

TODEN HIGA

Okinawa

I was born in the 20th year of Meiji (1887) in Okinawa, Nakagami-gun, Nakagusuku-son, *aza* Okuma. I was the oldest child in my family. My father and mother—every year they had a baby. Six in all, but I think two died.

My parents were engaged in agriculture. They were growing sugarcane. Since we ate potatoes in Okinawa, they grew potatoes too. Our family also tended some rice fields, but when I grew up it was cheaper to buy than to grow, so we bought all of our rice.

My family was poorer than the neighbors. To go to school, you need money. I only studied up to the eighth grade. Four years in elementary school and another four years in upper primary school, eight years total. After that, if I had gone to junior high school, I would have had to rent a place to live and commute to school, since it was a little too far from my house. My parents told me to try. But I thought they would suffer because they would have to pay for both rent and tuition. So I told them that I was not going.

Whether you are a farmer or a junior high school graduate, you have to work hard, otherwise you are no good to your family. There were so many junior high school graduates who were not any help to their parents. Some went to school just to waste their parents' money. I was engaged in agriculture. I grew sugarcane and other things and sold them. When I was still small I even grew potatoes and sold what we didn't eat.

What I grew I sold in a town not too far away. I went there on horseback. Along the road, people asked me to sell them potatoes. They told me to sell it to them for a certain price. If it was too cheap, I said, "That's too cheap to sell." I could sell potatoes near our farm only at cheap prices, but the prices rose as I got nearer to the towns. Town people had to buy food so

prices were higher there. But I didn't care to make extra efforts to go to distant towns.

My grandparents then were old and couldn't work. They were retired. Sometimes they came out to watch us working in the field. My father and mother were hard workers because they had so many children. They had to work hard. After school I worked in the field, too, to help my father and mother.

The land we worked had mountains, so we cut trees down and sold them. We had pine trees in the mountains. We just cut them off at the very bottom of the trunk and sold them as firewood. They were not used for making anything else. We had two mountains. Thanks to the mountains, we were a little better off, even though we were still poor.

When I was a child, other parents pointed me out as a good example. They told their children, "Look at Toden. He works so hard. You guys sleep till late, but he gets up early to work. You have to follow his example." While it was still dark I would leave the house to dig potatoes out and do other things. I worked from early in the morning. Other kids even hated me because I worked so hard. I didn't like to work, but I worked hard to help my family. After I finished the day's work in our field, I went to work as a laborer. Those who wanted to hire me asked me if I had time to work for them. I was sought by many people.

I did everything—taking care of sugarcane and plowing the fields and such. At the time, I worked for only six *sen*. Three *kwan* in Okinawa corresponds to six *sen*. Money was counted one *kwan*, two *kwan* in Okinawa. In mainland Japan they counted one *sen*, two *sen*. I got only six *sen* for a whole day's work. As for food, I ate breakfast at home and went to work, but lunch was offered at the working place. When I think back like this, it was really awful.

In my free time I played baseball and things like that. We played when I was in upper primary school. I wonder how old I was then? In Okinawa, we were the first ones to start playing baseball. When we played we used English words such as "home run." They taught us those baseball terms at school. Junior high schools in Naha were the first to take up baseball and schools in the country took it up later. I enjoyed playing baseball. If it was baseball, parents let their children play. Otherwise we had to work since most families were poor. Parents gave special permission for children to play baseball.

I went to primary school at the Chiba School. It was the nearest school to our section of the village in Nakagusuku. The upper primary school was also in Nakagusuku. It was called the Nakagami Upper Primary School.

The teachers were from Okinawa. We had some teachers from mainland Japan, too. But most of them were Okinawan because there was a school of education in Okinawa. After graduating from the school of education, they started teaching. The teachers were all male before but beginning with my time there were female teachers, too.

I was taught in the mainland Japanese language. We were not allowed

to speak Okinawan. We were scolded if we didn't use mainland Japanese. At primary school, you can't push small kids too hard, so they used Okinawan at first, but gradually we got used to speaking standard Japanese. But in the beginning we mixed both languages. We were told how to act if someone told us, "Hayo, hayo," (Hurry, hurry). We learned it that way.

