They made Chula Vista History!

Saburo Muraoka

Saburo Muraoka: a Farming Innovator

When he came to the United States as a teenager in 1915, Saburo Muraoka could not imagine the impact he would have on farming practices and new crops in Chula Vista or how world events would affect his later life.

Fukutaro Muraoka, Saburo's father, is credited with starting the farming of winter celery in Chula Vista.

Saburo Muraoka was born in 1900 in Yokohama, Japan. His father—Fukutaro Muraoka—left his family to work in the United States not long after Saburo was born. Fukutaro had planned to work and save money in the U.S. so he could return to Japan with enough money to support his family.

A variety of different jobs took Saburo's father from San Francisco to San Diego, where he worked as a cook. In San Diego, he met many Japanese farmers from the South Bay. At the same time, he saw all of the large fish canneries along San Diego Bay and found out that they disposed of their fish scraps as garbage. Fukutaro Muraoka saw an opportunity. He began to purchase and dry the discarded fish pieces and sell it to the vegetable farmers for fertilizer.

Saburo Muraoka was about 20 years old and living in Chula Vista when this photograph was taken.

After celery was picked in Chula Vista it was boxed and sent to markets across the U.S.

While Chula Vista was then known as the "Lemon Capital of the World," Fukutaro Muraoka thought the area also had the perfect climate to grow winter celery. Working with another Japanese farmer, they began to grow celery. By 1915, Fukutaro Muraoka's farming business was doing so well that he needed help. He sent for his third son—Saburo—to come from Japan to Chula Vista. Like his father, Saburo had to take a boat to San Francisco first and then he made his way down the coast of California. When he arrived in Chula Vista, Saburo later recalled that he thought the city was "beautiful" with "citrus groves everywhere."

Record amounts of rain fell in the winter of 1915-1916, which caused the Lower Otay Dam to break. The rain also brought severe flooding along the Sweetwater River through the Bonita area and along the Chula Vista border with National City. Because the route to San Diego was blocked due to the flooding, the Muraokas and other farmers had to transport their crops through Imperial Beach to Coronado and then across the bay by ferry. (The Coronado Bridge was not built until many years later.)

Besides introducing several new crops in Chula Vista, the Muraokas started the use of small tents originally made of used newspaper. These "tents" protected the celery and cucumber plants from harsh weather when the small seedlings were just planted in the

Celery "tents" were first used by Japanese farmers in Chula Vista and eventually were used on farms all across Southern California.

The Muraokas farmed in many locations in Chula Vista. They grew celery, cucumbers and other vegetables that were called "row crops" because of the way they were grown. It didn't matter what kind of vegetable was being grown. Someone, like Saburo Muraoka shown here, had to go out with a hoe and remove the weeds by hand.

ground. They also gave the seedlings a head start on growing, and the first farmer to get crops to market usually got the highest price. Eventually, almost all farmers—not just Japanese—used this method, and the tents got the name "hot caps."

In 1924, Saburo made a decision to stay in Chula Vista even though his father went back to Japan. Three years later Saburo married Haruko Miura. Haruko was a true "picture bride"—a term used for an arranged marriage since the couple had not met in person. Although Haruko was born in Hawaii and thus was an American citizen, a law that had been passed in California in 1922 took away citizenship from women who married a non-citizen like Saburo. Later the couple had two sons and two daughters.

Mr. and Mrs. Muraoka both worked on the farm in the early years of their marriage. They had two sons and two daughters, who also helped in the family business in Chula Vista.

During the prosperous 1920s and the depression years of the 1930s, the Muraoka family worked hard on their land and became among the most successful farmers in the region. Saburo Muraoka was an officer in the Chula Vista Vegetable Growers Association and was active in several other local organizations including the Buddist Temple of San Diego.

Like the Muraokas, most of the Japanese immigrants were hard-working and law-abiding citizens of California. Still some people didn't like the Japanese who had settled in the U.S. When the country of Japan attacked Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941, and the U.S. entered

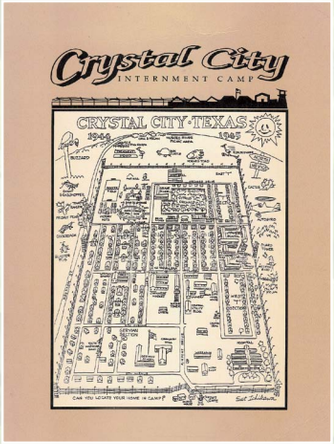
Saburo Muraoka sold celery and other vegetables using the "Emerald Gold" label. Wooden vegetable "lug" boxes—with his label burned into them—were used to ship the vegetables to market.

