

Unlikely Pioneers in the Southern Forest Experiment Station: Tomatsu “Tommy” Kohara and Jasper Burnes

Don C. Bragg

Don C. Bragg, Project Leader and Research Forester, U.S. Department of Agriculture, Forest Service, Southern Research Station, Monticello, AR 71655.

While the scientists and administrators of the South’s forest experiment stations receive the lion’s share of attention for their contributions to American forestry, they are not the only pioneers in the research and development of natural resource science. The Southern Forest Experiment Station (SOFES) employed many hundreds of persons during its 75 years of existence. A far from complete roster (Bragg and McDaniel 2023) represents the best current approximation of the professional-level staffing of the Station. Even though this roster is woefully deficient in terms of technical and support staff, it was possible to use this document and other sources to identify two individuals that represent early pioneers in the SOFES.

TOMATSU “TOMMY” KOHARA: THE FIRST ASIAN-AMERICAN SOFES EMPLOYEE?

Tomatsu “Tommy” Kohara (often given as “T.T. Kohara” on his photo credits) was born on July 27, 1916, in Omaha, NE, the second of five children born to Manabu and Saki (Tokio) Kohara. As a youth, Manabu Kohara had converted to Christianity and emigrated to the United States from his hometown of Kitsuki in southern Japan, arriving just before Christmas of 1903 to begin divinity school in Berkeley, CA (Kohara 2004). Nine years later, Saki Tokio arrived in California and eventually eloped with the elder Kohara. The Koharas soon moved across the United States with their growing family. By 1928, the family had settled in central Louisiana to work as truck farmers. Within 2 years, Manabu had left farming to open a photographic studio in downtown Alexandria (Simms and Johnson 2019).

From various accounts, the entire Kohara family were “expert” photographers, so when Manabu died unexpectedly in late 1941, Saki took over the studio business and her children soon joined in the effort. But photography had not been the original career choice for either Kohara or his older brother Susumu (“Sammy”) Kohara; both eventually enrolled at Louisiana State University (LSU) as forestry students (interestingly, Tommy started 2 years earlier than the older Sammy). A review of past LSU forestry graduates in the program’s 1938 yearbook (*The Annual Ring*) showed no prior surnames of obvious Asian origin, suggesting that Tommy Kohara might have been the first Asian-American to graduate from the LSU forestry program and may have been one of the first ones in not just the Southern United States, but possibly the entire Nation!