I studied arithmetic and other subjects like reading and writing. And we painted, too. On Mondays, we had this and this, and physical education classes were on certain days of the week. If you ever skipped arithmetic class, you had to study hard to catch up. There were several other subjects. There was ethics study, which was a study of morals. If you were good at arithmetic and ethics, you got good grades. You were forgiven even if you did very poorly in other subjects.

Unfortunately, I was not good in arithmetic because I had to work in the field after I came home from school. Other students could study after they were back from school. Since our parents had us working during the day, six or seven of us got together, and senior students taught us in the evening. Yeah, we did that because just a day school was not enough. We would finish working in the field in the evening, go home to eat, then go to night school for one or two hours.

My brother and sisters went to school for only eight years, too. They couldn't afford to go any further. When I was small I didn't have any ambition. If I could have gone to higher school and become a teacher, it would have been a different story. . .

I was still in Okinawa when the Russo-Japanese War began. There was a physical examination for conscription. My parents were afraid that I would be drafted if I stayed in Okinawa. So that's why my parents asked me to go to Hawaii. I was persuaded and came to Hawaii as my parents desired. They heard about Hawaii from people who had worked hard and sent money back home.

When I made up my mind to come to Hawaii, many people here and there offered to lend me money. Even though I was poor, they thought highly of me. A wealthy man lent me the money for the sea fare. The immigration company talked with a ship company and we immigrants just paid the sea fare. That was all. When we arrived in Hawaii we took care of the job contracts.

On the boat trip over, we went to Kobe first. There we were investigated—a physical examination. If you didn't pass you had to stay there until you did. They paid special attention to your eyes. I had trachoma and couldn't leave for a while. I took medicine, then I passed the physical examination the second time. There were about 30 people from Okinawa, but some failed the physical examination and had to wait to take it again. There were about 15 or so from Okinawa, about 15 people came.

In Kobe, some *Naichi* (Japanese from main islands of Japan) boarded the boat and traveled with us. Some of the Okinawans did not go to school, so they were looked down upon. They did not know the standard Japanese language. I went to school so I could talk with the *Naichi*.

Down-below Camp

When we arrived in Honolulu we went to an inn and then went to the immigration office to take the physical. The name of the inn was the Kawasaki Inn. We slept and ate and went to take the physical examination. After we passed it, we met people who had come earlier from Okinawa. They came to see us at the inn.

We then went to Ewa plantation. I went there because a person I knew in Okinawa was there. He was notified by letter that I was coming. He came to see me. I stayed at the inn one night and the next day I went to Ewa with him. I worked there for three months for 98 cents a day, \$18 a month. Later I heard that it was \$20 on the Big Island. I thought I should go to the Big Island if I could make two more dollars a month.

While in Ewa I stayed at what we called the "Down-below Camp." There was a camp far down in a valley. After we came back from work, we went there to take a bath, and then had supper. The camp had a long building and several people lived in each room of the building. The rooms were just huts with clothes in them. Nothing else. We hung things on nails in the walls. There were about twenty to twenty-four people, five rooms in a house. Three to four people in each room. Each person was allotted one mat space to sleep. Yeah, it was like that, I remember.

Cooks prepared our meals. We could eat for a month for three to four dollars. They only served rice and cheap stuff like dried *daikon* (turnip) strips or *konbu* (seaweed). They served two pieces of meat and other things in one common pot and put it on the counter with bowls for *miso* (soybean paste) soup. We just picked up one bowl each and went to the pot of *miso* soup to pour it into the bowl. Then we went to a table and ate. That was all. The cooked rice was served in a bucket, and we served ourselves as much as we wanted. Rice was cheap, so even if we ate a lot, it should not have cost much. The meat dishes were set on the counter so those who came first ate them all. Nothing was left for those who came late, especially when the cooks served good dishes. To remedy this situation they started to serve side dishes in each person's bowl.

As for work, usually we worked about 20 days but in the early months I worked for 26 days—as many days as I could work. To make \$18 a month at Ewa I cut cane and watered, too. I had to send money to Okinawa to repay all the money I borrowed.

At that time, some of the *lunas* at Ewa were good, some were bad. The *luna* carried a whip and rode a horse. Up until our time, if we talked too much the man swung the whip. He did not actually whip us but just swung his whip so that we would work harder.

