

I REMEMBER MY FATHER

By Yoshiko Nakamura Hasegawa

A Look Back on My Father Guichi "Chester" Nakamura

He came to this country at the age of sixteen with his father and younger brother from Wakayama-ken a little south of Osaka. His father was in the lumber business but in Japan there was a deep depression making it necessary for them to come to the United States to seek their fortune. They landed soon after the great earthquake of San Francisco, California in 1906. It was while working as houseboy that one of the women he was working for couldn't pronounce Guichi - named him Chester.

At some point, father, brother and Chester did some farming, growing tomatoes and doing quite well until 1914 when the U.S. entered World War I. With the great need for all metals including tin - canning tomatoes came to an end. The crops died in the field.

They made their way back to San Francisco and luckily found employment with a Japanese Import and Export Co. as a salesman. By this time many Japanese owned establishments such as hotels, restaurants, grocery and other businesses requiring things from Japan.

In 1920 with an arranged marriage planned for him by his family, he returned to Japan and married Shiki Kawae of Kyoto. She became a mother by 1921 and four more children followed.

In 1929 my father's company moved to Los Angeles. There was a flourishing Japanese town. He was sent out to take orders from all the Japanese businesses not only in Los Angeles but to many other towns and farms.

After two years in Los Angeles, he had an offer to join the produce department in the Marengo Market, a forerunner of the supermarkets of today. This moved us to Pasadena. The market had a grocery, butcher, baker and produce concession.

Later he joined the Market Basket chain and ended with fifteen produce concessions. Each night he went to the Ninth Street Market in Los Angeles to place his orders and delivered them by morning. He eventually had another truck and driver to help him distribute the produce.

Opening days at these markets were great events with great sales. Carrots, beets, and spinach were all bunched goods, were one cent a bunch. Potatoes were ten cents a pound. The produce was displayed artistically; business flourished. This continued until that fateful day - December 7, 1941. This day altered our lives forever.

My father had to sell all his stores, trucks, fixtures, our cars and house for the great evacuation day put forth by the Government. To prepare for this we had to store what furniture we had. My mother made duffle bags to pack up our bedding and towels. We were allowed to take only what we could carry in our two arms. My mother was wise to include in this a portable Singer sewing machine. Since she made all our clothes - with four girls - a sewing machine was a must. This was a very confusing time for us. Where are we going and what will we be doing? My mother summed it up saying, "As long as we go as a family we will be alright."

So, one fine morning we bid our house on Manzanita Avenue, Pasadena, farewell. We were taken to the Pasadena train station where we were boarded the antiquated trains taken out of mothballs that took us to the Tulare Assembly Center, a horse race track converted to a make-

shift camp with barracks and mess halls. This was indeed a new experience for all of us. It was overwhelming to be among all Japanese in a communal environment.

After four months in Tulare we were sent to Gila River, Arizona, about 50 miles south of Phoenix, now called a relocation center. It was situated in the middle of the desert where the Pima Indian Reservation was located.

My father became the block manager of Block 31-chosen to be a spokesperson for complaints and suggestions. He became a leader and morale booster for the people and made himself known to the administration.

Side note: If we had to be in a camp, Arizona, despite its hot weather and dust storms was not a bad place. The weather was dry - the night skies were beautiful - the electric storms that occurred were spectacular. The huge cactus in the buttes was a wonder, and we did see mirages a few times.

Early in 1944, my father was approached by the administration that informed him about Seabrook Farms in Bridgeton, New Jersey. Mr. C.F. Seabrook whose plant was packing food for the armed forces needed workers to carry on the frozen food and dehydration plants. My father and a friend went to see Mr. Seabrook and after seeing what was being offered, decided this was an ideal place for families to get a new start and where the children could attend a real school.

Our family - along with many other families - arrived in Seabrook by August 1944. The cinder block housing with necessary furniture was another new beginning. My father had no experience as a carpenter but Mr. Seabrook gave him the title foreman for carpenters. My mother, sister, and I went to work at the plant; my younger sisters and brother went to the public schools "outside" trying to continue where we left off in Pasadena.

By 1950 the family was in New York City. My father took over a dry cleaning business and later a little restaurant on Columbine Avenue called the Cherry Restaurant. As you can see, he embarked on different businesses. In 1958 we had a chance to open a gift shop in Manhassat, Long Island on the new miracle mile on Nanhem Boulevard - a large strip mall with a Penn Fruit Supermarket as an anchor on one end and B. Altmans on the other. In between were all the necessary stores as a shopping center. Our store was the Kyoto Artcraft. All things Japanese were very popular at the time and we rode on that crest. My mother and I tended the shop while my father took orders and custom made the Shoji screens, which were very popular at the time. He became very popular with his clients with his charm and honesty and happy personality. Something he sustained until he passed away in 1965 at the age of 75.

Reflections on my father

His optimistic ideals filled with wondrous outlook on life, his ever-present personality and charm, his zest for new horizons, and above all his great love of fishing, his quiet time - he used to say " Never look back!"



Mr. & Mrs. "Chester" Guiche Nakamura
Dealinok Farms -
Japanese Festival 1952.