



Kosaku Sawada, American

By Bill Ray

The Louisiana Purchase Exposition, also known as the 'St. Louis Worlds Fair of 1904' was, by all accounts a most lavish and elaborate celebration of the exuberance of Americans and the turn of the last century. We know this today both through conventional history, but primarily through history as presented through the eyes of Hollywood and Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer. After all, in the movies, the fair gave Judy Garland a couple of memorable songs to sing.

Forgotten today in those memories of over a century ago, are those exhibitions and displays built by other nations to advertise their presence at this most American of celebrations.

For our purposes though, we are concerned with a Mr. Mykawa who served as an official representative of the government of Japan at the fair. During the fair, Mr. Mykawa became interested in promoting a rice farming venture around Houston, Texas. After his duties at the fair were ended, Mr. Mykawa returned to Japan to recruit a group of people to help with his rice farming plans.

Mr. Mykawa returned to America with four young men to help him. Very shortly, misfortune befell the venture and Mr. Mykawa was killed in a farming accident. The rice farming venture failed shortly thereafter.

One of these four young men was Kosaku Sawada. He, along with several of his young companions operated the Alvin-

Japanese Nursery in Alvin, Texas for a time. The main operation of the Alvin-Japanese Nursery was to import citrus trees and plant orchards in southeast Texas. Along with Satsuma oranges, other plants were imported, including *Camellia japonica*.





Kosaku Sawada

After a few years, it became apparent that the more active growth in the citrus industry was eastward—so K. Sawada moved to Grand Bay, Alabama. Then a move to the largest nearby city seemed appropriate. Thus in 1914, the nursery acquired some land overlooking the city of Mobile, Alabama. In 1918, all operations were moved to this new site and Overlook Nurseries was born.

The first camellias were propagated at Overlook Nurseries about 1915. As the demand for camellias was small, propagation was begun on a limited scale. Cuttings were obtained from plants in the Mobile area—plants which had been planted in the nineteenth century. As the twentieth century camellia popularity boom began, cuttings were obtained from fine varieties throughout the country.

This popularity mushroomed and during the period of 1945 to 1950 the nursery was listing three to four hundred varieties in the nursery catalog and growing up to one thousand varieties in the nursery.

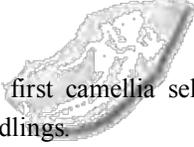
In 1916, Kosaku Sawada had married Nobu Yoshioka. The future Mrs. Sawada had brought some 500 camellia seeds with her from Japan. These were planted in the Spring of 1917 and this was the first planting of seed by Overlook Nurseries. Not until 1929-30 were the blooms of the first 'outstanding' varieties seen. These from seeds planted in 1925. The determination of what was 'outstanding' was determined by K. Sawada.

Today, some are blessed with these first plants in their gardens. Plants with names like 'Lurie's Favorite', 'Queen Bessie', 'Mrs. K. Sawada', 'Imura' and 'K. Sawada' are found in many an outstanding camellia garden.



What is thought to have been his crowning achievement as 'Mr. Camellia' came with the introduction in 1959 of 'Sawada's Dream'

We don't know the date of this photo, but the location is most likely the original ground on Overlook Road.



the first camellia selected at Overlook from cross pollinated seedlings.

‘Sawada’s Dream’ was the camellia that K. Sawada had dreamed of, hoped for and aspired to create for it had everything that he wanted in a camellia (except for the strong fragrance that he had hoped to infuse). It was the color, the shape, the size, everything that matched his internal picture of perfection and he did not believe any camellia could be better. It took him 10 years to develop ‘Sawada’s Dream’

In addition to the Japonicas, K. Sawada introduced a number of sasanquas, among them, ‘Cleopatra’, ‘Brilliancy’ and ‘Gulf Glory’ . K. Sawada was rightly known as a ‘plantsman’ for he lived plants. Azaleas, pyracantha, amaryllis, all were experimented with and new plants produced. When he found that the Japanese flowering cherry would not grow in the South because of the inadaptability of the root stock with which it had to be grafted, he finally succeeded in propagating it from cuttings and the Japanese Flowering cherry became a common and popular

tree in the Southern garden. He grew kale and cauliflower and Brussels sprouts when others only grew cabbage and turnips. He was constantly working for something new, something better.

Forgotten today are his articles for ACS yearbooks and magazines and his lectures. This normally quiet man could talk for hours about his camellias. He often said, “I wonder why everybody invites me to talk to their Club? Maybe, they want to hear my broken English and accent.” Hardly, people wanted to hear about Camellias, from one who lived, breathed and loved Camellias for so long—and had given them so many Camellias to love.

