

THE HISTORY OF THE ROCKY MOUNTAIN BONSAI SOCIETY

by Jim Robinson

I have been fortunate to have received papers about the bonsai clubs and will begin with the paper below.

Col. Robert Krueger wrote to me about how he learned about bonsai. He wrote:

"I had just retired from the US Air Force and returned from a three year tour of duty in Japan with my family. While there I had to learn Japanese as part of my duty, so I spoke Japanese. I had also studied bonsai for three years with a renowned sensai (teacher).

I learned of the Denver Bonsai Club where Japanese was the only language spoken, so I attended a number of their meetings. Ben Yamakishi was an original member of the now, Denver Bonsai Club, which was composed of 8 Japanese men. They were born in Japan, but migrated to the United States in the San Francisco area. After detention in camps during World War II in Wyoming, they became interested in our native fir, pine and juniper trees,

and desired them for beautiful bonsai. They had a reverence and personal feeling for nature's beauty in creating bonsai with these species.

Kai Kawahara was the youngest member of the Denver Bonsai Club, but had previous training in Japan before coming to the United States, so they dedicated him their sensai, or instructor, in bonsai. Members made many collecting trips to the mountain area north and west of Lyons. There was a Japanese man living in Thermopolis, who owned a large ranch with many weathered juniper trees. He sponsored a number of collecting trips to his ranch, which resulted in some of the most beautiful junipers in their collections.

Ben Yamakishi and I became good friends so he invited me to accompany him on many bonsai collecting trips in the Lyons and Estes Park areas. We collected a number of trees for bonsai and I had many great experiences. The best area we ever collected in was the Roosevelt National Forest. Our best area was East of Highway 7, Lyons to Estes Park, and south and north of the Roaring Fork Creek several times

south of Meeker Park in my scout vehicle. There were many big trees there so we only collected a small number of them. No body had ever collected in this area, so there should be lots of nice trees there. (Note that collecting is now prohibited in the area,)

One funny experiences we had, though not very safe, as the National Forest Rangers stopped us and asked what we were doing in this area. We showed our permits for collecting bonsai but they said we weren't wearing Orange Jackets. We asked why and they said this area is open to a special elk hunt and we were in great danger of being killed without orange jackets. We left the area immediately. Ben was like a mountain goat. In walking through the forest many times he would get so far ahead of me I couldn't see him. He said I was a slow walker but the area was heavy. Ben was famous for one of his favorite sayings. I heard him saying many times as we worked on recently collected trees. "No cut" was his saying and he was very ambitious as we worked on trees at home. He had a fascinating ability to bend and wire branches, and it was almost

like killing the tree to cut a branch off. He would watch a single branch, almost constantly wiring and bending it, spending up to a year to a work a big branch into it's final shape. Unfortunately, several years after all our collecting, Ben was killed in a tragic accident."

Bob, Harold Sasaki and I each became acquainted with George Fukuma, who sold plants and bonsai including bonsai pots as well as teaching bonsai. We had not met each other.

"Born in Japan. near Hiroshima, George Fukuma emigrated to the United States in 1919. He entered school here to increase his ability to use the English language and later was graduated from business college. He lived in Seattle, Washington at this time and it was during these years that he began his interest in the art of bonsai. In 1942, he was part of the group that evacuated from the west coast to the Colorado-Wyoming area, In 1944 he moved to Denver from Wyoming and went into business for himself. At first it was groceries but later it became a thriving import business and in later years, this was combined with bonsai.

The art of collecting and keeping specimens alive has been perhaps one of his greatest contributions to bonsai lovers. his collected trees, numbering in the hundreds, exist today all over the United States.

In 1945, George was part of the founding group of the Denver Bonsai Club and was one of its first officers. There were seventy members then, all Japanese, who studied with each other. When George began to teach bonsai in 1968, he helped the Denver Junior Bonsai Club with some of his first students. November 1974, just a week or so before his passing, George's dream, was finally fulfilled--the two clubs would now become the Denver Bonsai Club.

He taught bonsai at the Denver Botanic Gardens about six years and at Kansas City for at least eight years. He was an instructor at the Kansas City Symposium about 1972.

George Fukuma was considered a most influential member of the Japanese community in Denver and held an active position on its governing board. He was also a ruling elderly of the Simpson Methodist Church. He was considered

to be the one contact in Denver if you were a visiting Japanese dignitary of the consul. He and his wife, Marg, were always entertaining some interesting personage from Japan or out-of-town.

In 1954, a group of twenty Japanese from Denver, including George, finally achieved their United States citizenship and in gratitude for what the country had done for them, they went to Washington, D. C with George as their tour guide. They had a great desire to place a wreath on the tomb of the Unknown Soldier to honor their own lost sons in World War II. When they arrived at the gates of Arlington cemetery, they discovered that the area they wished to be in was closed. After explaining to many people, George Fukuma finally was able to reach the officer in charge, who, when he heard the story of why they were there, vowed he would take the situation all the way to the White House, if necessary. As a result, the area was opened for this important ceremony. Their goal had been achieved through the relentless efforts of George Fukuma.

