

ALBERTA PIONEERS

SUGIZO NAKAMURA

by Johanna Wenzel



IT WAS SPRING in 1908 when Sugizo Nakamura started for Vancouver where he was happy to learn there was employment with Canadian Pacific Railway.

Mr. Nakamura is 99 this year. When he arrived on this continent he had his sights set on making his fortune. Along with countless other immigrants before and since he hoped to line his pockets with gold and then perhaps return home. Home was the island of Kyushu, Japan, where his parents and four brothers were eking out a meagre living from growing rice.

Gold rolled in slowly. Sugizo's job with the CPR was to cut railroad ties at eight cents a tie. On a good day, he said, he was able to do about 40. It was hard work. Several months later he moved on to the B.C. interior. Finally he took a job as a lumberjack for a sawmill company in the Cranbrook area. It wasn't long before the foreman realized Sugizo needed no supervision. He had proven himself to be an exceptionally reliable worker. Thus, in addition to his regular \$2.00 daily pay, he received a bonus of 50c to \$1.00. All the while Sugizo was concerned about the welfare of his family in Japan, and sent a good portion of his income to them.

Although he had some problems with the English language, Canada did not intimidate him. He had come over with the motto, "I'm not afraid of anyone." Part of his self-confidence stemmed from a pastime in his youth. As a young man in Japan he and his brothers had fought wrestling matches in the surrounding towns and villages. Sugizo was of medium height, strong and resilient.

By now, his wife had joined him in Canada. But when she became ill she wanted to return home. Sugizo took her back, and she died shortly afterwards.

Returning to Canada, he decided that four years as a lumberjack were enough. He opened Sam's Barbershop in Edmonton in 1912 and operated it for nearly 60 years. Another marriage had been arranged for him in Japan. Once again he travelled home and brought back his bride, the happy, vivacious Hana. She too became a barber, working right along with her

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husband. One day she had a brainwave. Business could be much better if she had her own shop; the competition would be good for both of them. Hana got her shop, also charging 15c a shave, and 35c a haircut. Often her income was the higher of the two. She had proven to herself whatever it was she wanted to prove, and after two years she sold the place, content once more to assist her husband.

The Shimizu family, good friends of the Nakamuras, remember that barbershop well. Lively cardgames were played in the front area when business was slow. Often Sugizo would play the *sakuhaci*, a beautiful large flute, similar to a recorder, but made of one piece of bamboo trunk. He still is very fond of music; in fact at parties and gatherings he would usually volunteer to sing his native songs. The rich, near-baritone voice never failed to take the Japanese in the audience back 5000 miles over the ocean and into their childhood, while Canadians were invariably enchanted and touched by the mystery of the sounds of the East.

During the depression years of the '30s the Nakamuras found it hard to make ends meet. The family had seven children, plus one adopted son, a nephew from Japan. Food was supplemented by a large vegetable garden; tended with devotion by Sugizo. His special pride were the fine crops of snow peas, the large white radishes and rows of corn. George, his oldest son, remembers his mother working half through most nights at canning and bottling time. Other nights, when she wasn't sewing wardrobes for all the children, she would mend and repair.

Some of the Japanese food specialties, quite essential to their way of cooking, were not available in Edmonton then. The Nakamuras, therefore, started importing canned vegetables, soya sauce and large quantities of rice from Japan through a Vancouver co-op. The cost was reasonable. It was the Nakamuras' job to handle the monthly distribution of these goods to nearly 500 people in the city. That not so small volunteer work was theirs for 20 years, and handled in spare time.

Sugizo, luckier than most Japanese Canadians during the Second World

War, was not interned in a camp, but able to go about his business as usual. He says he felt no discrimination against himself or his family. His son George joined the Canadian army and was stationed in England.

Even though Sugizo worked hard to get established, he had no special ambitions for his children. All he wanted for them was to become financially secure. That they achieved. The sons are all university graduates, one being in educational psychology, one a teacher, and the third a welfare worker. One daughter learned dress-making, while the other three became secretary-bookkeepers. With 10 grandchildren in the family now, Sugizo is happy that the perpetuation of his family in Canada is assured.

Today Mr. Nakamura is still in relatively good health; however his eyesight is failing. Luckily he sees well enough to enjoy himself at the horse races. That, in fact, is his passion and he goes whenever someone will take him. Usually he bets on one horse per afternoon, and then only to show. A recently acquired wheelchair makes getting around a lot easier outside his home. Another favorite pastime is *hanafuda*, a card game he will play for hours with his wife and friends.

The Nakamuras joined the United Church in their early days in Edmonton. Formerly known as All People's Mission, the name was later changed to Bissell United Church. Both Hana and Sugizo were Buddhists in Japan. They found that certain concepts of that faith are quite compatible with the liberal United Church thinking. Hana, the more philosophical of the couple, said they were never asked to shed their basic belief, which indeed would be impossible to take off like a robe. In fact, the Buddhist belief in man's fundamental goodness stands them in good stead. The values of gratitude and brotherliness, Hana added, are basic values, which she has found to be a bridge between the two religions.

There is no doubt that the senior Nakamuras are honored members of their church and the Japanese community. Sugizo's cooking skills came in handy at the numerous social functions. He and his wife are best

remembered, however, for their hospitality, which they have extended to dozens of Japanese university students for many decades, offering them home-cooked meals, companionship and good counsel.

All indications are that Nakamura roots do well in Canadian soil. □