

GENEALOGY

FINDING YOUR UCHINANCHU ROOTS

The Okinawan Genealogical Society of Hawaii Helps Family Tree Branches Come to Life

Dan Nakasone

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"What school you went?" is a common question heard in Hawai'i when meeting a fellow "local" for the first time. That question is usually followed by, "What year you grad?" and "You know so-and-so?" In Hawai'i, it's how we connect.

However, for Okinawans in Hawai'i and on the U.S. continent, the question instead may be, "What city or village in Okinawa is your family from?"

For some Nikkei, this is easy to answer. There are prefectural clubs or *kenjinkai* throughout Hawai'i, the mainland United States and South America, made up of people who descended from the same place of origin. *Kenjinkai* were formed by Issei as social organizations and immigrant support systems built on a foundation of solidarity.

I found that, when introducing myself in Okinawa, it was customary to also mention the region, city or village from which my father's family had emigrated, thus potentially establishing a social connection. In essence, the place of your ancestors gets introduced as part of your identity.

When making these self-introductions, I knew that Aza Yogi was the home of my father's issei parents. An *aza*, or hamlet, is smaller than a village, ranging from approximately 30 to 100 households. However, growing up, I did not know where my maternal grandparents came from. Not knowing my mother's place of origin felt like a cloud of guilt hanging over me.

The hearsay was that my maternal grandparents were also from Aza Yogi, but I had no credible documentation to confirm that. I needed the validation to fill the big *puka* in my identity.

With my mother's birth certificate as well as the names and photos for her parents in-hand, I had planned to meet a volunteer of the Okinawan Genealogical Society of Hawai'i. However, the COVID-19 lockdown prevented that meeting from happening. Moving forward in the process of writing this story, I hoped to find a definitive answer.

The Quest to Find Our Ancestors is Big Business

Since the late 1990s, there has been a significant growth in the number of people searching for genealogical information. Some speculate this is a reaction to the way that today we might feel increasingly detached from ancestral roots and racial identity. With each generation that passes, the connection to our ancestors fades; we feel an urgency to reconnect.

With the need to know our genealogy in vogue, a new multi-billion-dollar genealogy industry arose, employing thousands of people. MIT Technology Review estimates that by the start of 2019, more than 26 million consumers had added their DNA to four leading ancestry and health databases. If this pace continues, that number will grow to 100 million people within the next two years.

In terms of market size: the popular website Ancestry.com was recently sold for \$1.4 billion dollars.



As part of his quest to learn about his mother's side of the family, Nakasone visited the Miyasato haka at Mo'ili'ili Japanese Cemetery. (Photo courtesy of Dan Nakasone)



Only recently did Dan Nakasone learn that the parents of his mother, Masae Miyasato Nakasone, had emigrated from Aza Yogi, Okinawa. (Photo courtesy of Dan Nakasone)

Okinawan Genealogical Society of Hawaii

In stark contrast, the humble, not-for-profit Okinawan Genealogical Society of Hawaii is made up strictly of dedicated volunteers. They may not have the scale or resources of the big guys like Ancestry.com, but the work they do is no less important to the people who seek their help.

OGSH, an affiliate of the Hawaii United Okinawa Association, emerged from a genealogy workshop conducted by Dr. Bernice Hirai and the Hawaii Hiroshima Heritage Study Group.

On March 20, 1993, a month after the workshop, Warren Higa, then-UOA (now called HUOA) president, called a meeting to inquire about forming a club. Thirty-four individuals signed up to become the first members of the Okinawan Heritage Club. On Oct. 18, 1997, the Club signed by-laws, added a genealogy component and changed its name to the Okinawan Genealogical Society of Hawaii.

OGSH's mission is "to promote, preserve and perpetuate our Okinawa family heritage through education, research and networking."

Journey of Discovery

I was probably the most ill-prepared descendant to start a search for my mother's place of origin. Masae Miyasato Nakasone's birth certificate did not include parents' names. And I could barely answer questions on the OGS Genealogy Service form found on huoa.org/nuuzi/genealogy.html.

