

Kris Domoto

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Family Biography

The Domoto's were one of the earlier Japanese settlers in the United States. Kanetaro Domoto (my grandfather), his elder brother Takonoshin, and their younger brother Tomonoshin left their home in Wakayama-ken and sailed for Seattle in 1884. Takonoshin was apparently a small, frail type of man and wanted to leave the country before he would be drafted and examined, because the chances of his being rejected from the army were good. Such a humiliation, that a farmer's boy was unfit for military service was to be avoided by sailing for the new lands. Kanetaro, on the other hand, was a strong young man of 18 and had decided to leave with this brother as a lark. Tomonoshin also went for the adventure involved. The three men worked their way down from Seattle to San Francisco, finally arriving there in October. They managed to land jobs working in a hotel, the elder brother signing a ten year contract and the other only working until they could find some other sort of work. One of Kanetaro's first jobs was working at Sutro Park, near the Sutro Bath area. This kind of work suited Kanetaro and eventually it was decided that he would try and find land and begin working it with Tomonoshin while Takonoshin would finish off his ten year contract and pay for the land. This agreement was reached with the understanding that after the contract was up, the three would be working together on the nursery. As it turned out though, Takonoshin became involved in ~~the~~ import-export work and set up his own business.

By 1900 Kanetaro's nursery was fairly well established and he decided to go back to Japan and find a wife. He and his spouse, Teru Morita returned to the U.S. and had their first child Toichi in 1902. The nursery was now on 55th Ave. in Oakland, but was then moved to East Oakland to a place that is now called Arroyo Seco Park. Here is where my father, Kaneji, was born and where he grew up. It must have been quite a huge place as it was at one time called the largest range of green houses west of the Mississippi. My grandfather was very innovative. He introduced the chrysanthemum for commercial cultivation and brought into the market gardenias, azaleas, and varieties of camellias and tree peonies. Grandfather was working with his younger brother Tomonoshin, the latter being responsible for the selling part of the operation. Tomonoshin stated at the market and sold the flowers ~~xxx~~ that Kanetaro grew. As each Domo child grew up they were incorporated into the workings of the nursery.

The elder brother Takonoshin was still involved in the shipping business, importing mandarin oranges and exporting pyrethrum plants. He was acquiring a bit of wealth and could send off all his children to the East Coast to preparatory schools and private colleges. (Apparently his wife also wanted to prevent the children from experiencing the racism existing during that time in California). Kanetaro also sent his oldest children to private school in California, possibly in attempts to keep up with his older brother. At the time of the Depression, three daughters had gone through Mills College and a daughter and son (my father) were enrolled at Stanford. The Crash brought about a number of changes in the Domo family. For one, my aunt Wak and my father were taken out of school to help at the nursery and take care of the house. Secondly, it was learned that the brother taking care of the selling aspect of the business had managed to

run up quite a few debts, which plunged the family into an economic condition that was worse than what the Depression had brought upon them. On top of this, grandma died in 1929. So the family sold the property on which they were living to the city, for the extremely low price that the city was willing to pay, in order to pay off the debt that had accumulated, and they moved to Hayward.

Land had been purchased for Toichi (as the eldest son he would carry on the Domoto family nursery) and much of the time during the thirties was spent developing that nursery. My father and Toichi set up the same kind of arrangement that their father and uncle had started- that of one being at the market and the other managing the nursery. An interesting thing about this set up was that while my uncle was much respected at the market, my father had a hard time running the nursery because many of the Issei working there didn't want to take any orders from the second son of the owner.

The Fall of 1937 saw my father going back to school, this time to Berkeley to study architecture. He helped put in the Japanese garden at the San Francisco World's Fair of 1939 and later went with the same group to install the Japanese garden in Flushing Meadows in New York. He stayed out on the East Coast, working for a landscape architect until the spring of 1939 when he went ~~to~~ Wisconsin to become an apprentice under Frank Lloyd Wright. After about a year of work there he went back to Hayward, just in time to get married and be relocated.

Rutaro Fujii was born in 1880 and the eldest son of a family long involved in banking. His parent's divorced when he was still young, his mother marrying another banker. Rutaro's father was strict and pushed him into the textile business when he was young. As there was no hope of inheriting the banking business from his stepfather, he decided in 1902 to go to the U.S. to study more about textiles. Having come with no knowledge of the school system here and with little in the way of money he found himself working in the garden of a business near Santa Cruz. Rutaro managed to work up into a higher position after a time, only to be pushed out of the job and work by the boss' relatives from Japan. While walking back to the East Bay, he decided to try his hand at the flower growing business and bought some land near the Domoto nursery. He would set up his cut plants outside the greenhouse or go to San Francisco to try and sell as much as he could. He was also one of the original members of the farmers co-operative which functioned to help establish new growers and fix up the places of the settled growers.