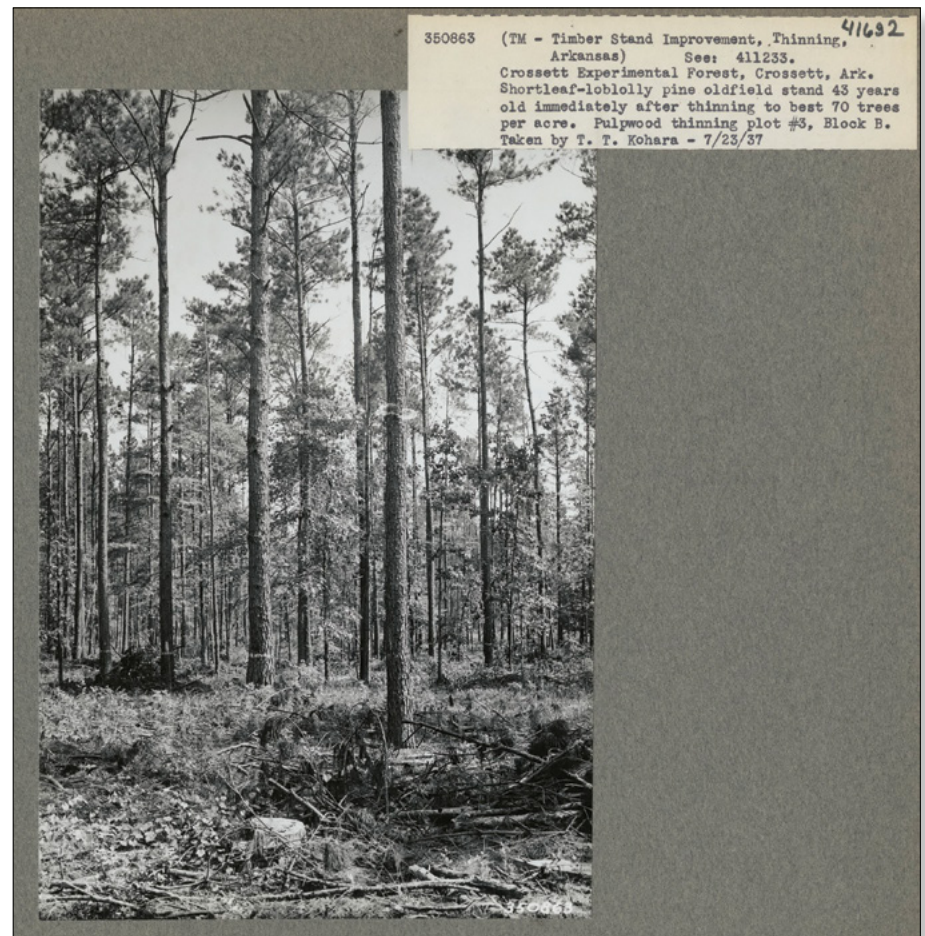
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It is unclear how minorities such as the Kohara brothers were treated as LSU forestry students; Louisiana was typical among States in the Jim Crow South of this period. *The Annual Ring* included a number of racial epitaphs. The banter that included mentions of Kohara was similar to that for his other white classmates: good-natured in its humor and content, if somewhat obscure in its references. One such quote includes a mention of Kohara needing a “long stay in some rest Sanatorium” after completing the forest engineering class in the 1938 summer camp and something about having to “grin and bear...[a] JKK party like Tomatsu had to do...” (Zachariah 1939: 32).¹

Whatever these statements reference, it did not seem to stop Kohara from being an active participant in LSU’s student life. He shared his family’s skills in photography, and served as the photographic editor of *The Annual Ring* in the yearbook’s inaugural 1938 issue, and then again the following year. Kohara was also in the LSU student chapter of the Society of American Foresters and a member of Alpha Zeta, a professional fraternity for students and professionals in the agricultural and natural resource professions.

The 1939 *Annual Ring* noted Kohara’s work as a student assistant with the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service. Regrettably, there is little in terms

¹ JKK was undefined in the text—perhaps it was an inside joke or referred to something else now lost to history.



An example of one of the many pictures taken by Tommy Kohara during his first brief stint (summer of 1937) with the SOFES. This image from the Crossett Experimental Forest shows the clarity, composure, depth of field, and contrast common in Kohara’s work. (USDA Forest Service photo [negative #350863] taken on July 23, 1937)

of Forest Service documentation for what Kohara did during these years—or even when he started with the agency. This first stint with the agency may well have been the summer of 1937, after his second year at LSU. Kohara received photo credits for images he took for the Forest Service by at least July of 1937, perhaps as an unpaid student intern with the SOFES. Unfortunately, the Station’s published annual reports provided only partial rosters during this period, and prior to 1939, these annual reports did not provide student worker names or many Station employees not in a professional series (Bragg and McDaniel 2023).² However, a different source confirms what the photo captions recorded. Russell R. Reynolds, the Crossett Experimental Forest’s leader and a long-time SOFES scientist, recorded a daily work log between 1934 and 1951, and he documented spending most of the week between July 21 and July 28, 1937, with “Assistant Kohara” taking pictures of the experimental forest and the nearby lands and operations of the Crossett Lumber Company.

Another example of Kohara’s early SOFES photographic work comes from the Station’s studies on the lands of the Urania Lumber Company in central Louisiana. This picture, taken on August 16, 1937, shows a man in a loblolly pine (*Pinus taeda*) stand (likely SOFES researcher C.A. Bickford, as it is almost certain that Kohara was the photographer). Phil Wakeley noted in his early history of the SOFES that Bickford was a less than stellar photographer, having “...underexposed his pictures badly when using [a Harvey] meter because his pupillary opening was abnormally large and he could read a number or two higher on the meter than anyone else.” (Wakeley and Barnett 2016: 112). In the next sentence, Wakeley went on to describe the Zeiss cameras they used as “superb” and that “...an occasional expert photographer like Tommy Kohara got pictures with them that have been published over and over again.” Those photographs by Kohara clearly show his abilities to compose and develop images with good contrast, depth of field, clarity, and framing.