I only stayed there for two or three months. Then I went to the Big Island because I heard that we could get \$20 there. People on the Big Island said "Why do you stay in Ewa for only \$18? You can get \$20 on the Big Island." We only thought of money. That was the only reason we came here.

Go-ken House

In 1907, I went to Ookala plantation on the Big Island. I paid \$2.50 for the boat fare. They served two meals on the boat. It was slow because the boat couldn't travel fast. There were two camps in Ookala: Mill Camp and Go-ken House. I went to Go-ken House. The camp had several long buildings. You don't see that kind of building here. The name "Go-ken House" comes from the fact that there were five buildings.

Compared to Ewa, Ookala was cooler so I thought, "I came to a better place." The people in Ookala were nice. The *luna* was Mr. Yonashiro from Kunigami-gun. So it was nice. He was Okinawan, so he treated the Okinawans better. On the other hand, we had to work extra hard for him. People who were not from Okinawa could refuse to work when they had pains in their shoulders or other places. However, we had to work even if we had pains because the boss was from Okinawa. Even though it was a little tough, we said "all right" and we carried cane to a wagon.

In Ookala, I cut cane and did other things. We did not only one type of job, but everything. When we had to cut cane, we did it. Some workers who were cutting cane changed their jobs to loading cane. By loading cane they could make more money. I also worked at loading cane. I was still young at that time. And, of course, I couldn't say "no" when asked. When we were not working we played *hanafuda*, which was a very popular card game.

We didn't sing songs often, but there was a man who could play the *shamisen* (stringed instrument). When we got together, sometimes we danced and sang. At that time, and even now, farmers from mainland Japan didn't dance as often as Okinawans. We danced often. *Naichi* sang songs but were amateur dancers. At any party—if it was an Okinawan party—people danced. We took turns and danced. Some were good and some poor, of course. But everyone had to dance then. We danced one after another.

In the later days, Okinawans and *Naichi* had parties together. But in the early days, Okinawans had their own parties and danced their own dances. We rarely saw *Naichi* at parties and we didn't know their songs. Sometimes Okinawans were hired to dance for *Naichi* parties in the camp.

When I was in Ookala, people would come to me and ask me to write letters for them. Nothing special. They asked about relatives, for example, or if their cousins were well. Or they wrote to their family that they got married or had babies. Something like that.

The women at Ookala did easy jobs and were paid only 50 cents a day. After the men carried sugarcane away from the field and loaded it into the wagon, the women picked up the scattered cane which was left behind. While the men did many things like cutting cane and carrying it, the women did only that kind of job. But at that time, there were not that many women in Ookala.

Okinawans were looked down upon in the camp. But after Yonashiro became a contract boss *Naichi* had to listen to him even though he was Oki-

nawan. There were some fights. But *Naichi* were afraid of Okinawan *karate* (barehand martial art). They said that Okinawan *karate* was really strong. I did not know *karate* but I once broke a cane with my fist. Other people wanted to see how I broke it. It was easy. People watched me break a cane and said "Look, Mr. Higa is so strong you will be a dead man if he hits you with his fist."

People also thought I was unusual because I told them I learned Japanese on the boat trip from Okinawa. They believed my story. I did not tell them the truth—that I went to school, because they did not ask me. They were impressed and said, "He learned Japanese only in 24, 25 days." Even if I had told them that I attended school, they would have thought that it was taught in the Okinawan language.

They said, "Mr. Higa is so unusual. He knows either language and speaks Japanese fluently."

And during a quarrel, I would yell in Okinawan. They complained, "Why do you speak Okinawan, you can speak Japanese."

Even the *luna* said, "Mr. Higa knows both Okinawan and Japanese, so he is superior to you all. You'd better listen to him."

Ikebata Camp

I stayed in Ookala for one year, and in 1908 I left for Kukuihaele, where the pay was a little better since it was in the countryside. I don't remember exactly why I went there. We went all over. We would hear that a certain place had a better job or better pay. Friends would tell us that it was better in such and such place and they would take us there.

