



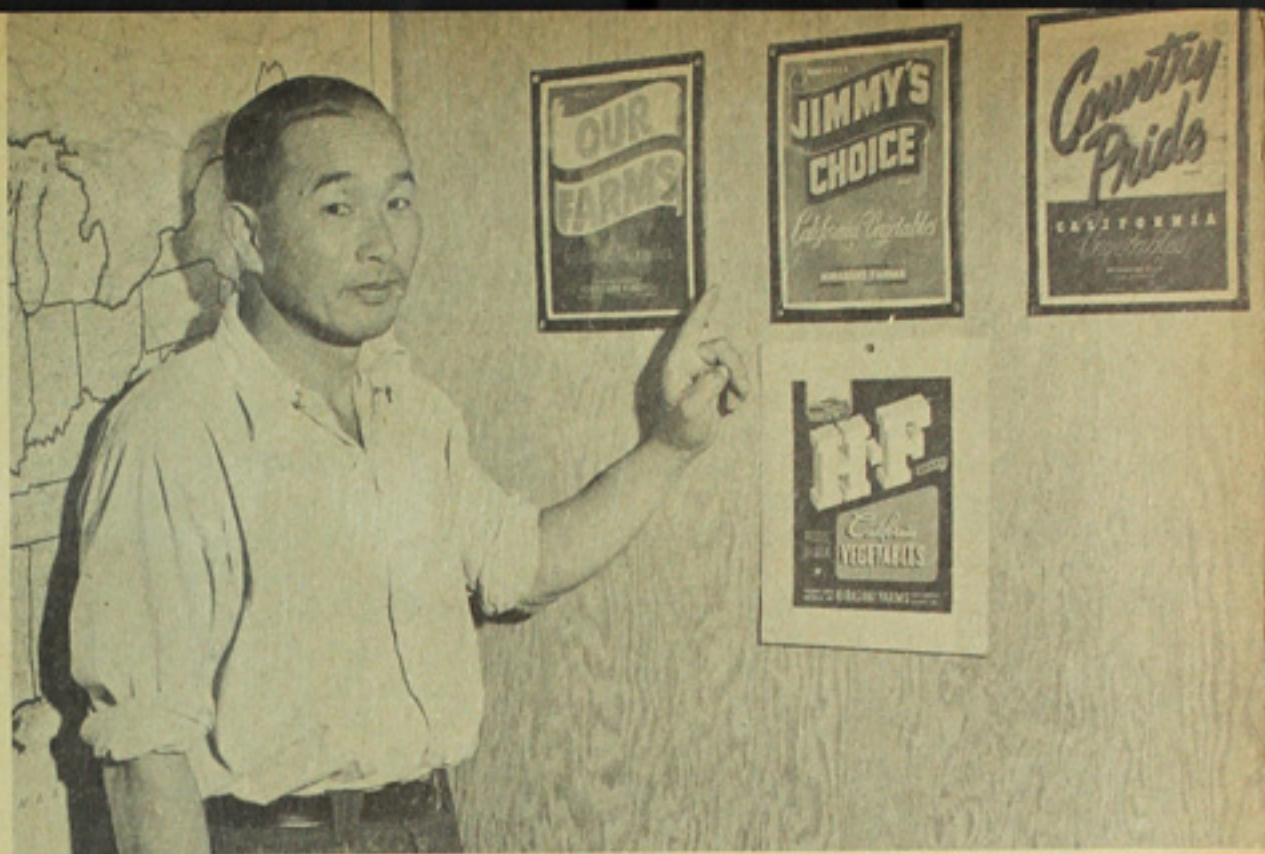
It's celery planting time at the prosperous Hirasaki Farms in California's lush Santa Clara valley.

## ***How a \$1,000,000 farm operates***

**Story of an immigrant  
youth's climb to success**



Photo by Bob Laing



**KIYOSHI HIRASAKI**, owner of Hirasaki Farms, shows a few of the brands he has made famous throughout the United States. "Jimmy's Choice" evolves from Hirasaki's nickname.



**HARVESTING CREW** loads celery onto trucks which take it speedily to the packing shed where workers trim, pack and ice it into crates ready for shipping.

**E**XTENDING SOUTHWARD from the southern tip of San Francisco bay, between the Santa Cruz mountains on the west and the Mt. Hamilton range on the east, is a strip of land containing some of the richest black loam soil in California. It is the Santa Clara valley.

At Gilroy, on U.S. Highway 101, is some of the best land in the valley, and it is here that Kiyoshi Hirasaki, founder and owner of Hirasaki Farms, Inc., cultivates 1,700 acres to raise truck crops.

It is a big farm, as truck farms go, but when one considers that Hirasaki raises such care-demanding crops as lettuce, celery, broccoli and peas, the enormity of the operation becomes apparent.

The busy season starts around May 15

each year and continues with frenzied activity until about Thanksgiving.

