Dr. Kenneth Otagaki Memoir

Introduction

This memoir had its beginnings when I unexpectedly found myself at the age of 88 as the recipient of an award from the University of Hawaii College of Tropical Agriculture and Human Resources. The gathering took place at the Coral Ballroom in Honolulu with more than 1,000 people in attendance.

The Governor of Hawaii, the Mayor of Honolulu and the Dean of the college gave ritual speeches in my honor. Well wishers, some of whom I knew as colleagues over the years and some I didn't know, shook my hands and said complimentary things to me. As I was pushed onto a darkened stage in a wheel chair all I could think of was my wife Janet.

Janet had made my life possible. She rescued me at the lowest point of my fortunes when I could have been consigned to an army hospital for life. She believed in me. She was the mother of our five children. I sat on the stage, tears from my one good eye ran down my face because Janet was gone, Janet to whom I owed everything.

I had been retired from the university for many years and, except for a few colleagues, had little contact with what was going on there. The award was unexpected. The most amazing thing about the award was that I was alive to receive it. Sixty years ago, I lay in a hospital in Naples receiving last rites from Father John O'Brien, as German bombers flew overhead and the room shook from explosions. The last rites were said, but I did not die. I went to sleep and the next morning when I woke up and looked at the stump where the doctors had amputated my leg I said to myself that if I came through the war alive, I would do something with my life.

One could say that I witnessed the highest and lowest points of the agricultural economy in Hawaii. When I was a boy I lived in a poor plantation shack under Scottish plantation managers who ruled vast fields of green cane sugar with an iron fist. My parents were not willing to pay for my education. They expected me to stay with them and work in the fields. At the height of my career I was State Director of Agriculture. Today most of the cane is gone, replaced by housing and luxury homes. Most of the fields are lying fallow or put to use for other purposes. Agriculture in Hawaii is vastly different. Now people are talking about reviving the growing of sugar for ethanol. The world of sugar seems to be coming full circle.

The story of my life is an account of a world that is now past. In a world driven by computers, it is difficult to explain how I became excited by the study of growing things and by the perhaps naive hope that my life could make a difference.

Boyhood

One day when I was 8 years old my father lay ill and could not go to work. It was unusual for him to get so sick that he could not get out of bed. He usually left by 4:00 a.m. to get to the fields where he worked in wooden flumes that floated tons of green cane stalks down a rapidly flowing stream of water from the upper fields of the Hamakua sugar plantation to the sugar mill below. At 4:30 a.m. we heard the sound of a horse's hooves outside our house and his Scottish field foreman, the person we called a luna, entered our small house in boots covered with mud. I watched as the luna tramped towards the bed, raised his leg and kicked my father in the shoulder with the toe of his mud covered boot. He said, "What's the matter with you. Get the hell up and go to work!"

My sick and shivering father put on his clothes and went out with him. The tall white man walked out leaving a trail of mud on my mother's clean wooden floor. It was as if he was not in the house of people, but instead in the barnyard. He didn't care enough to remove his boots because he thought of us as less than human. From that moment on, I detested the white lunas and decided that as soon as I could I would get out of the plantation and do something else with my life. I think I was never able to get over the anger of this moment my entire life.

The plantations are gone now, but in the 1920's when I grew up Oriental people living on plantations had a mentality of submission. The Scotsmen like the Camerons who ruled my plantation lived in great white houses in enormous luxury.

Directly below them they employed a field staff of single white lunas or managers who came from Scotland. Below them they had a house staff of Oriental workers and below the workers were the field staff of Oriental workers like my father. If you lived in a plantation society, you learned to know your place and that place was several rungs below the whites.

1917 was one of the most successful years for the Hawaii sugar industry. World War I had created international shortages of commodities and boosted the world price of sugar. Money and labor flowed into the small fishing village of Laupahoehoe on the Big Island of Hawaii. It was also an important year for me. I was born.

My father, Kanematsu Otagaki, was a sales clerk in a small shop called the Moses Store. He was from Hiroshima Prefecture in Japan and had purchased a wedding contract a few years before. My mother, Kumae Higashi, was thirty years younger than my father and came from a small farming village in Hiroshima.

I was born on July 2nd of that year in the small house my father rented in the village. I was the second son. My older brother Kazumi, known by his English name of Richard, had been born two years before. Under the traditional Japanese system, the oldest son receives whatever hopes, affection, and resources and pride the parents have and is sent off into the world to help provide for the family. On the other hand, nothing is expected of the second son. They don't expect him to be smart, ambitious or able. The only thing expected of him is to stay around and take care of the parents in their old age.

Perhaps for this reason, although there was only two years difference between us, there was always a gap between my brother and me. For the most part I did my own thing and was closer to others my own age than I was to him.

My family was typically Japanese for the time and period. My parents, who both came from peasant families in Hiroshima Prefecture, did not show affection to one another or to us. They provided for us. They fed us, clothed us and housed us. This was considered enough.

Laupahoehoe is built on a hill overlooking the deep waters of the Pacific Ocean. From the village, which consisted of a main street and a few stores, it was perhaps a half hour walk down the hill to the wharf. The road winds back and forth down the hill and then emerges in a small peninsula that juts out into the ocean. This is the only place to directly access the ocean for miles along the Hamakua Coast because on either side the land ends at sheer cliffs.

Laupahoehoe was the county seat for that small section of Hamakua. In contrast to the nearby plantation town of Papaaloha, Laupahoehoe was a metropolis. Along the road in the village besides the Moses Store there was the Nishida store run by the Nishida family. There was a small soda pop bottler owned by the Terada family and a small local telephone which one could pay to use that was operated by Mr. Joseph Jose. There was a courthouse with a local Portuguese magistrate, Mr. Gonsalves. The area was looked after by a part- Hawaiian sheriff, Mr. Lindsey, and Mr. Carlos Nobriga, our policeman.There were no streets in the village, just one winding road that wagons and cars and trucks went down with buildings on either side.

When I was 6 years old, the economy slumped and the Moses Store was no longer able to continue to employ my father. He decided to take a job as a day laborer at the nearby town of Papaaloa, which was where the sugar mill for Laupahoehoe Plantation was located. The distance from Papaaloa was only three miles, but the fall in status from store clerk to field hand was the humiliation of a lifetime. My father took it because he probably felt he had no other choice. It would later contribute to his drunkenness.

Hamakua is one of the oldest settled areas in Hawaii. It is very wet, full of waterfalls, with extensive agriculture fields. The readily available water made the area, which is perhaps 50 square miles, very popular for sugar production. There was no need for miles of irrigation canals to water the sugar in the fields. All that had to be done was to plant fields of cane and bring it to the mill. Over the years, 17 different plantations would be built along the Hamakua coast. It became known as the Scots Coast because the plantations that developed there were largely managed by Scottish engineers from sailing ships who were hired by the sugar plantation owners and investors to manage and develop them.

The water was transported down from the mountains overlooking the fields by an ingenious network of V shaped wooden flumes that carried the sugar cane down the mountainside into a central flume and onto the mill. The water traveled at great speed through the open wooden flumes, across gulches through the ravines hundreds of feet high and down the mountain to the mill pond where workers would collect it.

These were marvels of engineering. The wooden flumes were hammered together and built hundreds of feet up the sides of steep mountain cliffs. They were all wooden structures with wooden braces. The idea was that the flumes used the natural flow of the stream water to deliver the cane to the mill ten or twenty miles away. The cane fields were cultivated at different elevations in Hamakua. The higher the cane fields, the more the water and the greater the distance from the mill.

One can imagine how much time it took to cut the cane by hand in the rain and mud and then haul it by horse or ox driven cart from the muddy fields down the road to the mill. It took literally thousands of hours of worker time to cut and haul and transport the cane down to the mills. Then came this incredibly inventive hydropower system that used the water to take the raw unprocessed green sugar cane in deep wooden troughs zigzagging across hundreds of feet of sheer ravines, across rivers, down mountainsides, into the yawning mouth of the mill where heavy steel rollers would crush the cane, break it and spit out the juice in a slurry.