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When it seemed as if his business was fairly stable, he went back to Japan to bring home the woman who his mother had been wooing for him. Unfortunately, their ships passed mid-ocean and he arrived in Japan only to learn that his wife was already in California! This was in 1912. My mother, the second child of six, was born in 1915. Growing up was spent in Ashland, an on-existent place now, and on Soto Road, where the family nursery still is. All the kids worked on the farm, just as the children in the Domoto family did. Because of the Depression, my mother had to defer going to college for two years. She helped take care of the four littler

ones, cleaning the house, and doing the sewing for the family. Bachan worked at the nursery all of the time, keeping up the small flower business (funeral pieces, wedding pieces, etc.) that brought in the little bit of pin money that the family had.

In 1934, mom went off to college, commuting to Berkeley for awhile and then living in a Japanese home. She had a job in the Decorative Arts department, in her field, from the N.Y.A., a program that Roosevelt had set up for students. After working through this project for two years, she was hired as a reader in a few courses and did work in the art museum. Later she became a teaching assistant for some of the art history classes. For her, the major feeling that comes out of the Thirties is the incredible scarcity of money, money which just covered the essentials.

My parents were married just before the notice for eviction came out. Neither of them seemed to think that the Japanese would be put in camps, although Kanetaro Domoto apparently tried to impress on them the fact that Japan was now the enemy and that they (the family) were going to be considered on that side. The Nisei kids could understand the possibility of their parents being considered "enemies" but their American-ness seemed obvious to them. When the relocation notices were put up, there was shock, but immediately, items were being packed and all was being made ready for the relocation.

The Fujii's were sent to Tanforan Assembly Center and then moved on to Topaz. My parents and all of my father's family were put in the Merced Assembly Center and then moved to Granada camp in Amache, Colorado. At the assembly center, my mom taught a course in card weaving, but by the

time they got to the camp. she had a child to take care of and no longer had time to teach. She and my aunt Wak kept my grandfather company. My father worked in the engineering office and helped out with some of the landscaping that was done. The two made the best of the situation, as most of the people did, but they left the camps as soon as they could. Dad went all over the country, finding out what areas seemed to be ready to accept japanese-americans* traveling through the Mid-west, East Coast, and even through the South. He wanted us to grow up in a prejudice free area so there was nothing calling him back to california. The family ended up in "ew Rochelle, New York. It was close eno gh to New York City so that the commute for my father wasn't too long, and the neighborhood was friendly. It was still war-time and many of the families had sons in the armed forces, but no questions were asked about where the family came from and why they were moving in. Inspite of this, my mother stopped speaking japanese the minute she left the camp.

My grandfathe died in camp so there was no reason to stay in camp for my aunt Wak, who had taken on the responsibility of taking care of him. She and my aunt Yuri decided to try out Boston. They didn't have any particularly "bad" experiences, but a fear had been built up in them that they too would be attacked like the people out on the West Coast had been. After a few years, Yuri was married and went down to "ew Rochelle to live with our family and Wak went back to California in hopes of completing her education.

Today my mother is a housewife and secretary for my father, who is self employed in a combination architect-landscaped architect profession.

Hunt Wak is an executive secretary, Yuri is a hospital administrator, and many of the other aunts and uncles are involved in the nursery business. I don't think any of them would deny that they like what they're doing for they've all managed to fit into the society somehow and are making enough to live off of. Their reflections of the camps and what kind of effects that period of time has had on them and the Japanese people are interesting. There isn't too much in the way of questioning the legality of the relocation camps, rather a feeling that they were carrying on the Japanese tradition in the belief in the government by not protesting the action. They believed that the government has the power and therefore it knows what is right for the people. One of my aunts believes that the camps were good in that they broke up the Japanese ghettos, forcing the Japanese to spread out into parts of the country that they'd never lived in before. She also believed that such a spread opened up the minds of others so that jobs are now open to sansei, where previously the Nisei had been kept out of. Any kind of bitterness is still kept inside, and there may be a strong reason why my family isn't vocal about the past. Neither my father's nor my mother's families' nurseries were confiscated or sold for bargain prices. Although they weren't in the best of condition when the families returned after the war, the land was still theirs—it having been watched over by friends or rented out with the knowledge that it would be returned at the end of the war.

None of my relatives are living in a Japanese community, nor have they been involved in any community organizing. The JABC and the churches are seen as being the only forces that are continuing any sort of idea of community, and these are seen to be purely social groups. The Nisei in my family don't actively seek out other Nisei but don't avoid them either.

I don't think they view themselves as being out of the mainstream of american ~~life~~ life or that they've been b passed in jobs or friendships because of being japanese-americans. But they are aware of the fact that none of their kids speak japanese, a conscious result of the japanese being put in the camps, and that none of their children are married to other sansei kids. Although there aren't any specific desires they wish to see for the japanese community, I do think they would like to see more of the japanese traditions carried on in future generations and would like to see some of their children marrying other sanseis.