

A Special Place Called Wahiawa Leaves Lasting Impressions

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by Gerald Hirata

*Wahiawa, Wahiawa...
The dusty and puka roads
Where roaches are big as toads
No ka oi, ka oi
Ichiban, numbah one*

Its been eleven years since I wrote that refrain in a song that paid tribute to my Dad on his 61st birthday. In essence however, it was a song about Wahiawa, McBryde Sugar Plantation's Camp Two and Three. It chronicled a family's life on the plantation, but for me, it was a song from the heart, a voice from the camp.

The Wahiawa '85 Reunion this past weekend has given me the opportunity to think and to reflect on what it was like to live in Wahiawa. What made Camp Two and Camp Three so special for former residents like me? Why do I feel this lifelong affinity to a place with dilapidated houses, impassable dirt roads and outhouses? Why do I keep returning?

*Wahiawa, Wahiawa...
The neighbors are very nice
We never ran out of rice
Had Kimata Store
Kira's and Iida's*

What makes Wahiawa so special to me is the people – the camp folk. My childhood images are of playmates who were in endless supply, and the old folks who were home tending to the yard or garden, keeping an eye over us while our parents were at work.

We knew every household, who were the older and younger siblings of my classmates, their parents, grandparents, cousins, aunts and uncles. Wahiawa was one, big extended family.

A good sense of communication was needed when there was sharing of bath houses, laundry washrooms and outside toilets. There was intimacy when houses have thin walls and are in close proximity, row upon row. Such closeness of people can never be duplicated in today's communities.

When meeting friends or neighbors that I have not seen for a long time, or meeting a family friend for the first time, I still feel a strong bond between us.

The fact that Camps Two and Three were predominantly Japanese also made Wahiawa unique. Plantation life was not easy, especially for families like ours with five children and grandparents to care for. Yet most camp folk found gratification through hard work, sound marriages, sacrificing for their children, and caring for their elders. When times were difficult, traditional Japanese values told us to endure, to persevere and to stand firm.

Eventually things would work out and in Wahiawa, it usually did. The drudgery of camp life and the deteriorating conditions of the homes were almost transparent to us because life in Wahiawa was what people made of it. I remember it as a camp full of life, with Friday night movies at the community hall, numerous church functions like bazaars and Bon Dances, camp picnics, and Little League baseball.

It was a country life of hearts and feelings. Life was not all roses but it was good because we believed it was. It is a tribute to the camp folk and their Japanese spirit that made the most of an impoverished situation.

Another reason why Wahiawa leaves a lasting impression on its former residents is the church. It was the Buddhist temple with the Japanese school and the community hall that was the center of all recreational and cultural activities. Aside from providing for the social needs of the camp folk, the basic tenets of Buddhism shaped the character of the camp's Japanese community. It helped bridge the gap between generations because it allowed us to understand the values of our parents and grandparents, and stressed the cult of the family.

Buddhism stressed passivity, doing one's job well, almost breeding fatalism and complacency. It made the rough times of labor unrest and sugar strikes easier to bear. The church and its teachings also shaped our attitudes and ways of interacting with people, that is, to be humble, low key and have consideration when dealing with others.

We were taught that other people's reactions were important so it determined how we behaved. We never tried to get ahead at other's expense and we learned to respect and to accept one another. We developed a sensitivity for sharing and caring.

*Wahiawa, Wahiawa...
The houses are very old
The toilets are all outside
Plenty mango trees,
Papayas, lichees*

When the last homes of Wahiawa are razed by the plantation, the camp will no longer exist. As residents of the camp, we saw this day coming and have accepted it, without any trace of bitterness or remorse.

What changes for me is the landscape. The rows of houses and the temple will be gone, but my attitude remains unchanged. I still think of myself as a Wahiawa boy, a person whose identity was shaped by that dusty, little McBryde enclave.

There is so much of "Wahiawa" in me and my feelings for the camp and its people run so deep that the spirit of the community is still alive. Of this I know because there are so many others who feel exactly as I do.

The Wahiawa '85 Reunion and the 700 people were a testimony to this. So it is comforting to know that even if the old homes are gone, there will always be a Wahiawa because it lies in the hearts and souls of all of us who lived there. It is this kind of spirit within us camp folk that will draw us back to Wahiawa time and time again.

Editor's note (1985):

Gerald Hirata describes himself as “da numbah three son of da only son of one son-of-a-gun” or simply, a “Wahiawa boy.” His grandfather came to Wahiawa as a young man to work at McBryde Sugar and lived a healthy 92 years. His Dad, born and raised in Wahiawa, retired from the plantation after working there for 47 years.

After growing up in Wahiawa and graduating from Waimea High School, Gerald got his BA & MA in mathematics from Arizona State & UCLA, respectively, volunteered for the Peace Corps and spent three years in Botswana, Africa, and currently resides in Santa Monica, California. He is employed by Digital Equipment Corporation as a Software Specialist.