It has to be said that that no matter how inventive a system there are always problems with anything. Periodically there would be too many sugar stalks at any one point in the flume system and the whole thing would clog up. I remember stoppages in the flumes that were 4500 yards long. When the flumes were clogged, the entire systems became stuck and it became important for someone to actually go into the flume and clear it out take the sugar out by hand and then feed it into the main flume a little bit at a time. This was the job that fell to my father.

This could be dangerous, wet and cold work that required my father to sometimes walk up the mountain and climb up the sides of the scaffolding to clear out the blockage. The shift was from 5:00a.m. to 6:00p.m. six days per week and probably mind numbing. It is no wonder that when he came at night he was exhausted and only wanted to drink his homemade beer and forget.

Sometimes my father would go outside so drunk he would stagger and fall on the ground. My brother Richard and I had to go get him. It was so humiliating. From that time on, I was never interested in alcohol and never drank. I saw what it had done to my father. On the other hand, maybe it was the only way for him to deal with the stresses in his life.

It would be unfair to say that they never gave me any encouragement. Once I remember my father praising me for feeding the chickens. It stands out in my mind, otherwise I couldn't think of it. His whole life he never made more than $30 per month. If he never smiled much or gave us much attention, maybe it was because he just didn't have more to give. He was probably exhausted or drunk all the time.

My mother was totally different. She was young and enterprising. She ran a barbershop and laundry. She had a small barbershop in Papaloa town and when she was not cutting hair, she was taking in the laundry from the workers. Many of the workers were single men and they needed the services of a laundress. So she made money for the family two ways - from cutting hair and from doing laundry. Sometimes she would give us a penny and say "go to the movies," or buy crack seed or buy an ice cream. Those pennies did not come often, but when they did I remember them. So I when I say my parents could not give me affection, I have to add that maybe they gave my brother and I all they could.

I remember my mother's wash day. There was no detergent. To get the dirt out of the clothes she would fill an old oil barrel with water, build a fire underneath it, put in soap and then boil the clothes until they were clean. She would spend much of the day boiling the clothes. Then she would fold them and take them to her customers. It was because of my mother's businesses that we were able to live behind the barbershop on the main street in town and not in the camp among the field workers.

My mother was a very hard worker. After she had worked at these businesses all day, she would come and cook food for us. When we had money she would go shopping in one of the small nearby Japanese stores for food.

The work on the plantation was very hard. The weather was wet and rainy during the winter and hot and warm during the summer. There was no break from the tedious work of planting the cane, cutting the cane, hauling it to the factory and producing the sugar in the mill. There were no holidays that I can remember during the year, except for Christmas Day and New Year's. There were no presents. Nobody ever thought of them because nobody expected happiness. Everyone just worked. People may not have expected happiness, but they valued kindness.

The community was very small. There were perhaps 150 people living on the plantation and we got our water from a 1000 gallon barrel that was elevated. Pipes ran from it down to supply water to each home. My family associated with Japan camp. There was also a Puerto Rican camp, A Chinese camp and a Filipino camp.

My house was considered very nice compared to that of the field plantation workers. We had one room and a kitchen on the side. There was no stove. We would cut firewood, start the fire and my mother would cook from the stove. There was a tall box where we kept a few fresh things my mother would buy and it had a place for ice. Ice would be delivered by horse drawn wagon from Hilo once a week.

The structure of the building was above ground and the wooden walls kept the wind and rain out. To give an idea of how nice our house was compared to others, I have to relate that worker housing for field workers was only built from wood that was too worn out for anything else.

When the cut planks that held the water in the flume were so worn out they could no longer hold the water coming down the chute because they had knocked out holes, and had jagged splinters, they were used for worker housing. This was how things were. The managers of the plantation spent as little money as possible on the workers. This is why they made such enormous profits. It was feudalism in the old style.

In those days the plantations did not pay workers with money but with scrip. The scrip was paper that one exchanged for goods at the company store. Because of this system, the workers didn't have money. The company made money on every transaction. The workers made none. Because of this system, they were in debt to the company and did not have the possibility of leaving. Our situation was different. Because of my mother's businesses, we had money and were able to go to other stores like the Nishida store that sold Japanese food.

The Nishidas were very nice to me, often offering me foods to eat like American cheese that I had for the first time there. I would go in and I remember the person cutting cheese would wink at me and, when no one was looking, give me a small slice to chew on. Cheese to me was an unbelievable delicacy. At that time I only knew Japanese food.

The Nishidas had two sons, Mutsu and Sadao. They didn't get along, just as my brother and I did not get along. I spent my free time with Sadao and looked up to him as my older brother. The Nishidas, in many ways, became the family that I didn't have.

I went to Kapehu Elementary School. The school was five miles away and I walked to the school along the road. When it rained, which it did often, my mother put oil skins with linseed oil on us and we walked down the road to school. I would get up at 6:00 a.m. and would arrive at school about 7:30 a.m. Then when school got out, we would walk home.

The school had three buildings and was run by a Hawaiian gentleman named Mr. Able Ah You, along with two middle-aged single white ladies named Mary and Alice Sumter. They were unmarried older women of the kind that used to be called spinsters. There were three buildings at the school. Kindergarten and first grade were in the first building, second to fourth grade was in the second building and fourth to sixth grade was in the third building.

They did not care very much about educating the children of plantation workers. There may have been some time in the classroom, but most of our time was spent in Mr. Ah You's garden weeding and tending his vegetables. Mr. Ah You had a large family and depended upon on the labor of the children in the elementary school to grow the vegetables for them. Using the free labor of the children in the school was the survival strategy he had worked out for his family.

Lest anyone think that this was a fun or charming interlude, I have to bring up the memory of the switch. Those of us who didn't work were beaten with it. I thought it was a waste of time. I was beaten. One day in elementary school they were teaching us about the American south and slavery and how the people lived in tiny shacks and were beaten and I said to my teacher: "Slavery did not end! We live just like the slaves." Even then I understood the theory of captive labor and I didn't want any part of it.

The electricity came from the mill. The mill ran from 4:50 a.m. to 10:00 p.m. When the mill closed down, it was lights out. Everyone went to sleep.

When I wasn't going to school, I had total freedom. I spent my free time wandering around the camp with my friends or swimming in Indian pond. It was small pond where my friends and I would jump in naked and swim.

It was an idyllic childhood. Maybe I didn't have money or an ideal home life, but I could go where I wanted when I wanted. When I was hungry I would go up in the hills and pick guavas and mountain apples or go to up streams and catch o'opu. O'opu are freshwater gobies that are indigenous to Hawaii streams. My friends and I would catch them and then take a tin sausage can and we would make a small fire, put the fish in the tin and then roast them over the fire. It was delicious.

When I got a little older, I would work for the Nishida store doing deliveries to people up country on mules. This gave me the freedom and mobility to explore different places. It was a wonderful time in my life. The plantations were spread over a very wide area and it was in the plantation owner's interest to have people living in the mountains and remote corners of the plantations in their own houses so there would be somebody to watch over the land. Part of Mr. Nishida's business was to deliver rice and other goods by mule to these people. He had two mules and I would often watch him shoe the mules in my spare time. I marveled at the fact that the mules never seemed to flinch at the nails that were driven into their hooves.

When I was ten years old, I persuaded Mr. Nishida to let me deliver the groceries on Saturday. I would saddle up the mules and deliver the groceries to all the country people. I was by myself for hours at a time, climbing up the narrow tracks to the houses of the workers. The country people were different from the plantation laborers. They were independent and had their own homes. They were self made and weren't fancy, but they had their own personalities.

A lot of people had trouble with mules. But I had no problems because I would always let the mules eat as much grass as they wanted. I understood them and because of that we got along. I think from spending so time with the mules I developed this fascination with animals. I think I was more interested in animals than people. For about four years I worked with the Nishidas doing the deliveries. But what I really enjoyed most was riding the flumes.

