

Age brings honor to oldest member of Japanese community

By MARYBETH VARCADOS

Until five years ago, Kumajiro Murakami worked in the fields every day. Then, at age 95, he decided it was time to retire.

It was the work, he says, and the sunshine and fresh air, that gave him his 100 years. Well, those plus a small glass of warm sake every morning and every evening.

Murakami, who turned the century mark on Tuesday, will be honored as the oldest member of Watsonville's Buddhist community on Saturday in special ceremonies (open to the public) led by the Rev. Jim Yanagimura. On Sunday, his family and friends, some 100 in all, are honoring him with a party.

"Remember not to eat too much," advises the dignified, yet spry, gentleman. "And eat chicken soup. I happen to like sake better." Speaking little English, he relies on his daughters to

translate for him, and they coax his life story from their father who still is center of the household. As she has for so many years, his wife Fushi, bent with the toil of farming life, hurries to wait on him, and guests. Her task has been to care for her husband, and for 72 years she has done her job exceedingly well.

Murakami sits erect and walks with some ease in their humble home near Bridge Street. Tea is served. Finally, he is coaxed to sing, to share his beloved pastime.

The Japanese syllables ring out, angular note patterns carry an ancient story about a cat, a rat and a tiger-colored dog, all on their way to Mt. Fuji. For many years he performed with the Northern California Kinyukai Singers. And he enjoys dancing. Particularly the parasol dance.

Of his six brothers and sisters, he alone survives. They were children of a rice farmer in Yamaguchi-Ken, a Japanese village on an inland sea. Fishing was a popular childhood occupation, but not school. He tells about the days he enjoyed jumping off a boat into the water, with four or five friends. "But he got an ear infection and quit school. He was about 13, says his eldest daughter. From then, his time was spent with the blacksmith.

Hawaii's governor George Ariyoshi describes Murakami as a "pioneer worker on the sugar plantations, and a pioneer in Watsonville's strawberry industry" in a congratulatory letter. Sen. Daniel Inouye also has sent greetings.

Murakami was 17 when he and friends boarded a coal-fueled boat bound for the island of Hawaii. Many of the others died from serious illness in the sugar plantation infirmary. "But the cook was good to me, and saved my life," he says. "He made

rice porridge and saved the water for me to drink. That was why I was saved."

Following paths laid by other young Japanese, Murakami came to Watsonville, and raised strawberries on leased land in Pajaro. Not until many years later could they actually purchase land.

In 1909 he journeyed to Seattle to welcome his picture bride, Fushi Matsumura. Their parents had arranged the marriage in Japan. This May, they will mark their 72nd anniversary.

With others of the Japanese community, they have farmed nearly every Pajaro Valley district, growing crops varying from bush berries to peanuts, potatoes and small white beans. By 1915, when the World Exposition came to San Francisco, they decided the strawberry business was worth a big gamble. They increased production considerably, and went bankrupt.

Murakami and his family gradually carved their niche in the Pajaro Valley. In the late 30s, they purchased a little home.

Five children were born to them. Helen Muronaka, the oldest, now has three children of her own and two grandchildren. Her late husband was a foreign correspondent for a Tokyo newspaper; she does domestic work. Masano Yamashita, who runs the Pajaro Valley Fish Market, has four children and two grandchildren. As a girl, she was sent to live with relatives in Japan for seven years. Chester Murakami, who died in 1952, produced one daughter and two grandchildren. Michiko Hamada, a bookkeeper for Martinelli Co., has two sons. And Tom Murakami, who carries on the strawberry business in the Buena Vista and Casserly areas, has four children and three grandchildren.

As a young man, Murakami rode race horses; later, he became expert at grading the earth, traveling to farms in Stockton, Palo Alto and Mountain View to work the ground with a team of horses.

Then came World War II, and the family's life, so carefully built from nothing, was nearly shattered. On April 29, 1942, they were sent to the Salinas Assembly Center. A.N. Zufich, from whom they had leased land, took care of their home. On July 20, they arrived at Poston II, Arizona. Helen and her husband, a San Francisco newspaperman at that time, had been sent to Tanforan, then Topaz, Utah. And Tom was a soldier at Fort Snelling, Minneapolis.

Murakami settled in readily at the camp, making delicate painted birds with other men in a hobby class and, always, singing. When they were relocated again, in Chicago, the Yamashitas were sent to Tule Lake.

Finally the war ended, and all came home. The Murakamis became naturalized citizens.

Although a country man most of his life, Murakami helped build the Buddhist community. When the old temple was built, around 1906, he rode his bicycle through town, gathering contributions. For many years, he was the church auditor.

Murakami's zest for life is unchanging, despite the many years. He still loves to watch a rousing war movie on television, and he's content with the political climate. "There's nothing wrong with the new president," he says. And he still likes a cigarette now and then — Kools.

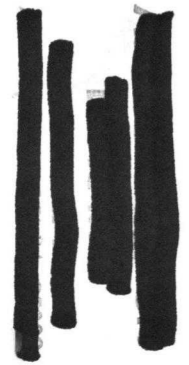
What's his secret to longevity? "Do not get too excited too much," he says. "And don't worry. Avoid tension."

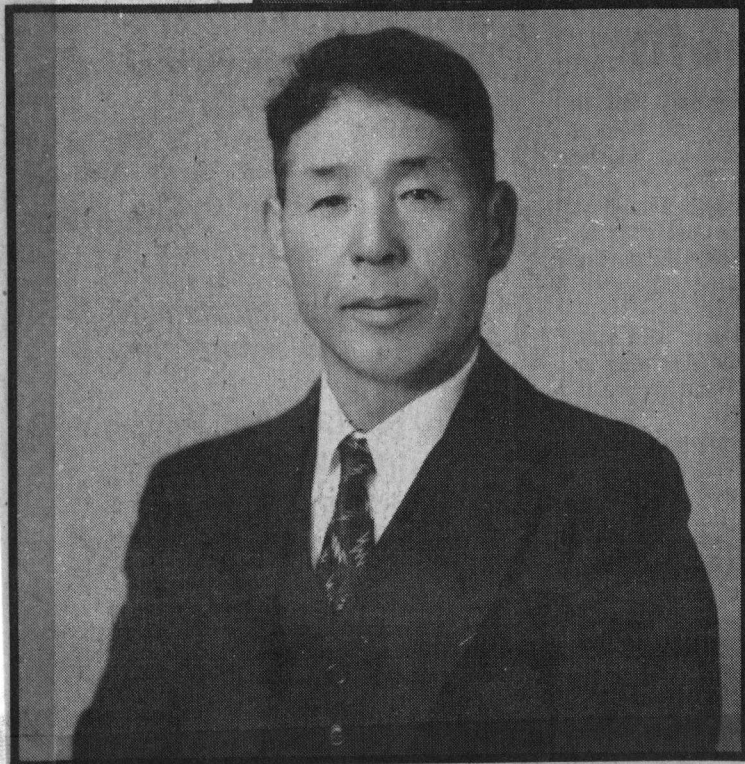
Has life been good to him? "Yeah," he grins. "Sure."



WATSONVILLE
REGISTRAR - PAJARONIAN
March 5, 1981

REFERENCE





Building both a family and a business, and enjoying life, have been important to Kumajiro Murakami. In Hawaii in 1899, he rode horses and bicycles (top photo). By 1917 (center) with his wife Fushi, he had produced three children. In the pre-war 1940s, (below) he was a landowner and successful strawberry farmer. This week, he turned 100.



Photo by Sam Vesta