



Shuji Hirata

1925-2018

Shuji Hirata, Japanese lumberman and chairman of the board for Nichiei Group Company, Ltd., was born November 16, 1925 in Omori, Tokyo, Japan. He is the son of Sadakichi and Tsune Hirata.

Shuji was born to parents who both traced their family lines through the Japanese lumber industry. His father opened his own lumber company on January 15, 1922. Sadakichi's older brother Mikio, as the first-born son, succeeded their father in the family business to become the eighth-generation operator of the Zeniya Lumber Company. Today he is still operating the company in Omori, Tokyo. Tsuya Hirata's family also operated a lumber company.

From this background, Shuji had no doubt his future was in lumber.

While majoring in economics at Nippon University, Shuji held a part time job at Nishisada, a nearby lumber company. Spending all of his free time at Nishisada, Shuji immersed himself in the company's activities and, together with five other college students, became a key member of the company's management. Following his 1948 graduation, he went to work full-time for the company.

In late 1949, an economic depression severely impacted the Japanese lumber industry. Nishisada, like most lumber companies, had difficulty securing the revolving funds necessary to conduct business.

Searching for a way in which he could free Nishisada from its economic troubles, Shuji devised and introduced the system of Ichiuri, a method of consigning and auctioning lumber. The system achieved such stunning success that Nishisada officials elected to establish a new company using its principles and its name. The Ichiuri Lumber Company was born and Shuji, at the age of 24, was appointed president.

As both the Ichiuri system and company grew in prominence, so did Shuji. While serving as president of Ichiuri, he also acted as a member of the board of directors for the Japan Lumber Market Federation and as chairman of the Kanagawa Prefecture Lumber Market Federation, a position he holds to this day.

By the late 1960s, Ichiuri Lumber Company

had outgrown its name. The company, no longer limiting its operations to lumber consignment and auction, had expanded into real estate and the sale of building materials and imported lumber. A new name was needed.

In Japanese, the word Nichiei is composed of the characters "Nippon" (Japan) and "Prosperous." Those two words form the heart of Shuji's philosophy — he wants his company and his employees to grow and prosper with Japan.

So it was settled. The search for a new company name had been a brief one — in 1970, the Ichiuri Lumber Company became Nichiei Company, Ltd.

One year later, a lack of Japanese-grown lumber, compounded by the problems associated with importing lumber through other Japanese companies, led Nichiei to found its Imported Lumber Division.

The new division performed its task well, providing Nichiei Company with a constant supply of high-quality imported lumber at an affordable cost. In 1973, in a reflection of the company's continuing success, Nichiei's stock was listed in the first section of the Tokyo and Nagoya Stock Exchanges.

As the Imported Lumber Division increased its purchase of North American lumber products, Nichiei searched for an appropriate international presence. In 1979, Nichiei found it, establishing its first international representative office in Portland, Oregon.

Over the course of the following six years, Shuji continued to search for opportunities to work with the people of Portland and Oregon and to contribute to their economies. In 1985, he did both by establishing the Nichiei America Corporation.

Nichiei America, founded to coordinate the purchase of finished North American lumber products for export to Japan, achieved its next major milestone in September, 1990 with the purchase of the Benjamin Franklin Plaza in downtown Portland for use as its North American headquarters. It was understandably an important event in Shuji's life.

As he progressed through the Japanese education system, Shuji had studied the writings of

Benjamin Franklin with great interest; as he rose through the Japanese lumber industry he had put those writings to great use.

At the November, 1990 dinner celebrating Nichiei Company's 40th anniversary and Nichiei America's purchase of the building, Shuji quoted his favorite Benjamin Franklin saying: "All things are easy to industry...all things are difficult to sloth."

In the late 1980s and early 1990s, Western-style homes enjoyed growing popularity in Japan. Already exporting North American wood products to Japan for use in such homes, Nichiei expanded its presence by building three test homes in Narita. Their immediate popularity led Nichiei to build four additional homes and, on June 27, 1990, establish Nichiei Prestige Homes to satisfy their customers' demands for high-quality homes. All materials used to build the homes are imported from suppliers in the Portland area through Nichiei America Corporation. Throughout his life, Shuji has always balanced his life goals. While he has dedicated himself to the success of his company, he has also dedicated himself to the preservation of the world's natural resources, in particular the forests.

As the Japanese population continues to rise and available land continues to decrease, undeveloped land is disappearing at a rapid rate. His love for trees led Shuji to actively pursue opportunities to preserve forested portions of his homeland.

In 1980, on behalf of Nichiei Company, Ltd. and in honor of its 30th anniversary, Shuji purchased 140.5 hectares of forested land in Wakayama (south of Osaka) for preservation. In 1990, again on behalf of Nichiei Company, Ltd. and this time in honor of its 40th anniversary, he purchased 122,235 square meters of forested land in Kanagawa for preservation.

As Nichiei Group, Ltd. looks toward its 50th anniversary, Shuji Hirata continues to lead the way. Nichiei America Corporation, under his leadership, not only provides Japanese builders with the quality lumber products they desire, it also provides North American mills with a welcomed market for their products.