He was an outstanding citizen and humanitarian. All bonsai enthusiasts have lost one of their most gracious teachers, guides, and friend.

by Mary Neil (Mrs. David), a friend of George's

My interest in bonsai began in 1966 when my office was in the Museum of Science and Industry in Los Angeles, Ca. I looked down from the walkway and saw these little trees in pots in the exhibit hall below. I quickly found the one bonsai book in print, The Japanese Art of Miniature Trees and Landscapes, Their Creation, Care and Enjoyment, by Fuji Yoshimura and Giovanna M. Halford, 1957. I quickly started growing plants and lost many as I tried to learn. I shipped ten to twelve bonsai in bonsai pots when I moved my family to New Jersey from Whittier, California and had each tied into double bottomed heavy card board boxes with "Do not turn over" in bold letters. They arrived at our new home in perfect shape. They survived the snowy winters in our garage with mulch around them and over the top of the soil. When we moved to Boulder, Colorado, all of the pots were broken.

I found George Fukuma's store in the Denver yellow pages as no bonsai pots were to be found in Boulder, CO. I bought twelve bonsai pots. George told me that he was going to form an Anglo-American language bonsai club in the Fall of 1969 and would let me know when the first meeting would be held.

I didn't hear from him and called only to find that the first meeting had been held. I called and found when and where the next meeting would be held. I met Hal Sasaki at the meeting and found that he hadn't been told about the previous meeting either. Bob Krueger was one of the charter members of the Denver Junior Bonsai Club. Unfortunately, Bob is now too ill to be able to attend many meetings.

There were some 55 charter members, but few of them continued after many years. I don't remember when I was elected secretary and treasurer, and later, President of the Denver Junior Bonsai Club. George did demonstrations for some programs and invited Kai Kawahara, Frank Takeshita, and Bob Kataoka to demonstrate other aspects of bonsai. Mary Ann Peacock was my Vice President and was active with the Japanese women who enjoyed succulent plants. Mary Ann was a great help to me as she could let these women know what we were interested in and they carefully suggested things for their husbands to do.

Mary Ann and Malcolm Correll wrote A short History of Bonsai in Denver, in Denver, November, 1980. *"In 1955 there were several Japanese gentlemen who had been born in Japan but then lived in the Denver area. Three of them, Mr. Fukuhara, Mr. Sam Naka, and Mr. Kai Kawahara, had studied bonsai in Japan. Mr. Fukahara hosted a meeting of all of the men at which they organized what*

they called the "Old Men's Club." We shall refer to this club as the "Senior Club." Mr. George Inai was president of the new club from its start to 1960 and Mr. and Mr. Fukuhara and Mr. Kawahara served as sensai (instructors)."

In 1960 Mr. George Fukuma, a charter member of the Senior Club, who had been its original vice-president and treasurer, was elected president. Since its inception the Senior club had produced an annual bonsai show and had exhibited some of their fine bonsai at various celebrations within the Denver Japanese community--the Doll Festival, the Cherry Blossom Festival, etc. A wider interest was developing not only among Nisei, who were not eligible to join the Senior Club, but also among people of non-Japanese heritage. George Fukuma and Sam Naka organized classes first for Niesi and later for non Japanese enthusiasts. George owned a store and shop that featured bonsai materials and supplies and he offered classes both at his shop and at the Denver Botanic Gardens.

The earlier bonsai shows had generally been at the Denver Buddhist Temple but in October, 1969, the show was held at the Simpson Methodist Church in Westminster, a western suburb of Denver. At this show a list was collected of people interested in forming another bonsai club. And on November 20, 1969 the Denver Junior Bonsai Club was formed under the leadership of George Fukuma and Leo Murakama, one of the Nisei. Leo was elected president of the new club and George was its instructor. Membership in the Junior Club was open to Nisei, to Niese women, and to non-Japanese. Thirty-six members started the new club and in recent years its membership started a new club and in recent years its membership has fluctuated slightly up and down from forty. Only Sam and Mary Ann Heacock and Bob and Louise Krueger from among the charter members remain in the club today.

During the latter part of 1975 the Senior Bonsai Club and the Junior Bonsai Club worked toward merging into one club, the Denver Bonsai Club.

These efforts resulted in a closer and enduring cooperation between the two groups, but the juniors with few exceptions, spoke no Japanese and the seniors were generally not fluent in English. The result is that the seniors were generally not fluent in English. The result was that the seniors continued to hold meetings where all communication was in Japanese, but they willingly assisted the juniors in every way that they could.

