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Photo courtesy of Michael Scott

My Family Values as a Nikkei in the Southland

*George Minoru Wakiji as told to
Raymond Chong*

Background

I am a Nikkei, born on January 26, 1929, in Pasadena, California. My parents were Hanhichi and Taeno (Hamaguchi) Wakiji. They were immigrants from Japan. They were from two villages (Uragami and Tenama) in Wakayama prefecture on the southern most point of the island of Honshu.

Together, as Issei, Hanhichi and Taeno raised six children, Nisei (American born second generation). They were: Masa, James Hajime, Kaoru, Takeko, Mari, and me. The Wakiji family lived at 1485 East Orange Grove Avenue near Nippon Nursery. We were one of the three Japanese families living east of Lake Avenue in Pasadena.

Hanhichi, my father, was a rather stern and controlling individual. He held a firm line but he also was generous. He invited fellow villagers from Uragami for dinner. Taeno fed them. My mother was a very gentle and kind soul who complemented my father. She was subservient to my father. Takeko "Tachy," my sister, was the only other person who lived at home when I was



growing up. She was 10 years older than me. We had our differences at that time.

In early 1905, Hanhichi, with two partners, Mr. Tani and Mr. Hori, fellow Issei, founded the Nippon Nursery Company (*niwa-zukuri*, literally "garden making"), located at 1501 East Orange Grove Avenue, on the east side, near



Left, George with father, Hankichi, 1932. Center, George with mother, Taneo, 1934. Right, Wakiji family, 1935.

the North Loop Line of Pacific Electric. Nippon Nursery was in the wholesale and retail business, specializing in palms, roses, ferns, evergreens, ornamental trees. It was the first Japanese nursery in Pasadena. Later, Hanhichi became sole proprietor.

On the grounds of the one-acre land, Hanhichi was always constantly busy with daily chores. In the early morning, he watered the plants in sections. Later, he planted and transplanted plants in bakery cans. He cultivated plants in a glass greenhouse and lath house. During business hours, he made sales and deliveries. He made deliveries in a Ford Model T truck with a flatbed. Taeno helped in Nippon Nursery. Business was decent enough to put food on the dining table and to get clothes during the Great Depression. We never lacked for food and clothes. Hanhichi was always busy running Nippon Nursery, seven days a week. The majority of his customers were Caucasian (*hakujin*) middle-class families.

In the early 1900s, a Japantown in Pasadena was rising in the Central Business District (Old Town) on the west side. Japanese American businesses were located along Fair Oaks Boulevard to serve the growing Nikkei community, near the center of town with Colorado Boulevard. Pacific Electric streetcars ran down Fair Oaks Boulevard.

Family Life

I was a child of the Great Depression in America. My nickname was “Wak.” My parents, especially Hanhichi, instilled Japanese values in me. “Do not bring shame to the name of the Wakiji family.” “Do not bring bad name to the Japanese.” They taught me to behave well anywhere. As the youngest child, I was spoiled because my siblings were much older than me. I observed my parents and tried to pattern their behaviors. Hanhichi was an open person who was very hospitable.

I grew up in Pasadena, in an exclusively white neighborhood, on the east side of town. Most minorities, including Nikkei, lived on the west side. I saw other Nikkei only when I attended Japanese language school on Saturdays and at church on Sundays.

The Wakiji family lived in a single story wood-frame house. It had two bedrooms, a living room, kitchen and toilet. There was a large porch in front of the house. Hanhichi proudly had a Japanese garden in the front yard with a fishpond and bridge. A building in back had three separate units that housed a tool shed, Japanese bath, and a laundry room. There was an adjunct building with two guest bedrooms. There was also a two car garage with a dirt floor.

We had electricity and indoor plumbing but no hot water. We did have one telephone, which was basically used for the nursery business. My father did not allow extraneous telephone calls.

As a housewife, Taeno was always busy in the kitchen, cooking Japanese and American dishes to feed the large Wakiji family plus relatives and friends. Japanese dishes included *sukiyaki*, sushi, and lots of *okazu* (meat with vegetables, fish). American dishes included stew, hamburger patties, etc. Sunday was a day of rest. A typical dinner could be *okazu* or American food (beef stew, spaghetti, or hamburger). One of my favorites was her beef stew. I had the leftovers for breakfast the next morning. Hanhichi taught the value of punctuality. We always ate on time for breakfast, lunch, and dinner as a family ritual. My father and my mother always spoke in Japanese.

We celebrated all American holidays, especially Thanksgiving (turkey) and Christmas (sharing gifts). Since I was the youngest, I generally got most of the gifts. Sometimes I would receive a dozen pair of shoes. Masako, my eldest sister, worked at Asahi Shoe Store in Little Tokyo in Los Angeles.

Taeno never shopped, so my father and I went shopping at the neighborhood Safeway in his Ford Model T truck. Mr. Bradford Kern was the store manager. At the ice cream parlor of a nearby pharmacy, my father bought me ice cream cones. They were his rewards to me for doing chores and for behaving well.

