

## **Domestic Help**

As I was putting down the title for this section of my writings, the temptation was to use the word “servants,” but in the interest of being politically correct and thinking back on how much these people were really part of the family in many ways, domestic help seemed a better designation.

It was not uncommon in our neighborhood for families to have a maid or whatever, so it never entered my mind that it was particularly unique to have hired help. Dad had his medical practice and was head M.D. at the Shriner’s Hospital in Honolulu and I suppose that his position and income allowed such indulgences.

Today, a housekeeper on a part time basis is not uncommon especially if one is single, or both husband and wife work. Our maids were full time except for weekends, lived in, and cleaned house and prepared meals. Our basement had originally been a two car garage, but had been enclosed to make a large play and work room, which today would be called the family room. Adjacent to this large room was a small room with a basin and shower which served as the maid’s room. Across the main room and up a step into a small shop to the back corner was the toilet. Originally the maid’s room was up a set of stairs off of the kitchen to a much larger room with a small half-bath. That whole upstairs attic area would be opened up complete with dormers for a large bedroom area later. But back to the maids.

I vaguely remember one lady named Yoshiya. Somewhere in the collection of old photos is a picture of her holding me as a very young kid. Who I do remember was Haruko Higa. In the hiring process we had one young hapless Japanese girl who came to fix dinner for the first time. She could not find the baking soda, so substituted cream of tarter, and the result was less than exemplary. That was the last we saw of her. Haruko must have done better, for she was with us for quite a while.

While the family was seated at the dining room table complete with white table cloth and napkins, it was Haruko’s job to wait on the table. Most of the time there were serving dishes on the table, but if we needed anything, Mother would simply step on the heavy duty push-button which was underneath the rug, and Haruko who was eating at the kitchen table would immediately appear through the swinging door to be of service in response to the buzzer. What a deal! After dinner we would roll up our napkins, place them in the napkin holders, and leave the dishes for Haruko to clear up and wash. We had an assortment of napkin rings over the years, I remember a plastic bird, but the last one I had was a silver initial “J” clip. An “M” wouldn’t do because of sisters Marilyn and Myra.

Haruko was more of a “family” member than any of the other help. She was there all day and I often had conversations with her, or perhaps more accurately, I would bug her while she was trying to fix dinner. I don’t remember what we talked about, but at least she put up with me, and was an active listener.

She got married shortly before Dad became ill in 1941. Because of that and the question of our family income, we never had a maid again. The wedding was quite a to-do. In typical Japanese fashion, shoes were checked at the front door. Everyone then found a place at the low tables which were laden with food. The custom was to sit cross-legged on a cushion and observe the goings on. I remember distinctly part of the minority, as we were the few haoles there. If you have ever seen the classic Japanese doll from the 20’s and 30’s and cheaply imitated today, that was Haruko. With kimono and elaborate wig and make up, she appeared with the groom to repeat the vows to the Buddhist priest. Depending on the wealth of the family, the bride appears several times in different costumes to continue the ceremony all while the guests are eating. As I remember, she had three appearances. There were attempts in later years to look up Haruko, but no one remembered her married name and finding the right Higa was like finding the right Smith or Jones.

Unlike Haruko, Suki Tanaka was a much older woman, and came to do the laundry once a week. There was never a week that went by without Suki. Her start with the family was before any remembrance of mine; I only remember when she left. Her English was broken, but she had a heart of gold and always tried to please. Laundry may not seem to be a big deal to the modern home, but remember it was a warm climate, clothes were changed often, and there was little in the way of synthetic fabrics. Everything was 100% cotton or linens and had to be starched and pressed. There were no clothes dryers, and for many years we had an old Maytag wringer washer. Much later we had one of the first Bendix front loading automatic washers that had to be bolted to the floor because of the vigor of the spin cycle. Mother used to cook up the starch on the stove and put a square of bluing in to balance the normal yellowing of the cottons, resulting in a bright white. Later the melted squares gave way to Mrs. Stewart’s Liquid Bluing, a corked bottle with a picture of an all knowing bespectacled older woman who no doubt knew all there was to know about washing clothes. Or perhaps it was some advertising agency’s image of such a woman.

The stiffened clothing had to be taken off of the clothes line and ironed after being sprinkled and rolled up to distribute the dampness. Remember, no steam irons were around either! Pressing out the clothes with an old heavy ironing was an all day job. Suki would take off her shoes there in the basement and stand on an old carpet to ease the strain on her old feet. Mother surprised Suki one day with a brand new G.E. mangle ironer with its padded rotary cylinder on which the ironing plate would be lowered. Seated and with a knee lever or hand control, the

ironing plate would be lowered on the clothing and the rotation of the cylinder would pull the clothing into the machine and come out ironed! Suki did not take to this new fangled machine very well until she discovered that you could do all the work sitting down and there was no bearing down and going over and over the clothing to take the wrinkles out. She had been pressing off the sheets, but now they looked like they came from Young's Laundry and Dry Cleaning. (Their truck came by at given intervals to pick up Dad's suits and slacks.) It was a new era, and Suki was very pleased. Technology was not a common word at the time, but surely this was one of its finest examples.

December 7th came and went, but Suki was not to return. As an older Japanese woman seeped in the culture of the old country, she explained over the phone to Mom that she was "too ashamed" and could not work for us any more. There was no way for her to save face over the unimaginable deed of her former countrymen.

S. Kedo-- I never knew his first name and really never had any conversations with him. The name was quite familiar because I used to take him his check that Mother had written at the end of the day once a week for working in the yard. All day for \$5. But then Haruko got \$25 a month with room and board. Prior to Kedo, we had a fellow named Watanabe, I believe, but memories of him are quite vague.

Kedo had an old Pennsylvania hand reel lawn mower with wooden bar and rounded wooden hand grips. His hand clippers that he used to edge with were the Japanese style with the looped spring as an extension of the handles. Simply squeeze the handles together to clip and the spring would bring the blades back apart. No wonder it took him all day. We lived on the corner, so there was a lot of curbing in addition to the front walk, the fence that separated the back and side yards, and of course the long double driveway with the grass strip up the middle as was characteristic of the homes of the day. He had his work cut out.

On the other hand he did not strain himself. There was the day when he stood there, hose in hand watering the lawn as it was raining. Who knows what was going through his mind. Or maybe that was the point! When Kedo left us I don't know. Surely he did not have the feelings toward the family as Suki and Haruko.

In the past when I have mentioned that we had a maid people were duly impressed, but times have changed and people are blasé about domestic help. People who have a housekeeper feel they have to clean up before they come and certainly don't have the same attitudes as in days past. The only thing I hear these days about a maid is my wife, Pat wishing she had one!