It is uncertain if Kohara did anything besides take photographs for the SOFES; no records have yet been found that describe all of his formal duties. Curiously, a biography of Kohara (Derr 1981: 19) based on an interview with him by someone who knew him for years, does not mention his 1937 stint. It specifically cites his first job in forestry was a 1-year temporary assignment on the Harrison Experimental Forest in southern Mississippi “...where, along with his other work, he took his first pictures of forests.” Given his work in the summer of 1937 taking photographs of forests in Arkansas, Louisiana, Georgia, Mississippi, and likely elsewhere for the SOFES, this statement is not correct (and perhaps came from a memory faded by time).

Kohara’s more formal position with the SOFES appears to have started at some point in 1939. He was listed in the Station’s 19th annual report (SOFES 1940: 25), with a job title of “Under Field Assistant” with an “informal appointment” that appears to have officially ended on July 13, 1939. Kohara next appears in the 20th annual report (SOFES 1941: 29), still as an under field assistant, apparently hired through the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) program with terms of service from January 1, 1940, until May 17, 1940, and then again from June 17, 1940, until June 30, 1940. Though the Government relief funding that supported his employment

Photograph of a man, probably **C.A. Bickford**, standing in a recently thinned old field stand of loblolly pine in Winn Parish, Louisiana. USDA Forest Service photo [negative # 352115] taken by T.T. Kohara on August 16, 1937.



² For most of the 20th century, Forest Service practice for its directories and public rosters was to include only the most skilled technical, professional, and scientific staff members—not laborers (of any race or gender) and only rarely any clerical staff.



Scene of the Civilian Conservation Corps Camp F-8 outside of Pollock, LA. (USDA Forest Service photo [negative #348459] taken by T.T. Kohara on July 13, 1937)

with the SOFES ran out (leading him to go back to work at the family business [Derr 1981]), he may have gone on to have a promising career in the Forest Service—until World War II interrupted. Along with many of his peers during these slow economic times, having registered for the draft³ in October of 1940, Kohara volunteered for the army on May 21, 1941, for what he thought would be a 1-year tour of duty as a company clerk (Derr 1981). As with most American soldiers of Japanese descent, once hostilities broke out (and following some training in Massachusetts and New York City), Kohara served in the European Theater as a photographer with the 3264th Signal Service Company. In this role, he took pictures on the front lines and behind the lines as the U.S. Army pushed through France and into Germany until he was discharged as a sergeant in late 1945 (Derr 1981).

Even after Kohara left the Forest Service, he continued to take forest and forestry related images, most prominently as a “Visual Aids Forester” with the Louisiana Forestry Commission, for which he worked from 1946 to 1956 (Derr 1981). In 1956, Kohara left the forestry profession to become the chief photographer for the *Alexandria Daily Town Talk* (a local newspaper), where he would remain until he retired a quarter-century later. During his long career (and regardless of employer), Kohara’s pictures of nature and the people of central Louisiana would appear for decades in numerous magazines (e.g., *Forests & People* and *Forest Farmer*), books (e.g., Lowery 1960), newspapers, and other publications, including some by the SOFES. These photographs were not just sterile images of trees or forestry equipment or the impacts of pathogens; they often captured the many faces of people who worked in and enjoyed the natural environment of central Louisiana. Kohara’s work also graced the cover of multiple issues of

³This information comes from his military registration card, available through a number of genealogy websites.

the Louisiana Forestry Association’s magazine, *Forests & People* (Derr 1981). His photography helped to capture a critical time in the resource management history of the Southern United States, from the beginnings of science-based forestry practices to the drastic measures the Federal Government undertook to keep its people employed. Even today, Kohara’s pictures are still helping to illustrate and frame forest-related research questions.

