

Nisei USA

by LARRY TAJIRI

Ben Kuroki, Country Editor

The other day someone asked us how Ben Kuroki was doing. The questioner, a Nisei, was thinking back to those days back in 1944 when race prejudice and hysteria were still factors to be reckoned with out in California. It was then that Ben, just returned from 30 heavy bombing missions over North Africa and Europe, made his speech before the Commonwealth Club of San Francisco, a speech which brought an audience of 800 business and professional men cheering to their feet. Ben's speech, and it was the first he had ever made before any such group, was the turning point in the battle of public opinion on the West Coast regarding Japanese Americans.

The strange thing about it all was that Ben had never been subjected to all of the pressures and prejudices which the Pacific Coast Nisei had endured before the war. Ben was born and was brought up in a small Nebraska farming community. Immediately after Pearl Harbor he had volunteered with his brother and had been inducted into the Army at a time when the induction of Nisei had been stopped on the West Coast. He got into the Air Force when that branch of the service was barred to the Nisei. Later, with the help of such people as Secretary of War Stimson and Provost Monroe Deutsch of the University of California, he got into the Pacific war as a combat gunner on the super-secret B-29s and served on 28 bombing missions against Japan.

When Ben Kuroki came back from the war he found he was more than just a tired GI looking for a shady tree under which to rest. He was something of a symbol. Ben's 59th mission started one day after V-J day at a B-29 base in the Marianas when he received orders to go to New York City.

A few days later he was tired, dusty, hungry and in need of a haircut, registering at the Waldorf-Astoria. The next day he

gave a speech from the same platform as Generals Marshall and Wainwright and a dogface called Bill Mauldin in which he found a kindred spirit, a kind of smoldering anger against the hate and prejudice which beset the world. Ben's speech was carried on a national network and later was reprinted by Reader's Digest. Later he appeared on other network programs like Town Meeting and We, the People. Then he started out in earnest on his 59th mission.

For more than a year Ben spoke to hundreds of school assemblies, luncheon meetings and civic clubs. He spoke of the world for which he and ten million other Americans had fought and for which many had died. He spoke of the kind of world he wanted to build for himself and for his family.

Then Ben got married and, with the encouragement of his wife, Shige, he enrolled in journalism at the University of Nebraska. He had decided what he wanted to do.

Last year, after his graduation from the university, he bought and took over a weekly newspaper, The Republican, in the town of York, Nebraska, a community of 7,000. Then a wonderful thing happened. A number of weekly newspaper editors in Nebraska got together and decided to launch Ben properly on his new venture. They decided to put out the first issue of Ben's paper.

"Operation Democracy" was a huge success. Editors, writers, composers came from all parts of Nebraska to volunteer their help. Publishers of weekly papers took time out to come to York to collect ads for Ben's special edition. Everyone pitched in and the little office of the York Republican probably was knee deep in coffee cups and cigarette butts. The 48-page special edition was a huge success, both financially and as an example of the sort of humanity which gives you a warm feeling.

It's been more than a year since Ben and Shige Kuroki went into the publishing business in York. We haven't seen them for quite a spell but from the looks of their paper the Kurokis are doing fine. The weekly Republican is newsy and chock full of ads. Its editorials are pithy and its columns are full of names and activities. On page 2 the editor has his say in a column called "Honorable Sad-Sak." It's a good example of a good personal column with bits of philosophy and a political comment or two mixed in with reflections on the state of things in York County, Nebraska.

Here are some sample paragraphs from Editor Kuroki's column.

"About this time of the year, my memory take me back to the little podunk of Hershey when I was a ten year old kid. It was the Fourth, and amid all the noisy ramblings, there were many contests and prizes including a free greased pig.

"The pig was of the razorback variety, but I remember how I thought he was the best looking animal I ever saw. And, although I was dressed in my best Sunday-go-to-meetin' clothes, I was determined to try for him.

"I soon learned that the pig was not only of the razorback clan, but also of the hi-speed variety. It wasn't long before hi-speed disappeared thru an alley with a dozen bigger boys close behind.

"As the criminal returns to the scene of the crime, so did the pig. And he was so exhausted that all I had to do was wrap my arms around his skinny frame.

"When I got home, I was disappointed to learn that Father had sold the pig for five dollars. It would never grow fat, he said, because he was a 'razorback,' stunted in growth.

"About this time of the year, I always wonder what Dad did with the five dollars."

Editor Kuroki's comments on issues of greater import than the memory of an incident at the age of ten are still couched in the same homey style of the paragraphs reprinted above.

It's been a long time since that day in 1944 when Ben, nervous and a little scared, gave his first speech in San Francisco. Since that day the Nisei are doing a lot better and it's nice to know that Ben is doing all right, too.