The flume systems on the Big island were engineering marvels. Designed to carry the cane from the upper mountain reaches down to the processing plants below, they were connected to the mouths of streams in the upper reaches of the mountain side. Built 200 feet high, they zigzagged down the ravines carrying the water and the cane within at top speeds down the mountains. There was a whole network of these flumes that were all over the plantation.

One day, when I was about 11 years old I decided that rather than walk down the mountain I would get in the flume and see where it took me. I grabbed the upper stalk of a cane plant, jumped into the water head first and held on! The water took the cane stalk and with me hanging cane I floated down the wooden box at top speed! I didn't feel the splinters that were digging into my arms. I didn't feel the cold water. I was thinking only that one of the most exhilarating feelings of my life and that I hoped I didn't go over the side! After I did it once and survived I kept doing it and some of my friends joined me. I think it was probably this that later got me interested in motorcycles.

We would rush down with the water, careful to angle our bodies to stay in the flume and to make sure that we could make the turns at the sluice gates. The flume would twist back and forth and at right angles and I got so that I could anticipate which way the water was flowing.

The people who saw me take the flume ride called me a "crazy buggah" and I guess I was. However, I enjoyed it. When I look back at that part of my life, I remember the flume ride the most vividly. It's a good thing my parents never knew.

When I was in 7th grade, my education took a turn for the better. I left Kapehu School and moved up in the world to Laupahoehoe Intermediate School. Laupahoehoe had professional teachers and a cafeteria. I had never seen a cafeteria before. There it was all in big medal trays behind a counter. The food was wonderful and abundant. For the first time, I enjoyed school tremendously. I studied. I liked science. I read. I was the editor of the school newspaper, the LapLander.

When you live in a small town there is not much to do. I was involved in 4-H activities. In a small farm community these were the outlets that we had. The man in charge of 4-H on the Big Island was Mr. Frank Goth. He was a tall man and I remember he always wore a brown forester's cap on his head.

It happened that Mr. Goth who was also the county agent would come to the school and check on 4-H projects. I began to raise chickens from small chicks. I organized my classmates and then I was selected to go to Honolulu to the State 4-H convention that was held at the University of Hawaii. We stayed in the dorms and ate at the cafeteria. It was unbelievably exciting to me. I suppose this was my first lesson in politics. If you wanted to get attention and get something done, it is important to be able to organize people and persuade them to do the things that you think are important.

When I had gone to Honolulu with my class, I met a Mr. Mitsugi Maneki who was in charge of the Farmers Exchange in Honolulu. I asked him whether it was possible that if I came to Honolulu whether he would be able to find me a job and a place to live. He said yes.

My brother had already gone. My father and mother had spent their little savings on sending him to the high school in Hilo. Since I was not expected to graduate or do anything other than live on the Big Island forever, I decided that I was going to leave.

One day my father showed me the two twenty dollar gold pieces they had saved. It was a tremendous sum for us. Almost a month's work! All the money was going for my brother's education. There was nothing for me.

By this time I realized that if I did not do something for myself that no one would do anything for me. I told my mother that I was leaving and going to Honolulu to live and go to school.. She told me, "Ok, but you're on your own." So I said OK. I saved $5.00 and bought a steerage ticket from Hilo to Honolulu – one way, which was all money in the world that I had.

Alone in Honolulu

Mr. Maneke had told me that if I came to Honolulu to live he could find me a place to stay for room and board. There was a small produce store there called the Farmers Exchange on the corner of River and Kukui Street. It was one Hawaii's first farm co-ops. I could work there and live upstairs and share a room with his brother, Satomi Maneki. I was 14 at the time and that's what I did. I worked in the store and lived upstairs. This was a remarkable change from my life on the plantation, as you can imagine. River Street at that time was in the center of Chinatown where all the houses of prostitution were situated before the war, so I grew up fast.

My routine was simple. I would get up at 5:00 a.m. and make breakfast, unlock the front door and put all the produce out in boxes on the sidewalk. Then, at 7:00 a.m. I would start off for McKinley High School, known then as Little Tokyo.

At that time it cost a nickel to ride the street car from River Street to McKinley, a distance of maybe two miles. I figured out that when the street car came to my stop the conductor would stop and collect fares, then give the signal for the driver to go forward. I would sneak up behind him at the last minute when the train started up again and take a seat way at the back on the outside. Since he was always looking forward and never back, I rode free every day to school. I suppose you could say that was cheating. But that nickel meant a lot to me. It was enough at that time to pay for lunch!

That fall I enrolled at McKinley as a 15 year old freshman. I didn't study particularly hard, but I suppose that I had been prepared well enough at Laupahoehoe that it didn't matter. At that time I had no social life and no money. My world revolved around The Farmers Exchange where I worked after I went to school and every Saturday, Sunday and holiday. The family who owned the produce store was related to the Sumidas who own the watercress farm in Pearl City. They were all very nice to me. I ate well. They treated me well and sometimes the people there would have private parties. You know the story about the farmer's daughter. Well, sometimes they would say Kengo "get lost" and they would bring over their girl friends. I learned the facts of life early. One day all of my friends were going to a whore house and they said come along and so I did and I became a man.

This was my life, very simple and self contained. I was not able to participate in all the social events that were held at McKinley High School. But I was happy and content and self contained. Even though I didn't have any money, I had a place to live, I had food and I had friends.

Then, one day something lucky happened to me. Mrs. Edith Caldwell, my sophomore English teacher, somehow had learned that I was on my own and one day after class asked me if I wouldn't like to come over to her house and work as the houseboy. She and her husband, who worked for the IRS in Honolulu, had no children and they needed someone to help them keep house. At that time houseboys were cheaper than maids. I did the laundry, cleaned the house, fed the chickens and did the yard. I was given a small room at the back of the house and went to school during the day.

I didn't study very much. I had no time to study or for a social life. I went to school and did well enough to graduate. During that time I lost contact with my family. I would not speak to my brother again for forty years and we eventually lost all contact.

My high school years went quickly. I worked for the Caldwells and later on for a very nice alcoholic lady and her daughter in Kaimuki. On weekends I continued to work for the Farmers Exchange. One of the benefits of the produce company job was I got to drive their company truck. At that time it was a very big thing to drive. Not everybody had access to a car or had a license. It was wonderful. I drove all over the island to pick up produce and met all the farmers. Some were wealthy and successful and some were not.

One week I would be in Waianae. One week I would be in Maunawili. I got to know Japanese farmers, Caucasian plantation owners, Filipino farmers and they all got to know me. They would invite me sometimes to eat with them and I felt very comfortable with them.

At that time Honolulu did not receive its fresh vegetables from the Mainland. The economy was very different. Refrigeration was expensive and so most of the farms were nearby. My job was to go to the truck farms and bring their produce to market.

University of Hawaii

The job driving the truck led to other contacts and I eventually got another job which took me to the University of Hawaii. At the University I enrolled in the College of Tropical Agriculture. I got a job working in the entomology department and was actually offered a scholarship, but my fascination was with animals so I stayed in animal husbandry.

I lived in a rooming house near campus with Satomi Mineki and several other older students and eventually into a co-op like dormitory that we called "the termite palace." To get around I bought an old motorcycle and I drove that around between my job and my classes.

Where the East-West Center building is now on the University of Hawaii campus there was once an extensive farm with pigs and cattle and chicken. I used to go there and work every day after classes. A lot of the students didn't like being hands on with the animals, doing the castrations of the cattle and that kind of thing, but I think because I had grown up doing that kind of work on the plantation, it was not that distasteful to me. In fact, I dreamed of one day having my own farm. I think that is when I really began to decide what I wanted to do with my life.