I stayed in Kukuihaele for a few years at Ikebata Camp. We called it "Ikebata" because there was a big pond (*ike*). We used the water in the pond. Pipes were installed from the pond to the houses in the camp. The camp was in the country. You couldn't even go out. As I recall, people came to take orders, but we went to a store where the prices were lower. Although the difference in prices was not that much, we carried home the things we bought all the way. It is ridiculous when I remember that. We got soaking wet with sweat, carrying things all the way.

The camp was made up of long buildings in the countryside. Everyone lived in one of the long buildings. Some of my meals I cooked myself. I cooked shredded *daikon*, *sōmen* (vermicelli), and *udon* (noodles). Since we were in the mountains, we planted our own vegetables such as onions and *daikon*. After work, we worked in our vegetable garden around camp.

Most of the people in Ikebata Camp were Japanese or Okinawan. There were one or two foreigners—they were Hawaiian. They lived in their own house. The Hawaiians went to work with us. The *luna* was *haole* (white). After that, there was no *haole luna*. *Haoles* were in much higher positions. Lower rank supervisors were all non-*haole*.

From Ikebata camp on, things were much more liberated and they could not fool us anymore. We even beat up a *luna*. We got together to beat up a *luna*. Of course, this was impossible before. We couldn't do anything

even when we were whipped. The reason things began to change was because Japanese became powerful, I think. Only Japanese could do a certain job so they started asking for Japanese. We could move freely from one place to another, from Honokaa to Paauilo. We were free.

I took care of the canefield in Kukuihaele, just as I did in the other two camps. I was paid about one dollar a day. After work, everyone did whatever he liked to do or worked in his vegetable garden.

There was a laundry person. We paid 50 or 75 cents a month for the laundry. The rest of the money I earned I sent to Japan. Most of us had borrowed money when we left Okinawa. Even those who didn't borrow money had to send money to their parents.

There was *tanomoshi* (mutual finance associations) at that time. We didn't get any interest on our money. It was like you take money this month and I'll take money next month. Later we bid for money, offering a certain interest. For example, if it is a ten-dollar *tanomoshi*, I bid for the money with one dollar interest and another one bids with dollar and a half interest. The money went to him. When someone got a letter from Okinawa and found that his parents were in trouble, he tended to bid higher to get the *tanomoshi* money. So someone who needed money for his family in Japan or Okinawa could get money from *tanomoshi*. Later, in some places, they had *tanomoshi* just among friends. Some men didn't like *tanomoshi* because they said the money was not safe. They deposited money in a store. Only a few men used a bank.

Sometimes I had to borrow money to send to Okinawa when someone was sick or in trouble. When I asked someone for money, he didn't hesitate to lend me some. He said, "Mr. Higa is honest." He lent me money and I could send it to my family. The next month I worked hard and returned the money I borrowed. I said "I have only this much this month. Please accept this." Some people charged a big interest on the money they lent, but I had good friends. They did not charge any interest and lent me money. They said "Anytime, when you have. I don't worry about it when I lend you money."

I did not pay back my debts all at one time. Some said I could pay back as much as I could. Some said they did not need it right away so I should save money at a store. Stores didn't give any interest on the money but we could buy things on credit from the store. The store liked to keep our money and we could withdraw money whenever we needed it.

After a while (1910) I decided to move to Paauhau. You know, whenever we heard of some other place paying a little more, even only a little more, we moved. We did not have many belongings to carry anyway so it was easy to move around.

New House

The name of the camp at Paauhau was New House. There was a contract boss, Mr. Okamoto, who was from Kumamoto. After he went back to Japan, we started to elect a new contract boss by voting. There was Mr. Oya-

ma from Kumamoto, who was educated at a high school in Japan for two years. He could speak English. I wanted him to be contract boss, but he didn't want to be. He said that even though he had been educated in Japan he could not become contract boss since he was not good at this kind of work. I could not do anything about it. I told the voters to vote for Hiyane from Okinawa, but they said he didn't like to supervise and he couldn't do it. I insisted that they elect him but they elected me. Me! If I declined to accept it, I would have to leave camp because that was what had been decided if anyone disputed the results. So I became contract boss.

