



Doing some business

Tosh Umemoto visits with Jim Tweedy and Paul Vervalle of AMB Tools of Yakima as spring work shifts into high gear.

Tosh Umemoto

Internment in WWII led him to farming

By Ted Escobar

Japanese-Americans from the World War II era have different memories of their internment that period, ranging from historical footnote to bitterness.

Wapato farmer Tosh Umemoto was there. To him, "it's a thing of the past," and there is no resentment. But he figures it did affect the course of his life.

As a young boy, Umemoto had not planned on becoming the successful farmer he is today. He had no intention of growing, packing and marketing his own corn.

But his family's stay at Hart Mountain, Wyoming, interrupted his family's fortunes and dictated that he return to Wapato to farm with his parents.

Tosh, who was born in Wapato, had seen the workings of farm life and he didn't like it. He saw people working hard and not being paid accordingly.

"My dad took me around with him. I learned that farming wasn't for me," Umemoto said. "I learned that farmers are at the mercy of the buyers."

Not only did he not like the pay, Umemoto also did not like the work. While city kids were traveling in summer or just visiting grandma, farm kids were working. For them,

summer vacation was the day they went shopping for school supplies.

"When we were kids working out in the fields, we loved it when it rained. It was a day off. School days were the greatest," Umemoto said.

Because he was only 15, Umemoto's recollections of the relocation are mixed. He felt bad because his parents had to give up everything they had. They sold all they could, but they didn't sell everything, and they didn't get top dollar.

"We didn't put it in a bank. My mother (Moto) just carried it with her. A lot of us thought we weren't coming back here," Umemoto said.

Although the people were treated with civility on the road to Hart Mountain, there were some noticeable things that made Umemoto aware that the relocation was a serious matter.

There were sentries on each of the rail passenger cars and the windows were covered as they traveled so people couldn't see the country through which they passed.

At Hart Mountain, the budding teenager didn't see life quite like the older folks. He attended a high school at the camp for three years and graduated from that school in early 1945. His high school baseball team played the Worland, Wyoming, High School baseball team. And

work was not a daily matter.

"We'd never had that many kids to play with all year around," Umemoto said.

In addition, although the families were not free to leave entirely, they could work for wages for farmers in the area. Some people even took jobs in such places as Ohio and Pennsylvania.

"We thinned beets in Montana and topped beets in Torrington, Wyoming," Umemoto said.

Later in 1945 Umemoto started to understand better the real impact of the internment. He left Hart Mountain as an 18-year-old who needed to go home and help his 66-year-old father Mantaro get restarted.

"It was pretty tough for him to get started up again from scratch. My thought at the time was to get the family on its feet and then strike out on my own," Umemoto said.

Because of Hart Mountain, Umemoto did not go to college when he might have had the internment not interrupted his father's fortunes. He farmed with his father a few years and then was drafted into the army in the early 1950s. He earned GI Bill privileges but passed them up after coming back to the farm.

"As we kept farming, (dad) grew older and my chances of doing something else diminished," Umemoto said.

But Umemoto's intelligence did not. Once he resigned himself to farming, he surveyed its benefits and gave serious thought to minimizing its drawbacks.

After Hart Mountain, the family went to eastern Oregon to sharecrop in 1946. A lot of Wapato Japanese-American families were there. So it was a natural decision.

But eastern Oregon was not to Mantaro's liking and he yearned for the Yakima Valley. In 1947 he brought his family home to 80 acres, three working horses and a 1947 John Deere tractor two miles out of Wapato.

"I sat on that tractor many hours. I even fashioned lights on that son-of-a-gun to cultivate at night," Umemoto said.

In 1949, Mantaro bought the 80 acres on Campbell Road between Ft. Road and McDonald that anchor Tosh's farm today.

"He bought it under my name, but it was dad's," Tosh said.

Today, Tosh owns 120 acres and leases enough to farm a total of over 350. This year he plans to raise 360 acres of sweet corn. He also farms 27 acres of grapes.

The farm was diversified when Mantaro ran it. He believed in raising about 12 different crops.

"We were constantly busy,"

Umemoto said.

With his father growing older, Umemoto started to run things before 1960. About 20 years ago, he started to farm sweet corn strictly.

Both of Umemoto's parents died in the early 1970s, but he kept on farming. He was committed by then.

Umemoto has his hand on every aspect of the operation, from planting to irrigating to packing to marketing. But he never ties himself down to a specific chore.

"I try to keep free in case somebody doesn't show up. If that person's job is critical, then I do it," Umemoto said.

Umemoto has arranged for Safeway's trucks to come right into the yard and take the corn to places all over Washington and western Canada.

That's better than going through a broker, but the challenge between the farmer and the buyer remains. The price is still not Umemoto's to set.

"Last year was a fair year, but the year before was just a disaster," Umemoto said.

The farm produces 80,000-90,000 crates of corn each year, picking and packing 15-20 acres of corn per day for a month.

Even when the price is not what

Umemoto needs, he picks the corn. He's at least able to recover some of the investment he's made that year.

"The cartons we can save for another year, but we have to try to recover as much as possible of what we've put into the crop," Umemoto said.

Umemoto looks for other ways to make gains, such as improving efficiency. He has developed a packing, hydro-cooling line that allows him to avoid paying someone else to pack and cool his product.

He looks for increased yields. While most corn growers plow, roller-harrow and plant on a flat surface, Umemoto leaves his fields sort of hilled on 34-inch centers in the fall. He avoids compaction that way and plants on the crests of the hills the next spring.

That gives him even germination, even growth and uniform maturity. He is reasonably sure ears on stocks that are side by side are going to be at the same ripeness at the same time. That ensures the best possible pack arriving at the super market produce section.

And on it goes, Umemoto constantly looking for better ways.

Somehow he doesn't really seem like a man who didn't want to farm.