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A STRAWBERRY CELEBRATION

It was the week after Father's Day and I thought I'd stop by to visit one of my favorite Island fathers-- Art Koura. He and his lovely wife, Flo, live on part of their old 180-acre strawberry farm. So do a hundred or more other families-- and hundreds more golfers! You see, Art and his family's former farm is now Meadowmeer!

Art recalls, "Dad gave up a store in Seattle in 1920 to 'get rich' growing berries on Bainbridge. His first farm was in Winslow."

The Koura family did well enough in Winslow to rent and eventually to buy hill-top, forest land, three-miles north of town in 1936. The Raber family, from whom they were renting, urged them to buy the land, "The only way to get ahead," Raber said. They bought additional land, too, from Maldur Flodin.

There, Art and his generation built the Island's largest berry farm and after being uprooted during WW II, they brought berry production back up to and beyond pre-war yields by the 1950's. Art did so despite wounds suffered in Italy while serving in the Army's most highly-decorated unit, the "Go For Broke" 442nd Infantry.

Today, Art and Flo live in the same spot atop Bay Hill Road. The berry farm's barn and shed still stand south of the house. Once, to the east, they overlooked a half-mile of lush berry fields, and to the west, scenic vistas of Manzanita Bay, Keyport and the Olympics. Trees and houses now fill the views. Art and Flo's home is surrounded by naturally seeded firs and several mature pines, planted by Art after he found them as seedlings while hunting the delicious and elusive matsutake Japanese pine mushroom in pine groves west of ... well, (no need to keep it a secret-- it's now all cul-de-sacs, too)... Poulsbo.

Art and I shared a soft drink and then he put a tape into his VCR and we watched it on his TV set-- since the Mariners weren't playing! He'd shared others with the *Snow Falling On Cedars* film crew. You can see them at the Museum.

I sat in continued amazement as we shared home movies he'd taken in 1951 and '52. First, were films of the Blossom's and Peterson's bulldozers digging the huge irrigation pond which sits today at the south end of Blue Pond Road next to Meadowmeer golf course's 4th and 13th tees. Its spring fed water was pumped to thirsty berries, not putting greens and fairways. We saw '50's county agriculturists inspecting the irrigation system and children fishing in the pond. Art laughed and recalled how a dozen or so fingerlings he planted

grew into large fish for the kids to catch. Their size surprised everybody! They were longer than a daily newspaper is wide! Not only did the pond feed the farm, it also provided winter recreation. We smiled as Art and friends zipped wobbly-legged around the frozen pond on ice skates.

More than the pond miracle, we watched the clearing of land for vast fields of strawberries-- as far as the eye could see! Trees were felled, limbed, hauled, and plopped into the bay, then pike-poled and boomed up into large rafts, and guided on an out-going tide beneath a new Agate Pass bridge.

Art left the camera in the house while dynamiting stumps. We did watch plowing, fertilizing, and seedling planting with then new, state-of-the-art, mechanical planters similar to those at our Museum and the Fil-Am Hall. These enabled three people to do the work once done by hand by large extended families. The farm community consisted of friends of all ages and nationalities-- Scandinavians, Cowichans, Suquamish, Filipinos, Germans, Swiss and folks of Japanese ancestry. These were films of happy days, growing families, picking berries in the morning coolness before sunrise, working hard and playing hard, too-- when work was done. We wondered if any of the children were still alive who we watched marching and clowning in the 1951 Strawberry Festival Parade. Art's films included winter gatherings-- mochi-making parties! And we laughed at orchard views of folks trying to get rid of tent caterpillars! You see, those critters have inundated us before!

This year's (2003) Strawberry Festival is June 29th at the Fil-Am Hall next to Strawberry Hill Park-- a day to have fun and embrace an important chapter in Island history. There'll be strawberry shortcake there, at Rotary's Auction, and Grand Old Fourth.

With luck, perhaps we'll find a videographer who can help edit and caption Arts film so it can be shared with BI Broadcasting audiences on and after June 25. Or the movies may be too fuzzy. Still, every time we visit Meadowmeer, watch folks enjoying a round of golf in that beautiful landscape, walk into a dense Island forest and think what it took to create agricultural land from it, and, yes, whenever we savor a fresh local strawberry the caterpillars haven't ravaged, we'll envision the hard work that went into clearing the land for the Island's berry farms and think fondly of Art and Flo, two of the Island's very special people.

-- Gerald Elfendahl, (c) 2003

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