

The following paper was written by John Egert who began his bonsai journey in the mid-1960's. He is relating stories from his conversations and experiences with some of Southern California's most influential bonsai founders before and after WWII.

By John Egert

The author of the following story was a beginning bonsai student in June of 1974 when his life changed in a way that most bonsai fanciers can readily understand.

"I was in about my twentieth year, in grad school and was also taking a bonsai course from Khan Komai at his nursery in Temple City, California. I was so utterly inept that in a moment of desperation I asked Khan for a part-time summer job on the theory that just hanging around him and his trees might have some beneficial effect. That first year I was exposed to the national convention in Pasadena and witnessed a continuous parade of the best teachers in Southern California who used Khan's classroom at the nursery. I knew then this wasn't going to be just a summer job. That same fall and winter I helped Khan repot, trim, and restyle hundreds of his trees, and the concentrated experience was tremendous. By the time I came into Harry Hirao's workshop, I was totally hooked. The 'summer job' lasted four years."

One of the bonuses of author spending time at Komai Bonsai Nursery was daily contact with Komai's father-in-law, Frank Nagata, who came to the nursery each morning in those days. This article grew out of conversations between the author and Mr. Nagata over several years.

"I became fascinated by Grandpa Nagata's life and began to see him as a personification of the experience of American bonsai. Each student's progress was a reflection of Nagata's relationship to the art, and he seemed to realize this. He always knew how to help a student who was stuck, and in fact, kicked me over many a psychic hump in my early years. I see myself as working in a tradition that Grandpa and Khan have developed over many years."

"I am always amazed by the remarkable longevity of articles written about bonsai. To be published in a bonsai magazine is to gain, for good or ill, a certain immortality since these little volumes, like 'National Geographic' or 'Playboy,' are never thrown away. I hope this story will remind readers of a time in this country about which far too much has been far too conveniently forgotten. And, I hope to reaffirm the magical power of the art of bonsai, it's one of the few things in my life that has never let me down."

Baiko* and Barbed Wire:
The Art of Bonsai and
the Japanese-American
Experience during the
Second World War

By: John Egert

Bonsai people mentioned in this paper:

Sam Doi, Frank Nagata, Takahashi (Father of Grace Suzuki - Mrs. Harry Suzuki)

Joe Yamashiro, Mrs. Ai Okumura, John Naka, Khan Komai, Ryoza Nomura, Morihei Furuya

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- literally, the scent of Ume Blossoms

"I wish to emphasize that bonsai is not a mere sketch of nature, but a reflection of the heart of its creator."¹ In no other way can the survival of the art of bonsai in America during the Second World War be explained and understood. A tree kept small in a shallow container is an odd combination of sturdiness and indomitability mixed with a terrible vulnerability and dependence on real care. The art itself is the same. It has come down through the years with great strength and vitality, but it is always crucially dependent on the skills and feelings of its practitioners. Pre-war years in this country saw the art begin to bloom, as Japanese-American culture increasingly flourished, on sometimes difficult and unfriendly ground. But after December 7, 1941, bonsai art was in imminent danger of withering and death. Of what importance could miniature trees be to a people herded into exile in desolate places? For an answer, the Japanese-Americans drew upon a culture which taught that survival does not merely mean staying alive, and that beauty, far from being an abstract concept which exists only in happy, comfortable circumstances, is a tangible "reflection of the heart of its creator" which can gain strength, character, and grandeur by exposure to extreme hardship.

So, bonsai was kept alive by a small group of people, not as an altruistic gift to posterity, but as a means of personal survival in a world gone awry. We may be absolutely sure that they experienced the same thrill from the blooming of a small whip of a plum, or the bright

autumn color of a seedling maple, as they received from the masterpieces which many of them later enjoyed in less harrowing times. Most of these men have seen bonsai become a hobby, and sometimes an art, for thousands of people, and a viable commercial enterprise for some. Most of them have been respected, admired, and revered for their trees and for their knowledge, but it is well to remember a harder time when being a Japanese in America who happened to be interested in bonsai was worth a crowded room in a tarpaper barracks, a face full of blowing sand, and a struggle to keep yourself, your family, and your little trees alive and well for one more day.