My job was to contract work from the plantation boss. For example, if I contracted for ten acres, I had to take care of the ten acres, weeding and such. After I started the job, the big *luna*, the one who supervised our work, liked me. After a day's work, when he was taking a rest and I was taking a rest, I asked him for raises because the pay was too low. So he raised the labor fee from \$3.00 to \$3.50 an acre. He really listened to me, the big *luna*. I always woke up early and was ready when he came to order us to work at such and such field. That was the reason he trusted me.

And then, eventually, the system changed so that the *luna* of the plantation began to take care of each worker directly. The *luna* began to pay the individual worker by the day. Because of the change, I was not necessary anymore. The system had been changed so that the *luna* of the plantation began to do what I was doing.

I went back to being a worker. I weeded, cut cane, and everything. I did what they told me to do. The *luna* of the plantation did me a special favor and paid me more than others—the same amount I was making as a contract boss.

During our free time in Paauhau we would go to the movies. There were movie theaters at Honokaa and Paauilo. We walked all the way to Paauilo. At first, there was no sound, only pictures. And then it became talkies. Those movies with sound, we thought small men were inside, but nobody laughed at us. Besides movies, there were people who went from camp to camp, singing. They sang something like *naniwa-bushi* (folk songs). When the *naniwa-bushi* singers came, we paid them the amount that each of us thought appropriate—we paid 20 cents or a quarter to enjoy their songs.

Later, Okinawan musicians who sang and danced came. We even went to Honokaa to see the wrestlers from Honolulu. When the Okinawan wrestlers came, it was fun. Okinawan wrestling is different from the mainland Japanese kind. Okinawan wrestlers hold each other by the belt and wrestle, but the Japanese ones grapple with each other's bodies when they start wrestling. During *Tenchōsetsu* (the emperor's birthday) and *Kigensetsu* (the empire day), we assembled and had festivals. On these occasions there were usually wrestling matches.

In Paauhau I began to teach standard Japanese at night school. Using a booklet from Japan, I taught some Okinawans who couldn't speak Japanese at all. The students were only those from the camp. They said, "We have to

learn Japanese.” There were only six or seven of them. They didn’t know their characters, either, so I taught them reading and writing, too. Some of them came to my house. There was not a set place where I taught. Sometimes they asked me to write letters. There were many men from Itoman. I wrote letters for all of them and read to them those letters from Okinawa. I was just like a secretary because I was writing letters while they were telling me what to write and to whom to write. Sometimes they just left the address with me and I wrote the letter when I had time. After I finished writing it, I called them and read it over and asked if what they asked me to write was all right. It was really absurd at that time.

There was also a man in the camp who taught us English. His name was Oyama from Kumamoto prefecture. We only learned greetings like “Good morning.” We also were taught writing, but it took time to learn it, so I gave it up. All the classes were held at night after we had finished work for the day. Tuition was not required. It was just like a friend teaching a friend. We just said “Thank you” for it. Later, I think I went to the upper camp where they taught English at the Japanese-language school. Yeah, I went there, but it didn’t last long.

In Paauhau there was a Buddhist temple. A Buddhist priest visited the camp and gave sermons in Japanese because everybody understood Japanese. He came from his temple about once every month or two. We later made a temple in the camp because we thought we should have religious services.

In New Camp the houses were only shacks. Only boards pounded together. All the houses were like that at the time. After I had many children I got a house because I had a big family, but others were living in small houses divided by a wall into two rooms so that two people could live in it.

In 1914, I got married to my wife, Ushi. I sent for her from Okinawa. She was a *tokoro-mono* (fellow villager). It was a picture marriage. I didn’t know her before at all. I had just seen her when she was small because we were from the same village. I arranged the marriage by asking my parents to look for a wife. And they found someone who wanted to come to Hawaii. They told me that they were going to send such and such person to Hawaii. I told them “all right.” Then, I went to the consulate and got a certificate. Now everything was ready so that I could marry. I sent the certificate to Okinawa to have the marriage registered at a public office, and had it sent back here. I first met my wife when she arrived in Honolulu. After she arrived, we got a marriage license from the immigration office and a priest conducted the wedding ceremony. We had a church ceremony to verify the marriage.

When I first saw her I wasn’t very sure at the time. You cannot tell until you live together long enough. There were some cases where people got divorced as soon as they left the immigration office. Sometimes they were divorced after they went to an inn. In that case, relatives here would take care of the woman and look for another husband.

