



Cherry Trees Planted by Sophia University Students

No.33

1. Cherry Trees to Commemorate Graduation

Every spring, the cherry blossoms along the embankment running from Yotsuya station to the Hotel New Otani attract many visitors. It was a Sophia University student, Satake Akio, who first planted the trees in 1959. At the time he was a senior in the English Department, Faculty of Foreign Studies.

The embankment rises above what had been the outer moat of Edo Castle (filled in after the Pacific War, this section of the moat,



Satake Akio with one of the cherry trees he planted (22 March 2013)

known as the Sanada moat, is now the Sophia University athletic ground). The only trees standing on it then were pines, and the embankment slopes were overgrown with tall reeds. The Hotel New Otani had not yet been constructed, and few people used the street running between the university and the embankment. Satake, who headed the karate club, thought this stretch to be a “dark and bleak place” every time he passed through it to go to karate practice.

During his four years at Sophia, Satake had succeeded in making the karate club the biggest sports club at the university, and he also had been

able to meet a karate master whom he admired greatly. He wanted to leave a lasting contribution to mark his graduation and decided to plant cherry trees along the embankment slope. Being from the Tosa area of Kōchi prefecture, famous for strong drinkers, and liking parties, he also fondly envisioned some day being able to drink sake under the trees with his friends.

Satake first went to the Chiyoda Ward Office, which is responsible for the embankment's upkeep, and readily obtained permission to plant the trees. His plan was to



Sanada moat embankment around 1950 (above). Young cherry trees growing on the embankment slope; to the left is Building No. 3 under construction (12 February 1962; below).



plant sixty cherry trees, the same number as his karate club members. But his allowance from his parents having run out, he lacked sufficient funds. To remedy this problem, he pawned his business suit. With the money he made from this transaction, one Sunday in November 1959, he went to a flower shop in Shinjuku and bought sixty Somei Yoshino cherry seedlings for thirty yen each. The seedlings were about one-meter tall and as thick as his little finger. Having used all his money on the seedlings, he and five or six junior members of the karate club walked back to the university from Shinjuku, weighed down by the seedlings. They borrowed shovels from the school and planted the seedlings midway up the slope of the embankment. Placed about every three meters, the seedlings ran from St. Ignatius Church to beyond the current location of the Hotel New Otani.

After graduating from Sophia in March 1960, Satake went to work for a trading company. Periodically he would stop by on his way home from work to check on the seedlings. Seeing that a number of them had been broken or uprooted, he hung signs on each seedling, then about two meters tall, requesting passers-by not to break the branches. About two years after he joined trading firm, it encountered hard times and had to lay off employees, including Satake, who then had to resort to a part-time job to eke out a living. Discouraged by this turn of events, one day he happened to walk by the university. Glancing up, he saw that there were blossoms on the trees he and his friends had planted. Tears welled in his eyes, and he decided that he had to persevere, come what may.

In March 1964, Fukuda Akira, proprietor of the well-known traditional restaurant Fukuda-ya, located next to the university, decided to plant cherry trees along the top of the embankment as a memorial for the thirteenth anniversary of his mother's death. He donated one hundred seedlings to Chiyoda Ward for this purpose. That September, a month before the Tokyo Olympics, the Hotel New Otani opened, and gradually more pedestrians came to take the street beside the embankment.

The seedlings both at the top and along the embankment slope grew until they formed the splendid row of trees that now stretches from Yotsuya station to the Hotel New Otani. Satake became a successful salesman at another trading company.

“I’m glad our trees grew so big. They are like my children,” said Satake, now seventy-six years old (March 2013), gazing at the fully blooming cherry blossoms. “I come



Marker midway up the embankment slope
commemorating Satake's planting the cherry trees



Sanada moat embankment (25 March 2013)

here every spring to see the cherry blossoms with my family.”
In the end his plan to hold big parties himself under the trees

did not work out. “Some twenty years after we planted the trees, I once got together with friends for a party under them,” he said, “But I don’t remember it well.” He is happy, though, to see other people enjoy themselves under his cherry trees. “Now so many people walk along the embankment to admire the blossoms and spread tarps on the ground to have a party under them. I’m glad to see them having fun.”

2. A Renowned Double Row of Cherry Trees and the University’s Centennial

Twenty-two of the trees planted by Satake and his friends still stand, extending their branches toward Sophia University. Chiyoda Ward has a number of spots famous for cherry blossoms, and since 2003 it has been promoting a plan for renewing the trees, which tend to be rather short-lived. According to the ward, at present 59 cherry trees stand on the Sanada moat embankment, most of them of the Somei Yoshino variety. They form part of one of the longest double rows of cherry trees in Japan, stretching for 2.2 kilometers from the Hotel New Otani past Yotsuya station all the way to Iidabashi station. Altogether there are about 330 trees. The ward’s cherry tree renewal plan makes special note of the “splendid spreading branches” of the Somei Yoshino trees lining the Sanada embankment. Sophia University is cooperating with the ward’s efforts to establish a fund and mobilize volunteers to help protect and renew the trees.

As part of the university’s centennial events, Sophia plans to raise a new generation of cherry trees from cuttings from the karate club members’ trees. The cuttings were taken in February 2013, and this coming autumn, the seedlings grown from the cuttings will be planted on the Yotsuya campus. Satake’s wishes for his alma mater, entrusted to the trees, now more than fifty years old, will be passed on to the next generation.