

"A THING OF STRENGTH AND SPLENDOR. . ."

The Growth of Northern California's Nikkei Flower Industry

By Dianne Fukami

A patchwork of color springs up among rows and rows of cultivated dirt, vivid purples here in one area, pinks and whites in another. Greenhouses separate the fields, their frosted panes obscuring what lies within. Three generations of the Ninomiya family of Richmond, California have grown cut flowers on this land. Now the family is retired and leases the land to a large company that provides bedding plants and flowers to discount stores and home supply stores for the do-it-yourself market. This is one example of how the Nikkei floral industry is evolving in the new century.

The Nikkei floral industry has its roots in the San Francisco Bay Area. Much has been written about the Domoto brothers of Oakland, who became commercial flower growers in the late 1800s and who inspired and mentored many other Issei to join the industry [see Timeline below]. In 1906, after the San Francisco earthquake, 42 Nikkei flower growers formed the California Flower Growers Association. They established the California Flower Market in San Francisco in 1909 as a place where growers and wholesalers could sell their flowers to retailers. The Market incorporated in 1912 with 54 Japanese flower growers as shareholders.

It was not an easy life. Opportunities were scarce due to language barriers and prejudice. Immigration was restricted



as
a
result
of the 1908
Gentlemen's

Agreement, which limited the numbers of Japanese laborers allowed into America; the Alien Land Law of 1913 prohibited Japanese from owning land and other laws prevented Japanese from becoming naturalized citizens or marrying Caucasians, which would have enabled them to circumvent the Alien Land Law. Many of the Issei had never grown flowers before coming to the United States. Job discrimination, combined with the success stories of fellow immigrants, lured them to this new experience.

But determination and sheer hard work helped them overcome adversity. They leased the land on which to grow their flowers and when their American children were born, purchased land under their children's names. Husband, wife

NIKKEI IN NORTHERN CALIFORNIA'S FLOWER INDUSTRY

By Kenji Murase

The history of Nikkei in the flower industry in this country began in the San Francisco Bay Area as early as 1884. The earliest of the Issei flower growers had no previous experience in floriculture in Japan, but through trial and error, they learned how to grow and market their products. Over time they developed methods to produce a superior quality of flowers and to become the dominant growers in the industry.

The following is a chronology of significant events in a history marked by the struggle and sacrifice of the pioneers, expansion and prosperity, the founding of the Nikkei-owned-and-operated California Flower Market, the disruption of war and internment, their return and recovery, transition from Nisei to Sansei leadership, the introduction of new production and marketing methods, global competition and the energy crisis.

and their Nisei children all worked in the family greenhouses, watering, disbudding, picking, and sorting the flowers. The more successful businesses were those with extended family to help out, usually at least two or three male siblings with their wives and children assisting. By 1904 the Domoto brothers oversaw the largest flower-raising enterprise on the West Coast, with national and international distribution. Nikkei who worked for them were encouraged to start their own businesses. Many found that the San Francisco peninsula was a great location, with its benign climate and easy access to transportation.

The Enomoto brothers were one family who made the move and began growing roses and carnations in Redwood City. But the big cash crop on the Peninsula was chrysanthemums; the use of cheesecloth to shield the chrysanthemums from the elements produced higher yields for flower growers. As a boy, Hideyoshi Kashima remembers families traveling from one nursery to another in the off-season to help each other construct the cheesecloth frames and sew the yards of cheesecloth together.

The first big economic setback for the flower growers was the Great Depression, which in 1931 prompted the formation of the California Chrysanthemum Growers Association, a cooperative designed to control production and enable volume purchases of supplies. After a rocky start, the chrysanthemum growers in the Association began to see the fruits of their labor; by 1937 five Japanese families decided to buy the Horgan Ranch land they were leasing in Redwood City, where the Association also opened new headquarters.

The second setback was one that would affect every Japanese flower grower: the removal of people of Japanese

ancestry from the West Coast during World War II and their subsequent incarceration at War Relocation Authority camps. Many were given less than 48 hours to dispose of their property, pack their possessions and leave their homes for what would be several years. In some cases non-Japanese growers and non-growers stepped in to take over the leases from the Japanese, agreeing to maintain and operate the nurseries in their absence. In other cases

Japanese growers were forced to abandon their homes and nurseries completely during the war. Others had to sell their land to pay property taxes incurred during their imprisonment. The Ninomiya family in Richmond was among the lucky ones; Caucasian neighbors volunteered to maintain and watch over their greenhouses while they were gone.

When the flower growers and other Nikkei were finally allowed to return to the West Coast in 1945, much had changed. Some families found their greenhouses, equipment and plants damaged and vandalized. Even those who had been lucky enough to entrust their property to neighbors or lessees often discovered that neglect and poor maintenance had taken its toll during the war—it had been difficult to acquire the supplies and manual labor needed to properly maintain the flowers and greenhouses. Instead, the greenhouses had been used to grow vegetables to sustain the temporary owners during wartime.

