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Interview with Kazuo "Kaz" Ikeda

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Kazuo Kaz Ikeda

INTERVIEW WITH KAZUO "KAZ" IKEDA

Arroyo Grande Valley Vegetable Grower,
Former Baseball Coach and Player

Kazuo "Kaz" Ikeda was born in 1918, in King City, California, to Juzo and Sei Ikeda. The Ikeda family moved to Oceano in 1929, having acquired land on which to farm independently. Following internment at the Gila Internment Center in Arizona during World War II, the family returned to Oceano and resumed farming. Vard Loomis, a close friend of the family, managed and looked after their property while they were away. Kaz married Mitzi in 1950. They have four children, Stan, Vard, Julie, and Patricia, all Cal Poly graduates.

Over twenty Japanese-Americans were attending Cal Poly prior to the bombing of Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941, and all were gone from campus by spring, following Executive Order 9066 signed by President Roosevelt February 19, 1942, which gave the War Department the authority to exclude anyone considered a threat from the western states. Although there wasn't ever one instance of espionage or sabotage reported, 120,000 people of Japanese ancestry were imprisoned in internment camps. Evacuation instructions and Civilian Exclusion Orders (originals may be viewed in the Special Collections Department, REK Library) were issued to all persons of Japanese Ancestry on the West Coast. Most residents of San Luis Obispo and Santa Barbara counties were transported to the assembly center in Tulare before being transferred to their destination at the Gila River Relocation Center south of Phoenix, Ariz.

The Ikeda brothers, Kaz and Seirin, both varsity baseball lettermen, eventually joined their family at the Gila River camp, where famous Japanese baseball player Ken "Zenny" Zenimura (who some consider the father of Japanese baseball) was also interned. Catcher Kaz Ikeda had attended Cal Poly from 1939-1940, before returning to work on the family farm. His brother Seirin, the team's shortstop, graduated in 1941, remaining a third year at Cal Poly to earn a technical certificate. Seirin, who is described in the 1941 *El Rodeo* as "one of the fastest fielders that can be found," sent a letter to the campus newspaper, in which he stated stoically, "We are very proud that we are not treated as prisoners although we are confined within the camp area." Family patriarch Juzo Ikeda passed away at the Gila camp in 1943, so Kaz, the eldest and most knowledgeable, filled the leadership role.

Overcoming huge obstacles such as the Alien Land Bill of 1913, which prevented Japanese aliens from owning land in California, and internment during the war, the Ikeda Brothers Farming Company, with Kaz at the helm, has become important in the communities of the Arroyo Grande Valley and beyond.

Moebius: According to the El Corral yearbooks and what I've read, you attended and played varsity baseball at Cal Poly in 1939 and 1940. Your brother Seirin also played during those years and stayed longer at Cal Poly. You were the catcher and Seirin played shortstop.

KI: Seirin played short stop and second base. I was the bench warmer [*laughs*]. Les Vanoncini was the catcher.

Moebius: Was it a good team?

KI: No, it was just a mediocre team. It was such a small school, with 500 students going there, and the baseball team composed of 12-14 players.

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Moebius: Looking at the photos, it looked like you were having a lot of fun.

KI: Oh yeah.

Moebius: Who was the coach?

KI: We used to call him Captain Duel. He later became Major Duel.

Moebius: Oh yes, now I remember. I've read a great deal about Captain Duel.

KI: He was really a gentleman.

Moebius: Could you tell me something about your father Juzo Ikeda coming to San Luis Obispo County, acquiring land, and forming the first Japanese-American baseball teams?

KI: My father came to Oceano in 1929. The young Japanese fellas in the Arroyo Grande Valley wanted to form a baseball team. Vard Loomis had graduated from Stanford and had come back to the family business, E.C. Loomis & Son. My dad, knowing that Vard had been a star pitcher at Stanford, asked him if there was any possibility of his coaching our Japanese young boys. He said, "Sure," because he was a baseball player himself, and because his friends at the time composed mostly of Japanese farmers. He furnished and sold us hay for the horses, seed, and other commodities. He was such a gentleman. He'd sit down and talk to all of the farmers. He and my dad would sit down in the middle of the field for hours talking about baseball.

Moebius: Did you play on these early teams?

