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Komure Family: Dean Komure (Middle)

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STOCKTONSpeaks!

DEAN KOMURE

Dean Komure grew up knowing in his heart that if his word is good, he would always have something. He learned from his parents to be proud of his upright Japanese heritage, and he has instilled a similar pride in his own children.

In fact, he has found that others recognize the high character of the Japanese. While helping a bereaved friend make arrangements for a funeral, the funeral home director told him, “Don’t worry about paying me yet, because there are two ethnicities that don’t cause me any worry over whether I’ll get paid—Jewish and Japanese.” In the Japanese tradition, whenever there is a funeral, mourners always present a monetary gift, called “koden,” to the family. Thus, the funeral home director could be confident there will always be money to provide for his services.

Born in Stockton, California, Dean was raised in French Camp, a rural area on the outskirts of the city. His father and mother made their living as a farmer and nurse, respectively. The youngest of three children, with two older sisters, Dean was brought up in a Protestant household and attended Sunday school regularly. In addition to going to regular public school, he also went to Japanese school, where he learned some Japanese reading and writing. The Komures mostly spoke English in their household; his exposure to Japanese language came from Japanese School and from interacting with his grandmother, who had journeyed along with his grandfather from Japan to Lathrop and Monterey, seeking more opportunity for their children in America.

While growing up, he hoped that his adult life would include a happy marriage, with wonderful kids. Being rich was not a goal. What he hoped instead was to be content with what he could accomplish. A career in the medical field seemed to his parents a good way to be happy and productive. Dean agreed. After he completed high school, he enrolled in the University of California at Davis, where he initially intended to pursue a degree in medicine. A Davis faculty member instead convinced Dean to take plant science and economics, courses which eventually led to a degree in Agricultural Science and prepared him for a career in farming.

Roxanne, Dean’s daughter, is also attending UC Davis where she is following her mother’s footsteps by pursuing a degree in the field of social work. While the Komures have this experience in common, daughter and father also have some generational differences. Dean was raised on the family farm and still works the land to this day. He

is not bothered by the expression “oriental,” which was generally applied to Asians before the term was considered politically incorrect. Roxanne, on the other hand, was raised in the city. She is offended by the term “oriental”, which she feels should be applied to food labels and rugs.

Just as Dean honored his own parents, he and his wife raised Roxanne to respect them and their desire to play an influential role in her life. One area of influence concerns the unspoken tradition that a Japanese girl marry a Japanese boy. Although Roxanne has dated boys of other ethnicities, she knows her parents and grandparents want her to marry someone from a Japanese family. Dean feels strongly that this is not a racist request, but rather an expectation borne of tradition. Dean is pleased to say that Roxanne is dating a young Japanese-American.

This pride in their ethnicity and strong family tradition is what has held the Japanese-American community together so tightly, especially through the hard times of World War II. On December 7, 1941 the Japanese government launched an attack on American military installations in Pearl Harbor in Honolulu, Hawaii, drawing the United States into World War II. This act prompted the American government to question the loyalties of all Japanese-Americans. Government agents from the FBI and other agencies swept into the Japanese communities up and down the U.S. west coast, arresting a large number of prominent members of the Issei (first generation). They were sent directly to internment camps without charges or hearings.

Despite government reports stating that the Japanese were no more disloyal than any other group of Americans, anti-Japanese sentiment in the west due to racism and economic competition, particularly in agriculture, prevailed. Two months after the Pearl Harbor attack, on February 19, 1942, President Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, paving the way for the removal of Japanese from anywhere deemed necessary for military security. In the end, that security area covered all of California, most of Oregon and Washington, as well as portions of Arizona. By June 1942, six months after Pearl Harbor, 110,000 Americans whose ancestors were Japanese were on their way to ten internment camps spread out over much of the interior deserts of the U.S. Most of these Japanese-Americans were second generation Nisei who were born in the United States—American citizens by birth.

Most of the families were financially wiped out, losing everything they had. Being put into the camps meant that there would be no one left to tend their land or take care of their businesses. With just a few days notice of the forced departure, allowed to take only what they could carry in one suitcase each, families sold their precious antiques

and heirlooms for pennies or gave them away. Their cultural heritage vanished from their families overnight.

And yet, young Japanese-American men—with their families crowded into tarpaper barracks in camps on stark, bare desert acreage enclosed by barbed wire and guarded by soldiers in gun towers—volunteered to fight for the freedom of their country, a country that held their relatives in prison-like enclaves.

Many became part of the famed 442nd Regimental Combat Team comprised solely of Japanese-Americans. By war's end, the 442nd RCT (which included the 100th Infantry Battalion of Japanese-Americans from Hawaii) became the most highly decorated unit in U.S. military history. Its 14,000 members who served during the course of the war were awarded 21 Congressional Medals of Honor (20 of them bestowed, 13 posthumously, in 2000, fifty-five years after hostilities ended), 18,000 individual awards for bravery, 9,500 purple hearts, and an unprecedented 8 Presidential Unit Citations.

This internment experience had a great impact on Dean's family's life, even though his parents never really spoke of their feelings and the situations that occurred during the war. His father, George Komure, was in the Pacific Theatre during the war, working as a crane operator. Despite his father's silence on the subject, Dean knows that it was very hard for his father to work for the freedom of his country at the same time that his family and his own parents—Dean's grandparents—were being held captive.

Dean's father George subsequently became very active in their community. He was a member of the local school board for many years but he was always quiet about what he was doing. The elder Komure's services and contributions were recognized recently when the school board named the district's newest elementary school the George Komure School. Dean and his sisters were shocked to learn that the school district naming committee had decided to name a school after their father; they never really knew he of his contributions to the community.

In fact, Dean recalls that in grade school, his teachers would tell him, "I'm going to talk to your father about this." He would shrug off the admonitions as idle threats, thinking to himself, "Sure, when are you going to see my father?" Little did he know that his father was at all the school PTA meetings!

Today, Japanese traditions still flourish in the Komure family despite their western upbringing. They observe the customs and prepare foods involved with celebrating New Year's Day, and they hang a flag emblazoned with a design of a carp, representing the male spirit, outside the home every year on Boys Day, May 5th.

In the long run, Dean Komure would like the future generations of his family to learn from those who came before and “to always do their best and to keep their word.” Why? Because, as he knows, “Without your word, you have nothing.”

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Ethnic Group: Japanese American
Generation: Middle