

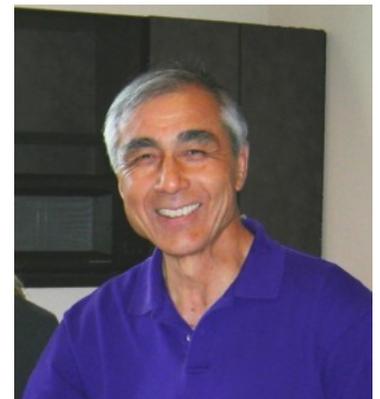
Lynell Tanigoshi: A ground-breaker in many fields

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WSU Mount Vernon's first entomologist leaves behind storied career legacy

If recently retired WSU Mount Vernon entomologist Lynell Tanigoshi were to write his memoir based on his professional path over the past four decades, he might well choose the title, "A Series of Serendipitous Events."

Before the 75-year-old WSU professor emeritus gained recognition in the discipline of biological control of agricultural mites and insect pests with their natural enemies in citrus, avocado, apple and small fruit crops, his career options were wide open. His pre-entomological work resume ranged from family and truck farming to grocery services and television acting.



Bit by the acting bug

"I was a junior working my way through Long Beach State College (now known as Cal State University Long Beach), where lots of young folks in those days wanted to work as an extra in Hollywood and TV," Tanigoshi said. "I just happened to meet a fellow classmate who was earning \$50 per appearance,

and that really piqued my interest. That was a lot of pocket money back in those days.”

Tanigoshi was a match for the ‘Asian’ profile desired by many filmmakers and television producers at that time. “By serendipity, I got a call from an agent who was a friend of the family, and that’s how I eventually ended up landing my first speaking role.”

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TANIGOSHI

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He played the character Foon Chang in “The Widow O’Rourke Story,” a 1963 episode of the network television series “Wagon Train,” which aired from 1957 to 1965. “It was just one episode, but that was my quick and dirty experience with fame,” he

Prior to becoming an entomologist, Tanigoshi caught the ‘acting bug’ during his undergraduate college years in southern California. (Image from the 1961 Academy Players Directory, Issue 88, Part Two)

chuckled. “Producers commonly advised me to go on and get my degree, because a career in acting was never guaranteed for minority actors, especially in the ‘60s and pre-Watts days!”

Acting was part of the experience Tanigoshi described as “magical,” considering he was of mixed-race, Japanese-American descent and coming of age at a time when post-World War II social prejudice was still simmering across the United States.

“Because of the example my parents and grandparents set through their hard work and perseverance in pursuit of the ‘American Dream,’ I was able to live this life that seemed Japanese kids growing up in the 1950s and ‘60s shouldn’t be living,” he said. “I went to a nice high school in Huntington Beach, California, enjoyed idyllic beach times, lettered in three sports and was voted class president.”

Behind barbed wire

Earlier times had not been so easy for the Tanigoshi family.

Born in the Russian neighborhood of Boyle Heights in East Los Angeles, Tanigoshi was not even two years old when his life was dramatically interrupted. Just five months after the December 7, 1941, Japanese attack on Pearl Harbor, then-president Franklin D. Roosevelt signed Executive Order 9066, ordering 120,000 people of Japanese descent living in the United States into forced internment.



Pre-kindergartener Lynell Tanigoshi stands by his farmstead home, circa 1945. (Photo courtesy of Lynell Tanigoshi)

The Tanigoshis were given less than two weeks to fill one suitcase each of select possessions and abandon their home before being shipped by train with shades down into forced relocation for the remaining three-year duration of the war. They soon found themselves crammed with up to 18,000 other Japanese Americans into wood and tar-paper housing at the Poston internment camp southwest of Parker, Arizona, in the middle of the Sonoran desert. “We were told that the incarceration was for our safety,” Tanigoshi said, “but the machine guns in the watch towers were pointing in at us.”

