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A Journey to the American Dream: Okinawan Family Histories in the New World

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Abstract: *The path to America has always involved an array of timelines, routes, and circumstances. The well-documented Ellis Island corridors display just a glimpse of the human migration story--focusing solely on the European experience—yet have remained the quintessential portrayal of immigrants entering America. The narratives of those arriving from the Pacific have largely remained unheard—receiving little, if any, mention. This report will not remedy the inclination to generalize American cultural and historical information; rather, it will provide readers with some insight into the diversity of situations and challenges faced by immigrants. The descriptions that follow are based on interviews that have attempted to gather information of two family histories and include both firsthand and secondhand accounts. The accounts collected in the interviews concern the stories of those traveling from the island of Okinawa to America and their lives thereafter.*

Keywords: American culture, human migration, Okinawan studies, oral history

Introduction

At the onset of the 20th century, an exodus from the island of Okinawa transpired due to harsh living conditions at home and an outlook of brighter economic opportunities abroad. The price for passage involved a treacherous affair. Dishonest brokers negotiated travel arrangements that bankrupted families and forced those on passage into indentured servitude (e.g., Hibbett, 2010). Many were falsely led to believe that conditions abroad would be better, but soon learned the graveness of their situation after work began in the fields (e.g., Ethnic Studies Oral History Project, 1981). Joe Yamagawa describes the struggle his parents endured in their journey to America and the years of turmoil thereafter.

During the years of U.S. military occupation in Okinawa, 1950-1972, the voices of those emigrating abroad seem less pronounced. Nevertheless, their stories offer much insight and interest. Hiroko Cantrell describes an arranged marriage that her family had tried to pursue—despite her strong opposition. She escapes those demands after obtaining a job on a U.S. military base and later marries an

American. Life abroad becomes demanding, as she later realizes while struggling to raise her daughter alone. In the end, Hiroko maintains a strong determination to prevail over much adversity.

The interviews took place in March of 2016 in the vicinity of Gardena, California. The interviewees were given the freedom to direct conversation as they pleased. Experiences are different and as such, each interviewee paints a slightly different picture of the American landscape. Still, these recollections provide us with a glimpse into the character and spirit of Okinawans who have traveled abroad to the unknown and faced extraordinary challenges.

An Endless Path

Joe Yamagawa

Joe Yamagawa is 93 years old and one of the longest serving members in the Okinawa American Association. Following in his parents' footsteps, he has maintained the legacy of active involvement and support in the Okinawan community. Here, he details a remarkable journey taken by his parents to America and the struggles endured in their search of the American dream.

Joe's mother, Hana Kaneshi, was born in Nakijin in 1894. Later, she would go to Peru in 1912 after a pre-arranged marriage. As a way to pay for the passage, she worked as a contract laborer at a sugarcane

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plantation for one year along with her husband, brother, and cousin. The work was harsh; ten-hour shifts for six days a week. Many of the laborers died of malaria and other illnesses. No one ever imagined that conditions would have been so severe. Hana eventually finished her labor contract along with her husband—although her brother and cousin escaped the labor camp some time earlier. They all would eventually meet once again in Lima. After her arrival in Lima, Hana immediately started to work at a tea shop and eventually opened a shop of her own. A couple of years later, Hana became pregnant, but her son died while only eight-months old. More tragedy soon followed as her husband would suffer a long illness and die just a year later. Hana had to keep working at the tea shop for several more years to pay off her debts and those of her brother and cousin. Once those obligations were finally met, she decided to go to America. As plans were being made, Hana would meet her future husband who had arrived in Lima due to unforeseeable circumstances.

Joe's father, Kitaro Yamagawa, returned to Kouri Island after the war in Manchuria. He learned that his bride, from a pre-arranged marriage, ran away to Brazil to avoid the burden of being married to the eldest son of a household. Kitaro immediately made plans to leave Okinawa to pursue his bride, but his motives were also partially based on avoiding a redraft into the Japanese army. Along the journey to Brazil, he stopped at Peru for a few days and met Hana. They were soon married.

Meanwhile, Hana's brother and cousin eventually reached America after several ill-fated attempts. On their last attempt, they barely survived a deadly voyage as their boat caught fire and many in the group drowned in the Colorado River along the Mexico-U.S. border. Hana and Kitaro stayed behind in Peru and continued to work for another year. They wanted to save enough money for their own journey. After Hana's brother recovered from the disaster, he began working as a laborer and soon saved enough money to help his sister and Kitaro with their travel costs.

The journey to America would be dangerous. This was especially heightened by the fact that



Figure 1. Joe Yamagawa (left) and the author in Gardena, California in 2016.

