

The 1933 Oliver football team played in sandlots against other local neighborhood Nisei football teams and also against other pick-up teams.

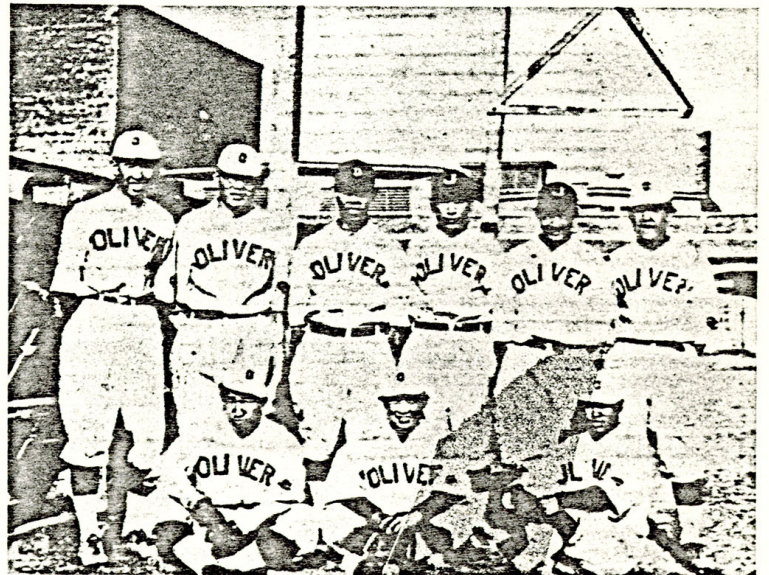
Nellie Oliver and the boys of early Little Tokyo

She was a spinster schoolteacher who stood ramrod straight, all 5'9" of her. She had a finely chiseled nose, on which a pince-nez would not have looked out of place. She taught at Hewitt St. School in what used to be the Japanese ghetto in the early decades of the century.

She died in poverty in 1947, but her name is forever enshrined in the memory of a large number of her former charges. An annual sports award given to the outstanding Japanese American graduating senior high school athlete also commemorates the name of Nellie Grace Oliver.

"She took a bunch of yelling, cussing 'yogore' boys and moulded us into a semblance of decent human beings," recalls Joe Suski, who was a member of the

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(Above) The nine-man Oliver baseball team (1924) competed against other local teams in what is now called semi-pro baseball. (L) Nellie G. Oliver, for whom the Oliver clubs were named, organized and sponsored the boys' clubs comprised of young Nisei from 1917 to 1939. A former schoolteacher, she felt that the Japanese Americans were the neglected members of the community. Nearly 300 youths felt her influence in the three decades in which she was active. Miss Oliver died in poverty in 1947, and the Oliver trophy is named after her.



Nellie G. Oliver also organized Nisei girls' clubs (1922).



1921 Oliver track team, "Champions of Boyle Heights."

'She taught us 'yogore' boys to say 'Please' and 'Thank you'

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Oliver Juniors, the second of seven Oliver clubs organized by Miss Oliver, as the little ruffians always addressed her. From a nucleus of the Oliver Seniors, organized in 1917, and the Juniors, organized in 1925, she eventually saw the Oliver Midgets (1929), Oliver Tigers (1932), Oliver Cubs (1934), Oliver Mustangs (1936-37) and Oliver Broncos (1939).

The groups met once a week in the old Daiichi Gakuen building, known in the early days as the Stimson Lafayette Industrial

School. Miss Oliver was a member of the board of the Stimson Institute which operated the school where newly-arrived Issei women were taught American cooking and sewing.

Most of the boys' parents lived in the area, operating boarding houses, barber shops, tailor shops, fish and poultry shops and other shops and services which catered to the growing immigrant Japanese population.

Seeing that the mothers were just as busy as the fathers working to make ends meet, Miss

Oliver worried that the boys were often left pretty much to their own devices. Those were the days before Scouting came to Little Tokyo, and Miss Oliver challenged the boys with nicknames like "Tib" and "Yampo" and "Squish" to take part in organized sports, after which they were treated to homemade cupcakes and cups of hot cocoa with marshmallows in them.

She also taught them the rudiments of parliamentary procedure and etiquette ("You're supposed to say, 'May I have this dance?'")

"She was a stickler for sitting up straight, of talking clearly and not mumbling, of saying 'Please' and 'Thank you' and not chewing gum," recalls Suski.

She even had an Oliver choir going, according to Suski. "I remember we sang over KRKD once."

The closeness and camaraderie established in their Oliver days have stayed with the members, and they still meet once a year, usually at the time that the Oliver Award is handed out.

Their parents were grateful for Miss Oliver's guidance, and in 1922, sent her on a trip to Japan by pooling their resources. Those were the days when it took a 14-day voyage by boat to cross the Pacific, and the voyagers were sent off with paper streamers and the bands playing "Auld Lang Syne."

Miss Oliver retired in 1939, but not before nearly 300 youngsters had felt her influence to do the right thing, both in spirit and form. The second World War scattered the Olivers to the four corners of the world, and it wasn't until 1960, when they were on their way to becoming respected pillars of their community that the Olivers found their benefactor buried at Inglewood Cemetery without a headstone to mark her final resting place. They quickly collected a fund, only to find that the rules of the cemetery prohibited use of gravestones in the area where Miss Oliver was buried.

The fund became the basis for the Oliver Award. An outstanding high school athlete has been chosen for the award each year since then. □

PETE KONDO: Nurse took care of Oliver athlete for life after becoming a paraplegic



Peter Hajime Kondo

An unusual aspect of the Oliver story is that of Peter Hajime Kondo, who was a high school star athlete at Lincoln High and had been playing semi-pro baseball for 12 years before an automobile accident severed his spinal column and he became a paraplegic before the war.

During the war, he was the bright focal point of the hospital at Manzanar. In spite of his handicap, Peter maintained his cheerful outlook on life. There he met Thelma McBride, a young public health nurse who specialized in the care of paraplegics.

McBride was so taken with Peter's personality that when she obtained a job with a sanatorium in Louisiana, she arranged to have the former Oliver moved to the sanatorium. His Oliver buddies and Lincoln High School fellow alumni pitched in to get him a television set (in the days when TV first came out) and a Hoyer lift, which made it easy for him to change positions in his hospital bed.

Before he died 10 years ago, Knodo managed to make a lot of friends in Louisiana in an area where few Japanese live.