The entomology department where I worked was not far from the Department of Home Economics. One day there was a college picnic that I attended and I noticed a very pretty girl. Her name was Janet Shigeko Maruhashi . I thought she was very kind. I introduced myself, but she was very different from me. I was a country bumpkin, lacking in every kind of refinement. She came from an upper class family from Hilo. Her grandfather was a publisher and her father was a businessman. From time to time I would see Janet after class or would make a point to say hello to her. She had a boyfriend at the time and was not all interested in me. I used to drive up on my motorcycle and say hello and ask her if she wanted a ride. She always said no.

But I persisted and after one year she agreed to go out with me. I took her out to dinner to a drive in where they had hamburgers and hotdogs. She offered to help me pay but I said ‘No, no let me pay!” She knew I was broke, but she let me pay.

She lived with her sister, Mrs. Sumie Yoshioka, in Manoa and I would come and visit her there. She was two months older than me and sometimes she would say “Maybe you should go out with someone younger!” I didn’t want to because I had fallen in love with her. This put tremendous pressure on me. I knew that in her presence I had to speak better, dress better and do all those things that I didn’t know how to do. I was not all refined and not sure how I would ever acquire the polish I knew I needed.

There would be dances in Klum gym and groups of us would go together. Mits Fukuda, who would later become a famous officer in the 100th Battalion, was older than I but roomed in the same place with Satomi Mineki and I. He had a girlfriend who was younger than me. He left his car with her while he worked on the Big Island and she would let me borrow his car and I would pick up Janet. We would all drive together. At that time it was very rare for any student to have a car, so this was a big thing. I would drive and sometimes my friend Douglas Sakamoto. At that time the University would hire a Filipino pick up band and they would play dances like the Charleston. I was not a good dancer but I tried and Janet must have been very understanding.

First Professional Job

One day in 1940 as I was about to graduate, Professor Hanke asked me if I would be willing to work as a farm manager on Molokai. The Hawaii Territorial Senate President Mr. George P. Cooke was looking for someone to run Molokai Ranch. Did he know someone he might recommend? Because I had done all the hands -on work at the UH farm, he asked me if I was interested. I was enormously excited. The job paid $150 per month and I would be in charge of five people and all the animals on the farm.

“Was I interested? “ At that time $150 a month was five times more money than my father made. I had been living on thin margin for years, counting every penny. This was my first opportunity to gain financial independence. I was certain my parents would have been proud of me.

My father, in the meantime, died of cancer after a very hard life and my mother moved to Honolulu where she worked again as a barber in a small shop. I thought that for the first time I would be able to send her some money. I took the job.

The Cooke family lived in a great white house on a tall hill overlooking Maui and Lanai. The house was called Kauluwai. It was a beautiful place. Mrs. Cooke allowed me to eat with the household staff and so I ate what they ate. I was given free run of the place. The field staff was Mr. Taniguchi in charge of the vegetable farm, Mr. Marumoto in charge of the pigs and Mr. Oshiro in charge of the milk cows. I was the farm manager. They were all gentlemen in their fifties. I was 21 and very conscious that they were all senior to me. I made sure that I listened to them as much as I could and was always careful to work on weekends so that they would have a day off.

So far as the house staff was concerned, I made sure that they got whatever they needed in terms of eggs or milk or chicken or beef. I did everything to make certain that everyone was satisfied. When I had free time, I would go to Honolulu and see Janet. The money I made enabled me to dress better and to take her to better places. My favorite thing to do was to take her to the Hawaii Theatre in Waikiki and listen to the organist before the show. It was a time of great happiness and personal satisfaction for me.

Mr. Cooke said that if I went back to school for a graduate degree that he would continue to pay my salary if I would come back and work for him. For the first time in my life, I had some feeling of direction and purpose and success.

In March 1941 I received my draft notice. This came completely unexpected because as an agriculture worker I was technically exempt from the draft. The way I got drafted was typical small town Hawaii. There was a gentleman on Molokai named Mr. Morris who did not like Mr. Cooke and was not on the same social level with him. He was in charge of the draft board and knew that one sure way to get back at Senator Cooke was to draft his farm manager who was me!

Military

I had never in my life had the slightest interest in being in the military. In all the times I was poor on campus and saw the young guys marching in ROTC I had never ever been tempted to join. I saw no reason to ever consider giving up my free time to hold a rifle and march, even for the scholarship money which would have been very helpful. Now suddenly I was drafted. I remember thinking ,oh well, it's April now, I can just get this out of the way and enlist, then 18 months later I will have done my national service and I can go back to the farm. What a fantasy that turned out to be.

Mr. Cooke agreed to my request to leave the farm temporarily and so off I went and was assigned to the 236th Engineering Battalion at Schofield Barracks. They were a group of uneducated people from Tennessee with horrible personal hygiene. I tried everything I could to get myself reassigned to the air force, officer candidate school, anything to get out of where I was. But it was of no use. I was stuck there with them.

Suddenly, on December 7, the Japanese attacked Pearl Harbor. There were explosions everywhere. Black smoke went straight up into the air. I was assigned to watch a truck with Albert Oki, the only other Japanese in the battalion. Well, it started to rain so we got in the cab of the truck so we wouldn't get wet. The white sergeant suddenly came out and pointed a .45 caliber pistol at us and told us to get out of the truck and take our clothes off. He thought maybe we were Japanese saboteurs and that somehow in the rain we were hiding rockets or some other secret signaling devices in our clothes, so they had us strip down in from all of them; I stood humiliated in my underwear as these white soldiers made fun of us. I said "Why are you doing this to me? I am an American just like you." It was one of the most terrible experiences in my life.

Soon after, I was reassigned to the veterinary service. I thought, oh, maybe this will be better. It's animals. It's something I know. They had me shoveling out manure in horse stalls all day, so I said please just transfer me to the Hawaii National Guard - the 298th and 299th. I want to be back among my own kind. By that time, the Hawaii National Guard had been reconstituted as the 100th Bn, an oversized battalion which was primarily Japanese American.

So it happened that I found myself a private in the 100 Bn. The people I had seen marching in ROTC were now my officers. There was already a shortage of officer slots in the battalion as they had brought in white officers. So if you were a private, that was what you were intended to be. Once again, after a taste of being a manager, I was on the bottom again and felt almost immediately that I was wasting my time.

I tried everything to get out of what I was doing. I tried to transfer to Officers Training, join the Navy, anything. But it was no use. The only role my former fellow students at the University of Hawaii could see for me was carrying a rifle in the infantry.

When we weren't training or marching or training again, we had to live in barracks. Each weekend my friends would get together and go into Honolulu. Four of us would get together and share $20 and then we would share food and drink. But I didn't drink and I felt after awhile that it was a waste of money, so I didn’t go. Instead on my free day I used to go out in the country with my friend Keicihi Kimura. He was an artist and I would sit with him as he painted. He later became a very famous artist.

When we were sent by ship to the Mainland and then to Wisconsin, it was the same kind of thing. We drilled every day during the week and then my friends would go out and drink and I would stay in the barracks or accompany Keichi.

I was still not reconciled to either being in the army or being a private. The worst thing was that some of our own people lorded their positions over us. I remember once in Wisconsin we were standing at attention in the bitter cold and one of our officers comes out – calls us to attention and then says “Hands out of pockets!” Well, we didn’t have mittens. It was bitter cold. Our fingers were numb. So we take our hands out of our pockets and then he says “at ease.” And then he turns around and puts his hands in his pockets and starts to walk back to the barracks. I yelled out. “What about your hands in your pockets!” I was hoping no one would know it was me. Not very smart. The next thing I know I hear “Otagaki! KP!” I was assigned kitchen duty. I guess it was that rebelliousness that came from my plantation upbringing.

I spent my free time walking around with Keichi and my friend Albert Oki without much to do, because by then I had decided not to drink. So I was mostly bored. Then a lucky thing happened. My former teacher from Laupahoehoe Intermediate was from Wisconsin and wrote to his friends that I was going to be there. His friends looked me up. They were people in their fifties and they began to invite us to their homes and to go fishing at the lakes. Keichi and I would go out together to these nice people’s homes and eat huge meals. We didn’t meet any pretty girls that way, but we ate very well. In the meantime I communicated with Janet.

