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Sho Sato—In Memoriam

Michael E. Smith†

Sho Sato was a Professor of Law at Boalt Hall for more than thirty years. He died on July 27, 1986, at the age of sixty-two.

Sho was a reticent man; he did not advertise his activities or achievements. At his death, many of his students and younger colleagues learned for the first time of the richness of his life.

Sho specialized in legal subjects of relatively low scholarly visibility but of great day-to-day importance. He taught, lectured, and wrote widely on the law of state and local government, state and local taxation, and the law of natural resources, especially water and geothermal energy.¹ He was the co-author of a leading law school text on state and local government law.² He also served on a number of important public committees dealing with taxation, local government, and novel natural resource problems, such as weather modification.

For ten years Sho was a member of the California Law Revision Commission, including two years as its chairman. This was a particularly productive era in the commission’s history, when it enjoyed national renown for its work on knotty legal problems, many of which were within Sho’s area of expertise, such as governmental tort liability.

Work was a large part of Sho’s life, but only a part. He was an avid and expert fisherman. He particularly enjoyed outings to Silver Lake in the Sierras, where he typically caught his limit of trout. Until his final illness, Sho was also a fine athlete. At least once a week he played handball or tennis with energetic younger colleagues and more than held his

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own against them. He was also an enthusiastic spectator whenever the University of California basketball team played at home.

Sho loved classical music. He subscribed to the opera and concerts, but he probably liked best listening to music in the quiet of his home. He had a marvelous collection of records and tapes, amassed with great care over many years. At the memorial gathering for Sho at Boalt Hall in August 1986, the program consisted mainly of the music that he loved.

Sho was not a hail-fellow-well-met, but he was the center of an intimate circle of devoted relatives and friends. His wife, Mas, and two sons, Reed and Jay, came first. After that, Sho particularly enjoyed the give-and-take of advising colleagues, and being challenged by them, on difficult questions of state and local law. He also enjoyed sharing with a few colleagues his delight in fishing, court games, and music.

Sho was a second-generation Japanese-American. That heritage must have affected him in ways that his non-Japanese friends never fully understood. Sho’s family was forced from its home and business in Sacramento and interned at Tule Lake at the start of World War II. Yet within a few years he was a U.S. Army officer, supervising translators in the western Pacific. Upon graduation from Harvard Law School, where he was an editor of the Law Review, Sho was denied employment at San Francisco firms on account of his race. Instead he became a Deputy Attorney General of the state of California under Edmund G. (Pat) Brown, and then in 1955 he joined the faculty of Boalt Hall, the first Japanese-American on the faculty of a major American law school.

To his colleagues Sho never expressed bitterness about the discrimination against him and his family, nor was he politically active in Japanese-American affairs, but he was widely known and admired in the Japanese-American community. His death evoked a flood of gifts in his honor, many from Japanese-Americans with no prior connection to Boalt Hall.

Sho visited Japan often and with deep enjoyment, three times as a Fulbright Scholar at leading Japanese universities. He was instrumental in creating a program by means of which Japanese and American legal scholars study the laws of each others’ countries. By vote of the Board of Regents of the University of California, the program is now called the Sho Sato Japanese American Legal Studies Program. This may be the aptest memorial to Sho that any of us could have erected.
ARTHUR H. SHERRY