



KAZOKU

The Foundation

By Jerry Figgiani

In my last two columns, I talked about the two hotbeds for Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu: one on the East Coast, the other in the Midwest—specifically in the states of New York and Ohio. It was in these states that the foundation was laid for present-day instructors like myself. We owe a great deal of gratitude to the early pioneers who have followed in the footsteps of Okinawan Karate Master Nagamine Shoshin. When speaking about the inception of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu in the Midwest, one has to start with James K. Wax.

Sensei Wax was the first American who brought back this art form from Okinawa. A student of the late James Wax, Mike George stated, “the Genesis of Matsubayashi in America began when a young, returning American Marine, Jim Wax, the father of American Matsubayashi began teaching in Dayton, Ohio. Soon after that, Shorin Ryu began and spread fast over the Midwest—starting in Ohio and quickly moving through Kentucky, Indiana, Missouri, and Illinois.” Some of the biggest names, not only Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu but in the martial arts in general, came out of the Wax dojo. Some of those early pioneers included not only Sensei Mike George but Robert Yarnell, Parker Shelton, Jim Harrison, Gary Tikitin, and Frank Grant, President of the World Shorin Ryu Karate Federation. Sensei Brad Wells who resided in the Midwest, stated that these above-mentioned instructors went on to have a level of independence and practiced in their own ways. They maintained strong ties to the Nagamine family and have a great deal of pride that they were part of the inception of Matsubayashi in the United States.

In speaking with Hanshi Frank Grant, I found out that he first heard of Sensei Wax through Wax’s parents who attended the same church. Wax’s parents mentioned that their son had studied martial arts in Okinawa under Shoshin Nagamine. Hanshi Grant then began his training under James Wax in 1959. It

wasn’t surprising that Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu spread because of Sensei Wax. He carried a certain charisma which drew people in. This charisma has also been mentioned by Hanshi Ernie Ferrara.

Hanshi Ferrara was studying Shotokan when he first saw Sensei James Wax demonstrate his style of Shorin Ryu Karate in New York. He was so impressed by Sensei Wax’s demonstration that he switched from the Shotokan style of Karate to the Shorin Ryu system under Sensei James Wax. Hanshi Ferrara later went on to become the first black belt recipient under Master Ansei Ueshiro in the United States.

Back in the Midwest, Parker Shelton, Robert Yarnell, and Jim Harrison all went on to have successful tournament careers. These senseis have produced many black belts who continue to teach and produce other black belts today. A well-worn path was established between the Midwest and the East Coast. In the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s many Midwest dojos developed with strong ties to Okinawa. In the late 1960s, Soke Takayoshi Nagamine and Kiyoshi Nishime Sensei settled in the Midwest for a number of years. However, Soke Nagamine later returned to Okinawa. In 1992, Soke Takayoshi Nagamine briefly settled on Long Island, New York with the support of Sensei Nicholas Racanelli. In 1998, Soke Nagamine reestablished himself back out west and made his home in Columbus, Ohio for a short period of time before moving back to Naha, Okinawa.

Today Matsubayashi is made up of many splintered organizations and still has a worldwide following. A large reason for its longevity can be attributed to the strong contributions from the Midwest dojos and their senseis and students who filled them. Presently, there are so many other Midwest high-quality Shorin Ryu instructors who are continuing to preserve the history and traditions of Matsubayashi Shorin Ryu. 🐉

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