Wisconsin was very nice. The people were kind. The countryside was beautiful and even though I had nothing to do much of the time, army life was boring but bearable. It was nothing like Mississippi.

Mississippi was a shock. It was hot and miserable and the people were not friendly. Here I encountered the worst racial prejudice I had ever seen. Separate bathrooms for whites and black people. The white people stared at us because they hadn’t seen Oriental people before. We had learned so much about fighting for democracy and the American way - this was very disappointing. It was exactly like life had been on the plantation.

There was only one person who was very kind. His name was Earl Finch and he ran a general store in Hattiesburg. For some reason, he took a liking to us and we used to hang out in his store. He invited us to his farm, cooked meals for us. Everybody liked him. He eventually moved to Hawaii and became an entrepreneur, a successful promoter.

I spent most of my time in Mississippi carrying a rifle in the extreme heat and getting bitten by insects. The worst were the chiggers, small insects that one couldn’t see that tended to hang around in your pubic hair. They caused welts, rashes and unbearable itching. It was terrible.

Finally the day came when they sent us off to war. I got onto the transport in Norfolk, Virginia and eventually ended up in Salerno. We arrived there three days after the battle. Our landing craft stopped short of the beach and thinking I would step ashore fully prepared, I grabbed my rifle and two extra bandoliers of ammunition and jumped off into battle. I sank to the bottom.

Oh no, I thought. It was deeper than I thought it was. I took off the bandoliers and swam to the surface wet and glad to be alive. Then I joined the others and within two days I was fighting. I fired my rifle. I was not sure during the first six months whether I ever hit anybody. One time they almost hit me.

There was a German body in front of my trench and I jumped out to see if I could get a war souvenir which was what everybody was doing. I was going through the pockets when suddenly there was a ‘Zing’ sound, the sound of a bullet aimed at me that missed! I jumped back and another bullet came. Then another! I jumped back in the foxhole thinking ok,I am lucky to be alive. I fired my rifle several times in the direction of whoever shot at me. At that time we didn't have much knowledge of infantry tactics, so people fired at us and we fired back.

I was in Headquarters Company. In those early days in the war for us in 1943, it was every man for himself. One had friends but you were always conscious that you could be the one that was shot and left behind. I'll never forget standing with my friend Roger ------ and he was telling me about his girlfriend and what he was going to do after the war. I was standing a few feet from him. There was a shot from behind me. It hit Roger right between the eyes and he was dead right in front of me. That was the thing about the snipers - they were always all around us.

The only way to describe our situation in Italy was to compare where we were to Manoa Valley. We were in the bottom of the valley and they were up in the hills and could see everything we were doing during the day. But we could not see them.

We moved at night because that was the only time we could move forward without them being able to accurately zero in on our positions. After six months in the infantry, a lot of people had been killed or wounded and they needed more stretcher bearers. How does one get chosen to walk into battle holding a stretcher? I will tell you. A sergeant comes by and says "you and you and you and you" and the next thing you know, that's what you're doing.

One night eight of us were assigned to go up a hill and recover the wounded who were stranded. It was a clear night in the middle of winter and thick snow lay on the ground. By that time I knew the risks, but you didn't argue. If someone told you to do something in the army, that's what you did.

By that time I had had some experience for at least a month as a stretcher bearer. We would go out and we would have to pick up boys who were in terrible pain, whose bodies were mutilated and we had to do what we could for them and be kind to them, even though sometimes we knew they were going to die. I still remember picking some of them up. Sometimes they would scream out in pain. There were no helicopters at that time. You picked up the wounded, carried them to battalion aid station where they were then treated and then picked up by trucks and taken down to where they could be sent to hospitals. It was a process that took hours and in the meantime, little could be done for a lot of the wounded.

`We would go out with Chaplain Israel Yost, a tall man from Pennsylvania, and he would comfort them. Tell them that they were going to die and to prepare for death with a clean conscience. It was all very difficult emotionally to take.

The night when we were called out, a group of us was bunched together going up a hill. Rule number one in war is that you never bunch up in a group. That's the most dangerous thing. Well, we were bunched up and all of a sudden mortar fire came down on us. I don't know if it was German fire or our own friendly fire.

All of a sudden I realized I was hit and the others around me were killed. I didn't know how badly. I couldn't move my leg. I could see the bone splinters in it. It was very cold. I was thinking I don't want to die. I don't want to die now. I want to see Janet. I remembered that if it became very cold that blood would coagulate and that I would stop bleeding, so all through the night I tried to stay awake and think of what I would do when I came back. I think I went over my organic chemistry as I lay on the ground

When the light came, some stretcher bearers came and got us and put us down in the snow to wait to be transferred to the Battalion Aid Station. I called out to my friend Sakae Takahashi who by then was a captain. I called out "Sakae! Sakae!" and he and the other men of the 100 Bn walked past me.

I stayed awake and they transferred me to a field hospital in Naples. There I passed out. They amputated my leg. I was then blind in both eyes and lost two of my fingers. The Germans started to bomb the hospital as Father O'Brien was giving me the last rites. But I didn't want to die. I wasn't ready to die.

I woke up a few days later in a troop ship on its way back to the Mainland. I was in a cabin by myself and I was still completely blind. I had bandages over my eyes. I could hear the sounds of the engines and I talked to the doctors and the nurses when they came in. I kept thinking as I lay there day after day that I wanted to come home and see Janet. I wanted to live. It was then I began thinking about becoming a teacher. I thought that was a way I could make a living.

We landed in North Carolina and I was sent to a rehabilitation hospital and I think it was a week later that they took the blindfold off and I was able to see out of one eye again. It made me so happy. Then they told me that I had lost a leg and two of my fingers and my eye. I was injected with morphine every day for the pain. The nurse would come with a large hypodermic needle with a clear liquid and inject it in my arm. Then they sent me to Washington DC to Walter Reed Hospital.

There I was assigned to Ward 16. It was a long ward with 32 people in it. I was the only Japanese-American. Everyone was badly wounded. Everyone wanted to go home. The nurses were so kind. They were so beautiful and so very nice. I didn't get to know any of the other soldiers in the ward really, even though I was there for 8 months. I didn't want to know their names. They didn't want to know my name. We didn't want to have conversations. We all just wanted to go home and start our lives again.

Everyday was the same. I would get up, eat, get rehabilitation and then wait for the day to end and start again the next day. Then one day I got a note ordering Private Otagaki to get dressed and have lunch at the White House.

I did as I was told. I got dressed and went down in my wheelchair and was picked up by a limousine and taken to the White House where I was met by the first lady Eleanor Roosevelt. This was very odd- it seemed like a dream. She was very tall, white haired, not at all good looking, but very gracious and very kind.

It turned out that Mrs. Roosevelt was honoring wounded 4-H veterans who had gone to war and I was on the list. So she invited me to lunch in the private quarters. I remember it was a white bread sandwich. At one point I was alone in their quarters when Mrs. Roosevelt's dog Fala came in and nipped at my leg. I was still not sure that this was dream. I bent down petted him and quickly plucked a hair from the dog and put it in my pocket. If this was a dream I wanted it to be real. I actually saw Franklin Delano Roosevelt. He waved to me from a side room. What an amazing day for a young wounded veteran from Hawaii!

In the meantime, I wrote to Janet and I told her that I was coming back and she wrote me back. It was those letters that kept me going. It was really all I could think about.

They sent me downstairs for career counseling and a person said, "We think with your background you should go to Iowa State University in Ames, Iowa". I said ok and I took the cards with the information and enrolled.

As I was leaving the hospital I asked the nurse how I was going to cope with the pain of my wounds without the regular injections of morphine. She said not to worry. She had been giving me injections of water for the last few months! I had already dealt with all the pain I was going to have to worry about.

