Almost Neighbors
The Orimoto Family
4501 Clement Street
Period of Residence: 1935–1942

Shigemi and Michiko Orimoto moved into 4501 Clement in 1935. The Orimotos were likely the last inhabitants of the property, living there until forced to relocate in 1942. The neighbors at that time consisted of the Stephenson family at 4425 Clement immediately to the north and Arthur T. Ono and Haruno Ono, across the street at 4514 Clement. The three parcels to the south of 4501 Clement on the west side of Clement were vacant until 1924, when Shinzo Shiraki operated a plant nursery at 4601 Clement (the third lot south of 4501). 4411 Clement was occupied by the Fujimori family in 1930. Another Fujimori family lived on the other side of the street at 4534 Clement. All Japanese residents of this neighborhood were interned under the terms of Executive Order 9066 issued February 19, 1942, following the U.S. entry into World War II, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor December 7, 1941.

The Sanborn map shows two pink highlighted archaeological features (8 and 25) that contained artifacts belonging to the Orimoto family.
Features 8 and 25: Orimoto Refuse Trench and Pit

Two archaeological features associated with the Orimoto family were discovered on the lot formerly known as 4501 Clement Street. The first of these is a long and narrow trench or swale (26 ft. × 4 ft.) (Trench 8) located at the back of the former lot. Examination of the artifacts suggests that the earliest this trench could have been dug for the disposal of household refuse was 1940. It appears to represent a household cleanout associated with the removal of the Orimoto family to the Topaz internment camp in central Utah in 1942.

The second feature was a small refuse pit containing primarily Asian ceramics, such as bowl fragments (one of which bears four Japanese characters translated as “Garden/Valley/Joy/mountain”) and a dish of Japanese porcelain. The porcelain fragments from this pit do not appear to have been made for export, in contrast to those found in Trench 8. The only markings are in Japanese, indicating that these items bore a paper label or more likely were brought to the United States as personal effects.
Meal Times at the Orimoto’s

The collection of artifacts associated with meal times from the Orimoto family’s assemblage reflects the observance of traditional Japanese cultural practices while integrating and adopting American values. One of the most common artifacts found in the Orimoto collection was medium sized ceramic bowls used for eating and indicates an adherence towards a Meiji “family table.” The bowls not only reveal that the Orimotos were using Japanese bowls as part of their table setting but also points to the consumption of specifically Japanese foods such as rice. In Japanese culture, rice is a staple around which meals and rituals are based and Japanese immigrants in America continued to use rice as an expression of who they were and as a way to preserve their cultural identity.

In Japanese culture proper food practices also include an emphasis on presentation. Attention to aesthetics has been part of Japanese cuisine for centuries and can still be seen in the attitudes of modern Japan. Based on the type of Japanese ceramics found in the assemblage it is clear that the Orimoto family placed great value on traditional tableware.

The juxtaposition of traditional Japanese ceramics with unmistakably American cultural icons like Coca Cola bottles provides a visually evocative representation of the two cultures straddled by families like the Orimotos. The mass-produced, factory made soda bottles, applesauce jars, condiment bottles, and canning jars stand in stark contrast to the handmade and hand painted porcelain bowls from Japan. Although these artifacts differ greatly in manufacturing processes and in representative ideals, combined they are testament to a Japanese American dual identity.
What We’ve Learned about the Orimoto Family

The Orimotos’ story, their struggles and evolving identities, would have been familiar to many Japanese American families of the era. Although each family’s story would have been different, the themes of cultural preservation and identity creation were the same. The Orimoto family’s archaeological assemblage gives us a glimpse into a way of life; they overcame obstacles that exemplify many Japanese families in Northern California. The Orimotos retained aspects of Japanese culture, most prominently through food, while also incorporating American products and ideals into their daily lives. Their children were part of a generation that began the on-going task of defining Japanese American identity. The artifacts from Trench 8 and Pit 25 are tangible reminders that living a dual identity involved balancing the influences of two cultures and making them work together.

Analysis of the Orimoto family artifacts and documentary research has shown how an immigrant family delicately balanced the traditional beliefs of their culture with the social, political, and economic challenges of 20th century America. These are some of the things we have learned about the Orimoto family through the archaeological and documentary records.

1) While preserving traditional Japanese mealtime and family practices, the Orimoto family was integrating and adopting items associated with mainstream America into daily life.

2) The Orimotos shared similar perspectives of hard work and frugality with their American neighbors.

3) The Orimotos, like other Japanese neighbors, were forced into the Topaz internment camp in 1942.