My friends were Caucasian kids who lived in the neighborhood, such as Dick Vernon, Paul Couch, Frank Levine and Bob Granger. I played "war" in an empty lot across the street from our home with them. We dug trenches and threw clods of grass as our weapons. We played a lot of hide-and-seek in Nippon Nursery. We had a tree house in our backyard where we played a lot. My pet to play with was a Scotch terrier named "Julius." I went to a lot of movies. I remember that tickets cost around 10 cents. My favorite actor was Maureen O'Hara, whom I loved. I was not a beach person; guess I didn't

like the sand sticking to my skin.

I learned the value of hard work through family chores. I basically helped out in the Nippon Nursery. I did a lot of weeding. I put together flats of bedding plants, which entailed preparing the soil mix and fertilizer, placing the soil base in 24-inch square wood flats, and putting in seedlings. I cleaned up and helped customers in Nippon Nursery. I loaded and delivered plants and soil for customers. Hanhichi had two cages of yellow canaries, one under the front porch and another one near the fishpond. I fed, watered, and cleaned up after the two dozen yellow canaries. My chores were a duty and an obligation to my family.

I attended public schools in Pasadena: Thomas Jefferson Elementary School and John Marshall Junior High School before World War II. There were very few children of color at the schools. I enjoyed school and was an above average student. As a leader, I was usually the one who chose the teams to play in the various sports. I enjoyed good grades up through the eighth grade. Unlike the stereotype, math was not my strong suit. My teachers were all single ladies. I remember Miss Knapp, my kindergarten teacher. My teachers taught me the value of a good education. I learned to study well. They kept me on course for the future. I was attracted to Shirley Bloomfield, a pretty blonde haired girl.

During weekends, I associated with other Nikkei kids. I attended Japanese Association Language School on West Del Mar Boulevard at the Japanese Community Center. Mr. Shiojima was the first principal. Later, Mr. Sugimachi was the principal. Every Saturday, year round, from 9 a.m. to 3 p.m., I learned the Japanese language. Mrs. Ikeda, the teacher, gave good lessons. I got a trophy in a Japanese speech contest. My friends were Tsuneo "Toe" Inuzuka, Kazuo "Katch" Hayakawa, Henry "Hank" Yamane and others. We were interested in playing sports. We played football at a nearby park on Fair Oaks Boulevard. Mr. Kawahara was our bus driver. He did a circuit in Pasadena, San Gabriel and

South Pasadena. I practiced the classic Japanese martial art of *kendo*, swordsmanship, Saturday evenings at the Japanese Community Center. Mr. Hamasaki taught me discipline in fighting through the constant practices. At this *gakuen*, I was exposed to the spoken and written Japanese language. I learned to appreciate the culture of Japan.

I attended worship and Sunday school service at Presbyterian Union Church on 293 Kensington Place. Reverend Kengo Tajima led the Church from 1928 to 1942. Miss Honma was my Sunday School teacher. I memorized the books of the Old Testament and New Testament. I developed good relationships with my peers.

The Wakiji family went shopping in Little Tokyo where we held family gatherings for pleasure. We bought clothes and shoes from the various businesses. We also frequented Chinese chop suey restaurants like San Kow Low.

Our favorite dining establishment was the old Far East Café (En Tow Low), on 347 East First Street in the heart of Little Tokyo, now Little Tokyo National Landmark Historic District. The Wakiji family usually ate in the secluded mezzanine section. We feasted on “China *meshi*,” the popular Cantonese cuisine of this chop suey restaurant. It was always a treat to eat “China *meshi*” at the Far East Café. I can still vividly recall the dark cherry wood panels, which covered the walls and booths.

Reflection

After eight decades of a great life, I deeply reflect on my formative 13 years as a youth in the Southland. In the Wakiji family, Hanhichi, my father, strongly influenced and shaped me. He gave a solid framework of values for me as a Nikkei. He emphasized the importance of direct honesty anywhere and kind consideration for others. I always did the best of my capability in whatever I undertook at home and at work.

During my early years in the Southland, before World War II, I was fully instilled with

Japanese values. The Japanese clearly was my group identity. My father set my goals of achievement and played a dominant role in my values system as a Nikkei in the Southland. I was firmly obligated to my family and to the Japanese. I took full responsibility in my relationships. I did my duty in Nippon Nursery. I was motivated based on the important value of obligation. I had submitted to authority, principally to my father. I respected the importance of positions in my relationships. I readily accepted rules and propriety. I was passive and yielding to people. I was always polite everywhere. I was self-effacing. The traditional Japanese values of my forefathers in the Wakiji family clearly influenced my life.

I had many positive role models in my youth. My identity was formed during these early years of the Great Depression. I have a strong link with Japan, my ancestral country. My Japanese values affected my direction in life in America and overseas. As an adult, I learned to balance Japanese values and American values to the circumstances. When I look back, I am happy to be a Japanese American. The values of the Wakiji family are in my heart and in my mind. ■