Although conditions were harsh, Tanigoshi harbors no resentment of his boyhood behind barbed wire. After 14 months, he and his father, mother and sister were allowed to move eastward to Denver, Colorado, where his dad worked in the produce department of a large grocery store. “Life was easier living in our own rented home, compared with the communal barrack life and lack of privacy in Poston,” he said. “We remained in Denver until the end of the Pacific war in early September 1945.”

Fortunately for Tanigoshi’s parents, who like other Japanese-Americans were prevented by law from owning land during the internment period, the surrogate who held title to his grandfather’s farm honorably returned it to the family.

“That was very serendipitous for us,” Tanigoshi said. “Three generations of our family was able to move back to grandfather Shiba’s 10-acre truck farm, located on rich alluvial soil with an abundance of Artesian well water in Westminster, CA.” That’s where he was first introduced to agricultural science and later opportunities not previously available to his parents and their Nisei generation.

“I experienced the freedom of safely living and exploring on our own farm

property with our dogs, cats, chickens, rabbits and racing pigeons, while spending memorable long, summer days working with my mother and grandmother in the strawberry field to make ends meet,” Tanigoshi said. “Things were loosening up in the 1950s; there was this sense that there was a positive change happening in those post-war years that stirred my curiosity and imagination about life sciences.”

A turn toward science

By his sophomore year in high school, he said, Cold-War politics and propaganda had resulted in major curriculum shifts toward mathematics and biological, physical and technological sciences — including higher-education programs supporting the southern California aircraft and weapons industry. “I vividly remember watching Sputnik I race across the sky in early October 1957 and being scared that it was marked with a big ‘USSR’ and not ‘USA,’” Tanigoshi said. “That sparked a real turning point in my life.”

Despite the Space Age shift in American life, Tanigoshi’s mother wanted him to be a dentist. “She wanted me to be able to get off the farm and potentially earn a good salary,” he said. “That is still the dream of minority mothers today for their children.”

With “hands too calloused for the dexterity required to fill cavities with silver,” he said, he instead went on to earn his master’s in biology at Long Beach State College and a Ph.D. in entomology and plant pathology at the University of California Riverside. “My hands became expert at pinning insects and making countless numbers of glass slides of chigger mites for Dr. Dick Loomis at LBSC,” said Tanigoshi. “I still owe a debt of gratitude to him as my most memorable mentor.”

Tanigoshi said he also appreciates the perks afforded throughout his career as an entomologist. “One of the highlights of my WSU career has been all the experiences I’ve had while traveling around the world,” he said. A 1990 Fulbright Scholarship award sent him for a year to the University of Amsterdam and the Republic of Benin, where he consulted with internationally



WSU Mount Vernon entomology team continues its battle against the invasive spotted wing drosophila: (from left) Tanigoshi, Bev Gerdeman and Hollis Spitler. (Photo by Kim Binczewski).

acclaimed scientists on the biological control of spider mites in Africa's staple food crop, cassava.

In the Dead Sea region of Jordan, Turkey, Syria and Morocco, Tanigoshi worked at regional research centers to determine the origin of the exotic Russian wheat aphid and its native natural enemies. His research on the cherry bark tortrix along the U.S. west coast led to explorations for its natural enemies in central Europe.

But it's his continuing WSU work closer to home on small fruit pests, such as the spotted wing drosophila, root weevils, aphids, leafrollers, and spider mites — and as a mentor of the WSU Mount Vernon entomology program and on behalf of the Pacific Northwest growers — that he finds most rewarding, now that it's time for this former high-school track star to “pass the baton,” he said.

“I'm proud of the creativity of entomologist Bev Gerdeman and the technical expertise of research technologist Hollis Spitler and all they've contributed to the progressive-thinking entomology program here at the WSU Mount Vernon Research Center,” Tanigoshi said. “As professor emeritus I'll be around for a while to help ease them through the transition following my retirement, and I'll still be privileged to ‘bug’ fellow faculty, staff and students on my own time now. I thank everyone here for their friendship and the best of times.”

-Written by Cathy McKenzie, WSU Mount Vernon Newsletter, March 2016

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