Wednesday, May 12, 1993
B
The Atlanta Journal
The Atlanta Constitution

LIVING

Child Life
When in-laws treat adoptee differently
B3

Health Watch
Angina is less deadly for women
B4

CELESTINE SIBLEY

College's honor causes a night of memories

Robert Frost wrote of home as "something you somehow haven't to deserve." There are a lot of those things in life, as I'm sure the venerable poet well knew. I don't deserve the family whose love and exasperating ways surround me. I don't deserve the Dutch iris that sprang up all elegant blue flags where I don't remember planting it. I don't deserve a job I love when there are so many smarter, better people out there looking.

And I sure didn't deserve to be invited back to old Spring Hill College in Mobile to get an imposing doctorate degree in the humanities I didn't work for and by no means earned.

If you wake up in the night and think about such things you can shrivel your soul with regrets. I tried not to think those I-should-have, why-didn't-I thoughts one night shortly after the school's Jesuit president, Father William J. Rewak, wrote to me extending this mighty courtesy.

To keep from thinking, I got out of bed and went downstairs and started searching the bookshelves for mementos of my brief and unillustrious time at what Mobilians call "the Hill." There was my Shakespeare book, a fine hardback by Hardin Craig with my name and the year, 1934, written in it, and crayon scrawls from my children when they were babies all through "Romeo and Juliet" and "Julius Caesar." I wiped the dust off the book on the tail of my nightgown and took it back to bed with me.

The reason I kept Shakespeare when so many other books I used to cherish have fallen by the way-

SEEDS OF UNDERSTANDING

A promising soybean deal with Georgia farmers is Seiho Tajiri's latest effort for improving relations between blacks, Japanese

By Lee May
STAFF WRITER

Seiho Tajiri, shirtless on a hot Sunday afternoon, interrupts a dining-room chat, goes to his office in the next room and comes back with a fresh newspaper story about Japanese efforts to improve relations with black Americans.

"This is good," he says, settling back into a chair. "It is a good tendency that Japanese are beginning to notice black people. I am glad to see this."

It is not surprising that the story, centering on growing initiatives among Japanese on the economic and social fronts, would be welcome news to Mr. Tajiri.

The 83-year-old, Japanese-born resident of Duluth has spent the past 30 years working to help the oppressed, promote business ties and further understanding between black Americans and the Japanese — tasks fraught with mutual misunderstanding and made more difficult in recent years by insensitive comments from some Japanese government officials.

Through it all, Mr. Tajiri pursued his efforts, the latest of which is putting together a deal in which a group of black Georgia farmers will grow soybeans and sell them directly to a Japanese food company, Takano — the first such agreement, say the farmers.

"We're hoping this will be like the Vidalia onion," which is known worldwide, says Lucious Abrams Jr. of Waynesboro, one of the participating farmers.

He calls Mr. Tajiri "the heart" of the deal. "Without him it would be impossible."

Mr. Tajiri, who calls himself a "go-between" for the farmers, has been working on the soybean deal for a year as part of his longtime efforts to help black farmers market their crops. He says he receives no money for these efforts, living mainly on income from properties in Japan.

George Harris, who heads the Center for Family Farm Development, formed in 1986 to promote entrepreneurship, says Mr. Tajiri is "totally straightforward" and "an incredible teacher."

Mr. Harris recalls that the soybean deal began in the wake of the riots following the verdict in the Rodney King case last year when Mr. Tajiri telephoned and said, "Let's get busy."

And busy he's been for years — fighting to bring the American dream to the downtrodden. But for his part, Mr. Tajiri seems to have found that dream,

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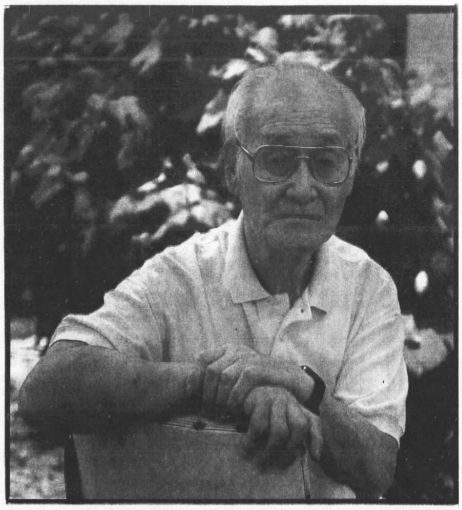

JEAN SHIFRIN/Staff

Seiho Tajiri, 83, has felt kinship with black people since moving to America 31 years ago.

