

Japanese immigrant reviews 66 years of Wapato history

By Frances Story

The Japanese Buddhist community of the Yakima Valley will extend a hundred welcomes to guests at the annual Sukiyaki dinner Sunday, March 5.

The theme for this year's dinner is Centennial 89, in honor of Washington's 100th year of statehood. Hundreds of cranes, symbols of longevity done in the art of origami, will be hung in the Wapato Buddhist Hall to deliver the centennial welcome a hundred-fold.

To give added emphasis to the theme of longevity, the community has chosen to honor Yoshiko Uchida, one of the oldest in the Wapato congregation, although she will be only 88 in this centennial year.

Mrs. Uchida's husband Harry, were he alive today, would have celebrated his 100th birthday along with the state's this year.

The Uchidas came to Wapato together in 1924, as a wedded couple of just one year.

They arrived in a town which had a thriving Japanese Village on West First Street, between Wasco and Satus.

The "village" of three grocery stores selling the familiar goods of her homeland, the restaurant, two hotels and garage—all Japanese owned—went a long way toward making Mrs. Uchida feel at home.

She had been in the United States only a year, although Mr. Uchida, who was born in Wakayama, Japan, on July 22, 1889, had left Japan as a teenager to work for a brother who was a foreman in a sugar company in Maui, Hawaii.

In 1907 Mr. Uchida took passage as a cook on a sailing ship from Hawaii to Seattle. He graduated from two automotive schools in Seattle in 1913 and 1914, and then worked on a tug boat between Seattle and Bellingham, hauling fish oil for tempering steel. When he saw the difficulty Seattle area growers were having shipping their produce to markets in Seattle, he turned to custom hauling. That agricultural interest eventually brought him to the Yakima Valley in 1918 where he combined his automotive knowledge with produce hauling.

He returned to Japan in 1923, to marry Yoshiko Takebe. They were married in Wakayama, their hometown, Nov. 28, 1923.

Theirs was not, strictly speaking, an arranged marriage. Coming from the same village in Japan, they had known each other before they married. Still, there was the formality of a "go-between," a person known by both families who could ask the questions curiosity had raised on both sides.

"Will he make a good husband?" "What faults might there be?" "Are they compatible?" "Would they have a good life together?"

Those are some of the questions that a "go-between" might ask—and some more personal yet—said Tom Uchida, one of the seven children the Uchidas gave birth to here in Wapato.

"Yes, even though it wasn't an arranged marriage, there was an official go-between," said Tom Uchida. "Really, it is still more or less like that among Japanese families when someone in the family is thinking of getting married. They turn to someone both families know to ask the questions you wouldn't want to ask yourself. And some of the arranged marriages work out best."

The Uchidas spent their first year of married life in Seattle, where other Japanese families had settled before them.

"They were among the last of the immigrants coming from Japan, so there were many already there," said Mas Wada, co-chairman of this year's Sukiyaki dinner who was helping Tom Uchida translate for his mother who speaks only Japanese.

"There was a community waiting into which they fit. It made it easier for her. She was put together with similar ladies in waiting. It made it a little more comfortable," said Wada.

The established Japanese

community in Wapato further softened the cultural shock for her.

Mr. Uchida had a garage with gas pumps among the Japanese-owned First Street shops. His business was near the end of the row. The Furuta's grocery store was first. Next to it was a restaurant owned by the Hisashima family (a Hisashima daughter married Ed Iseri; they live in Granger now.) Then came a two-story building with a grocery store on the ground floor and a hotel upstairs. It was owned by the Kaichiro family. Uchida's garage was next, then a grocery store and hotel owned by the Hirakawas (the mother of Mas Jio of Wapato was a Hirakawa).

"From there on it was an open lot and there were cabins in front of Logan's Feed," said Tom Uchida, pulling memories from the early 1920s. He also recalled that a livery stable used to sit where the Pan Cigar Tavern is now and a blacksmith's shop was in front of what is now the Filipino Hall.

"Where Save-More Grocery is now was just brush. All that was there was a barber shop and a great big tree," said Tom, "and there were big, old locust trees in front of the Filipino Hall, too. Chambers Automotive was a livery stable. Rainier Bank was the boondocks, all farm area."