If you would breathe deeply, the lungs must first be emptied.

Desiring strength, you must first weaken.

If you will overthrow, you must first exalt.

If you would take, you must first give.

This is how the soft vanquishes the hard, the weak the strong.²

When the first large numbers of Japanese immigrants arrived in the United States in the early years of this century, they were generally poorly equipped in the vital areas of language and wealth to make their way in a new land. Their primary assets were a determination to find work and establish themselves, and a solid cultural foundation on which to build a future. This determination can be demonstrated by the fact that in 1919 the production of California Japanese farmers had risen from virtually nothing fifteen years earlier to a full ten percent of California's total output. Most important, these gains were made by raising crops which were unpopular with Caucasian farmers because of their difficulty to grow and/or harvest, and by farming lands which had previously been thought unfarmable.³

The cultural foundation of the Issei* evidenced itself in the self-discipline necessary to do demeaning, backbreaking work with a larger picture in mind. They knew that only by submission to the necessities of the present could the goals of the future be achieved. The old Issei saying, "Shikata ga nai", meaning "it can't be helped", or "it's got to be done", served well in those early times and would be called upon again. Their cultural background also included their art, ideas of which had been instilled into many immigrants even though they had left Japan as very young people. It is certain, for example, that many of the most humble Japanese-occupied dwellings in the United States contained a tokonoma, or alcove in which could be displayed a flower or driftwood arrangement, possibly an interesting stone, and perhaps a scroll, dish, or incense burner brought along from the homeland. In this tiny area could reside a respite from a miserable day's work, and a bit of beauty in an otherwise stark existence.

*Issei means first generation, born in Japan. Nisei means second generation, children of Issei, American citizens by birth. Kibei are technically Nisei who spent the formative, school age years in Japan and then returned to the United States

When a bonsai might first have come to repose in an American tokonoma is not clear. Japanese trees had been seen in this country as early as 1913 when Larz Anderson, United States Ambassador to Japan, brought back a sizeable collection of trees and two Japanese caretakers who maintained them for twenty-five years. These specimens were given to the Arnold Arboretum of Harvard University in 1937, and they remain one of the most important collections in America. In 1915, at the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, held in San Francisco to celebrate the opening of the Panama Canal (which, incidentally, involved some remarkable political maneuvering in an effort to halt anti-Japanese legislation in order to encourage full participation in the exhibition by the Japanese government⁴), several bonsai were shown which remained in this country. It is doubtful, however, that any but a very few Issei had worked with bonsai in America this early, mainly because they had no spare time, and also because most had come to the United States as youngsters who had not had time to learn the art in Japan.

Two exceptions were Ryozo Nomura and Sam Tameichi Doi. Nomura was born in Mie prefecture in 1899 and entered the United States nineteen years later with his parents. He had been learning bonsai since at least his tenth birthday, and began working for his father at Hollywood Nursery in Los Angeles. He made several trips to Japan in the years before World War II.⁵

Less is known about Sam Doi. He had a collection of bonsai before the war, and more important, he was willing to teach others what he knew. Two early students were Morihei Furuya and Frank Fusaji Nagata. Furuya owned the Pine Nursery on Western Avenue in Los Angeles, and Nagata was a gardener in the area. Others involved in bonsai in the pre-war years included Mr. Sugita who had a nursery in Long Beach, California, which had bonsai on display and for sale; Mr. Ito, who lived in Encinitas, California, and owned at least one of the pines which was imported for the Exposition of 1915; Chiyo Kichi Takahashi of Berkeley, California; and Kay Omi of San Francisco.⁶

With the exception of Doi, Furuya, and Nagata, these eight had little contact with each other as bonsai men, and in several cases, did not know of each other at all. They were soon to be separated by even greater distances.

