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Hirata Family: Henry Hirata (Middle)

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HENRY HIRATA

Henry Hirata and his sisters think of themselves as part of the Nisei generation, even though their mother was also born in America. In the Japanese community, Issei, or first generation, is the term reserved for immigrants to America who were born in Japan, while U.S. born children are referred to as Nisei (second generation.) Typically, Nisei are challenged to live a mixture of Japanese and American culture.

Going to school with white Americans, Henry worked to assimilate to their norms by day and then to revert back to Japanese culture at home in the evening. Henry attended a small high school with several Italian-American immigrants and fewer than a dozen Japanese-Americans. However, because of the size of the school, he interacted with his peers without being overly self-conscious about his ethnicity. Japanese-Americans at larger schools may well have had a harder time integrating into a white world.

Having the opportunity to participate fully in school events gave him confidence socially. Still, on occasion, Henry felt that he was different or separated from his classmates. For example, he knew instinctively that he could not openly date a white girl. Realizing the existence of such limits, he was torn between wanting to be accepted and having pride in his heritage.

Japanese tradition dictates that the eldest son of the family will assume the family business, which in his case was a farm. Being the eldest sibling and a male, there were higher expectations for Henry than for his sisters, who were younger. His father and mother wanted to be sure he “went the right path.” This meant more responsibility and less freedom than was accorded his friends. Others had part-time jobs in the community, while he was restricted to work on the family farm. If problems occurred, he would immediately discuss them with

his parents. While he never worried about being fired, he also could not search for a job he might prefer.

Given his responsibilities at home, Henry was unable to join the football team, despite the coach's pleadings. The football team practiced in the spring and played in the fall, times when he was busy on the farm. He did play basketball, as games were scheduled during the winter months. However, Henry was frequently late for practice when he had to finish work on the farm. It was expected that he would become a strong business leader like his father, so Henry accepted the fact that he would have to work particularly hard and make sacrifices.

Without an allowance or a paying job, Henry had no source of income. If he needed anything, his father would give him money for it. Henry was hesitant to ask, however, as he wanted to be seen as independent. When he was sixteen, his father rewarded Henry's hard work with a car. This event stands out in Henry's mind as a time when his desires and his father's response fit together perfectly. It was as if his father recognized his need for independence as an important step to adulthood.

Henry enjoyed his work on the farm and his car, but increasingly, he craved ever more independence. In search of the next step to adulthood, he enlisted in the Army, to ensure that he could fulfill his military obligation quickly. While he waited to be called, he accepted an invitation to farm with his brother-in-law and left his job on the family farm. Once inducted into the Army, he expected to be gone only eight weeks. However, he was shipped out for a full six months, during which time he could not return home. This was Henry's first separation from his family. As he recalls, "It was a change in lifestyle, where I was not depending on my parents, although I kept in contact with them by letters and sometimes by phone." It was a good time for him, but it was difficult to be away from his loved ones, as well!

Before the Army, Henry had led a sheltered life. After his two years of duty, his horizons broadened and he felt ready for adulthood. Though still afraid

of failure, he gained confidence in himself once back on the family farm. As years passed, he set goals beyond economic security. It became increasingly important for Henry to feel personal satisfaction from whatever he undertook.

Japanese-Americans have a tradition of working hard and sacrificing so that the next generation has an improved chance of success. Henry's parents felt they owed an obligation to previous generations to not fail. His parents worked hard to help him and his two sisters succeed. As Henry's father told him, "Don't forget who you are and what you are; do your best and don't embarrass yourself, your family, or the Japanese community in the process."

These words have always been in the back of his mind. He has spent his adult life honoring this tradition.

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Ethnic Group: Japanese-American
Generation: Middle