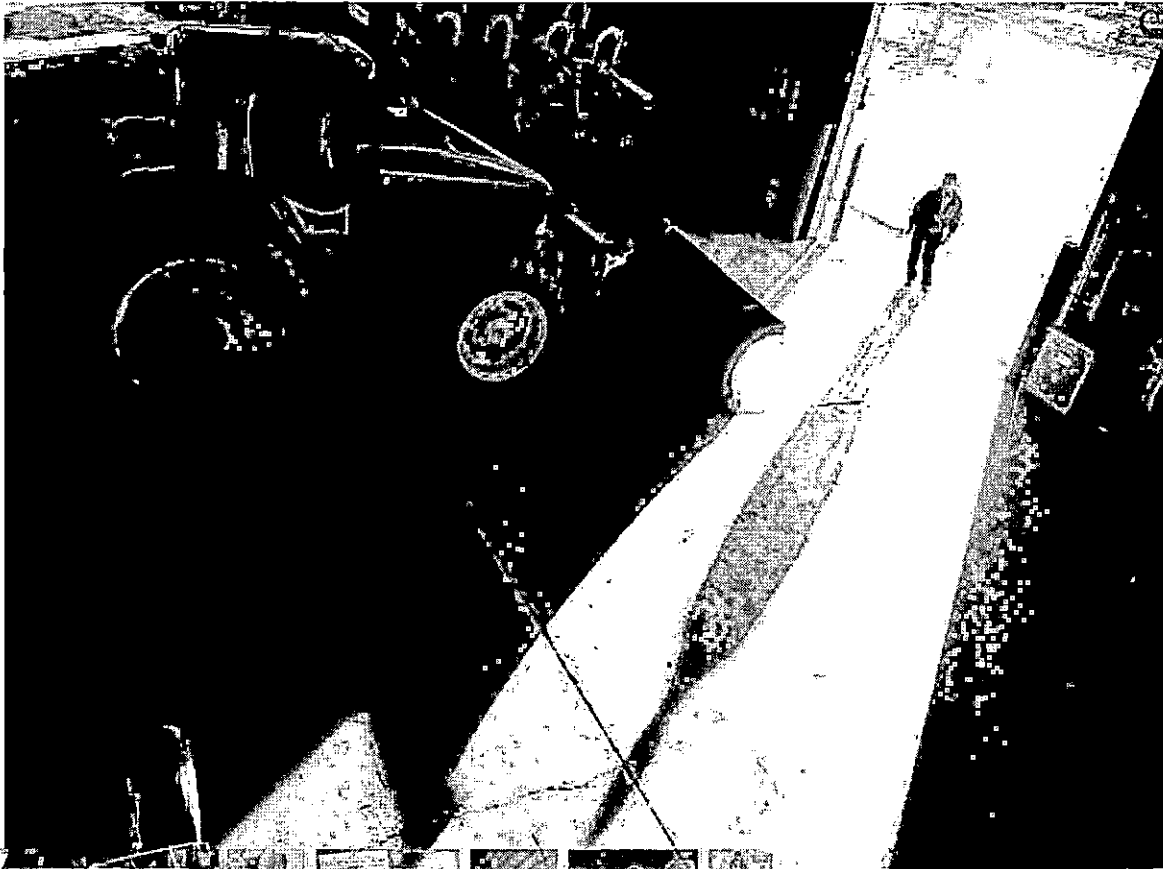


Kayla Young | Editor

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From internment to Weld County farming icon: Bob Sakata cultivates lifetime of lessons

Show
Caption



Sakata Farms today

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Sakata Farms produces sweet corn, cabbage, onions, pinto beans and occasionally broccoli on 2,400 acres of farmland in south Weld County for local consumption and export. During peak production times, Bob Sakata said the company employs 200 people, with 70 staying on year round.

In 1999, Bob and Joanna Sakata were inducted into the Colorado Agriculture Hall of Fame. This Jan. 29, they will join the Colorado Business Hall of Fame.

Bob Sakata's Philosophy on Life: Ten Simple "Don'ts"

- Don't just look, observe.
- Don't just hear, listen.
- Don't just talk, say something.
- Don't just work, be productive.
- Don't just set goals, achieve them.
- Don't just live on a title, continue to prove you are worthy of it.
- Don't just tell the truth, live it.
- Don't just love, have respect and honor with it.
- Don't just make a promise, follow through with it.
- Don't just pray, have faith.