Frank Nagata remembers December 7, 1941 very well. On that day he became an enemy alien. The attack on Pearl Harbor caused him feelings of grief and fear, and put an ominous damper on the first wedding anniversary of his daughter Kiyoko and son-in-law Khan Komai. Nagata had been working with bonsai long enough to have a modest collection in his yard, and as events began to move rapidly, there arose a small but significant problem of what to do with these trees if the rumored evacuation came to pass. On February 19, 1942, Franklin Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, giving the War Department the authority to exclude anyone from its designated military areas in the West whom it judged

to be a threat to the war effort. On March 24, a curfew was enacted effecting "all persons of Japanese ancestry", and on March 29, all movement out of Military Area Number One (the coastal areas) was forbidden.⁷ The handwriting was clearly on the wall. "Furuya and I began selling our bonsai at his nursery, the Pine Nursery on Western Avenue. We sold them very cheap."⁸ Together with large household goods, business merchandise and fixtures, cars and anything too big to carry, these precious trees were sold at absurdly low prices, or simply left behind.

In mid-April, 1942, Nagata and his family were ordered to Santa Anita Assembly Center. "When we went to Santa Anita, I put the family on the (government) bus and a few trees with our baggage in my Model A."⁹ The conditions at Santa Anita were deplorable, with nearly 19,000 people crowded into horse stalls. But Nagata held his family and his few trees together through a miserable summer, under the glare of machine gun towers, and behind barbed wire.

By June 5, 1942, ten sites had been designated as permanent camps for the evacuation of 100,000 Japanese people in America, citizen or alien, man or woman, young or old. The sites were Manzanar and Tule Lake in California, Minidoka in Idaho, Heart Mountain in Wyoming, Amache (or Granada) in Colorado, Topaz in Utah, Poston and Gila River in Arizona, and Rohwer and Jerome in Arkansas.¹⁰ "All ten sites can only be described as God-forsaken. They were in places where nobody had lived before and no one has lived since."¹¹ Though the camps were still only partially completed, and though the War Relocation Authority recommended a delay, evacuation was well under way by mid-June, 1942.¹²

The trip from assembly center to camp was likewise a grim affair. The trains and buses were all in poor condition, troop transport being a higher priority for the better equipment, and they traveled with curtains tightly drawn to protect the internees from hostility along the way.¹³ Frank Nagata was ordered to Camp Amache, near Granada, Colorado and he and his family left Santa Anita by train -- he and his wife about September 8, 1942, and his daughter and son-in-law on about September 10. He was able to send his bonsai as baggage, and after a hard journey, marked by many interminable waits on sidings, Nagata, his family, and his bonsai all arrived reasonably intact. Though he was thankful to know his friends Doi and Furuya were at Amache also, he and the others were shocked at this treeless, desolate place located in the Arkansas River Valley of southeastern Colorado.

As soon as the shock wore off, and as the camp community began to get organized, each "block" tried to improve its surroundings. The block where the Nagata-Komai family lived heard of some small elms available cheaply from a nursery in Holly, Colorado and bought enough of them to "beautify" their area (residents of Topaz, Utah, were not so fortunate. "Seventy-five large and 7,500 small trees and 10,000 cuttings of shrubs were eventually

transplanted, but nearly all died, despite desperately intensive care by the evacuated people, many of whom were experts at horticulture"¹⁴). Nagata quickly made a shelf for his few bonsai, and awoke one morning to find them blanketed by the first snowfall of the year. He particularly remembers one tree, an Atlas Cedar brought from Los Angeles. "It was very beautiful, covered with snow, but the tree soon died. The shock was just too much. After that, I kept my trees under the roof overhang."¹⁵ Mr. Nagata also remembers fellow Amache inmate and bonsai teacher Sam Doi with a great deal of respect. "Mr. Doi had a way with trees which was better than anyone I've known since."¹⁶ If being in a camp had any positive aspects for Nagata, one surely was that he had a chance to be in close contact with, and learn from Sam Doi. He admits, "I didn't know much about bonsai in those days,"¹⁷ but Doi is remembered as being a capable stylist, probably the best the United States had yet seen.