In his tribute to the people who worked to help resurrect the South’s forests following the “big cut,” Barnett (2016: 108) lauded Kohara—one of only two people he recognized for photography—for “...setting a standard for quality in forest photography that remains today.” Given the accolades Kohara received following his passing on June 29, 1999, at his home in Alexandria, LA, the professional and personal contributions of this first-generation American son of Japanese immigrants cannot be overstated.

JASPER BURNES: PIONEERING AFRICAN AMERICAN WORKER AT CROSSETT

Jasper H. Burnes was born on July 15, 1896, in Sumpter Township, Bradley County, Arkansas, the eldest child of farmer George Burnes and Emma (Simon) Burnes.⁴ Between the Civil War and World War I, Arkansas received a large influx of African Americans from further east, seeking better economic opportunities and the opportunity to acquire farmland (Matkin-Rawn 2013). Jasper Burnes’ grandparents joined this migration in the 1870s. A decade later found the George Burnes family still on their Bradley County farm, with Jasper and six additional siblings. Early life for Jasper must have been hard in segregated Arkansas. Both his parents reported in the 1910 census that they could read and write but that none of their children of school age had attended school, and 13-year-old Jasper was listed as being illiterate.⁵ When the unmarried younger Burnes later registered for the draft in June 1917, he listed his occupation as a self-employed farmer in the small community of Jersey (in southern Bradley County), and he signed his own name to the card.

Burnes did not stay with farming for very long. The 1920 census lists Burnes as a laborer in a lumber camp in River Township in Bradley County, joined by his wife Fannie E. (Pewford) Burnes and their 6-year-old son Arma in a rented house. During this period, the big timber cut in Arkansas was winding down, although old-growth pine and hardwood were still being harvested in this part of Bradley County. At some point during the 1920s, Burnes had moved his family to Stillions, a small sawmill community a little southeast of his 1920 residence. Stillions was named for a family who purchased a large amount of bottomland hardwood timber along part of Ashley County, Arkansas, and operated a sawmill there until around 1930 when it closed (Etheridge 1959; Moseley 2015). According to Crossett Experimental Forest Project Leader Russell R. Reynolds (1980: 9), Burnes was injured in a mill accident (probably at Stillions), causing him to have a “stiff leg.”

⁴As is often the case, birthdates and name spellings are sometimes inconsistent in early public records. For instance, Burnes’ family surname is given as both Burns and Burnes, and his birth year is given in most records as 1896. It is unclear why the spelling of his surname was changed to “Burns” by the 1920 census; the only written material I have found by his own hand was a brief, friendly note to Reynolds from early 1943 signed “From Jasper Burnes.”

⁵It is unclear why Burnes was not reported by his parents as having attended school in the 1910 census. The 1940 census records, presumably, supplied by Burnes himself, noted that he had attended up to the 5th grade.

After the closing of the Stillions sawmill, life would have been difficult for the Burnes family, between his injury and limited economic opportunities in the area. Apparently, they continued to reside in the Stillions community for a while (Reynolds [1980: 9] described them as “stranded”). Perhaps Burnes worked on local farms or for the Crossett Lumber Company, which operated a large sawmill complex in the city of Crossett about 8 miles to the southeast. As with much of the country, the Great Depression further reduced employment opportunities in rural Arkansas, with Government relief programs often the only work available. Even then, those fortunate to get that work still had major challenges, as Reynolds (1980: 9–10) observed:

“Most likely, Burnes was not the first African American employee of the SOFES, and he definitely was not the last—but his experience is no less part of the Station’s story of the many other research pioneers.