At 89 years old, Sakata's philosophy is no coincidence — it comes from a life of lessons and a drive to succeed in the face of adversity.

His optimism and his dedicated vision are what accompanied Sakata through dark times and the anti-Japanese sentiment that swept the nation following the attacks on Pearl Harbor on Dec. 7, 1941.

Now an icon of Weld County's agricultural community, Sakata's life today sharply contrasts from his early years tenant farming in California and later, his time spent alongside 11,000 other Japanese Americans in the Topaz, Utah, internment camp.

When Sakata first arrived by himself to Brighton in 1942, the 16-year-old knew nothing about Colorado. He only knew the Centennial State offered one of the few havens for the Japanese in the West.

Sakata had heard Colorado Gov. Ralph Carr's rare speech openly defending the rights of the Japanese community: "Remember that America is a great melting pot of the modern civilized world. From every nation of the globe, people have come to the United States who sought to live as free men."

The stance cost Carr his political career, but it offered relief for young men like Sakata.

"He openly stated that what the government was doing was unconstitutional and he invited any Japanese American from the West Coast who wanted to voluntarily come to Colorado," Sakata said. "I thought if there was a governor who felt the way he did, this must be a good place to live."

Back in Topaz, Utah, where Sakata had spent the past six months, the teen's father, brother and twin sisters remained detained in an internment camp with other Japanese and Japanese Americans who were forcefully removed from their homes on the West Coast.

Like so many other American families, the Sakatas saw their lives drastically set off course by the Japanese attacks on Pearl Harbor. From one day to the next, the Sakatas were no longer a family of humble farmers working the land in California. They now embodied the fear and uncertainty that had gripped the nation.

With President Franklin Roosevelt's Executive Order 9066, the Sakatas had no choice but to leave their land and their lives for a desert prison far removed from anything they knew.

"When I went into the camp in Topaz, Utah, I felt I could not mentally be able to stand it in there. I believed so much in this United States and its constitution and when I saw them standing with their guns pointing inside, I knew that was wrong. I forgave them for that but I felt I should do everything I could to legally be out," Sakata said, sitting at the headquarters of his now 2,400-acre vegetable operation south of Brighton.

With his father's permission and the sponsorship of a Caucasian American, Sakata was able to regain his citizenship and was the third person to leave the camp.

Sakata did not dwell on the story or offer greater detail on his time in Utah. He instead removed a slip of paper from his wallet. Its faded ink and tattered edges hint that Sakata turns to this note often: "Whenever there's a big challenge that God gives us, I pray and say, 'Don't let me go into failure because of these disasters but help me use these challenges as a stepping stone to a brighter future. Just give me the strength and the confidence to be able to go forward.' "

For Sakata, the ability to work with the land is a blessing in itself. For a farmer who saw his family's land taken away, Sakata exudes that unique sense of gratitude felt by those who know the meaning of loss.

"In farming, every day you realize there is an almighty God. So you don't have to go to church on Sundays. You don't have to be preached to about the Bible; you believe it. You see God's miracle every day, every morning. When the sun rises, what a beautiful site," he said.

Like many of Colorado's most established and respected farmers, Sakata traces his roots back through generations of farmers before him. Many of his earliest memories come from working alongside his father, Mantaro, a talented orchardist and dedicated gardener.

After harvest, he would observe his mother carefully utilize the gifts of the season, collecting the smallest and otherwise discarded potatoes that would fall through the cracks in the processing line to feed her family of five in Depression-era California.

"During the years we were stricken with poverty, I didn't know we were poor. Everyone was poor. ... But we made it. We made it by helping each other," Sakata said. "I still remember our neighbors coming down and asking mother for a cup of rice so she could feed her children. That was normal. And during the winter months, dad knew how to store every vegetable you could think of that we grew."

In those early days near San Francisco, the Sakatas made a life out of working the land, tending to 10 acres of fruits and vegetables as tenant farmers. Here, they would plant, weed and hoe by hand, just as

the family before them had done back in Japan. Farming was and remains the common thread that ties the Sakata family history together. It is how Mantaro first came to the United States, following the invitation of an American farmer seeking Japanese expertise on rice production.