I took the plunge and contacted volunteers I had met a couple of years earlier, Rodney Kohagura, former OGS president, and Steve Miyashiro, former OGS vice president, who were eager to help. Kohagura suggested that I find my mother's marriage or death certificate. He also recommended that I visit my grandparents' gravesite, because the inscriptions on the gravestone may yield answers.

At this point, I also contacted a friend and OGS volunteer, Hiroaki Hara. Hara is a librarian at the Okinawa Prefecture Library. He was studying for his master's degree in library science at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa. I had hoped to seek help from Hara prior to the pandemic lockdown.

While in Okinawa in 2016, Kohagura, then OGS president, had arranged to meet with OPL directors. He established a working partnership with OPL to collaborate and expand the scope of their genealogy networks.

Finding official documents with my grandparents' names and dates of birth was the first order at hand.

Steve was able to track down their names in the 1940 U.S. Census. My mother's death certificate included their names as well. I also paid a long-overdue visit to my grandparents' gravesite at the Mo'ili'ili Japanese Cemetery, finding their names and dates of birth on the back of the gravestone. Inscribed on the front of the gravestone was my grandfather's name in *kanji*; on the back, my grandparents' names and birthdates.

This is where the journey took a twist in the road: I learned that documentation during the sugar-plantation era was inconsistent. This was not surprising, given the influx of immigrants during that period, and given that, like most immigrants, my grandparents could not write or speak English. Things got lost in translation depending on who was scribing that day. My grandfather's name was listed as Yamasan, Yamazo and Yamazou; my grandmother's name as Ushi, Chie or Chiye.

Steve told me that this is a common occurrence when researching someone's genealogy. He said although it presents a challenge, it made his detective work more interesting. To him, learning how to research and figure out misspelled or misinterpreted names feels like deciphering a code.

I had sent a copy of the census record that Miyashiro had found, my mother's death certificate and photos of my grandparents' gravestone to Kohagura, Miyashiro and Hara. It did not take long for Hara to find the answer to my question: Where did my maternal grandparents emigrate from? Yamazo and Ushi Miyasato, he discovered, came from Aza Yogi! That one validating piece of information filled my heart. After so many years of not knowing, my identity was finally whole.

As Ralph Waldo Emerson said, "It's not the destination, it's the journey."

While at the cemetery, I discovered a story that sent a chill down my spine. On the back of the gravestone was a name I did not recognize, Matsuko. I read that she was born on Oct. 10, 1916, and died on July 7, 1917. She was my grandparents' firstborn, but she died as a 9-month-old infant. Ushi "Baban" was just 19 years old at the time of her daughter's death. I stood there imagining the emotional trauma they had to endure.

I left the cemetery that day with mixed emotions. Regretful that I lost touch with my Miyasato grandparents but grateful that this journey brought me back.

Finding Family

Many others seek the help from OGS, because they desire to find family members in Okinawa. To meet blood relatives face-to-face is to see the top branches of their family tree come to life.

This was the case for **Beverly Dawson (Higa)**. Her mother's father, Kiyukichi Higa, came to Honomū on the Big Island from Urasoe, Okinawa, to work on a sugar plantation.

Dawson's initial search to find family in Okinawa came to a dead end, so she gave up. But later, close friend Steve Usui rekindled her enthusiasm with his persistent encouragement. Usui suggested that she contact OGS.

She met with Kohagura at the Hawaii Okinawa Center with her family tree in-hand. Because it was in Japanese, Kohagura asked Hara to assist her. Dawson said Hara was in shock and utter disbelief when she showed him the family she had sought. He told Dawson that she had a cousin in Okinawa, Tsugiko (Higa) Morikawa, who was looking for her.

Helping Dawson make that connection with her family, Hara said, was an unforgettable "chicken skin" moment.

To call this mere coincidence would fall short of describing that moment. In Okinawan spirituality, ancestors' spirits are always present in the lives of descendants. Perhaps we could say that the stars were aligned, or call it divine intervention.