As camp life settled down, the three men began to have leisure hours, like the other Issei, probably for the first time in their lives. This gave them time to devote to their hobby, but, as may be expected, material with which to work was hard to find. As security relaxed, the three went out of camp and dug a type of sage brush, which had contorted trunks in somewhat the same manner as the great Japanese Shimpaku junipers, and they discovered some stunted wild flowering plum along the banks of the nearby Arkansas River, a counterpart of sorts to the winter blooming Ume flowering apricots of Japan. The satisfaction of finding, digging up and nursing these plants back to health must have been tremendous, indeed it still is today for bonsai fanciers. Mail order, the main source of amenities for all the camps, provided a further source of material. As the other Amache citizens waited eagerly for irons, clothing, or radios from Sears-Roebuck, Nagata, Doi and Furuya waited for trees to come bare-rooted from Armstrong Nursery, so they could cut them back to bonsai size and look forward to spring. Though Nagata had a few genuine Japanese bonsai containers, the men had to plant most of their trees in scrap-wood boxes and cement pots. Tree seeds were available to them, but "we never expected to be in camp long enough" to make planting seeds worthwhile.¹⁸

The activities of these three bonsai pioneers culminated in what appears to have been the only bonsai show to take place during the internment years. This display, consisting of approximately a dozen of their best efforts, was a source of great satisfaction to the men. "There was a lot of interest", Nagata recalls, but none of the Nisei, nor especially the Kibei who were later to become the solid core of talent among American bonsai fanciers, seemed to want to learn the art. "They were too worried about getting jobs or going off to war to be much interested in bonsai."¹⁹

Bonsai activity in other camps appears to have been even more limited, Amache being the only camp with three bonsai men who were active before the War. Mr. Chiyokichi Takahashi of Berkeley, the first to actively create bonsai in the Bay Area, and one of first real bonsai artists in the United States, was sent to Topaz, and Mr. Sugito and Mr. Ito were in different

camps as well. Ryozo Nomura, with more bonsai related horticultural experience than anyone in the country with the possible exception of Sam Doi, was sent to Manzanar in California with his parents. His father's nursery, Hollywood Gardens, was lost and Nomura was forced to leave his bonsai with Caucasians he hoped would care for them but "he never saw any of his trees again."²⁰ Only two years before the war, Nomura had gone to Japan and had studied Japanese grafting techniques, so it seems certain that he was involved in horticultural enterprises at Manzanar, possibly including bonsai.²¹

These wartime efforts on the part of a small group of men working largely independently, constituted the flickering light of an art in exile. It is a tribute to these pioneers that this engrossing hobby and high art was able to find a small but important place for itself in the most adverse of circumstances.

As has been pointed out, conditions in camp in the early stages were nothing less than grim. There were no heating stoves in the barracks at Minidoka, Idaho until late November, 1942. It was still blazing hot in Gila, Arizona, and the black tarpaper barracks were like ovens until the evacuees were able to buy some electric fans and use them to devise swamp coolers. All barracks were built above ground level, and in Heart Mountain, Wyoming, which recorded 30° below zero temperatures that first winter, the evacuees had to shovel dirt up around the walls to prevent the cold winds blowing under the floors.²²

As the camps settled down and the basic necessities were fairly reliably provided for, time began to pass very slowly. Camp jobs became organized to the point that they could be completed in a very few hours, leaving the rest of the day open. No one was getting ahead in savings, since regardless of skills or hours, no job paid more than nineteen dollars a month. Sports and hobbies became very important. The Issei in particular had plenty of time for conversation, Japanese arts, gardening both for produce and for ornament, and of course, for the omnipresent card game.²³

Why did a few men decide to continue to do bonsai? Just the difficulty and ingenuity involved in finding material must have been a satisfying activity. Also, keeping trees in pots to appeal to the imagination in an area where there were no trees was, no doubt, very enjoyable. But there are deeper, more important reasons.