After I was married, all my money was spent on day-to-day living since babies were born every year. Hatsume was born, then Toshiko and two boys who died in infancy. Then Yasuko, Kikue, Mitsuko, and the last one,

Sueko, came. After we had children, my wife stayed at home to take care of the children. She came to the field with me frequently though, because we were so poor. I got a field from the plantation and was growing sugarcane at the time. She tied the children with a string so that they couldn't walk away; she worked, too. If we let children play around, they might have gone somewhere. Every day it was like that.

Honolulu

In 1938, I moved to Honolulu. Our first daughter got married and moved here, and the second and third daughters wanted to go to Honolulu in order to work, so I let them go. After that, they said that working on the plantation was too hard for me. They told me to move to Honolulu. They said I did not have to work because they were all working here. After we discussed the matter, we moved to Honolulu. At first, I did not want to come, but after I came to Honolulu all my children were here and they told me not to worry. Since then I have been in Honolulu.

When I first arrived, I began work as a yardman because my son-in-law's father, Fujii Kaneshiro, who had been here since before I came, was a yardman. Fujii used to work with me on the Big Island. He came to ask me to let my daughter marry his son. I knew him very well, so I gave her to his son. After I came here, he looked for yards for me to work in and taught me how to do it. We worked from 7:00 in the morning to 4:00 or 3:30 in the evening. It was I who first started contracting for yardwork in Manoa. I got a contract to work a yard for such and such fee. If it was a big yard, I charged more. Other people were working by the day or by the hour. At first, there were cases when they asked me to clean their yard by the hour, but I did not accept. I said I worked only by the yard, not by the hour. They said that I would not work long. I told them that I would work only if they leave me the entire yard to work on. At the time, there were not many yardmen. It was I that started the "whole yard" contract system in Manoa. After that, every yardman followed my system.

In the beginning, I worked on two yards, but afterwards I was able to do three yards. I did not complete one yard a day— but first day, half, and the next day, the rest. Sometimes I couldn't accept a job unless they paid more. I did such good work that many people asked me to clean their yards. My job expanded from my clients to their friends. I worked seven days a week and I was paid when the work was done.

In 1941, the war started. It was not too bad here. When I bought this house in Manoa, my second daughter's father-in-law told me that it was not a good time to buy a house because Japan would win this war. He insisted that Japan had never been defeated and America would be defeated by Japan. He said "Japan will win this war. Look at the Sino-Japanese War and Russo-Japanese War. All those wars, Japan won." He really sympathized with Japan. But I told him that America would not be defeated, and I bought this house anyway. All in all, my life was not much different during the war.

It was right after the war that I started my nursery. In the beginning, I

didn't know how to grow plants so I learned from watching what other people were doing. My second daughter's husband, who was a yardman and knew about plants, taught me. His father did, too. Afterwards I could figure out how to do it by myself. Then people would see me carrying plants and ask me if I was selling them or not. That's how I got my customers. Later on, some plant dealers began to order from me and I stayed in business until 1978.

Retrospective

In 1978, I retired from my nursery business. Now, I'm just idling my time away. When I want to take a trip, I just go. My daughters are taking care of the plants. I'm just spending my time doing nothing and my daughters are taking care of me.

Now when I look back, I think it was better to have come to Hawaii than to have stayed in Okinawa. I don't have anything to worry about now. I had sent money to my parents while they were alive.

For my daughters, sons-in-law, and grandchildren, I want them to go to school. Good education is necessary in this world and I tell them to study hard. I have tons of grandchildren, not only one or two. I give some money to those attending school on the Mainland. I can afford only a little money, I give 10 or 15 dollars when they come to see me. I tell them to go to the Mainland. That's a big place. It's better to work in a big place like the Mainland than to stay in Hawaii if you want to do something big. You should do whatever you can while you are still young enough. But our stories like this one should be listened to by many young people. It's for their sake. We really had a hard time, you know.

UCHINANCHU

A History of Okinawans in Hawaii

CENTER FOR ORAL HISTORY
UNIVERSITY OF HAWAI'I AT MĀNOA

HAWAI'I UNITED OKINAWA ASSOCIATION



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