Dawson and her husband, along with Steve Usui and his wife, set out to meet her family in Okinawa from late March to early April 2019. In April,



OGSH's "A-Team." Front row, from left: Sally Kamiya Tsuda and Dorothy Nakama. Back row, from left: Shigeru Yoshimoto, Steve Miyashiro, Alan Toma and Rodney Kohagura. (Photo courtesy of Kaaran Takara)

Okinawan families celebrate the centuries-old tradition of *shimi*, when they visit their family *haka* (tomb) to pay their respects to the spirits of ancestors.

Her Okinawan connections arranged for Dawson to meet her family and participate in the *shimi* tradition at her family's *haka*. Roughly 60 people attended, including nearly 25 relatives with their spouses and children.

Once food and respect were offered to their ancestors, these family members celebrated with their ancestors by partaking in food, drink and conversation. It could not have been a more fitting way for Dawson to finally meet her *Uchinanchu* (Okinawan) family and to honor and recognize her ancestors.

For many, the desire to discover our roots come later in life. Maybe a defining moment triggers us to want to learn about the place, the people and the culture that informs our identity.

For Penny Sakamoto (Ueshiro), that moment happened at the 2011 Uchinanchu Taikai, or Worldwide Uchinanchu Festival. *Taikai* is a feast for the senses with cultural performances rich in tradition and a range of events and activities happening simultaneously throughout the four-day festival. Held every five years, it was estimated that 350,000 people would attend the 2016 Taikai with 7,000 coming from overseas. For descendants of the diaspora that had left Okinawa in the early 1900s, it is a "coming home" to the motherland.

The Taikai trip was Sakamoto's first time traveling to Okinawa and, for her, a profound experience. Finding family in Okinawa soon became one of her priorities. Through a friend with whom she attended the Taikai, she learned of OGSH, so they both decided to join.

Her Ueshiro family, she next learned, had emigrated from Onna, on the western coast of Okinawa, to Hilo on the Big Island.

Then, during OGSH's 25th Anniversary tour to Okinawa in 2018, OPL arranged a meeting with 10 of Penny's family members at the Kisenbaru Community Center just outside of Onna.

Sakamoto credits members of OGSH, OPL and the Onna Museum for going that extra mile to help fulfill her wish. Besides helping her find family members, they provided a plethora of information on her family going back centuries. They went as far as tracing her family back to 1577. Sakamoto said the whole experience was overwhelming, but in a good way.

Stories that Bind Us

Dr. Nathan H. Lents wrote in "Psychology Today," "Connection to our recent ancestors is what compels us to study our genealogy. It is their stories that fascinate us, not their genetic stock."

OGSH seems to grasp this well. One of its most vital projects undertaken is the "Short Stories" series, in which OGSH publishes people's stories to preserve and share those compositions, so that present and future generations can learn from them and get inspired. OGSH currently works on Volume VIII of the series. Each book contains priceless stories and sells for \$20. "Short Stories" can be purchased at the Hawaii Okinawa Center in Waipi'o. (For HOC gift shop information, see huoa.org/nuuzi/giftshop/gift%20shop.html.)

Moving Forward

Donna Nakazato Nakamura, current OGSH president, believes the organization will continue to grow to serve a larger community. The foundation of her

vision is the new "Okinawan Immigrant Database," which can be accessed online at huoa.org/nuuzi/index.html. She believes that technology along with the right people will provide the catalyst that will allow OGSH to better serve Uchinanchu well into the 21st Century.

Finding Your Uchinanchu Roots

Before the coronavirus lockdown, volunteers generally offered their help at the Hawaii Okinawa Center's Serikaku Chaya Building on Fridays from about 9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m. to assist people (by appointment) with their genealogy research. It is uncertain at this time of the pandemic, exactly when OGSH will resume a normal volunteer schedule. For updates, inquire by email at ogsh.mail@gmail.com.

