

Adopted PATRIOT

BY JAMES BREIG

Against all odds, a young Japanese girl came to America and became an indispensable part of the legacy of Ulysses S. Grant—and of the Saratoga County people who “adopted” her as their own.

The recent closing of Mount McGregor Correctional Facility in Saratoga County has caused consternation to some residents of the region because of the loss of jobs. But others are pleased, because the closing makes Grant Cottage, located on the prison’s grounds, more accessible and might allow visitors to learn more about this New York State historic site. There, the gravely ill Ulysses S. Grant retreated in his last days and, in the span of a few weeks in the summer of 1885, completed his memoirs. A few days later, he died. Tourists and history buffs alike will now be able to learn more about the eighteenth president—and about the remarkable story of the woman who

cared for the cottage while interned there during World War II.

Seven months before the December 7, 1941 attack on Pearl Harbor, a public event was held on Mount McGregor to honor the memory of President Grant. Taking a key role in this memorial was a forty-year-old Japanese woman named Suye Narita, caretaker of Grant Cottage, who was described in the *New York Times* as the “Japanese girl who cares for the flag” at the historic site. After attending a talk about Grant’s life and listening as “Taps” was sounded, some participants, including two veterans of the Civil War, then presented her with gifts.



FRIENDS OF THE GRANT COTTAGE STATE HISTORIC SITE

Although Suye Narita was unable at the time to become a citizen of the United States, she faithfully raised the flag every day at Grant Cottage.



FRIENDS OF THE GRANT COTTAGE STATE HISTORIC SITE



Immigrant and “Daughter”

As recounted in the booklet *Saving Grant Cottage* by Steve Trimm, a Grant historian and cottage tour guide, Suye Narita had arrived in America in 1907 when she was six through the generosity of a medical missionary named Adaline Kelsey, who worked for decades in Asia. On her occasional returns to America, Kelsey often brought Japanese families with her and sponsored their children’s education. At one point there were five Naritas living with Kelsey in Oneida County, New York, one of them Suye (pronounced “C-A”). In 1914, Suye contracted tuberculosis and was sent to the Balmoral sanitarium, only a brief walk from Grant Cottage and its then-caretakers, Oliver Clarke, a Civil War veteran, and his wife, Martha. The couple soon “adopted” Suye, a connection made through Martha’s sister—Dr. Kelsey.

When her health was restored, Suye asked to continue to live with the Clarkes. From then on, she was either self-taught or educated by the Clarkes; she never

attended school beyond the fifth grade. However she was educated, she grew into a woman with a talent for writing, playing music, and recounting details of the biography of the Civil War Union general who became the eighteenth president of the United States.

The Clarkes were custodians of the cottage from 1890 to 1941. When Oliver died in 1917, Martha became the sole caretaker. Under her guidance, Suye became familiar with both maintaining the historic site and telling Grant’s life story to tourists. As an adult, Suye worked as a librarian at the Balmoral sanitarium (for about a dollar a day) and edited the facility’s bulletin, the *Mt. McGregor Optimist*. A Methodist who played the organ during services and taught Sunday school, Suye was also a frequent guest speaker at many functions and an avid social club member—surely the epitome of a twentieth-century American woman, except for one thing:

Suye Narita was admitted to the Balmoral sanitarium at the age of thirteen.

she was not yet officially an American, because Asians were not permitted to become citizens.

Ironically, among Suye’s earliest tasks at Grant Cottage was raising and lowering the Stars and Stripes each morning and evening, a role she carried out in the company of her dog, Clover. “Not once have Clover and I missed out on our job,” she told a newspaper in 1931. “In the winter time I keep a path open to the flag pole. Sometimes the rope is stiff with ice but we always manage to work the pulley. You see, that is our job.” If she sometimes slumbered too long in the morning, “Clover comes into the room and starts pulling the bedclothes off. I love America and Americans, I love the flag.”

Citizen-in-Waiting

Just as strongly as she had adopted the U.S., the people of Saratoga County adopted her and shared her longing to

Suye was “adopted” by the custodians of Grant Cottage in 1914. She spent the rest of her life on Mount McGregor.





In her lifetime on Mount McGregor, much changed in the world, but Suye's commitment to honoring a president and his country never wavered.



ALL IMAGES: FRIENDS OF THE GRANT COTTAGE STATE HISTORIC SITE

become a citizen. Among her supporters were the Sons of Union Veterans of New York State and a local congressman, E. Harold Cluett. In 1938, the *New York Times* noted that Cluett "appealed to the [House Immigration] committee to 'reward this fine Christian woman for her loyalty to her job and this country.'" Suye herself testified that "what I have done in this country," including her charitable and patriotic works, "I have wanted to do. I love it."

