

## **Personal History of Kozo Ikemi**

Kozo Ikemi was born in Orange County in 1919 to Eizaburo Ikemi and Sen Harada Ikemi. He was the sixth of eight children. The family then moved to the Vista area in San Diego County. The family tried to farm a couple of different sites. They finally farmed in an area that is now covered by a housing development near the north gates of Camp Pendleton.

Kozo's father, Eizaburo, an educated man had effectively run away from Japan, traveling as far north as Alaska before settling down in San Diego. His father preferred fishing and hunting and having discussions in the Japanese communities. Kozo was proud that his father had a role in the founding of a school associated with the Vista Buddhist Temple. In contrast, his mother, Sen, was stern and instilled discipline in the family.

Since Eizaburo was not much of a farmer, running the farm was up to the second oldest brother, Taizo, with the assistance of Kozo and his sisters Ritsuko, Mary, Hideko, and Mitzi. Meanwhile, his oldest brother Eddie was sent from Japan by an older sister to bring their father back to Japan. Eddie decided to stay in the states and started his own trucking business.

Kozo was proud of the skills he learned to survive—hunting, running a farm, and driving trucks and tractors. His favorite subject in school was probably shop. He dreamed of being an aviation mechanic. Kozo was schooled in Japanese, and later, he worked as an interpreter for a short time. He would always love to read and learn about new technology and current events.

World War II interrupted life in Vista. One of Kozo's bitterest memories was being thrown out of the San Diego Depot when he went there to volunteer to serve his country. Later, he would respond "NO-YES" to the notorious WRA loyalty questionnaire of 1943. He was a part of the lead team sent out to construct the Poston Concentration Camp. While interned in Poston, Kozo tried to make the bad experience as positive as possible. He took every opportunity to develop his skills with machinery. He drove semis hauling ice to the camp and Caterpillar tractors to help with the work. In his later years, he would often say that he would like to drive the large farm machines just to see what they would be like.

Kozo returned to California after the war. Like many young Nisei men, he lived on Skid Row in downtown Los Angeles since it was all he could afford. In looking for work, he faced discrimination: "No Japs." Somehow,

he and the other young men survived. He persuaded machinists to teach him how to operate the equipment needed by an automotive machinist. He soon mastered the trade. He observed that he was not being paid the same as other workers because he was Japanese.

Kozo started his own business with his partner Roy Nakashima. They ended up renting space from a man who would become a lifelong friend, Sam Miyakawa. The early years were lean and they nearly starved, but Kozo persevered. Eventually, his business, K & Y Motors, became a very successful rebuilder of forklift and industrial engines. He owned and operated K & Y Motors until he retired in 1984.

In 1950, Kozo married May Matsubara. They moved to East Los Angeles where they raised their three children. He was dedicated to his family throughout the 53 years of his marriage. He was always proud of his children's achievements.

Throughout his working life, Kozo found time for recreation. In the early days, he raced speedsters on dry lakes. In the 1950s, he built a ski boat completely from scratch. He steamed the wood in large barrels patiently, carefully bending it to form the hull of the boat. Of course, he built the boat's engines beginning with a flat-head Ford V-8 and ending with a Chrysler hemi. Once the boat was completed, every week was spent water skiing and playing on the then empty beaches of Southern California. When go-karts became popular, he raced them often bringing home trophies from the local go-kart tracks. He raced dirt bikes around the desert. As he grew older, he switched to road bikes. Over the years, Kozo fished with family and friends for tuna, marlin, trout, and bass.

After Kozo retired, he learned how to play golf. He and May would play nine holes in the early morning hours in Monterey Park. Kozo and May fished for the elusive trout and bass in the Colorado River. They were often accompanied by Kozo's faithful Shih-Tzu, Koko. He spent time nurturing his backyard orchard and enjoying the afternoon sun with his dogs. Kozo was always a voracious reader who loved to share what he had learned with fellow readers.

When he was reflecting upon his life in his later years, he always reminded us that we should enjoy life and appreciate everyone because time passes all too quickly. By his example, we learned that we should not be afraid of the challenges of life, but face them with our best efforts.