

Lest We Forget...

BY DAVID W. LEVY

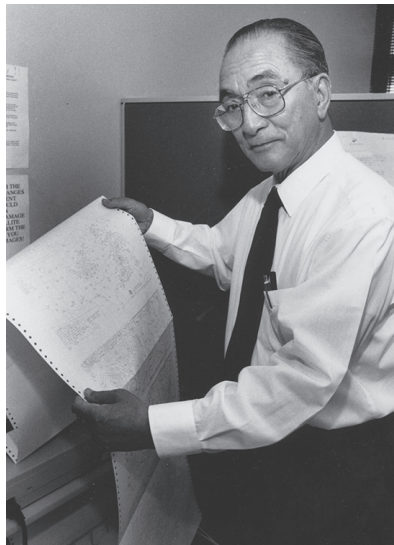
Yoshi Kazu Sasaki: *Oklahoma's pioneering weatherman.*

Yoshi Sasaki was born on January 2, 1927, in Akita, on the northwest coast of Japan. During World War II, he moved 170 miles south and inland to Yamagata, where he graduated from high school in 1947. He then entered Tokyo University, where he received an M.S. in 1950 and a Ph.D. in meteorology in 1955. His dissertation, "Study of Numerical Prediction," was an early indication of a passion that would occupy him for most of his life—the use of mathematical models to predict and analyze weather disturbances. While still a student, he won a prize from the Japan Meteorological Society for his research on the numerical forecasting of typhoons.

In 1956, the year after receiving his doctorate, he and his wife, Koko, moved to America. The brilliant young meteorologist took a research position at Texas A&M University, where he joined Walter Saucier, a man with interests similar to his own. The two hatched an ambitious plan to start a meteorology program at the University of Oklahoma. After several trips to campus and gaining enthusiastic support from President George Lynn Cross and OU professors in related fields (Richard Fowler in Physics, Cheddy Sliepceovich in Engineering and Sherrill Christian in Chemistry), Saucier and Sasaki moved to Norman in 1960.

Saucier taught some meteorology classes in Engineering Physics, and Sasaki was attached to the University's Research Institute. After three years at the Institute, Sasaki joined OU's new Department of Meteorology, then still part of the College of Engineering. That same year, the U.S. Weather Bureau's Severe Storms Project (later the National Severe Storms Laboratory), led by Edwin Kessler, moved to Norman.

Saucier departed in 1969 to start a meteorology program at the University of North Carolina, but the partnership between Kessler and Sasaki laid the groundwork for the future eminence of the study of meteorology at OU. The department became the School of Meteorology in 1977. From the beginning, Sasaki's pathbreaking papers on the analysis and numerical prediction of typhoons, hurricanes and squall lines earned him national and international recognition. His work won praise and financial support from several branches of the government, and his presence attracted to the University dozens of promising graduate students and outstanding faculty members who came to Norman partly because *he* was in Norman. During his career, he shepherded



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19 students to their Ph.D. degrees and 53 to master's degrees. One of his students became director of the National Weather Service; another, director of the National Hurricane Center.

If the science of meteorology was Sasaki's first passion, his second was building strong and friendly relations between his native Japan and his adopted state. He forged numerous cross-national partnerships between cities and schools; he also founded the Japan America Oklahoma Society and introduced aspects of Japanese culture to Oklahomans. He advised several Oklahoma governors on Asian matters, enticed Japanese firms to move to Norman and Shawnee, and persuaded Japanese philanthropists to endow chairs at OU.

At the end of his career, Sasaki devoted himself to organizing the study of disasters in general (not only weather-related ones, but cataclysms such as earthquakes, fires, chemical and oil spills). He was interested in how to predict, prepare, assess and recover from these calamities. Before and after he retired in January 1994, he was honored in almost every conceivable way. At OU he was made both a George Lynn Cross Research Professor (1974) and a Regents Professor for Superior Professional and University Service (1991). He was inducted into the Oklahoma Higher Education Hall of Fame (2004), and two governors declared "Yoshi Sasaki Days" (2001 and 2009). He was named an Honorary Member of the American Meteorological Society, its highest award, in 2012. (The president of the AMS at the time remarked that choosing Sasaki was the "easiest decision" he ever had to make in selecting honorary members.) In 2004, the Emperor of Japan bestowed upon him that nation's highest civilian honor, the "Order of the Sacred Treasure Gold Rays with Neck Ribbon," for his contributions to science and public affairs.

Yoshi Sasaki died on March 12, 2015, at the age of 88. He carried on his research, publishing scientific contributions until the year before his death. He also maintained in retirement a lively interest in the school he did so much to help build, often attending faculty meetings and seminars. He lived long enough to see the program, ensconced in a magnificent new building on OU's south campus, become one of the very finest in the United States.

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