Today in the archives of the American Camellia Society at Masee Lane Gardens, there rest a number of water color paintings of camellias, painted by K. Sawada. Having no formal training as an artist, his works are all the more remarkable: in addition to the painting of the flower itself, he noted detailed descriptions of the flower as well as the leaves and plant. He



C. japonica ‘Sawada’s Dream’

also noted any other information that he had on the history of the variety. To quote ACS historian, Forrest Latta, *'they are unique in all the world'*

The Sawada's had four children who survived into adulthood: Tom, George, Lurie and Ben. Tom was born in 1918 and named for Thomas Jefferson, George was named for General and first President, George Washington. Ben, the youngest was born in 1930 and named for Benjamin Franklin and is today a retired Methodist minister. Nobu died shortly after giving birth to Ben and 'Papa' and oldest son, Tom, raised the three younger children. George died in 1998 and Lurie in the year 2000. Tom died in September, 2004.

People in the local community sometimes asked K. Sawada why he didn't settle on the West Coast of the United States where he could speak Japanese, read Japanese newspapers and magazines: his answer, always: if he had wanted to speak and read Japanese he would have remained in Japan. He was in America. He and his children would speak and read English. Tom, George and Ben were the most American names he could think of for his sons, names of American patriots and statesmen—for he wanted them to be AMERICAN. Lurie's name is something of a family mystery, 'Papa' never shared why she was given that name.

George along with Bill Dodd and Tom Dodd, Jr. were one-half of the first horticulture class at Alabama Polytechnic Institute. After their time together at Auburn, the Dodd's operated Dodd Nurseries for many years while the Sawada family continues to operate Overlook. Rather than competitors, the two families have remained, 'friends in the same business' for decades. After George Sawada's death in 1998, the Dodd family presented a camellia named for 'George Sawada' at his memorial service.

The 'present' George Sawada, son of Tom Sawada, was very pleased that his beloved namesake uncle had been so honored by friends that he had treasured for so long.

Indeed the Sawada's friendship with the Dodd family was not



Clockwise: Papa, George, Lurie, Ben, and Tom. Tom was 12 when their mother died after giving birth to Ben, 10/30, so this picture was taken in the early to mid 1930's.



Kosaku Sawada



unique, K. Sawada seems to have made a habit of knowing his competitors on a first name basis. The stories are told of young people beginning small nurseries in the area being visited, unexpectedly and unannounced, by the then successful K. Sawada and being presented with specimens of Overlook plants for beginning nursery stock for their new business. Help, advice, and support were freely given.

At the beginning of WWII, this generosity was repaid wonderfully by local nurserymen. There were two 'Japanese' named nurseries in the Mobile area: Overlook Nurseries and Kiyono nurseries. T. Kiyono and his camellias had even been the subject of a Life magazine article in March of 1939.

Nevertheless, after the Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, T. Kiyono's nursery was seized and sold at auction by the government. Kiyono's case was not helped by his being in Japan at the time of the attack.

Overlook was scheduled to be seized and sold, but the nurserymen of the surrounding area went as a group to the authorities and pled K. Sawada and his families' case. K. Sawada was an American, there were few in that room that had not known his friendship and generosity. There was a heated, indeed, a passionate discussion with the authorities. The local nurserymen argued that K. Sawada was one of THEM—one of their OWN.

Local legend has it that the pleasant, soft-spoken, man of few words, K. Sawada was moved to tears by the actions and love of his friends, his 'competitors' and their families.

The Sawada family was allowed to keep Overlook.

Indeed, son Tom was in the US Army when war broke out. He was asked to be a undercover operative. He responded that he would do anything he could to serve his country, but were they aware he did not speak Japanese? The idea was dropped and though Tom did know some words and phrases, he never learned to speak Japanese, fluently.

Son George suffered from asthma and was ineligible for overseas military service, he was, however, active in the Coast Guard and in defense work at home.

April 15, 2008 marks 40 years since the death of Kosaku Sawada, 'Mr. Camellia'. Born October 21, 1882 in Osaka, Japan, he, by his own design and determination, became as American as baseball, hot dogs, apple pie.....and Camellias.

So today, amid talk of politically correct 'cultural diversity' and 'maintaining ethnic heritage' let us remember a gentle man and his family who have given us so much beauty to enjoy and who proudly became Americans to do so.