The Hisashima and Uchida families started a company that made Tofu, grinding soybeans between giant stones with a system of leather belts and pulleys operated by one electric motor.

The Uchidas were pioneer members of the Yakima Valley Japanese Community, and he was a Ken-Jim-Kai founding member of the Yakima Buddhist Church. (A "Ken" can be equated to a specific area of a country, much as a county or state is referred to in America, so Ken-Jim-Kai founding members would all have come from the same area in Japan.)

The Uchidas have six sons—Mas, Aki and Tom of Wapato, Shig of Kent, Sam of Seattle, Yosh of Yakima—and a daughter, Mrs. Hideo (Kimiko) Mori of Seattle.

Their children were raised here, went to school here...and left here when the Japanese were relocated to camps during World War II.

"Evacuation was the most traumatic thing for her," Mas Wada interpreted after he had asked Mrs. Uchida to name the biggest adjustment she had to make when she came to the United States.

His question brought an intense flow of words, words that almost did not have to be translated to catch their meaning. It could be read in her face—somber at first, then creased with lines that seemed to spring from questions still unanswered and, finally, a repose that settled into a smile.

"She says," Wada repeated in English, "that, being a mother, the evacuation was the most traumatic change. It came so sudden, the confusion of getting ready to

evacuate, disposing of as much property as possible.

"You took whatever you could carry. Larger families took more, but needed more. You took only bedding and clothing, nothing but duffel bags stuffed full of bedding and clothing..."

"And tin plates," remembered Tom Uchida. "Dad bought tin plates at the hardware store."

"And you didn't know where you were going or for how long," Wada continued the story for Mrs. Uchida.

"As a woman and mother that was something of a highlight. The mothers just couldn't get over it. As years went by, they adjusted. There was no other way. According to the teachings of the Buddha, we are taught to learn to appreciate even in the time of need or distress. It was a very gratifying experience," Wada concluded.

Gratifying?

Wada was asked to explain what Mrs. Uchida had found gratifying about being uprooted and interned three and a half years in a camp at Hart Mountain, Wyoming.

"Distress teaches one not to hold resentment, to accept reality, to be more understanding and appreciative...and try to become better. There is a satisfaction in just coming through in good health and being alive," Wada translated.

"It's beyond the stage of anger; you can't harbor it forever."

When the Japanese families returned to Wapato they found the "village" in a shambles.

The Hisashima building was still standing but in ruins. Most of the other buildings, all made of wood, had burned. A building on the corner, a building that was the original train depot but had been moved to First to serve as a grocery, was still standing but in disrepair. They were never rebuilt.

The Uchidas returned to the land, farming then as they do now.

Mrs. Uchida now lives in a home adjacent to her son Tom's house.

For years she could be found in the kitchen at the Buddhist Hall on the day before the annual Sukiyaki dinner, helping with preparations then and, later, serving the meal that brings hundreds to town. This year, Tom has been instructed to bring her to the Sukiyaki dinner Sunday so she can receive a formal centennial welcome from the community to which she has belonged for 66 years.

Correction

In a feature story about Yoshiko Uchida and the pioneer Japanese community in Wapato, published last week, there were several errors which were brought to the paper's attention by Haiuko Hisashima Iseri of Granger whose family owned property in Wapato in the '20s.

First, it was inadvertently stated that "a Hisashima daughter married Ed Iseri." Ed is Haiuko Hisashima Iseri's son; she married Frank Iseri. Second, the story stated that a "Kaichiro family" owned one of the buildings in Wapato's Japanese village. Kaichiro is the first name of Yoshiko Uchida's husband, not a family name; and the building in question was owned by the Hisashima family. Third, it was stated that the "Hisashima and Uchida families started a company that made Tofu." Only the Hisashimas were in that business, Mrs. Iseri said.

The writer, Frances Story, apologizes for any inconvenience these errors may have caused anyone involved.

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Hundred-fold welcome

An 88-year young Yoshiko Uchida, backed by the state's Centennial '89 banner, symbolizes the wish for longevity Buddhists will extend to guests at their annual dinner which will have a centennial theme this Sunday.



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