The Sakuma Family History

A Japanese-American Family Success Story

Honoring the past. Growing the future.

The Sakuma Family in Seattle walking to the train to the Manzanar internment camp in California.

The Sakuma Brothers Farm in northwest Washington is well known throughout the industry and region as a leader in berry production and processing as well as for its berry plant nursery. What may not be as well known is the remarkable Sakuma family history, a true American family success story.
The Beginnings

The story starts in 1907 on the island of Kyushu south of the Japanese mainland. Young Takeo Sakuma came to the West Coast of the United States leaving home and everything familiar behind. He moved to Bainbridge Island, west of Seattle and began farming. Like many garden farmers, he took his produce to Seattle by ferry selling at terminal markets and the Pike’s Place Market. Takeo returned to Japan and married Nobu in October, 1914. She immigrated in 1915 and they started a family. Such was the beginning of the Sakuma family farm. The land they farmed was rented as Japanese immigrants were prohibited from owning land at that time.

From Bainbridge to Burlington

Takeo Sakuma became known for growing strawberries, a real challenge in the soil and growing conditions of Bainbridge Island. A Seattle processor suggested to Sakuma’s that the fertile Skagit Valley near Burlington was an ideal place for growing strawberries. It was the eldest of the second generation who, after graduating from high school in 1935, moved to Burlington. Atsusa Sakuma was the oldest of the nisei generation, the first of the family to be born in the United States. He also became the first of the family to grow berries in Skagit Valley. The stories of ideal strawberry growing conditions proved accurate. The rest of the family remained in Bainbridge but would come to the Burlington farm during the summer to help with the harvest. One by one, Atsusa’s brothers would join him in on the Skagit farm when they graduated from high school.
But a dark cloud was hanging over the world in those days, the cloud of war. In 1937 Japan invaded China and pushed its empire throughout Southeast Asia. In 1941, four Sakuma brothers were farming together in Burlington supporting the rest of the family that remained on Bainbridge Island. That all changed in December 1941 with the attack on Pearl Harbor. Suddenly America became a place that welcomed immigrants--except those from Japan.

In March 1942, the Sakuma family received orders to relocate to the Manzanar internment camp in California located in the remote foothills of the Sierra Nevada mountains. In June 1942 the Sakuma brothers from Burlington were ordered to the Tulelake camp in northern California. It was over five hundred miles from the rest of their family. They were given a list of personal possessions they could take with them including blankets, toiletries, silverware and clothing. Everything else had to be stored.

The Sakuma family spent the next three years behind barbed wire, under constant guard. The cabins and rooms were overcrowded and poorly constructed with up to 32 per cabin and 8 per room. The rooms were for sleeping only. Bathrooms, laundry, kitchen and dining rooms all were in other buildings. There were long lines to do anything including eat an ordinary meal.

While their family members were treated as enemies of America, six of the eight Sakuma boys joined the US Army to fight for the freedom of all Americans. Three joined the famed 442nd Infantry Regiment and fought in Europe. The 442nd was a self-contained fighting force of about 14,000 soldiers almost all of whom were nisei, or Japanese-Americans born in the United States. Many, if not most of their families, were interned in camps while these soldiers went on to become the highest decorated infantry regiment in US history. With eight Presidential unit citations, 18,000 medals and 21 Medals of Honor awarded, the 442nd is widely known for its bravery and effectiveness in combat. Three other sons served in the Pacific Theater in the Military Intelligence Service. Serving as translators and guides to Japanese culture, these soldiers provided invaluable...
service to the Allies.

With the end of the war, the Sakuma family returned. Their property in Bainbridge was sold or donated and most of their stored items were lost. The entire family moved to Burlington. During the war years, their strawberry farm had been maintained by the Oscar Mapes family who graciously returned it to the Sakumas—an act of kindness that will never be forgotten. This sad chapter in American history had some closure in 1988 when President Ronald Reagan signed an act of Congress providing a presidential apology and a symbolic payment to the families interned in the camps.

With their success in growing strawberries, the Sakuma brothers decided to get into the certified plant business in 1948. Their plants provided the start for many strawberry farmers throughout Western Washington and the West Coast. The success of this business led to expansion of the nursery operation and location in northern California. Two of the brothers moved to the Redding, California area to run the growing Norcal Nursery business around 1970. Production acreage for Norcal can now be found throughout Oregon and California.

An expanding family meant expanding farm operations and in the early 1970s the Burlington farm branched out into raspberries, blueberries and a raspberry plant nursery.

In 1977 the transition began to the third generation of Sakuma family members. This generation, called sansei, was the second generation born in the United States. This transition of management was completed in the year 2000 when the last of the nisei generation, the sons of the first Sakuma farmer, retired at age 75. Brothers Bryan and Glenn along with cousin Richard managed the Washington operations. Cousins Ron and John were managing the California operations.

The Sakuma family entered the fruit processing business in 1990, originally leasing their processing plant building to another processor. In 1997 Sakuma bought the
processing equipment and began Sakuma Brothers Processing, Inc. In 2003 the plant was expanded by adding an Individual Quick Freeze, or IQF, facility. 2005 saw further expansion with a cooler for incoming fruit.

The Sakuma Brothers operation was fully integrated in 1999 with the addition of a sales department. The vertical integration now encompasses all aspects of small fruit production and marketing including plant propagation, research, commercial nursery operations and sales, berry and fruit farming and harvesting and a fresh market retail stand. Sakuma berries can be found throughout the United States and in many parts of the world including a large presence in Japan, Europe, Mexico and Canada.

2004 was an important year of transition for the family as the first female board member was welcomed. Hebe (Sakuma) Bradley joined the board while the first of the fourth generation, the yonsei generation, was brought into the business. Ryan Sakuma, son of Steve Sakuma,
joined as a Corporate Director and currently serves as President of the farming operations. In 2012 Ron Sakuma, the eldest of the sansei, third generation, retired and the transition to the next generation of Sakuma family members is underway.

So the Sakuma family tradition of excellence in berry and fruit production continues--now into the fourth generation. Throughout all the challenges of farming, of family, of war--throughout all this the family tradition holds strong. The new generation is as committed as the first Sakuma’s to the corporate vision:

“Honoring our past, growing our future.”