Tajiri: 'Black people and Japanese people share something similar'

▶ Continued from B1

enjoying an elegant brick home in a Duluth subdivision where street names are golf-inspired: Par, Birdie.

An assortment of slippers sits by the front door, decorative fan on the wall, manicured lawn, junipers out front and a garden he tends out back.

Mr. Tajiri, slightly but firmly built, with longish gray hair around the edge of his head, would seem far removed from black farmers and their concerns.

But no. In spirit, he is one of them, in much the same way he has felt kinship with black people ever since moving to America 31 years ago.

Born Jan. 19, 1910, in Karatsu, Saga, Japan, Seiho Tajiri was one of nine children. He later lived and worked 20 years in China. In 1947 he returned to Japan, and three years later he started an oil business, which he subsequently turned over to one of his four brothers.

Seeking new horizons, he moved to San Francisco in 1962. It was there that his affinity for black people manifested itself.

Ignoring Japanese friends' warnings, Mr. Tajiri walked through a black neighborhood one day. "Why [do they think it's] so dangerous?" he recalls thinking. "I want to try. I said, 'I don't care. I die anytime.' "

In that and other walks, he found friends, not danger. But he also discovered crushing poverty. That surprised him.

"I thought that in America everybody was wealthy," he says in a still-heavy accent and speech peppered with the rhetorical "*neh?*" ("no?" in English). "Wealthier than Japanese," who had lost the war. *Neh?*

Puzzled and curious, he set out to learn as much as he could about black Americans, reading hungrily, including books on slavery.

Black Muslims, with whom he had become friends, invited him to a mosque and asked him to help them become more self-reliant, he says.

"Japanese good to make money," laughs Mr. Tajiri. He says that back in the 1960s he helped the Muslims import Japanese merchandise, including cloth, dishes and fish.

Compared with those days, the soybean deal is a piece of cake.

Back then, he says, he had to assure Japanese business officials that they were not in danger from the Muslims. "Black Muslim people very peaceful," he recalls telling the Japanese.

Mr. Tajiri also had to endure many quizzical stares as he traveled around this region with groups of black people, hawking fish from a van. A man who enjoys busting stereotypes, he still chuckles gleefully as he shows a picture of himself as a fish seller flanked by Japanese and black people standing next to a van.

Armed with knowledge gained by book and by experience, Mr. Tajiri began looking South, moving to Atlanta in 1970. "Atlanta is the center of black activity," he says. "Politics, culture. It has many black colleges. The South is the original place for black people."

Father of four grown children who live in Japan, he and his second wife, Tomie (married 20 years) consider themselves a team working to foster understanding: He brings home numerous folks, American and Japanese. She makes them feel *at* home.

Over tea and snacks the other day, Mrs. Tajiri said: "He works very hard for a long, long time to improve relations and understanding. He is not alone. His work is my work. To understand America, we must also understand black people. Otherwise, we will not truly understand America."

Beaming, Mr. Tajiri said, "She is my partner."

The partnership has explored a dizzying number of avenues to understanding.

Mr. Tajiri has organized several trips to Japan for black people, helped select black exchange students, founded the Japanese African-American Society and made numerous speeches on racial harmony in Japan, which he still visits often (he has long been an American citizen, becoming one, he says, to ensure that his alliances with black activists would not cause U.S. officials to deport him back in the volatile, suspicious '60s).

Why? What makes him work so tirelessly to bring Japanese and black Americans together?

A man who values simplicity, Mr. Tajiri answers: "It's my nature."

He says his effort is a moral one, and he speaks passionately about the Institute of Moralogy in Japan, which aims to promote world peace and happiness.