Hana was pregnant—although unbeknown at the time. Still, she was determined to leave Peru for America. At the beginning of the trip, they had to go to Chili to get a boat that would navigate the waters towards Mexico. After leaving Lima and arriving at a port in Chile, Hana and Kitaro met a group of men who just arrived from Japan and also had plans to go to America. Since Hana was the only person able to communicate in Spanish, everyone thought it would be best to travel along with her. They boarded a boat that took them along the coasts of South America and Central America. After several weeks of travel, they eventually arrived in Mexico. From that point onward, they were to take a train for some distance and later travel by boat across the Sea of Cortez. It so happened that the journey turned quite treacherous halfway through as they encountered a violent storm. The boat somehow managed to stay afloat and after arriving at port the next morning, the group walked quite a distance inland to their next destination. Not a day had passed, and they were detained by Mexican police—despite having all of the proper documentation. They were put in a detention center for several days and then held at gunpoint by the police who demanded all of their money. They were eventually released and returned to the boat heartbroken. The captain sympathized with them and agreed to take everyone a little farther to the mouth of the Colorado River. There, they

began walking in a new direction, but into a desert. Although a less than desirable path, it was the shortest distance to America. Lacking money and fearing the police, this was the only way for them to get to America.

As they continued to walk, the group would occasionally see a nearby farmhouse. They were fortunate to receive much help from farmers who gave them shelter and food along the way. During their travels through the desert, Hana was taught how to make tortillas. Joe recalled his mother's description of the journey, "I would pat the tortilla dough as she walked through the desert, all the way to America." There was little time to rest.

As they continued to walk for days and days, the landscape began to gradually shift from desert to jungle. They were coming close to the border. It was then decided that the group should take extra precautions and travel only at night to avoid detection. However, those precautions were short-lived. They were soon caught near the border by Mexican mounted police. At that point, Hana cried and showed them that she was pregnant. The group then gathered all of their money and handed it over, but the police refused the bribe. Instead, they directed Hana and the group to a different direction, "Go that way and it's the safest passage to the border." The walk would continue for a couple more days with much more caution. Approaching a cotton farm, they soon heard people singing in Japanese. These were laborers working in the fields. They greeted each other and the laborers helped everyone by providing shelter and food for a couple of days.

The border was not far away. A fellow Okinawan who worked on another farm nearby helped Hana and arranged transportation over the border where she would be reunited with her brother. Kitaro stayed at the cotton farm to work for a couple of months before rejoining Hana. The Japanese men in the group also decided to stay to work as well.

In 1920, after a seven-month journey, Hana finally arrived in America and was reunited with her brother. He was working as a laborer on a farm in the Imperial Valley. Almost immediately after Hana's arrival in the U.S., she gave birth to a baby girl. The Imperial Valley would become home for Hana and Kitaro for the next six years. The family would grow in size to four children during those years. However, farming was not a feasible means of living. The Imperial Valley is essentially a de-

sert. Kitaro would soon need to look for employment elsewhere. The family decided to move to Los Angeles where Kitaro was able to find a job as a milk deliverer. Soon afterwards, Kitaro and some Okinawan friends started a wholesale produce business. The profits were marginal but enough to sustain the family for several years. In 1932, another Okinawan friend of Hana's asked if she could take over the lease of a hotel. She agreed and the hotel became quite profitable. In 1942, however, a notification was issued by the U.S. government requiring all Japanese to evacuate Los Angeles. Failure to comply meant being forced into an internment camp. The family decided to go to Colorado and work on a farm. They had a couple of Okinawan friends in the area. Farming became their primary source of income for the next few years. In 1945, as soon as the ban on Japanese in Los Angeles was lifted, Kitaro took the family back to their home. Life would be different. Although they lost the hotel that was left in the care of a friend, Hana eventually acquired a low-rent apartment. Running the apartment was very stressful since constant haggling became routine whenever she tried to collect rent. Several years would pass and the family expanded its enterprise to include additional apartments and hotels in prominent locations—reaching much success by the mid-1950s.

Throughout their entire lives, and especially during the turbulent years of hardship and struggle, Hana and Kitaro depended much on their close ties with friends and families—especially those in the Okinawan community; both home and abroad. The relentless efforts made to ensure the wellbeing of their family eventually led them to success. Joe Yamagawa understands firsthand the hardship faced by his parents as they strived to adapt to the American way of life. Still, it is evident that the *Uchinanchu* spirit has remained strong in Joe's family. His parents maintained close ties with the Okinawan community and had an active role in helping establish the Okinawa Association of America. Joe has continued the family tradition and remains active unto this day.