Back to Hawaii and My Life's Work

I got on the train to Hawaii and all I could think about was Janet. I was wondering how things would be when she saw me. Would she still love me? Would she accept me? Would she still marry me? Those were the worries that I had as the train took me across the country to San Francisco and ship to Hawaii.

I came back and to my great joy and relief, Janet did marry me. We were married In her sister's house in Manoa and then for the first time in three years, I was able to relax.

But not for long. I had to prepare myself for graduate school in Iowa, a place I had never been. Ames, Iowa is a small, pretty town in the middle of Iowa of mostly old fashioned red brick buildings, white painted wooden homes and narrow streets. I arrived there in the winter of 1945. Snow and ice was on the ground and I was petrified of sliding down and falling on my stump. Several times I slipped on the ice and I had to pick myself up, try and get my books up the best I could and stand up again and walk.

How had I come to Iowa State University? It was purely by chance. I had been in the rehabilitation ward at Walter Reed Hospital and they had asked me what I wanted to study. I had said animal science. The next thing was that they pulled a card for me, told me about a program at Iowa State and enrolled me. I didn't have much money. They gave me a small allowance and a stipend for housing.

It was big change from the army and the hospital. Suddenly I was living in a comfortable rooming house. The landlady lived upstairs and Janet and I lived downstairs. It was two blocks from campus. As a disabled veteran, the government had bought me a brand new red Ford automobile. It had the gear changes and hand breaks on the steering wheel.

My colleagues at Iowa State were friendly. The people in the mid-west are liberal. The only exception was my Professor Cannon of animal science who was not friendly at all. He was openly hostile to me and would make insulting remarks to me and the only black student in the department. There was still such incredible prejudice at the time. Here I was - I had a fought a war supposedly against prejudice and this was what I encountered. It was enormously frustrating.

However, he was the exception. There was very kindly Dean Kildare and he made up for the antagonism of Professor Canon and I had a very kind professor, Dwight Espee, an assistant professor and very good person. So it was a very mixed group. For the most part, I didn't socialize very much. There were not many returned soldiers there at the time and I kept mainly to myself. I had a Japanese friend in a neighboring town that we would visit occasionally, but mostly I just studied.

I suffered through statistics. It was incredibly difficult for me because I had not taken math courses for some time and now after the war and the time in the hospital I was forcing myself to be a student again. But on the other hand, I was able to take enormously interesting classes in animal physiology that were at a level I never ha experienced at the University of Hawaii.

For my Masters Degree project I was assigned to sort out all the prize winning dairy cows at the Iowa State Fair by blood type. I essentially sat in a large room where there were boxes and boxes of cards signifying information on the prize winning cattle by blood type.

Time passed fairly quickly. I had several friends. Janet made my life in Iowa pleasurable. She joined a women's club and we later moved to veterans' housing. We had our first child in Iowa.

After I received my Masters Degree, Janet and I got in the car and drove across country. It was a wonderful trip and then I came back to Hawaii as a teacher and taught animal science at the University of Hawaii under Professor Henke for two years. Then I decided that I had to go away do be somebody. If I was ever going to be able to provide for my family, I had to become a full professor. I had to get a PhD, so I applied to the University of California at Berkeley into their graduate program in animal science and was accepted.

Janet and I bought a small house in a primarily black neighborhood in Oakland. There were many people who bought homes only among other Japanese, but I was not interested. I had friends from every nationality and that was the way I preferred it.

I found graduate school an extremely intellectually stimulating experience. I was then transferred to the University of California at Davis in Sacramento where they had a large agriculture and agricultural nutrition program.

My most important professors were Samuel Lepowsky and Agnes Morgan. They both taught nutrition and the value of vitamins. I thought this was so very intriguing that I would often spend my spare time standing outside their lectures even when I didn't have their classes. They were so brilliant. For me, someone who had never taken serious interest in the intellectual or scientific world, this was deeply inspiring. I think it made me into a different person. It gave me tremendous confidence and made think that if I learned the lessons that I was being taught at Davis, I could make a contribution in the world.

There was also another thing I noticed in California. There was recognition that handicapped people needed some extra consideration . The cities there had handicapped stalls which we didn't have in Honolulu. When I returned, I called a friend of mine who had lost an arm in the war who was then working for the City and County of Honolulu and he encouraged the Mayor to put in the first handicapped stalls in Hawaii.

My biggest experiment in 1954 and 1955 was slipping a nylon bag into the stomach of a cow. Then I would feed the cow with as much local grain and molasses as I could and see how much they would eat. Then at four or eight hour intervals, I would take out the bag and measure the level of bacteria in the stomach and how far it had consumed the feed. By using this method I could figure how long it took the cattle to convert feed to animal protein. After numerous experiments, I was able to prove one day that the animals I was testing did not have to eat all the food I was giving them to gain weight. Their own natural systems would determine how much they did or did not eat. This might have been a small inconsequential discovery for other people, but for me it was a feeling of total triumph that I had used the knowledge that I gained on the Mainland and done something that worked.

When I returned back to Hawaii with my PhD in 1954, Professor Henke offered me a job as assistant professor in animal science. I was so happy to get the job. There I was able to spend my time doing experiments with cattle and pigs. It was a time of enormous opportunity for me. The children were little. Professor Henke was a very tolerant and generous boss and my teaching load was very light, so I was free to experiment with cattle as much as I liked.

Since I had been a child on the plantation, I was always curious how animals converted grasses and foliage to beef and milk. I wanted to do what I could to improve the conversion of feeds to human food. I had complete freedom to replicate many of the same kind of experiments I had seen at UC Davis. The nutrition orthodoxy and feeding practice at the time was that one should provide a fixed amount of feed for each of pound the animal gained. This led to enormous waste as the animals could not consume as much as they were fed and the farmers spent more than they needed to on very expensive feed.

The great expense came from having to ship all the feed from the Mainland. Unfortunately, the feed was necessary as the local grass does not contain adequate nutrients and for that reason healthy cattle have to have grain supplements.

To someone who had spent hours and hours of his youth with animals, the idea that you had to feed animals a set amount based on a fixed formula made little sense to me. My belief was that animals were self-regulating and that they would stop eating when their systems told them to stop. I thought that I would start doing my own experiments to prove that I was right. The idea of using the nylon bag was something that I had read about on the Mainland. By measuring the level of bacteria of digestion I could measure the speed of the digestion and hence how much feed an animal needed.

Most of my colleagues in animal science had never spent much time on farms and I think they were used to laboratory animals, not large farm animals. Very few of them seemed particularly interested in research either. When I started doing experiments, many of them seemed interested and amused. "What on earth is he doing?" was the reaction of some of my colleagues. I didn't mind. I was getting paid for something liked to do. I was home in Hawaii and I had Janet and my family and a job I loved to do. As far as I was concerned, these were some of the happiest days of my life

I starting giving the cattle large piles of feed and tracking their productive performance and after a while I began to see a pattern. Animals responded according to the protein each required.

I started with different rations with varied levels of molasses, grain and roughage and vitamins and experimented to find the feeding regimen that offered the greatest amount of weight gain in the shortest time. Because transportation costs in Hawaii are so high, my goal was to make use of the waste products of the plantations so the animals would be fed on what was already here.

There were several other experiments I was able to do. One of them involved putting a piece of glass in a cow's stomach to watch the process of digestion. The other was using B complex vitamins. Another used radio isotopes to trace the digestion process in the cow's stomach.

Department of Agriculture

When I pulled up in front of the Hawaii Sugar Planters Association research station at the end of Keeaumoku Street in 1963, I knew it was going to be an eventful morning. I had just been appointed chairman of the State Board of Agriculture by newly elected Governor John A. Burns and I was going to my first meeting with the all-powerful Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association, known in Hawaii by its acronym HSPA.

For more than 100 years, the Hawaiian Sugar Planters Association was so powerful they determined every kind of political and social event in Hawaii in either negative or positive ways. There were more than 40 sugar plantations in Hawaii at that time and they provided, after tourism, the largest single source of revenue for the Islands. The owners of the companies were generally related to the missionary and business families who came in the 19th century. They had been the employers of the Scottish foreman who came into my family's house and I knew that only a few years before that it would have been unlikely for me as a Japanese-American to be invited among them.