KI: Yes, I was the first player on the first team. I had already played one year on a San Luis Obispo Japanese team. I was only thirteen years old, to give you an idea of how young all of these players were. I was tall for my age, 5 foot 4 inches, but I haven't grown since then [*laughs*]. There used to be a Japanese Farmer's Picnic every year, where we played baseball. There were a lot of kids my age and older who wanted to play. There were Japanese baseball teams in almost every city in the area, like San Luis Obispo, Santa Maria, Guadalupe, Santa Barbara, Lompoc, and Salinas. When the team was being formed in Arroyo Grande, the catcher we started with didn't pan out, so they asked if anyone wanted to catch. I said, "I'll try," and I've been catching ever since. "Since you're the catcher," said my brother, "I'll play short stop."

Moebius: Where was the Japanese picnic held? San Luis Obispo? Oceano?

KI: The barbeque was held where Lopez Lake is today, before it was a lake; it's underwater now.

Moebius: How did your father come to love baseball?

KI: My dad came to the U.S. in 1906, right after the San Francisco earthquake hit. Prior to that, he had been in Hawaii for a year. The earthquake struck while he was on

the high seas, devastating the city. He worked around the Salinas and King City areas. He began buying the *San Francisco Chronicle* and learned to read and write English by reading the *Chronicle* sports page. He studied English using a Japanese-English dictionary. He married Sei Ikeda in 1916 in Japan, returning to Japan to be married. Not being the first son, my father followed the Japanese custom of taking the family name of the bride. I was born in 1918, the first boy born of Japanese ancestry in King City. Kazuo is the Japanese character for "first boy." In 1924, when I was six years old, my dad sent my mother and us kids back to Japan for an education. It was difficult raising four children on farm labor pay. My sister Emi was four years old and Saburo had just been born. We were there for three years. After my sister Emi died of dyptheria, my father brought us back to the United States. It became too difficult for my mother to raise three boys alone.

Moebius: When did your father become so interested in baseball?

KI: My dad first became involved with baseball in the San Joaquin Valley, where Japanese baseball teams had already been formed.

Moebius: After Pearl Harbor, Dec. 7, 1941, what was the attitude at Cal Poly regarding Japanese Americans?

KI: I had already left Cal Poly to work on the family farm. All the people at Cal Poly were fine.

Moebius: Did the people in Arroyo Grande, Oceano, and the South County treat your family differently when the war started?

KI: I didn't notice anything. When the war started my dad had a farm accident that left him paralyzed from the neck down. Vard Loomis took me in when everybody left for the relocation camp. My dad was in the hospital, so they couldn't move him. My mother could stay with him, but she couldn't drive or speak English, so I asked the War Relocation Authority to let me stay and they okayed that. I lived with Vard and Gladys Loomis for 2½ months. Some of the local people who came to E.C. Loomis & Son for supplies said that they wouldn't buy from them anymore with that "Jap" staying there. "Better get rid of him," they said. Those things came up, but Vard never told me. He was such a nice guy. I found out about it after the war.

Moebius: And your father passed away at the Gila Relocation Center in 1943, with your mother Sei Ikeda by his side, acting as his nurse?

KI: Yes.

Moebius: According to what I've have read, improvements were made by the internees at the Gila River War Relocation Center in Arizona. Sagebrush was removed to make baseball diamonds. I've read that baseball was good for morale at the camp. Did you play baseball there?

KI: Yes. They made one main diamond in the camp. I lived in Canal, in an offset corner, and it was quite a walk to practice. (The center was divided into two camps, Butte and Canal, which were 3½ miles apart, with the baseball diamond located in Butte.) In the relocation camp, I formed the “A” team (varsity) which was composed of all the youth from the area that I knew from Santa Barbara to San Luis Obispo. I got the best players. When we started to practice, our pitcher’s mother passed away and then the next thing you know our catcher’s mother passed away, then our third baseman’s mother passed away, and then somebody else died. Most of the Japanese families were Buddhist, and when a mother or father passes away, there are 49 days of services. So, I ran out of players. Around that time my father said to me, “I know that I’m going to die sooner or later. If I die, you don’t have to wait 49 days, you can go out and play ball the following week.” We were Christians, you see.

Moebius: It sounds like a lot of people passed away at the camp.

KI: There was a lot of dust; valley fever. A lot of people passed away.

Moebius: That’s terrible. And baseball somehow helped morale even then?

KI: Yes, it did. After a year or so at the camp, after my father died, I grew a little impatient, and the Relocation Authority said that I could go north and work any place other than Western Washington, Oregon, California, or Arizona. I went to Idaho to work.

