Historical Society](#).*

Bring it Home: Conversation Starters

Ask yourself: Kuniko Terasawa epitomized power through quiet persistence. When is that a better approach than being outspoken and aggressive?

Ask a friend: When have you followed a similar path to produce the result you wanted?



I'm passionate about all things Mary Ware Dennett, one of the most pivotal and unsung leaders of the early reproductive rights movements, and other remarkable women who overcame tremendous obstacles only to be swept aside by history or have their achievements wrongly attributed. My book, [*Women Make History: Fifty-Three Stories of Courage, Strength &*](#)

[*Resilience*](#), highlights a few of these inspiring stories. I'm also at work on a novel about her Dennett's extraordinary life.

My essays about Dennett have been published in [*Ms. Magazine*](#), [*Smithsonian*](#), [*New Hampshire Magazine*](#), and others. I love hiking and skiing in the Wasatch Mountains near Salt Lake City, where I live with my husband and a funny black lab named Hank.

If you need a speaker, reach out! I love sharing these stories: [SharonSpaulding.com](#).

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