Approximately 1,000 acres are planted to lettuce and two crops a season are harvested. About 260 acres are planted to celery at the rate of two and a half acres daily so that it can be harvested and processed at that rate later. Green peas take another 300 acres and 200 acres are set aside for broccoli.

The highly successful owner of this king-sized farm was born in Kumamoto, Kyushu, 50 years ago. His father left his family in Japan and emigrated to the United States while the son was still a baby. When Kiyoshi was 14 years old his father called him to San Jose where the youngster was put to work

for the Kimverlin Seed Co. Five years later, after a thorough, and valuable, apprenticeship in the seed business, young Hirasaki in 1919 leased 130 acres, bought three teams of horses and struck out on his own.

He prospered almost immediately and a year later returned to Japan to marry Haruye Yonemitsu, a hometown girl.

His first child, Manabe, was born two years later at the farm. Manabe now is general manager and although only 28 already displays the qualities of good judgment and executive ability of his father.

In the years that followed Hirasaki and his wife had seven more children: Mineko, Fumiko, Michiko, Aiko, Hisa-



**WITHIN MINUTES** after the celery is cut in the fields it arrives in "baskets" at the packing shed, on the main line of the

Southern Pacific at Gilroy, about a mile from the farm. Speed keeps wilting at a minimum.

shi, Shinobu and Midori. The last named now is 10 years old.

Mineko, bookkeeper of the farm's enterprises, is the wife of Lawton Sakai and the mother of a young son, Kenny. Her husband oversees operation of the farm's huge packing shed. Michiko forsook the farm life to be a licensed pharmacist and now is working in San Francisco. The others live at home.

In 1919, Hirasaki's wealth was easily figured: Three teams of horses and 130 acres. Nowadays, he has to go to his accountant to find out how many tractors he owns and what they are worth.

He puts the machinery inventory at slightly more than \$100,000. Just to keep it running on gas and oil costs him \$1,000 each month. Repair bills for his equipment alone are almost enough to keep a nearby machine shop in business. The farm's payroll averages, during the season, \$10,000 a week.

Add to this, \$45,000 annually for fertilizer and \$200,000 a year for crates,

and it is understandable why the farm has to gross a million dollars each year to break even.

It explains in this instance, why a crate of lettuce, delivered to the East Coast, must sell for at least \$5.50 a crate for the grower and shipper to break even. Anything above that is the profit on his investment and risk.

And there is plenty of risk. Take last year for example. The East had fine growing weather and bumper crops throughout the summer. California vegetable growers took it on the chin. A good part of the Hirasaki lettuce was plowed under this year because the market price would not pay for harvesting costs. Fortunately, celery held firm and made up for the loss.

All vegetable farming requires a lot of painstaking, manual work but celery is by far the most difficult to raise. Young plants are nurtured for 60 days in green houses, then taken to the fields and set along the rows by hand, or in

some cases, by planting machines. The irrigation water must reach the young plants within minutes after planting. After that, they must be watered twice a week until just before harvest when they are watered every other day.

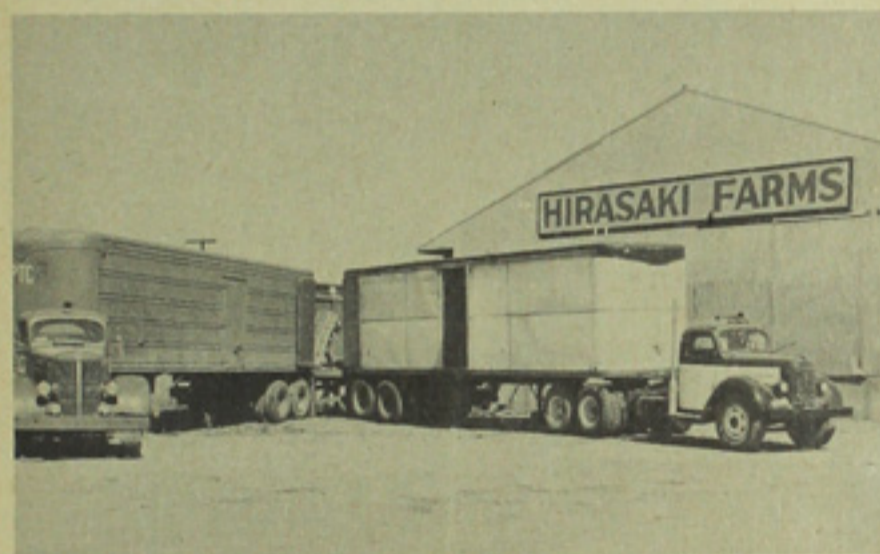
Often, just before harvest, the maturing celery is given a shot in the stalk by an ingenious system of infiltrating calcium nitrate into the irrigation water as it flows onto the field. About 500 pounds of this chemical is used to each acre.

An acre of celery contains 40,000 plants, which yield about 1,200 crates. An acre of lettuce yields only 300 crates. For this reason, \$3.75 per crate on the East coast will cover the expense of raising and shipping celery, as against \$5.50 per crate for lettuce. The difference is in the greater yield per acre of celery.