Saburo Muraoka did many jobs on the farm, including driving the tractor to get the long straight rows ready for planting.

into World War II, government officials were concerned that Japan would attack the mainland of the U.S. There was fear that some of the Japanese residents who lived here were spies.

The bombing of Pearl Harbor changed the lives of the Muraoka family. Saburo Muraoka was arrested immediately and eventually sent to military stockades and prisons far from his family and the West Coast. Saburo was jailed in Montana, Oklahoma and Louisiana,

Then on April 1, 1942, all Japanese-Americans living in San Diego County—including women and children—were ordered to leave their businesses, farms and homes in just one week. Saburo Muraoka's family was among those who reported to authorities. Soon after they were taken to "war relocation centers"—fenced and guarded



This is a hand-drawn diagram of the Crystal City, Texas, internment camp where Saburo Muraoka and his family lived during World War II.

camps—where they were forced to live from 1942-45 when the war ended.

Saburo Muraoka did not see his family again until they were all moved from other detention camps to one in Crystal City, Texas, in late 1942. Gradually, the Japanese were allowed to leave the internment camps starting in 1944 until the last camp closed in 1946.

After their release many Japanese families decided to restart their lives somewhere new rather than return to California. Others, like the Muraoka family, did come back to Chula Vista only to find all of their possessions had disappeared during the war years. They had to start over again.

Three generations of Muraokas—Saburo and Haruko are on the left with their grandson, Ken, and son, Roy.

Farmers did everything from planting seeds to fixing equipment. Here, Saburo's son Roy is shown working with a Caterpillar tractor on the family farm.

By 1950, the Muraokas had worked hard enough to be able to purchase 70 acres of land to grow cucumbers and other vegetables. During the 1960s, Saburo sold most of his farm land and started Muraoka Enterprises which developed property in Chula Vista for houses and businesses. Saburo turned some of his farmland into Palace Garden Mobile Home Park.

Some plants grow tall and have to be given support so the vegetables don't sit in the dirt and rot. Saburo's son Roy checked the plants to be sure they are growing okay.

Although Saburo Muraoka and other Japanese-Americans had suffered during World War II, later he worked to promote peace and understanding between the U.S. and his native Japan.

After President Dwight Eisenhower started the People to People Program in the 1950s, Saburo helped establish the San Diego-Yokohama Sister City program. This successful partnership was used as a model for other Sister City programs. Later Saburo was one of the founders of a second Sister City program—between Chula Vista and Odawara, Japan. In addition to these, Saburo supported student exchange programs between the U.S. and Japan to help strengthen ties between the two countries that had become important allies after the war.

Saburo Muraoka died in 1983. Among his survivors were members of the fourth generation of the Muraoka family—many who continued to call Chula Vista their home.

Saburo Muraoka is remembered as a successful farmer who brought new crops and farming practices to Chula Vista. Just as important, he worked to fight the hardships of prejudice to work for peace and understanding between his native country and the United States. The Friendship Bell on San Diego's Shelter Island is one of the lasting symbols of this effort.

Muraoka family members are gathered with Reverend Yamamoto from the San Diego Buddhist Temple to celebrate the groundbreaking for the Palace Garden Mobile Home Park. Saburo Muraoka is to the left of the priest and his wife, Haruko, is to the priest's right.

This booklet is one of five produced cooperatively by the Altrusa Club of Chula Vista Inc. Foundation; the Chula Vista Elementary School District; and the Chula Vista Public Library. Altrusa initiated the project and its Foundation printed the brochures as the club's contribution to the celebration of the City of Chula Vista's Centennial in 2011. The project leads were Altrusa member Jeri Gulbransen Gustafsson, who researched and wrote the brochures; CVESD Assistant Superintendent John Nelson, who edited the copy and coordinated use of the booklets with the third grade local history curriculum; and CVPL Librarian Donna Golden, who provided research materials and photographs from the library's Local History Collection. In addition, the Japanese American Historical Society of San Diego and the family of Saburo Muraoka reviewed this brochure and the photographs all came from the Muraoka Family Collection, with the exception of those on pages 3 and 4. The graphic design was completed by Komin Design.