But the appeal was denied. "It seemed silly to me not to give her that honor," Cluett remarked afterward. Rather than being disheartened, however, Suye wrote the chairman of the congressional committee, saying, "It was a wonderful experience to be in Washington. I have come home with a very deep respect

and so much more sympathetic understanding than I have ever had" about how government works.

As Martha Clarke aged, Suye became increasingly involved in Grant Cottage. When Mrs. Clarke died in August 1941, Suye eulogized her, saying, "No hour of the day or night was too inconvenient for her to show [visitors] through the rooms occupied by [Grant] in his last days." Suye also inherited \$3,000—and the position of caretaker of the cottage. But just as she settled into her new role, history threatened her: Japanese forces attacked Pearl Harbor on December 7, plunging the United States into World War II. In Western states, tens of thousands of Japanese nationals, including Suye's relatives, were quickly rounded up and interned in makeshift camps to prevent their "conspiring against America."

In New York State, hundreds of Japanese and German nationals were arrested by FBI agents and sent to Ellis Island, where they were processed for relocation, criminal trial, or deportation. Just three days after Pearl Harbor, a *New York*

Times article, headlined "367 Are Arrested Here," listed 205 people from Japan among them. A followup story from the International News Service revealed that the action against the Asians was carried out "under a presidential order to remove all potentially dangerous non-citizens."

Forestalling History

Steve Trimm states that oral tradition holds that Suye was spared Ellis Island and allowed to keep her role on Mount McGregor due to the support of friends and citizens who had known her for decades. "The people and organizations who vouched for her at the Congressional committee in the 1930s vouched for her again after Pearl Harbor," he says, "and that tipped the scale away from internment to house arrest."

Apparently the scale tipped very rapidly. On the last day of 1941, three weeks after the roundup of Japanese nationals, Suye was off the mountain to attend a holiday party in Saratoga Springs, where she told Christmas stories to a group of children. A sign of her support appeared in a



Grant Cottage.

brief notice about the event in *The Saratogian* newspaper, which observed that she was “wholly [sic] an American in heart and spirit.” Throughout the war, Suye took part in many efforts to support American troops and war-torn Europe. In 1943, for example, she contributed to a Bundles for Britain drive to cheer children in English hospitals.

Allowed to carry on her very American tasks, Suye not only maintained Grant Cottage but also acted as a docent, guiding people through the cottage and telling them about the life of Ulysses S. Grant. At the end of each tour, she would hand a small flag to each visitor. And she continued to attend to her other “job,” the daily hoisting and lowering of the large flag that flew at the site.

A Wish Come True

After the war's end in 1945, the sprawling sanitarium where Suye had convalesced and then worked was bought by New York State and turned into a veterans' rest camp. As many as 500 men at a time recovered there from their wounds and illnesses. In

1949, Suye met one of those veterans, Anthony Gambino, and they fell in love. Despite their age difference—he was thirty, she was fifty—they wed. Like the Clarkes before them, they became the married couple who cared for Grant's final home.

In late 1952, eleven years after Pearl Harbor, passage of the McCarran-Walter Immigration Act finally permitted Asians to become citizens. As quickly as she could, Suye Narita Gambino raised her hand to take the oath of citizenship. *The Saratogian* declared that the action fulfilled “a girlhood wish of the Japanese native to salute as her own the flag of the United States, which she has often unfurled to the breezes in front of the Grant Cottage.”

In May 1984, Governor Mario Cuomo honored Suye's seven decades on Mount McGregor with a plaque that recognized her tireless service to the cottage and the state. She died a few months later, having become three things she could hardly have imagined when she arrived in the U.S. in 1907: an expert on Ulysses S. Grant, a GI's wife, and an American citizen. ■

THE ARCHIVES CONNECTION

Reconstructing the life of Suye Narita required the exploration of many repositories. The New York State Archives and State Library proved essential for probing both state and federal census records to trace Suye's movements as she grew from child to adult and moved from living with the benefactor who brought her to America, to recovering from tuberculosis in the sanitarium, to becoming caretaker of Grant Cottage. The State Library also holds copies of the *Congressional Record*, which recorded her request for citizenship and the debate on it by the House Immigration Committee in 1938.

Many historical newspapers contain images of and articles about—and by—Suye, as she was an occasional contributor. She also made national news when she became an American citizen. The National Archives and Records Administration's Northeast Region branch holds her naturalization record.

Finally, *Saving Grant Cottage*, written and researched by Steve Trimm and published by The Friends of Grant Cottage in 2012, is a popular source that details the history of the cottage and all its caretakers, including Suye.

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