Interested individuals are required to do preliminary research; OGSH researchers will assist them toward their goal. No fee will be charged for OGSH services; however, as a nonprofit, the genealogical society welcomes donations. For more information, visit huoa.org/nuuzi/clubs/OGS/ogs.html. (Note that this webpage is currently being upgraded.)



Volunteers at the genealogy research table at the 2019 Okinawan Festival. From left: Ayako Omori (OPL), Shigeru Yoshimoto (OGSH), Hana Omine (OPL) and Hiroaki Hara (OPL/OGSH). (Photo courtesy of Curtis Shinsato)

I owe a debt of gratitude to Rodney, Steve, Hiroaki, OGSH and OPL. Now, when I introduce myself in Okinawa, I will share my surname's place of origin and proudly proclaim, "... and my mother is a Miyasato from Aza Yogi!"

For now, my heart is full. **HH**

Dan Nakasone is a *sansei Uchinanchu* from *Wahiaiwā*. A marketing and advertising professional, he was a producer/researcher for PBS' award-winning food and culture series based in Hawai'i, "Family Ingredients," hosted by Chef Ed Kenney.

SPOTLIGHT

TAMURA FAMILY HONORED FOR "LONG-TERM SUCCESS"

Ida Yoshinaga

With now four generations establishing, staffing and operating Tamura Supermarket in Wai'anae, the current leadership of the Tamura family empire, headed by 28-year-old president and corporate treasurer Jill Tamura-McCleary alongside her 85-year-old grandfather, CEO Clifford Tamura, not only co-manage the beloved west-side business, but they have recently earned an Editor's Choice Award for "Long-Term Success" from Hawai'i Business Magazine. Tamura-McCleary and her grandfather are honored together with her *sansei* father (also named Clifford), who prior to her, had helped run the popular store which has been a fixture in O'ahu's leeward coast since Makitaro Tamura founded it in the 1920s.

The supermarket's award for its long-range accomplishments shines among nine annual recognitions of Hawai'i small-business owners, which the magazine's Editor's Choice series profiles as "great local companies ... which you should know about"

in different categories such as "Best Veteran-Owned Business," "Best Women-Owned Business," "Innovation," "Food & Beverage," and "Health Care."

Tamura Supermarket has long supported the Wai'anae and local communities by selling products from Hawai'i farmers, local food producers and regional fishermen, as well as locally made products. Living through every major change in the Hawai'i retail landscape over the past century — from the interwar and Depression eras, to an age of Facebook social-media posts promoting the market's latest "Hot buy!"s and "Great deals down every aisle" as well as of seniors-only shopping hours during the COVID-19 crisis — the Tamura family has adapted and innovated to survive.

Jill follows in the footsteps of her *issei* great-great grandfather Makitaro, whose hard-working descendants do not only include the young president, her sisters and aunts and their kids — who all work at the Wai'anae market on Farrington Highway whenever they can, according to Tamura-McCleary in the magazine article. But this lineage also envelops an extended family which had started a separate

line of food-related enterprises in the 1990s. Herbert and Glenn Tamura's Tamura Enterprises, begun by relatives of the Tamura Supermarket family, created a new set of retail businesses not related to the main company — such as Tamura Market, well-known in central and east O'ahu for its fine wines and gourmet offerings (see bestretailandfoodpractices.com/2016/08/tamura-s-market/ for more).

Hawai'i Business Magazine pairs award winners with corporate executives from prominent large or medium-sized Hawai'i firms who then speak to the strength of the more modest enterprises as they serve as sponsors of these individual awards. Cheryl Tomimatsu, Asst. VP and manager of First Hawaiian Bank in Wai'anae, praised Tamura Supermarket and its family leadership as a successful business model, as it serves the needs of "all families within the community, through employment, marketing and their charitable foundation," according to Hawai'i Business writer Beverly Creamer (for more of Creamer's coverage of Tamura-McCleary and the Tamura Supermarket family, see hawaiiibusiness.com/small-business-editors-choice-awards-2020/). **HH**