Moebius: Through the Diamond: 100 Years of Japanese American Baseball by Kerry Jo Nakagawa is a difficult book to find, but I did manage to read about the Gila River team, known as the Butte High School Eagles, beating the horrific Tucson High School Badgers, which had a couple of players who would be signing pro contract. Do you know about that game?

KI: Gila had a star named Ken Zenimura [the Dean of the Diamond] from Fresno. He was a super-smart baseball player. He was a baseball fanatic. He played with such future baseball greats like Babe Ruth and Lou Gehrig. He managed many teams in California composed of all Japanese players who played Major League Baseball teams off-season. They barnstormed all over the country. By the time Ken Zenimura got into the camp, he was over forty years old, so he coached. He had two sons who played on the team. I was out of Gila by the time the game that you’re referring to was played.

Moebius: There’s been a lot written about Manzanar, the bitter cold and unendurable heat, the dust, the barbed wire, barracks being divided up with families living in one room, lousy food, and over all bad conditions. I haven’t found as much written about the Gila Relocation Center? How would you describe the place?

KI: Yeah, things have been written about the lousy food at the camp, but every barrack

had a kitchen. To me, it wasn't that bad, the three meals a day. All of the mothers, who worked all of their life, who were working on the farm, looked as if they were making the best of it. They enjoyed all kinds of activities, like flower arrangement and sewing. Of course, people were really bitter.

Moebius: The United States takes pride in being a democratic form of government, of being the land of the free, and yet 120,000 loyal Americans were incarcerated. There wasn't a single incident of sabotage by anyone of Japanese ancestry during the war, and the Japanese-American 442nd Regimental Combat Team suffered 9,486 casualties fighting in Europe and was the most decorated unit of the war. You must have become outraged and bitter at some point?

KI: Not really. I made the best of it.

Moebius: When you were finally able to come home to San Luis Obispo County, were you able to begin farming on your own land again?

KI: Before we left for the camp, I asked Vard Loomis to look over our 60-acre property in Oceano. We had the property when we came back. The people who were farming there knew that I was coming back, so they got the last crop out, and we started back into farming.

Moebius: I understand that you coached Little League and Babe Ruth Teams throughout the years in Arroyo Grande.

KI: In the 1950s, Little League was formed in the Arroyo Grande Valley. My brothers Seirin and Saburo coached Little League minors and Little League seniors. Then after Little League, Babe Ruth was organized. I coached the Oceano Babe Ruth team for about 23 to 25 years.

Moebius: Do you have a favorite Major League team?

KI: Major League team? It doesn't make much difference. I like the Angels or the San Francisco Giants.

Moebius: Do you follow the Cal Poly Mustangs?

KI: Oh yeah. I have season tickets. The trouble is, now there are too many night games. I'm getting too old. So, I try to go to Sunday games. Have you heard of Harry Wineroth? [Harry Wineroth, Cal Poly class of 1942, was Student Body President, 1938-39, and an important member of Block "P."]

Moebius: Yes, I've heard of him.

KI: After we returned to the valley, Harry Wineroth called. He wanted me to play in an exhibition game between the Cal Poly varsity team and the Cal Poly old timers. I only played for a couple of innings. You see, after leaving camp we had worked all of the time,

going to Idaho, then Chicago and Utah. I hadn't had a chance to play. Then there was all of the time spent getting back into business here as well, so I didn't have the time. Before the war, right after my brother Seirin had graduated from Cal Poly, he was asked by the NYA (National Youth Association) at Cal Poly to play summer baseball. My father said, "No," because he considered it a handout, like being on welfare. Seirin was disappointed because he would've had the chance to play next to Jackie Robinson. Jackie Robinson was an amazing athlete. Did you know that baseball was his weakest sport?

Moebius: No, I didn't know that. He was such an astounding baseball player! I remember him playing for the Brooklyn Dodgers. He was everyone's hero when I was a kid. And you played at Arroyo Grande High School?

KI: I played four years at Arroyo Grande High School. I graduated in 1938.

Moebius: The Ikeda Brothers have come a long way since your father obtained sixty acres in Oceano to farm on back in 1929.

KI: Yes, we have. ☺

Notes

Saburo Ikeda, the youngest of the Ikeda brothers, served as an interpreter for the occupation forces and earned a degree in chemical engineering at UC Berkeley.

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