

William Sumio Naito (1925-1996)

By Chet Orloff

William "Bill" Naito was born in Portland in 1925. His parents, Hide and Fukiye, had emigrated in the 1910s from Japan, and Hide ran a successful retail and wholesale business. Naito liked to remind people that, because no one would hire Japanese men for a "real" job, they had to start businesses on their own. After the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941, Hide and his family avoided internment by leaving their home and business, and moving to Utah with relatives. Naito graduated from high school in Utah and joined the 442nd, the most-decorated regiment in the U.S. Army. He transferred to Military Intelligence and served in the occupation of Japan until he was discharged at the rank of staff sergeant in 1946.

Following his military service, Naito attended Reed College, graduating Phi Beta Kappa with a degree in economics. He continued his education at the University of Chicago, where he received a master's degree in economics, and began work on a doctorate. While in Chicago, he met Millicent (Micki) Sonley, whom he married in 1951; they had four children.

In 1953, Naito left the University of Chicago and returned to Portland to join his brother Sam Naito and their father in the family import business. Ten years later, the family opened Import Plaza in the historic Globe Hotel, an innovative and popular store that sold goods from around the world. Within ten years, the Naito brothers began buying buildings in Portland's Old Town, leading the city's early efforts at renovating and revitalizing its historic buildings. "We have stopped the bulldozer," Naito said in 1977. "Now the only direction is up." He and his brother ultimately purchased and restored more than twenty historic buildings in Portland and received dozens of awards from the business, architecture, and landmarks communities.

In 1975, Naito turned his attention to downtown with the purchase of the Olds, Wortman & King building, which he renamed the Galleria. It was Portland's first downtown shopping mall. The same year, the family company opened its first Made In Oregon store at Portland International Airport. With the purchase and renovation in 1985 of Montgomery Park, Naito continued his bold investments in eccentric-yet-successful real-estate "adventures," as he once called them. "There is no funner career than being an entrepreneur," he said in a 1994 *Oregonian* interview. "I wouldn't trade the life I've had." Naito Properties continues to be a prominent real estate and redevelopment firm in Portland into the second decade of the twenty-first century.

Business, however, was only a part of Bill Naito's life. Honored with nearly sixty awards—from Portland First Citizen (with his brother Sam) to recognitions from colleges, architects, environmentalists, and chambers of commerce—he was involved in civic organizations of every description, including the Urban Forestry Commission, Artquake, Multnomah County Library Trust, and Portland Vintage Trolley. Significantly, Naito's broad endeavors often resulted in legacies; that is, his projects and interests have lasted. He led the effort to plant over 10,000 trees in the city, his buildings are a testament to his city's history, and his ideas for preserving and beautifying Portland continue to inspire people. Perhaps most proudly, he was finance chair of the Oregon Nikkei Endowment. Through his fundraising efforts, the Japanese-American Historical Plaza opened in 1990, memorializing the role of Japanese in American society.

In 1996, Bill Naito, a self-professed "local busybody," passed away suddenly from cancer. He had described himself exactly.

The City of Portland changed the name of Front Avenue to Naito Parkway in Bill Naito's honor in 1996.

Sources

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