When I was president of the Junior Club, I was invited to several Sunday morning meetings of the Denver Senior Bonsai Club. I could not understand what was being said, but I saw many of these experienced bonsai men wire branches, use gestures to show where they were headed for each branch, and gestured where the next was going. I could not get over how they held a branch, wired it carefully from the base to the apex and then with both hands made curves that aged each branch instantly. I was fortunate to watch John Naka, Sam Naka's brother, do this wiring. He was amazing.

In 1974 George displayed his "Smiling Dandelion Bonsai" for our enjoyment. Unfortunately George died that year.

Bob Kataoka was always ready to demonstrate grafting and other techniques. He explained that bonsai are trained, not tortured. It is not neglect that creates the weathered look, but the right training. He and Malcolm Correll published a paper in 1984, "Pine Pruning for More

Branches and Shorter Needles.” His best Ponderosa Pine became the logo of the Denver Junior Bonsai Club and remained our logo when the club changed its name to the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society in 1983.

In 1986, the Bob Kataoka Memorial Award, “Artist of the Year” was established in his honor and is presented to a member who has developed a bonsai that is outstanding.

Bob’s magnificent forest of 47 Alpine Firs was prepared to honor the 47 Ronin, a revered and hallowed story of 47 Ronin, who displayed eternal virtue and sincerity. This bonsai is now in the Weyerhaeuser Company’s Pacific Rim Bonsai collection in Federal Way, Washington State.

Bob Kataoka was a gentle man and a gentleman. His contribution to our knowledge of bonsai and his character continues to influence all of those who knew him.

In 1976 the Denver Botanic Gardens had Dr. Kwan-zaa from UCLA in Los Angeles to prepare a design for a Japanese Garden. They obtained permits from the U. S. Forest Service to collect large Ponderosa Pines to become the major trees for this garden. In 1977, Bob Kataoka, and Kai Kawahara from the Denver Senior Bonsai Club and Harold Sasaki, Floyd Sunshine, Bob Krueger, Keith Jepson, Larry Jackel and me from the Junior Bonsai Club maned the flat bed truck and collected eight or ten large trees. A Tea House was also built by the Gardens to make a significant Japanese garden. Kai Kawahara was

asked to be the curator for the Japanese garden and served full time for many years in caring for the transplanted pines and prepared the well designed Japanese garden. He had previously gone back to Japan to study Japanese gardening. He received the title of Master of Japanese Gardening award and received the title of Master of Bonsai. Kai was chosen as "Artist of the Year" from the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society in 1987 and 1995.

The Denver Senior and Junior Bonsai Clubs began to have an annual show of their trees at the Denver Botanic Gardens. In 1984 the Junior Club changed the it's name to Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society. Phil Hayward of the Society did the art work for the logo, using Bob Kataoka's best Ponderosa Pine for the model.

At that time the Botanic Gardens did not charge admission to events. The Clubs were able to have a large bowl for donations. After each show we would have a dinner party for members at a local organization that prepared dinners.

The City of Denver eventually required an admission charge for all major events to the Gardens, but did enabled groups that had events in the Gardens to have a receptacle for collecting voluntary donations from visitors to the shows. The responsibility for preparing the show, making tables, back drops and all of the materials and preparation for the shows became the full responsibility of the Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society with encourage-

ment for members of the Senior Club to show their trees. The Society used any funds left over to purchase shoji screens as backgrounds for showing the bonsai and other materials to improve the esthetics of the annual Bonsai Show.

Many of the ways we have developed each tree and shrub species into outstanding bonsai were learned from our Japanese friends. Those of us who knew them and learned from them were indeed fortunate. We have developed skills and value the character of these wonderful men, learning so much from them, about bonsai and the Japanese character.

The Rocky Mountain Bonsai Society continued to have regular meetings each month at the Botanic Gardens. Our first meeting room was in Room C in the basement of The Botanic Gardens. It was our best place for meetings as this room was designed with tables for work allowing us to have our meetings where we could enable members to work on their plants rather than listen and try to remember what to do. We were able to have two meetings per month and have our library cart at hand at every meeting.

We have since been moved to the large room in the administrative building which is carpeted, has folding chairs, no library is available and the room can only be used for one meeting per month.

A Front Range Bonsai Study Group began on January 18, 1986. The format for the meetings will remain the same with breakfast followed by a workshop type program based on a predetermined theme. Those interested met for breakfast at the International House of Pancakes on Colfax at Race at 7:30 am. Kai Kawahara arranged for the group to use the Botanic Gardens work area for the upcoming year. Two dollars per year from each person should just about cover postage to announce meetings. Finally, after a natural search for a qualified coordinator, Larry Jackel was selected. So, lets meet in January for a kickoff meeting to work together, plan the year together, and enjoy the fellow ship that bonsai can us all. (Reference, "Front Range Bonsai Study Group.")

This "History" could not have been written without the contributions of Col. Bob Krueger, Harold Sasaki, Larry Jackel, Mary Ann Peacock and Malcolm Correll and Mary Neil, George Fukuma.