

Beacon Hill News & South District Journal

Graham Hill illustrator is the cat's meow

By SUZANNE SMITH

Are you acquainted with Bert the Talking Salmon? You may have seen him in print or on television ads delivering tips on how to do things like wash your car without polluting our waterways. Bert is the charming and personable creation of graphic artist Mits Katayama. You have probably seen many of Katayama's illustrations over the years. They're full of color, detail, and emotional nuance, and the work of this Seattle graphic artist spans five decades.

The son of Japanese immigrants, Katayama grew up in Pacific, Washington. His parents were truck farmers in the Sumner area who grew a variety of produce. Classified as aliens, the Katayama's were not allowed to purchase property. Undeterred, the family leased the land they farmed, and lived in the house associated with the property.

During World War II, the Katayama family, along with a hired farm hand, was forcibly relocated to the Minidoka "re-education camp" near Twin Falls, Idaho. Mits was in junior high school when he moved with his mother and younger brother to the camp. Mits's father died shortly before the family's internment.

Forced from home

Mits remembers having to quickly get rid of the family's possessions. The family put some of their things into storage, gave many items away, and had a yard sale for the rest. Mits received only 10 cents for his bicycle.

Before he left for Idaho, Mits remembers one of his teachers telling him, "Don't let anyone try to tell you you're not an American."

The Katayama family spent three years at Minidoka. They left the camp shortly before the end of the war, but before they could go, internees were required to have a sponsor. A produce company in eastern Oregon looking for laborers assumed this responsibility for the Katayamas and many other internment victims. The company housed the work crew in an old motor court in Nyssa, where Mits completed part of his junior year in high school. Eventually a cousin of Mits's mother let her know he had found a place for them to stay in Seattle, and the family moved from Nyssa into a mission for Japanese American families, a large old home on east Yesler Street.

The Katayamas lived in the house's tiny

attic apartment. On top of this, the possessions they had put into storage before their internment had been stolen. To ensure the family survived, Mits's mother took a job as a seamstress. She was paid by the piece or by the hour, depending on which option would result in lower wages from her employers. The family struggled to adjust to their new lives in the city.

Rising above ruin

Mits attended Garfield High School for the rest of his junior year, and for his entire senior year. While in school, Katayama found work doing "show card lettering" for a variety of stores. He did everything from lettering small price tags to painting large signs for jewelry shops and grocery stores. After graduation his mother encouraged him to go to college, but Mits knew the family would be hard-pressed to afford it.

Despite his concern, Katayama took his mother's urgings, and his love of art, to heart. He applied to the vocational program at Edison Technical School, later renamed Seattle Central Community College. While waiting for a spot to open up in the vocational program, Katayama took some classes in English and writing. He spent one school term, nine months, at Edison before accepting a position as a junior artist with a local printing firm. The position entailed producing straight lines for forms and doing paste-ups for brochures, but no drawing.

Katayama left his entry-level job to serve in the army during the Korean War. Upon his return to Seattle, he went back to work for the same printing company that had previously employed him, and just before he left the company he finally got to draw something. Katayama recalled the assignment, a vacation schedule for employees where he drew the four seasons. On the strength of this humble brochure, Katayama landed his first outside job as an artist.

By this time Katayama was married and had his first child, he joined a studio, which was essentially a four-man partnership. While working for the studio, a group of freelance artists tried to convince Mits he should go out on his own.

He decided to ask for a small raise from the studio, bringing his wages to \$400 a month, and if they turned him down, he would begin freelancing. The studio refused his request, and his freelance career was launched. The first month Katayama did better than he would have done with the raise.

The power of art

Back then the local graphic arts scene looked far different than it does today. It was a smaller world, and not as specialized. Often Katayama would work on many aspects of a project. In addition to illustrations, he did everything from layouts and displays to paste-ups and lettering.

In 1956, Katayama was one of the original members of The Society of Professional Graphic Artists, an association of freelance illustrators and designers formed to deal with unfair business practices. In those early days of advertising work, the artists were more or less at the mercy of the clients. The association included many of the biggest names in the graphic arts community, and was able to leverage changes to the advertising industry.

Today most of Katayama's projects are editorial in nature, meaning he primarily focuses on book and article illustrations rather than advertising work. While Katayama is capable of working within various artistic styles, he is probably best known for a whimsical and humorous format featured in his recent self-portrait introducing this story.

Katayama is currently working on illustrations for a children's book and a set of children's "self-calming cards" for Seattle-based Parenting Press.

Katayama is warm, low-key, and gracious. Clearly these attributes are helpful in his collaborative work with authors. Many people can draw, but it takes a special interpretive creativity to be a good illustrator. Mits Katayama has this trait in abundance.

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