They had their own research scientists which they kept aloof from the University of Hawaii. The thinking was that anything that the University did was in the public domain.

Because they were so advanced in developing new and valuable plant hybrids, it was in their interest to keep their own research laboratory where they anything they developed was proprietary.

I walked into the building on my crutches and the tall men of Hawaii's sugar industry looked at me with a mix of curiosity and caution. Everyone was neatly dressed up as I was. I sat down and was introduced by Robert Cushing, the Director of the HSPA. They were all tall, white Anglo Saxon gentlemen, nearly all over six feet, in height and I was a 4 feet 11" Japanese-American on one leg. There was a moment of silence and I was asked by Mr. Cushing why I believed that they should combine their own private research station with the efforts of the University of Hawaii.

I told him that I had grown up on the sugar plantations when labor was cheap. Now labor was organized by the unions and was asking for fair wages. I explained that from my perspective the high costs of producing sugar cane in Hawaii would make the plantations unprofitable and would drive them out of business.

At that point, there was uncomfortable silence. I knew they were thinking, “what right does this little twerp have to tell us our business? “ I went on to say that they had many things to offer sugar plantations around the world where land and labor were cheaper. They could sell their considerable expertise in agricultural research. I asked them why they wanted to stay in production, which in the long term was likely to be a losing enterprise when they could sell their expertise and become world famous consultants instead. I said that as the new chairman of the State Department of Agriculture I could help and that we should combine all the independent sugar and pineapple industry research stations with those of the University of Hawaii. I said that the time had come for us to be flexible, to get out of these big one-crop plantations and diversify into more highly priced crops in which we would have a bigger comparative advantage. This is what the rest of the world is doing and we should do to.

At that point they stared at me in silence which I took to be a polite decline. I thanked them for their time and when the meeting was ove,r I left quietly in my car. I was to be head of agriculture in Hawaii for the next eight years. Sadly, my warning went unheeded and by the time I left office, most of the sugar plantations were either on shaky ground or going out of business.

Prior to my appointment, the State Department of Agriculture had been a quiet regulatory agency whose main function was to protect the interests of the sugar planters who controlled the land, the water and most of the politics in the State of Hawaii through their trade organization (HSPA). They had ruled Hawaii for nearly 100 years, using their power to make sure that the best land and water went to their plantations.

In many ways, I was their worst nightmare. I understood the economics of sugar plantations intimately because of my background. I knew their strengths and their weaknesses. And I was not afraid to tell them. There was always tension on the sugar plantation between the mostly white managers and the Japanese and Filipino workers and now as a result of the social revolution in Hawaii, I who had once been a field worker in a home where a plantation manager dragged my sick father out of bed while stomping through the house in riding boots, was in charge of the regulatory agency that managed everything agricultural the plantations did. If this had been scripted in a novel, I would have never believed it and yet here I was.

I was not the first choice in the new Burns Administration to be appointed to the position of Chairman of Agriculture. I doubt if I was even the third. One day, soon after Governor Burns was elected, one of my colleagues at the University of Hawaii came up to me and said “Congratulations”. I said congratulations for what? and then he showed me the morning newspaper in which it said an unknown assistant Professor of animal science at the University of Hawaii named Ken Otagaki was to be the new chairman of the State Department of Agriculture. I called Janet and I took a breath. I was totally surprised. I said “Guess what? They have just appointed me Chairman of the State Department of Agriculture. “ There was a pause at the end of the line and Janet said. “But you already have a job.”She was not enthusiastic. But I was. I was completely astonished.

What had happened was that the newly elected Burns administration was looking for someone for that office and my two friends, Senator Dan Inouye and Spark Matsunaga who was later a US Senator, recommended me to the Burns people.

It was a huge leap for me from my tiny office in the animal science department at UH to the Board Chairman’ s office, a seat in the new cabinet and a telephone line to the Governor. From being a nobody, I was suddenly “it”. People came up and spoke to me, wanted to know my opinion on things and invited me to fancy dinners and functions at Washington Place.

The sugar and pineapple industries took my appointment in stride. They were big business and had every reason to be confident that when the chips were down, the Governor and the powers that be would back them up. They expected things to go “business as usual.”

By the time I was appointed Chairman of the Board of Agriculture, the shrewdest of them knew that eventually the most valuable lands they owned were not be used for sugar cane, but for luxury hotels and housing.. However, in the meantime, they were smart enough businessmen to know that they had to keep sugar growing in order to take advantage of the generous federal subsidies that kept their plantations profitable and paid their bills until they could get the necessary land use permits to develop their lands for tourism.. They expected to keep sugar growing as a profitable sideline while they developed their lands for tourism at maximum profit.

More than that though was the lifestyle that sugar represented. It was the dominance of the old style establishment that had ruled Hawaii from big, white houses for more than 100 years. There were wealthy mostly white, upper class families, now largely interrelated to one another, sitting comfortably on interrelated boards that had enjoyed a comfortable lifestyle for generations and most did not want things to change. But change was in the wind.

It was 1963, John F. Kennedy was the president of the United States. Governor John Burns had led the Hawaii Democrats to victory and, we, the World War II generation, were in charge. It was an exciting moment in history to be a part of.

I did not just want to be in office. I wanted to do things. I wanted to make things happen. Like many of my colleagues my chance soon came.

Soon after I came in office a group of dairy farmers came to see me. They knew me because of my long time work in cattle nutrition. They were mostly Portuguese. At that time agriculture in Hawaii was largely divided by ethnicity. The whites did pineapple and sugar, The Japanese had chicken farms and truck farms. The Chinese did truck farming and had produce stores. The Okinawans raised pigs. For each group there was a recognized niche.

They came to me with a familiar story. The milk processing industry was dominated by two large dairies, Foremost and Meadow Gold. They paid the dairy farmers as little as they could for their milk and charged consumers as much as the market would bear. Meanwhile, the farmers were paying ever increasing amounts for feed. They were being squeezed out of business.

Over the years, the independent dairy men had been my friends and supporters and provided me with data for my research. I felt that since they helped me that I should help them and that I was now in a position where I could. What could go wrong? After I announced that the Department of Agriculture was in favor of the farmers getting more for their milk a huge public relations attack was mounted against me.

The large dairies accused me, Ken Otagaki, of interfering in the market, of threatening their livelihoods, of putting their employees out of work! Never mind that they had been the beneficiaries of government subsidies for many years. There were hearings at the legislature. I received phone calls at home threatening to kill me and my family if I didn’t back down. This was hardball and I was not at first prepared for how nasty a discussion on milk prices could be. Nor did I recognize that decisions I made at work would affect the lives of my family. for the first time I realized that in public life one doesn’t just expose oneself to criticism and personal risk but ones entire family

I was naïve. Any challenge to the established economic order in Hawaii I learned would bring nasty repercussions. Few wanted to risk change.

Fortunately, Governor Burns backed me on this. Even when the pressure from the dairies became very strong and there were editorials supporting them in the newspaper he asked me only. "Is this the right thing to do?" And when I said yes, he said "be fair and treat everyone equally." We went ahead and supported the farmers. Eventually we were able to reach a settlement with set quota and prices. The dairies survived, the farmers did better and everyone went back to work.

I found myself testifying at the legislature usually with, but sometimes against, people I had known for years. It was sometimes very intense, but intellectually I loved being in the political arena. It wasn't always pleasant, but it was exciting.

The next confrontation that I faced came from the vegetable vendors in Chinatown. From my experience working there in the Co-op, I knew that there were always unscrupulous merchants who used fake weights. This was a small issue. However, dishonest merchants made a fortune off poor people who had no one to look out for them. I thought it was wrong. The problem was that the Department did not regulate weights and measures in stores. We had inspectors, but we had no one with the job of going into stores and checking how they sold their meat or fish. This sounds like it would have been a normal kind of action to take in any society – to safeguard the public well being. The wholesalers were generally very honest and the problem, as I expected, was among the retailers. I said there needed to be change.