The California Flower Market had been able to arrange for the San Francisco Flower Growers Association to act as caretakers for the operation during the war, providing a trickle of rental income for the Nikkei board members who were incarcerated. But even when they returned to the Flower Market after the war, they faced hostility from Caucasian growers, wholesalers and retailers who wanted to



Okada Brothers, San Lorenzo, 1910s

1884

1885

1887

The Issei Pioneers

Takanoshin Domoto arrives in San Francisco, to be followed shortly by his brothers, Kanetaro, Motonoshin and Mitsunoshin. The Domoto brothers become the core of the early founders of the Nikkei flower growing industry in Northern California.

Domoto brothers rent a plot of land in Oakland and become the first commercial growers of flowers in Northern California.



Hiroshi Yoshiike, a domestic worker, plants chrysanthemum seedlings brought from Japan in the backyard of his employer's house. He begins to sell the chrysanthemums in the neighborhood. He later rents an acre of land and experiments with chrysanthemum cultivation. The Japanese variety of large-petal chrysanthemums are a novelty

and an attraction to people accustomed to the small-petal Chinese variety. In response to demands, Yoshiike builds five new greenhouses in West Oakland and adds carnations to his production.

exclude them and avert the competition they would bring. Those efforts proved unsuccessful and the Nikkei flower growers were able to continue the business relationships they had nurtured before the war.

One of the biggest results of the war was a psychological passing of the torch. Before the war the Issei clearly were in charge of the family businesses and the families as well. The eviction from the West Coast and the years behind barbed wire had taken a toll. When they were released from camp, many of the Issei were near retirement age and lacked the stamina and enthusiasm needed to restart their businesses. Their Nisei children were now young adults and capable of shouldering the burden of the family business, which they did. In cases such as the Kitayama family's, Nisei brothers banded together to continue or form new operations. The three brothers were able to turn a 16-acre lot on the east side of the San Francisco bay into what would become Kitayama Brothers Corporation, one of the largest and most modern nursery and wholesale flower operations in the country.

Today the future of the Nikkei floral industry faces many challenges. Imported flowers, rising labor and energy costs and government regulations pose threats to the domestic floral industry at large. In California, the appreciating value of land has made it attractive for growers to "grow condos" instead of flowers. In 1992, Masaji Honda's nursery in Redwood City on the San Francisco peninsula, the last in an area once known as the "Chrysanthemum Belt," became a thing of the past when he accepted a \$2 million offer for his land.

Part of Honda's motivation for selling was that his children were not interested in the family business, as is the case in many of the smaller family-run Nikkei floral farms. Sansei and Yonsei don't face the job scarcity and prejudice the Nisei and Issei did; they have many more career opportunities. Also, in spite of modern technology, flower growing remains a tough business. Growers are subject to the vagaries of the economic and political climate and the mar-

keting competition, both foreign and domestic, is fierce. Still, some families continue their flower growing tradition into the third and fourth generations, such as the Shibatas of Mt. Eden, the Kitayamas, the Yoshidas of Sunnyside Nurseries and the Sakai Brothers among others.

A post-war Nikkei floral community bloomed in the Watsonville-Salinas area, started by the Nagamine, Fukutome and Yamaguchi families. Like the Domotos before them, in the 1960s they attracted immigrants from the Kagoshima area of Japan, so that today there are currently more than 50 nurseries in the area owned by growers from Kagoshima, the catalyst for the founding of the Monterey Bay Flower Growers Association. They are struggling in the present economic climate, but they survive.

The survival of the Nikkei floral industry lies in its ability to innovate and evolve. Most of the existing family businesses no longer rely on just growing their own flowers in order to make a living, but have branched out into shipping, retailing, importing, breeding or partnering with other businesses. But the future owes its success to the Issei pioneers who worked the land with their hands and sacrificed so much for their families. The words of flower grower Eiichi Yoshida pay homage to the generations that came before: "In the language of horticulture, the scion is posterity. Through the scion the original is preserved. And if the original was a thing of strength and splendor, those features can be perpetuated in the scion. Just as this is a basic truth of horticulture, so it is true in our personal and business lives. What we enjoy and too often take for granted today has its roots in the vision, the toil and the wisdom of those who came before us...We, the scions, look backward to remember our ancestors with respect, gratitude and the hope that the present at least approximates the posterity they envisioned." *

Dianne Fukami has produced and written documentaries and videos about Japanese American history. She is co-writing a book on the Japanese Americans on the San Francisco Peninsula and currently serves on the Board of Directors of NJAHS.

1892

The Domoto brothers purchase two acres of land in Oakland and expand their production to include roses, lilies and camellias, in addition to chrysanthemums and carnations. They import ornamental plants from Japan, Australia and Europe and introduce camellias, Japanese maple, ginko, azaleas, and other Japanese plants.



1894

The Midwinter Fair in San Francisco showcases the Japanese Tea Garden, designed by Makoto Hagiwara. The fair features Japanese plants and flora that create a sensation and heightens public demand for these products.