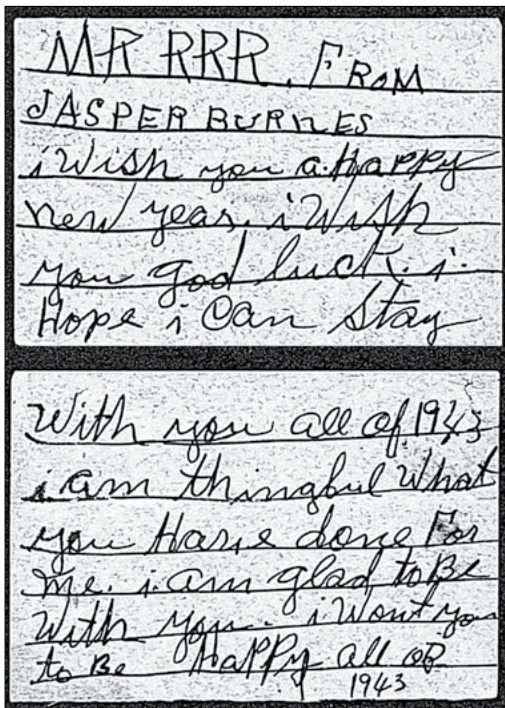
Conditions were so serious that the Stillions group had to walk 8 miles down the Rock Island railroad to Crossett each morning, leaving Stillions at about 4 a.m. We [the Forest Service] would pick them up at the Crossett Filling Station at 7 a.m. each day. The men would put in a 10-hour day. Then we transported them back to Crossett, and they walked the eight miles back to Stillions. They would arrive at Stillions at about 9 p.m. Here their families would have some eats ready for them. They would later fall exhausted into bed. Their wives would awaken them at 3 a.m. and they would start another long day. For all of this the men were paid \$1.25 per day for a 4-day week ... stiff leg and all, Jasper made the long walk twice a day in order to stay alive.

Handwritten note from Jasper Burnes to Russell Reynolds, from the archives of the Crossett Experimental Forest, Crossett, AR.

As one of this Stillions group, Burnes’ work ethic must have impressed Russ Reynolds, as he continued to keep Burnes on the payroll once he was able to hire supporting staff at Crossett, noting “Jasper became a valuable permanent member of the Crossett Research staff and worked for the Government until his retirement many years later.” (Reynolds 1980: 10).

Fortunately for Burnes and his wife, his employment by the SOFES also came with a much more convenient housing opportunity. As the facility at Crossett was developed, between 1935 and 1938 a small cabin on the far western edge of the administrative complex was constructed to house supporting workers; it would be known as “Laborers Cabin #1” in a June 1947 inventory of the facilities at Crossett. Built at a cost of only \$118.50 at the time, this modest home apparently remained their residence until Burnes’ retirement. The 1940 census records show Burnes as a “laborer” employed as a “wage or salary worker in Government work” who had worked for 40 weeks in 1939 and earned \$475. His employment status may have been a bit uncertain during World War II, as the Station’s resources were stretched thin and locations such as Crossett had limited operating budgets. Around New Year’s Day in 1943, Burnes penned a note to Reynolds expressing his gratitude for his assistance to that point and his desire to remain on the experimental forest for all of that year.

We actually know very little about Burnes’ work for the SOFES over the decades, although it likely consisted of physical labor to support field operations and maintenance of the Crossett Experimental Forest. Unlike the researchers who would come and go at Crossett, Burnes did not generate publications or design experiments or provide field tours. He may appear in some of the photographs taken of operations at Crossett Experimental Forest, a number of which show



unidentified African American workers. As a non professional worker, Burnes was not listed in any SOFES annual reports or in the national Forest Service organizational directories between 1935 and 1966. Curiously, a separate list of Crossett Experimental Forest employees purportedly employed between 1939 and 1959, which included positions such as unskilled laborers—even those who were only employed for days or weeks—and Burnes is not listed there, either (Bragg and McDaniel 2023). This list is also incomplete and may have only included those whose time at Crossett had come and gone (but not then-current employees, as Burnes would have been).

Personnel records on Crossett staff are largely absent or unavailable before 1980, so it is unclear when Burnes retired, but it was before his death in June of 1972. Given Reynolds’ effusive praise of Burnes (he is the only such laborer so recognized in *The Crossett Story*), it would appear that Burnes was a vital part of that operation, even if not otherwise documented by the Forest Service. Most likely, Burnes was not the first African American employee of the SOFES, and he definitely was not the last—but his experience is no less part of the Station’s story of the many other research pioneers.

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