One of the most remarkable dimensions of the art of bonsai is time. "The Noh play or ballet expresses its movement in a relatively short period of time. On the other hand, you can hardly notice the slow growth of bonsai. The object of bonsai is to simulate nature. Nature expresses eternity in very slow movement and bonsai demonstrates this concept of the slow process of nature."²⁴ Bonsai people do not view the passing of time with alarm. The changes that a year or two years bring to one's trees are so interesting that the past is often seen as how one's bonsai once were, and the future as how they will be. It is certain that the few internees working with bonsai benefitted from such a perspective. They understood

the contribution of time to beauty and character, which helped to take the edge off their boredom and dread.

Similarly, bonsai people view the change of seasons through their art. The change in a tree in the course of a year is astonishing. Buds popping in spring, cool green leaves in summer, the colors of fall and the winter silhouettes are all a source of delight to its care-taker.

"Bonsai's association with the change of seasons, mountains, valley, rivers, waters, lakes, storms, gentle wind, rains, snow, frost and many other natural phenomena is far more important than one can imagine."²⁵ The people in camp could view the coming season with far less worry, and even eagerness as they tended their trees.

"Picture yourself standing at a corner of Ryoanji's stone garden in Kyoto in the evening, in late autumn, in a misty rain. You are viewing the garden; the next moment you close your eyes and are deep in thought. Actually, there is nothing in your mind. It is empty, and yet your mind or heart is fulfilled with certain contentment. That feeling is wabi."²⁶ Many gardens were created in the camps, for reasons more important than just finding something to do. The bonsai men, too, in their relationship to their trees, were able to find this wabi, or peace of mind, amid the chaos and tragedy of the internment years.

"These are not easy-going feelings; they are very disciplined feelings. It is quiet but severe. The feeling is common among people who are very religious and people who create bonsai."²⁷ When one is viewing or working with bonsai, a world is created which cannot be violated from the outside. For the prisoners, this world of self-discipline provided a platform on which to stand when all the others had been knocked away. It provided a place to retreat for spiritual rebirth, and a place from which to help others. "I think this feeling is love; love for trees, love for human beings."²⁸ It would give the small group of men a base upon which to rebuild their lives when the time came to be uprooted once more, and return to live outside of camp.

On January 2, 1945 the U.S. Supreme Court ruled that it was a violation of the Constitutional rights of Japanese-Americans to be held against their will. But the return "home" was a less than joyous occasion. Most internees had no homes left to return to, no jobs, not many more material goods than they had brought to camp almost three years earlier, and no money. Nor did they have mustering-out pay or a G.I. Bill.²⁹

After a period of working in Denver while his daughter Kay looked for a new home, Frank Nagata returned to Los Angeles with a few bonsai. "When I came home, I brought back three or four trees. The rest had to be left behind."³⁰ He was soon able to re-establish himself as a gardener and began saving to buy a nursery. Sam Doi returned to Japan in the late Forties, but not before helping a student newly arrived from his home in Colorado, John Naka. With their new collections flourishing, Nagata, Furuya, Naka, and two friends Joe Yamashiro and Mrs. Ai Okumura displayed their trees at the San Gabriel Valley Fall Flower

and Garden Show at Brookside. Park, Pasadena, in 1950 under the name Southern California Bonsai Club. This was the beginning of the California Bonsai Society which has become, under Naka's long-term Presidency, the most prestigious bonsai organization outside Japan.

Frank Nagata's nursery, the Alpine Baiko on Jefferson Avenue in Los Angeles, opened in 1954 and shortly thereafter he began teaching Caucasian students, the first bonsai teacher anywhere to do so. Now eighty-seven years old (in 1977), he is still active in bonsai, rarely missing a meeting of his society, the Baiko-en Bonsai Kenkyukai. His son-in-law, Khan Komai, is one of the prominent bonsai men in America and owns a nursery in Temple City, California.

The late Mr. Takahashi continued his bonsai work after the war and his daughter Grace married Harvey Suzuki who now owns a bonsai nursery in Berkeley*.