As an adult, when Sakata had the opportunity to visit his father's hometown, Kurume, Japan, he witnessed the family's agricultural heritage first hand.

"When I first went to visit the Sakata's grave site (in Japan), ice went through my veins. The thing that came to me is that, now I know why I am what I am. The family owned about two hectares there of fruit trees. They did not waste any land. They grew vegetables between the trees," he said.

After disruption of the family's life in 1942, the farming tradition could have easily been lost to circumstance. After all, when Sakata first arrived to Colorado, his resources were limited and he had no land to call his own.

His break came from a dairy farmer who would be pivotal in establishing the modern day Sakata Farms.

"I came here and worked for a farmer, Mr. Bill Schluter. I did chores for him and went to school and graduated from Brighton High School in 1943. I lived in the little milk house," Sakata said. "I came here with a lot of reservations wondering how I would be accepted in Brighton High School when they all knew that I just came out of a concentration camp. I was welcomed with open arms and I never felt so great in my life."

By 1945, when the Japanese internment camps were shut down, Sakata had made an impact on Schluter. The farmer took interest in the family's future now that they were free. He believed in the Sakatas' right to farm.

"Mr. Schluter is the one who asked me what I wanted to do with the family. I called my late brother Harry and he said he didn't want to go back to California and I didn't want to go back either," Sakata said. "I told him there was an opportunity here, so the whole family came to Brighton after Mr. Schluter financed us with a 40-acre farm that he bought for us."

The initial years farming in Colorado brought challenges of their own. Sakata's father and brother would both pass away in this time, and later Sakata would suffer severe, life-threatening burns.

His saving grace was Joanna, his wife for nearly 60 years now.

"Sakata Farms could have never reached this plateau without Joanna and I working as a team," he said.

Joanna, sitting at her desk in the office, chimed in, "I knew Bob couldn't make it on his own, so I had to step in."

"You can publish that. That's true," Sakata said with a laugh.

Today, the couple manages the office and their son, Robert, serves as president.

"A couple of years ago, our board of directors of our family fired me as president," Sakata said, laughing again. "They didn't know what title to give me, but they finally gave me the title of chairman of the board. So I am certainly blessed that I have a reason to get up in the morning."

Every morning, Sakata rises before the sun to tour the farm, "not because I have to but because that's what I enjoy." By 7 a.m., he is at the office where he works until 5 or 6 p.m. "when the phone stops ringing."

Joanna, who grew up farming near Granby, remains in her role as secretary/treasurer.

"I told my mom, the last person I wanted to marry was a farmer because I knew the life of a farmer was tough and I didn't want to live a life like that. Looking back on it now, it was a good choice," she said. "We really had a lot of exciting times, good and bad. We've done a lot of interesting things I probably would have never done otherwise."

The success of Sakata Farms came with its sacrifices, she explained, pointing to the office carpet as an example. Throughout the years, it was never changed; the money was better spent buying new tractors and farm equipment. Her willingness to sacrifice was one of the many reasons Joanna made such a fit partner for the operation.

"One reason we were able to move ahead is that I never had to worry about the office. My peer, I knew, took care of everything in the office," Sakata said.

Those who are close to the family echo the praise for Sakata and his wife.

When asked to describe the Sakatas, former Colorado Commissioner of Agriculture Don Ament shared glowing words about the entire family. Speaking on his good friend, Bob, however, Ament named off an extensive list of compliments.

"Everything he does is special," Ament said. "(He's) hard working, motivated, always trying to listen and do things smarter. (He's) humble. That's why everyone likes to have him around. He's got a sense of humor, he's not arrogant and everyone knows that what he has is a result of his hard work and his motivation to learn and find a better way."

Fellow Brighton farmer Dave Petrocco pointed to Sakata's good land management, as well as his community involvement.

"Bob is great to be around. Bob's got a very magnetic personality and he commands a lot of respect. People not only in ag but his whole community do listen. They know what he does and what he stands for. He's quite influential in Colorado and beyond the state boundaries," Petrocco said.

When asked what he believes brought him success as a farmer, Sakata said, "I just had faith in America as a free nation, I truly believed that if you worked harder, you obeyed the laws and you thought smarter, you could get ahead. And that's what I did." ❖