The Hirasaki method of irrigation is interesting. After the land is plowed by gang-plows digging 18 inches deep



**AS CRATES OF CELERY** are loaded into trucks and freight cars, chopped ice is blown in before car is sealed.



**NOT ALL OF THE Hirasaki** celery goes by rail. Huge trucks take it all over the country. Truck at right is from Omaha.



**HERE THE STALKS** are trimmed and washed while workers at right pack it into crates. At the end of this line is the lidder.

into the soil, and disked, harrowed and rolled not less than six times, a "lister" makes the long, heaped up rows of dirt in which the plants are set.

Across the upper ends of the fields an enormous, double-bladed plow digs the irrigation ditches each time a crop is planted. The water level in the naturally diked up ditch is slightly higher than the feeder rows. Hundreds of short sections of lead pipe are used to siphon the ditch water into the rows.

The worker places his hand over one end of the curved pipe, pumps the other end in the ditch a few times to force out the air, lays the pipe down and the water comes boiling through. It is ingenious in its simplicity and inexpensive.

An enormous amount of water is needed. All during the summer months 10,000 gallons of water a minute, day and night, are pouring out on the Hirasaki farm. That's a million and a half gallons a day.

At cutting time, crews slice off the plants just below the ground and lay them in long rows. Trimmers follow the cutters to clean off roots. Trucks, with trailers holding four "baskets" each, come along the rows and are loaded. They immediately take off for the packing shed, a mile or so distant on the main line of the Southern Pacific at Gilroy. A schedule is maintained so that the plants reach the coolness of the packing shed within minutes after cutting.

On reaching the packing shed, the "baskets" which hold about 15 crates of celery, wheel off the truckbeds and on to a tilting apparatus along an endless chain table. Here women lay the bunches with tops all one way. The plants go through a high pressure washer and out past a long line of packers.

As fast as a crate is packed it slides onto a belt that carries it to the lidder, then through a cooling, hydrochlorine bath and out to another belt where it is

labelled. Without stopping, the crates continue along the platform outside the shed and into freight cars or huge trailer trucks.

As each car is filled, 10 tons of chopped ice are blown into the car to insure freshness while in transit. Thus, the seven to eight cars shipped daily use a tidy 70 to 80 tons of ice.

A federal inspector paid by the Hirasaki firm is on duty at the plant. He opens at least one out of every 50 crates packed and inspects for grade and quality.

In addition, state experts are continually inspecting the plants for insect damage, fungi and anything that might harm the product, or spread to other plantings.

Until last fall, the farmhouse consisted of two houses. One was a typical, large ranch house; the other was a bit of transplanted Japan complete with tatami, fusuma and a genuine Japanese bath. A landscaped garden and a pond



ONE OF THE TWO HOUSES on the farms is an authentic Japanese structure which was built in 1941 with material obtained

from the Japanese exhibit at the Golden Gate Exposition. It is complete to tatami, shoji, fusuma and even a Japanese bath.

complete the picture.

But recently, a long, new, one-story building that embodies features of both western and oriental design has supplanted the old ranch house. The new addition, built of redwood lumber, is of modern California ranch style consisting mainly of sleeping rooms. The rooms open on a long hall that runs the length of the building along one side, much like the *engawa* or enclosed porch in a Japanese house.

This hall is joined to the *roka* which is connected with the Japanese house.

The Japanese house was built in 1941 with material obtained from the Japanese exhibit at the San Francisco Golden Gate Exposition in 1939-40.

It was the elder Hirasaki's intention to do away with the *tatami* in the Japanese house and use conventional hardwood flooring. However, his friends' pleas to retain one place where they could renew their memories of the homeland dissuaded him. He plans to retain the *tatami* but, except for special occasions, it will be covered with carpet so that shoes may be worn in the house and furniture placed in the rooms.

An example of the business acumen that has turned waste into hard dollars

is the Hirasaki farm's utilization of celery too small to pack for market. Last year stalks too small for crating were



MR. AND MRS. KIYOSHI HIRASAKI pose before their Japanese house.

given to a nearby dairy for cattle feed. But this year they were sold to a concern that packages celery hearts in cellophane for the chain store and super market outlet. Income from this source alone last year paid for a brand new Cadillac for Hirasaki.

Late last month Kiyoshi Hirasaki decided he had striven long enough. The immigrant boy who started with a team of mules and 130 acres 31 years ago was now a successful and respected farmer. He had built the little plot into the produce factory that was Hirasaki Farms, Inc., the largest packers of fresh vegetables in the Santa Clara valley. He could point to the fact that Hirasaki lettuce last year received the highest price ever paid on the New-York market.

The elder Hirasaki is retiring. The announcement released to the newspapers said that others will farm the acreage after Feb. 1 and that the packing shed will be leased to a dehydrating firm. His eldest son, Manabu, president of Hirasaki Farms, Inc., will retain ownership of the properties but the old man is looking forward to taking life easy at an age when most men still face long years of dubious labor.