Yutaro Uyeda, Monrovia's Strawberry King

When he passed away in 1949, the *Los Angeles Times* dubbed Yutaro Uyeda "Monrovia's Strawberry King." Yutaro planted acres of strawberries and was an integral part of Monrovia life before World War II. He was a community leader for the Japanese Americans of Monrovia.

Yutaro Uyeda (1877-1949) originated from Fukuoka and went to Hawaii in 1903. Like other immigrants, Yutaro was lured by the promise of work opportunities. He came to the mainland and found work laying tracks for Pacific Electric's Monrovia-Glendora line. When that work led him to Monrovia near 1907, he stayed. In 1919, Yutaro sent for a picture bride, Naka Shinohara (1889-1988), originally from Kumamoto. The Uyedas had three children: Isamu, Toshiko Ethel (1922-1995), and Mary Yoshie (1923-2018). Mary Uyeda Sakatani said, "My father was a small man, very loud, and very hardworking."

Farm life in Monrovia was hard work for the Uyedas and other Japanese pioneers. Many Japanese were in the production of strawberries and other labor-intensive crops to avoid competition with Caucasian farmers. Japanese Americans knew to avoid cultivation of citrus, grapes, and nuts; and concentrated instead on faster growing annual vegetables, fruits, and flowers. A 1910 survey showed that about 80% of strawberry growers in Los Angeles were of Japanese descent. Such strawberry farms were concentrated in Gardena, Anaheim, El Monte, Oxnard, and elsewhere. Strawberry crops took hours of back-breaking hand work and stoop labor. The success of strawberry farms in the early 20th century was linked to the development of the refrigerated rail cars, and truck farming - which brought fresh vegetables and fruits weekly to the growing urban communities. Japanese Americans formed supportive strawberry growers' associations like the San Gabriel Valley Berry Growers Co-op.

Yutaro was able to use City land between Mayflower and Magnolia – just north of Huntington. But Yutaro would often take advantage of other empty unused lots wherever he found them. If owners complained, he would gift them flats of strawberries. He even gave strawberries to police officers and others in Monrovia. Despite his broken English, he got along fine and everybody knew him.

He did own the home at 331 West Huntington Drive. As the 1913 Alien Land Act prevented resident aliens from buying land, it was probably purchased in his son, Isamu's name. Isamu died after being kicked by a horse when he was nine years old.

Yutaro first used Japanese laborers from Los Angeles to help pick the strawberries. But that gave Naka the responsibility to cook and feed them. The seasonal workers would sleep over in Yutaro's Monrovia garage. Soon after, Yutaro started hiring Mexican neighbors who would go home for lunch and in the evenings. Naka and her daughters worked the fruit stand on Huntington Drive. Huntington Drive was Route 66 and a busy thoroughfare. Mary said, "In those day, my sister and I were never allowed to sit

down on a sofa during the day. Mom was also a hard worker. She was always busy with our fruit stand at 331 W. Huntington Drive."

Yutaro took the effort to be a part of Monrovia with his floats for the Monrovia Day Parades. He had his daughters sit on the float and pass out strawberries. Yutaro was also one of the community parents that helped build and sustain the Japanese language school on Mayflower, south of Duarte Road. Like in other towns, the *gakuen* was a place for the Japanese Americans to take pride in their ethnic heritage. And once a year, the Japanese Americans would get-together for the New Year *mochizuki* (rice pounding event). Yutaro's daughters, Toshiko and Mary attended Santa Fe Elementary, Clifton, and MAD (Monrovia-Arcadia-Duarte) High School - and went straight to work each day after school.

But Yutaro did have a special friend: Orman Good. Orman Good was a neighbor on Lemon Avenue, and an agent for Standard Oil Company. Yutaro had a gas pump on this property and the two men became drinking buddies. After the attack on Pearl Harbor, Yutaro was picked up by the Monrovia Police, at the behest of the FBI, and sent to a high security facility in Santa Fe. FBI had pre-identified and targeted Japanese community leaders around California. Mary said, "The Monrovia police seemed kind of embarrassed because they knew my dad. I was 18 years old and forced to leave my schooling at Pasadena Junior College." Executive Order 9066 unjustly forced Monrovia's Japanese to evacuate to the detention center at the Pomona Fairgrounds. From there, they were transported to Heart Mountain concentration camp in Wyoming. Mary said, "The most humiliating part for me was being forced to wear numbered tags while standing in line at the Pomona Fairgrounds."

The Uyeda's were very lucky because Orman Good looked after their Monrovia property. "We gave the Goods our sugar rations and Mrs. Good brought us cookies while we were at Pomona Detention Center. Mr. Good would send us money from leasing out our home. He had been given power of attorney. Mr. Good picked us up – along with the Asanos – from the Monrovia train station when we returned from camp. We had a hard time evicting our tenants so we lived in the garage for a while," said Mary. Mary's daughter, Keiko, added, "For years, my father would bring a box of fruits and vegetables to the Goods. They, in turn, would bake us date nut and orange breads, a real treat for us children."

The Uyedas returned to Monrovia after World War II. Toshiko and her new husband, Yoshito Sakatani, lived in the front house on Huntington Drive. Mary and her new husband, Masato Sakatani, lived in a converted garage off of the main house. Mary and Toshiko had married brothers from El Monte. Yutaro died in 1949. Mary and her family moved to Walnut Avenue in Monrovia, and Toshiko and her family moved to Baldwin Park. After the 1952 Walter-McCarran Act, Naka gained her naturalized citizenship in 1955. There are still Sakatanis living in Monrovia.

Former California Secretary of Food and Agriculture and strawberry farmer in Orange County, A. G. Kawamura, said, "For nearly a century, California strawberry farming has provided a ladder to success for Japanese American and other Asian families. It has allowed generations to rise up from the fields to improve their lives, assimilate into American society and assume leadership roles in business, academia and government." Yutaro Uyeda was certainly one strawberry farmer that used his hard labor to build his family and his community.

Uyeda's Produce Stand, 331 W. Huntington Drive. Photo courtesy of Keiko Sakatani.

1938 Monrovia Parade. Photo courtesy of Keiko Sakatani.

Monrovia's Japanese language school on Mayflower in early 1930s. Note the outhouse to the left of photo. Photo courtesy of Keiko Sakatani.