

Joe Otto

History of Wyoming

Instructor: Chris Plant

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George Okano: A Life History

George Okano is a true Wyoming Native. Not the traditional cowboy or shepherd, George is the son of immigrants from Japan. George's life history is one of great interest and fascinating facts.

Many Japanese people came to America figuring that they would make a fortune and then return to their homeland. Looking for work, Kikuji and Misao Okano, George's father and mother, came from Hiroshima, Japan to Seattle, Washington in 1906. Kikuji worked as a cook in Seattle. George comments: "He was a good cook, my gosh, he showed my mother how to cook." After working as a cook for about seven years, Kikuji heard word of the booming Coal Industry in Wyoming, so they packed their bags and ended up in a little coal mining town called Lioncol, about seven miles north of Rock Springs. George was born in this town on May 11, 1920. After getting out of the mines, Kikuji opened up a merchandizing store, where he had walk-in trade and also peddled items to the railroad. The store also featured a fish market. George comments, "I don't think there was nobody who knew how to handle fresh fish like my mother and dad did, they would bring it by railway express. Can you imagine, by gosh,

they'd have it all iced up and we would have fresh fish here."

The Okanos helped support many families during hardships. "Gosh, I don't know how many families my dad helped support during the rough times, but they all paid him back, ya know," George stated. The Depression years were hard on the people of this area and George can remember the hard times. "Things were tough...but one thing for sure, in those Depression days, the people were more closer, they needed each other's help and so that made the closeness. I don't know how we made it...of course we wasn't alone, we was all poor and didn't know it--cause that the way of life."

George has had several jobs throughout his life such as a custodian, a railroad section hand, and also helped his father with a chicken farm that he started up.

Georges saddest memory was when he was called into the service. George recalls "Uncle Sam called me and says, please report to your draft board." At 21, George was first stationed at Fort Warren, Wyoming and then at Fort Leavenworth, Kansas and Camp Robinson, Arkansas. He then came back to Cheyenne where he trained for a Japanese-American combat team. He fought with this team along with the 100th Battalion in Italy. This was the most decorated unit in the history of the U.S. Army. "It was quite an accomplishment...we lost an awful lot of boys, though." Some of the awards George has received include a Combat Badge, Bronze Medal, Unit citation, and a Purple Heart. He attained

the rank of a Staff Sergeant. George is very proud of his service record, but when asked what he thought about the Atomic Bomb, he said "I think it was uncalled for, it was cruel, ya know. Ever since that Atomic Bomb has been dropped, it just threw the fright in the whole world. Sure, we know that it ended the war quick, a lot of people suffered. Still, I don't think it should have been, they could have ended the war some other way, ya know." After the war, George worked for Mountain Fuel for several years. After that, in 1955, when this area was in an economic slump--the coal mines closed down--George saw an opportunity. He bought a greenhouse for, in his words, a pretty good price. He had the resolve to make it a success. "Tell ya the truth, I don't know how we made the first five years...by gosh, we never seen a dime...it's just sheer determination to make it, that's what it takes."

After George got his greenhouse business going, he traveled to Japan and married his wife, Ineko, in August, 1964. He had corresponded by letters with her for three years. She helped in his greenhouse business. He recalls: "It's very rewarding. Growing the little plants...a lot of satisfaction in it. We didn't have much time to ourselves, 'cause we was trying to make a living, trying to keep our heads above water."

George and Ineko were getting "up in years" when they had their daughter, Georgiann. She is just twenty years old now. George said that he would have liked to have a few more

children, but he says "we don't regret it...that's just the way life goes, I guess."

George is retired now and has lots of time to do some of his favorite things. He loves to hunt and fish. "I like that fresh fish," says George. He also gets out hunting as much as he can. His back yard is full of various deer and elk antlers. George also says he "likes to do a lot of piddling around work, like repairing stuff or fixing cabinets and do a lot of little things, sure keeps me busy doin' that. I love that kind of work, ya know."

When asked what advice he would give to his posterity, George replied: "All I can say is, by gosh, I'll say this to anybody, ya know, life isn't all peaches and cream, ya know, and if you want something you have to work at it, you have to really be sincere in what you want to do...and always be honest. I still think that's one of the main things of livin'. And honesty is, it goes farthest of all the things, ya know, and work hard, nothin' will replace hard work, and eventually--you might not accomplish what your goal is today--but, if you keep on trying, why, tomorrow it will show up. You bet, and it's, well, rewarding. That's one of the things, everybody should remember that, ya know."

NAME: George Okano

PRESENT ADDRESS: 414 W. Blair Ave. Rock Springs Wyo

1. Present profession or occupation: - Retired
2. Occupations followed in the past (give dates): *Chicken Rancher  
Greenhouse + Florist*
3. Date of birth: *5/11/20* Place of birth: *Lioncol, Wyo*
4. Date of moving to Wyoming: - Was Born in Wyo
5. Full name of parents (give mother's maiden name)  
*Father's Name - Kakaji Okano  
Mother's Name - Masao Funayama*
6. Names of brothers and sisters (and to whom married):  
*Haruko (Sister) Miyamoto Marion Okano  
Keiji - Brother Margie Fearing  
Pauline - Matsumonji*
7. Schools attended (give dates):  
*1926-1932 - Washington Grade School - R.S.  
1932-1935 - Sr. High - R.S.  
1935-1939 - 83 - High School - R.S.*
8. Places of residence in Wyoming (give dates):  
*Rock Springs - 1922 - Present Time*
9. Military service (dates, awards, area served, rank, etc.):  
*1942 - Feb. Inducted  
Area Served: European Theater, Awards: Combat Badge, Purple Heart, Bronze  
Medal, Unit Citation, Rank: Staff Sgt.*
10. Political offices held (give dates):  
*None*
11. Political affiliation:  
*None*
12. Religious affiliation:  
*Protestant*
13. Marriage (spouse's name, date and place of marriage):  
*Ineko, Aug 1964 - Japan*
14. Children (names, dates of birth, grandchildren, etc.):  
*Georgiann, 4/11/69*
15. List of clubs and societies of which you are a member:  
*VFW  
American Legion  
Rotary Club  
Rocky Mountain Fair Assn.  
Wyo Assn of Fairs.  
AARP*