This set in motion another firestorm of protest. Many of the merchants who had been doing this for years questioned why anyone would interfere. For them it was let the buyer beware. They expected to continue the way things always had been done. Eventually we did introduce standards and life went on.

You could say that this caused many headaches for Governor Burns. He obviously had more important things to worry about than weights and measures in Chinatown. The huge outcry was undoubtedly a distraction from other things he was trying to accomplish and I am sure an annoyance. Yet he stuck with me and we were able to achieve a small degree of reform in this area.

I also pushed during this time for the implementation of experimental corn crops in Hawaii. A researcher had discovered that because of Hawaii's unique climate we could get three crops a year and it would cut research costs for seed growers. Most corn was grown by seed growers on the Mainland in places where only two crops per year were possible. The longer the growing season, the more varieties could be tested in the multi-million dollar seed business. Others grew corn in South America, but regimes there were unstable and created uncertainty.

The fact they could do it in Hawaii rather than in a place in the Southern Hemisphere meant that their businesses were protected by U.S. regulations. We started the corn experimentation program in 1965 and eventually it grew into a huge multi-million dollar business and became the fastest growing sector in Hawaiian agriculture.

These were my successes. I also had failures. The worst was 'the green chop." Because of my work in nutrition at the University of Hawaii, I had become very interested in using different kinds of locally produced agricultural materials for animal feed. It was so expensive to bring in hay from the Mainland. We could increase the profitability of agriculture by using locally grown plant by-products as animal feeds.

One of the ideas was to use discarded pineapple leaves, chop it up and use it for cattle feed. The economics of this seemed very appealing. It was a waste product that could be taken from the pineapple fields and with minimal efforts made available to cattle growers. The pineapple leaves have a lot of sugar within them and provide valuable silage for the animals. There was some concern when I began this experiment as to whether the pesticide that is used to control pests in pineapple would be present in the green chop as residue after we cut it up and served it to the cattle. I asked this specific question of the chemists at the Pineapple Research Center. They said not to worry because we were dealing with organic pesticides that would breakdown as they were consumed by the cattle and as a result, there would be no residue left over in the feed. They assured me there would be no trace elements that would be found in the cattle.

Readers let this be a lesson to you. If there anything that is crucial to your life, check it out yourself. What happened next was a disaster. A year after green chop was introduced, the pesticide heptachlor which was used in the pineapple plants against parasitic nematodes was found in the dairy milk. There was a costly lawsuit against the State that involved the State paying a large sum of money and the whole effort at finding an alternative from by-products was dropped.

The other major disappointment that affected me at the State Department of Agriculture was the Kohala Task Force. This was towards the end of my stay during the Burns Administration. The Kohala Sugar Plantation had closed, stranding hundreds of workers in the Kohala area of the Big Island without jobs.

The sudden closing of the plantations had left a vacuum and there was nothing to replace the lost sources of income. The International Longshoreman’s Workers Union ((ILWU) wanted the State to take action. As a result, the Kohala Task Force was created to funnel millions of dollars in aid to this area to rejuvenate agriculture and provide jobs. All of the proposals were well meaning. However, it became clear to me from the outset that this would not work.

The success or failure of agricultural businesses is based on a number of factors: the uniqueness of the product, the proximity to markets and the skill of the farmer and marketers. What they were proposing in Kohala was to bypass all the known wisdom of farm business through generous government subsidies that would essentially recreate the jobs and security that had been lost when the plantation closed. They planned to build nurseries that would supply the growing hotel and golf course developments coming up on the south side of the island. In the newspapers this sounded pretty good. However, in practice we faced the intense opposition from well established nurseries in Hilo who were not all enthusiastic about the prospect of Government funded competitors springing up and competing with them on the other side of the island. To make matters worse, developing nurseries takes time and skilled workers. The workers from the plantations did not have those kinds of skills. I thought that the entire enterprise was doomed to fail from the beginning.

What followed was another harsh lesson in politics. I told Governor Burns my reservations. But he was under intense pressure to restore jobs from the unions who were his most loyal political supporters, so who was he going to listen to, me or them. Governor Burns told me he was going ahead with the task force. The result was a disaster. The money was allocated, then disappeared. There were public scandals. The businesses failed and the State Department of Agriculture, which was in the middle of it, got the blame. It was the end of my tenure as head of the Department. I was, of course, disappointed but I had a great time as Chairman and got to do really interesting things. At the end I was out of a job and soon back at the University.

Consulting

Then an amazing thing happened. I got a call from Wayne Richardson of Alexander and Baldwin, one of the “Big Five” owners of sugar plantations in Hawaii. He ask me to become an international agricultural advisor for the consulting firm that they had started. He asked me if I would like to join their team and go around the world. The children were grown. I leapt at the chance.

Lessons of My life

I suppose the greatest lesson of my life is that I was very lucky. You might ask how anyone who suffered the traumatic wounds that I did during the war and survived might be considered lucky. Well, the truth is that my greatest piece of luck was that Janet married me. I think that made up for everything else. In life, to have somebody love you and believe in you are really more important than anything else. It's certainly more important than fame or status or money. The other things all can come and go, but to have someone be your mate and friend and supporter, that is something that is really important.

The reason that I made any money at all was because of Janet. Janet stayed home and never worked. But she was always reading. She took the money I earned and invested in McDonalds and Disney and Hewlett Packard when very few people knew about those stocks. It was Janet who made the difference in my life.

I was also very lucky in my friendships. I had people all along in my life who believed in me - Mrs. Nushida, Mr. Gothe in Hilo, Mr. Maneki in Honolulu, Professor Henke, Senator Cooke, Professors Morgan and Lepinsky. I was very fortunate to have these mentors in my life.

They were people who looked out for me and were willing to help me. I think in my life I had a handful of true friendships and they made a difference. I am very fortunate in having people all along who looked at this person who was a country bumpkin, who came from a small town on the Big Island with no education, no social background, no social graces, no contacts, no important friends and were willing to invest their time in him and help him make something of himself. I am eternally grateful to everyone who was kind enough to help me. I was very lucky that somehow fate and coincidence played a role in having me meet people who believed in me or,more precisely, believed there was something inside of this raw person that was worth developing.

I took enormous risks in my life. I came to Honolulu with $5.00 in my pocket and went to work for Mr. Meneke at the Co-op not knowing at all how that would work out. I knew that the only way I could get away from the plantation was if I took the steps myself. It has been said that without risk, there is no reward. I might easily have ended up as a truck driver on the plantation if I hadn't left.

I think it is important to try things even though you know they might fail. If there are no failures, there are no successes. However, I know how much failure can hurt, especially in politics when things can happen that are out of your control like the Kohala Task Force. It didn't matter what I told the Governor - he was determined to pursue something that turned out to be a failure.

I should have never listened to the Pineapple Research Institute about the lack of heptachlor residue in the feed. It was my responsibility. Anything that is important, you should check, check again and double check on your own to see the information is correct. The heptachlor lesson was harsh, but one that I never forgot.

I think if I have a big regret it is that I was selfish without knowing it. I enjoyed my career and my job so much that I worked from 8:00 in the morning until late at night and then I was out again first thing in the morning. It irked Janet that I did that, because she knew that our children were young and needed me at home. I think it's important to have balance in your family and professional life. It is something that still bothers me. In retrospect, I think that I probably owed more time to Janet and more time for the children.

I was very fortunate in having a career I loved doing. I loved animals. I loved managing a farm. I loved teaching. I loved the University. I loved my job as Chairman of the State Department of Agriculture. I loved traveling the world doing agricultural consulting. If people were to ask me about my life and what I learned, I would say find someone to love and do what you love. In my life, I was very fortunate in being able to have both. I think the feeling that you are making a contribution is what counts. You have to feel your presence on this earth has made a difference.