"Black people work hard," he says he tells Japanese people, "and we've got to help them."

Impassioned, he says from the first time he walked through the San Francisco streets and saw impoverished black people, "I dedicated myself to improving their lives. I said, at least I must try."

Moreover, he says, black Americans have been badmouthed by white Americans, adding, "Japanese believe white people's talk. I say no. Talk with black people."

There is still another element to Mr. Tajiri's crusade on behalf of black people in general and black business people in particular.

"It's good for Japan, too," he says, noting the growing political and economic power among the 30 million black Americans.

He says the black population's steadily increasing clout means Japan "must know and make friends with" blacks. "Then it's easy for Japanese."

Black people who know him accept Mr. Tajiri's straightforwardness in the manner he offers it.

"This just seems to be what he wants to do with his life," says Andrew Young, who has known Mr. Tajiri more than a dozen years.

And Mr. Young, former U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, former Atlanta mayor and current high-level international businessman, empathizes with those who try to effect international trade deals.

"People in the United States were laughing at me when I talked about doing business in Africa," he says.

Mr. Tajiri may have drawn a few laughs. And a few frowns as well. It seems he couldn't care less.

In fact, he seems to revel in his recollection of an incident at a homeless shelter he visited, accompanied by a Japanese television crew documenting his social activism. "They asked me for food," he says of the 40 or so homeless men. "I didn't have food, so I gave them money — a dollar apiece."

The sight of a man passing out money led to a bit of scuffling. Mr. Tajiri describes it as "not a big thing," but the scene reportedly drew criticism back in Japan when shown on television.

Does this make him naive? Patronizing?

Mr. Tajiri also had to endure many quizzical stares as he traveled around this region with groups of black people, hawking fish from a van. . . . He still chuckles gleefully as he shows a picture of himself as a fish seller flanked by Japanese and black people standing next to a van.

Mr. Tajiri scoffs at the notion. "People welcome help," he says.

Indeed, there's no criticism from the black farmers and their supporters involved in the soybean deal.

Mr. Abrams, the Waynesboro farmer, visited Japan with Mr. Tajiri last December. He calls Mr. Tajiri "one of the kindest, most lovable individuals I ever met. And he's so knowledgeable."

Adds Mr. Abrams: "He's trying to get the Japanese to know black Americans other than Michael Jordan and Michael Jackson," a job made tough because "we were not in the history books."

Mr. Tajiri seems to be doing everything he can to change that.

"Black people and Japanese people share something similar," he says. "I feel it. Black people can understand Japanese character. We can work together."

Regardless of whether this actually is true for all people in both those groups, it at least is *his* truth.

Filling a need in the Japanese market

A group of black Georgia farmers and Takano Foods Co., based in Ibaraki, Japan, are negotiating an agreement under which the Americans will grow and sell soybeans directly to the Japanese company. The crop will be planted within the next week and harvested this fall.

The deal, brainchild of Seiho Tajiri, is expected to be signed by May 20 and is believed to be the first direct sale of soybeans to Japan by black American farmers. It calls for up to about a dozen farmers to grow several hundred acres of soybeans in a research project. Selling directly eliminates brokers' fees and increases farmers' profit margin.

The special high-quality beans, which are smaller than other soybeans, will be used to make a popular Japanese food, *natto*. It is manufactured by steaming the beans, spraying them with bacteria and fermenting them.

A company brochure describes the fermented beans as healthful, rich in vegetable protein and highly versatile, showing them served on toast, in omelets and in spaghetti.

The project, estimated to be worth several hundred thousand dollars to the farmers in Burke, Worth and Mitchell counties, could lead to much larger — and more lucrative — deals in the huge Japanese soybean food market, which includes tofu, miso and soy sauce, officials say.

George Harris, chairman of the Decatur-based Center for Family Farm Development, one of the negotiators, declared, "We're going to demonstrate that African-Americans not only are competent, we're competitive."

Lucious Abrams Jr. of Waynesboro, one of the participating farmers and the president of the Small Farmers Association, which promotes direct marketing efforts, said, "The way has been cut. Now all we have to do is walk down the path."

— *Lee May*