Independence and Determination

Hiroko Cantrell and Maudie Romero

Hiroko's family were originally from Ogimi Village. Her father was born in 1876 and her mother

in 1886. She recalls ceremonial visits to Nakijin Castle and the burning of incense in honor of her relatives. The family line descended from the third ruler.

After the war, it was a time of desperation as everyone struggled to get back to a normal life. Hiroko was the youngest daughter, and the family made plans for an arranged marriage. Hiroko was in her late 20s but had other ambitions. She had dreams of opening up her own beauty shop. Soon, she took the initiative and even went to the extent of placing a newspaper ad announcing the opening date of her beauty shop. In preparation for opening day, she had to clear a dense field that surrounded her shop. That required laborious outdoor work. She had to burn underbrush and debris. After a full day of outdoor work, Hiroko found herself covered completely in soot. While continuing to cut and burn branches, she saw some of her classmates walking by. They were all dressed quite fashionably in brand new clothes. Hiroko asked, "Where did you get those nice clothes?" They replied, "Oh, we all got jobs on the military base. We're working in a store and staying in the women's compound." At that instant, Hiroko dropped the branches and left the field.

Several days would pass before she finally went to the base and applied for a job. She was soon given a job and started working immediately. Once her family found out about her abrupt new venture, they became quite upset. They wanted to force her back home. They were concerned about the marriage arrangement, but Hiroko refused to go back home. She remained in the women's compound. She continued to work and live on the base. Sometime later, she would meet her future husband while working in the mess hall.

Hiroko got married and went to America in 1956. First, she traveled to Seattle on a transport boat and then made her way to North Carolina. There, she would spend the next several years with her husband who worked as a military police officer. After their daughter Maudie was born, the family decided to move to California. Hiroko started to work at a clothing factory and received the minimum wage of \$1.25 per hour. The total paycheck amounted to \$35 a week. She struggled to live on that amount of money. A friend advised her to go to a local business college. The tuition at the college was quite expensive at \$500 a month. The curricu-

lum required six months of study and training. Hiroko contacted her brothers and sisters who were working in Tokyo and Osaka at the time. They agreed to help her pay the college tuition. Meanwhile, tensions were starting to build up in her marriage. As Hiroko tried to manage her finances while raising Maudie as best as she could, she began to feel that her husband was careless in wasting lots of money. He would sometimes leave the house for days without offering any explanation. That soon forced Hiroko into a difficult decision; she decided to end the marriage in divorce.

Meanwhile, Hiroko continued to work towards her degree—although it was understandably a difficult time in her life. She had to remind herself that graduating from college would allow her to obtain a much higher-paying job. It seemed like an impossible dream to accomplish at the time because of money constraints, but she did her best to continue. She studied sewing at the business college. She was able to learn how to use many different types of industrial sewing machines. Hiroko described the sewing machines vividly; as being so fast and strong that sometimes clothes would fly off the table while being stitched. Right after graduation, Hiroko went to a company located next to the school and was hired immediately as a sample maker. Essentially, she would make clothes samples on her own and sell them to the company. In her apartment, she worked as hard as she could. Sometimes, the neighbors complained about the noise from her sewing machine. There was nothing she could do. She had to work. At times, Hiroko thought that continuing to work in her apartment wouldn't be possible, but she kept at it. Later, she was able to get a magazine that had some of the latest fashions from New York. She began creating clothing patterns based on those designs. After that adjustment, she was able to turn out a high-profit margin. She calculated that after purchasing \$5 worth of cloth, she could turn it into a \$10 dress that could be easily sold. Later on, she even made dresses for weddings. The training in using industrial sewing machines, along with the advice that she received from the business college, helped her financially in the long term. Since she was able to work fast and independently, that allowed her to make much more money. Hiroko was able to improve her economic circumstances from \$1.25 an hour to \$10 an hour.

Hiroko feels that all of her hard work and effort have paid off with the success of raising her daughter. She is really proud of the fact that Maudie always did very well in school; ultimately graduating from medical college. The sacrifice of leaving Okinawa was too great of a burden for failure to ensue. Hiroko remained strong and was able to succeed as a mother and provider through sheer determination.

Conclusion

Although the life stories in these interviews differ in terms of historical context and involve unique circumstances, several common elements emerge. All of interviewees share the perspective that an ill-fated outlook awaited them in Okinawa. Either due to harsh economic realities, military conscription, or arranged marriages, these were strong motives that influenced their decision to emigrate and seek a better way of life. Hope and desperation were some of the driving forces that led many immigrants to the United States (LeMay, 2012). After settling in

America, each of the interviewees mentioned the difficulties of coping with unfamiliar surroundings and overcoming extraordinary odds. There is no equal in terms of Okinawan determination and hard work, and these attributes helped lead them on a path to success in the New World.

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