Ryozo Nomura, now seventy-eight years old is considered the master horticulturist among this country's bonsai artists. His grafted Blue Atlas Cedars, Japanese five needle pines, and Shimpaku junipers are the finest in this country and among the world's finest.

Among the other Issei who began growing material for bonsai and landscaping immediately after the war are Yukio Yasuda of San Fernando, California, and Mrs. Yamaguchi of Sanger, California, whose field grown pines still provide a source of aged material not otherwise available in America. These and others have contributed to the fantastic growth of the art of bonsai in recent years.

*After further talks with Frank Nagata, I now believe Mr. Takahashi to be the first bonsai man with good display-worthy trees in the U.S. It is possible he showed some of his trees in the aforementioned Panama Pacific Exposition of 1915.

"Apart from trees in the field or forest, trees in bonsai trays or pots are, I believe, the longest living plants which you help to grow and sustain with love, and which share your joys and sorrows. It becomes a sort of religion when you start loving a bonsai which has a much longer life span than your own."³³ A small group of people kept this "religion" alive during a terrible period in American life, but the art of bonsai is not restricted to a certain culture or a certain people. There are conditions today which encourage this art and they exist regardless of race or cultural background. If you are eager to gain status, win awards, or impress your neighbors, your bonsai will not be good. Your trees will know that your relationship with them is false, and they will not grow well for you. If, however, you "share your joys and sorrows" with your trees, and live with them on a day-to-day basis, they will respond to your care, and improve themselves with the passage of time. The people in camp understood this relationship, and made no demands on their trees other than enjoyment on a day-to-day basis. Like them, we live in uncertain times, and we all wonder

what the future will hold. We are trying to live in balance with other living things, and trying to understand our place in the life process. We all feel a kind of kinship with soil, rocks, and living plants, which we hope will bring us through a difficult time. We share with the internees the desire to bring quality into our existence, and the urge to create something beautiful in an unfriendly world. If we can share their dedication, and their sense of wonder in the simple beauty of life, we can also meet our future unafraid.

FOOTNOTES:

1. Kyuzo Murata, "Spirit of Bonsai", speech before California Bonsai Society, Summer 1975. Translation provided by speaker.
2. Lzo-tzu, quoted in Nancy Wilson Ross, *Three Ways of Asian Wisdom* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1966), p. 142.
3. Bill Hosokawa, *Nisei: The Quiet Americans* (William Morrow and Co., New York, 1969), p. 60-61.
4. Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 101.
5. Dr. Juyne Tayson, "Bonsai Personality: Ryoza Nomura", *International Bonsai Digest*, (Fall 1974), p. 72.
6. "History of Bonsai West" (Staff article), *International Bonsai Digest*, (Fall 1974), p. 94.
7. Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 318.
8. Information from an interview with Frank F. Nagata, November 14, November 21, and subsequent.
9. Nagata Interview.
10. Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 339.
11. Roger Daniels, *Concentration Camps USA: Japanese Americans and World War II* (The Dryden Press, Illinois, 1971), p. 96-
12. Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 343.
13. Mine Okubo, quoted in Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 343, 344.
See also, Jeanne Wakatsuki Houston, *Farewell to Manzanar* (Bantam Books, New York, 1973), Chapter 2.
14. Daniels, *Concentration Camps*, p. 97.
15. Nagata interview.
16. Nagata interview.
17. Nagata interview.
18. Nagata interview.
19. Nagata interview.
20. Tayson, "Nomura", p. 72.
21. Tayson, "Nomura", p. 73.
22. Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 351.
23. Hosokawa, *Nisei*, p. 349-350
24. Murata, "Spirit".
25. Murata, "Spirit".
26. Murata, "Spirit".
27. Murata, "Spirit".
28. Murata, "Spirit".
29. Hosikawa, *Nisei*, p. 439.
30. Nagata interview.

31. "History of Bonsai West", International Bonsai Digest, p. 94.
32. Tayson, "Nomura", p. 73.
33. Murata, "Spirit".

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