

# Building the Silver Bridge

- a fictional account of Koichi Tohei's time in Hawaii -  
by Gordon Teekell

*Dear Web Shihan,*

*My name is John Fujiyama. I am writing to you because I heard that an old friend of mine, Shun Wakanabi, recently passed away. Growing up we were neighbors and best friends. As single young men, we were roommates until Shun married and moved to California. He has a daughter who followed his example and studied aikido. Over the years, I had lost contact with him but I believe that she still lives in California now and I am hoping that by sharing a few excerpts from a diary that he kept in our youth, and that I recently discovered while going through some old keepsakes, that she may see it on your website and recognize some of the stories that he may have told her during her childhood and as a result, contact me in Hawaii. I will include my address and phone number so that you may share it with her if she sees these excerpts and would like to have it. It is now her diary and I would like to send it to her.*

*These entries were written when we were 15 to 22 and later when we were roommates. Shun's father was a member of the Buddhist church that hosted the first aikido dojo in Hawaii. Of course, the first aikido teacher in Hawaii was Koichi Tohei. Shun and his father were among the first students of Tohei sensei and because he had an extra room in his house and a second car (a rarity at that time) Tohei sensei stayed with Shun's family and Shun became Tohei's uke and chauffeur as he traveled the Hawaiian Islands doing demonstrations and starting new classes.*

February 2, 1953

Dear Diary,

Today we heard from Pastor Sukinori that the Nishi Kai Health Group's request to Ueshiba Sensei in Japan to allow us to begin an aikido dojo in Hawaii had been met with approval. Next month, he will be sending a teacher to Honolulu to start a dojo. Training will begin at that time. When the priest mentioned that he would be looking for a place for the teacher to stay, my father volunteered our house until things were settled and the new teacher could have a place of his own.

March 15, 1953

Dear Diary,

My father didn't let me go because our car was full already but he was part of the welcoming committee to greet the new aikido teacher. We found out that the new teacher is one of Ueshiba Sensei's favorite students in Tokyo, Koichi Tohei sensei. Naturally, they all went out to lunch and had a welcoming ceremony. Since the temple is near our home in Nuuanu, I was there to see that. It is hard to believe that such a small man can do the things everyone is talking about. Once we learned from Tokyo who our teacher would be, everyone started writing, even telephoning, their friends and relatives in Japan to see what they could find out about him. He has been a soldier and saw action in China. It is said that he used a mysterious force to concentrate during battle and that this is what he credits his survival to. He has previously studied judo just like me and father. A bunch of father's judo buddies are going to be taking classes in this new martial art. Dad said I could too. I like judo a lot and this new stuff sounds like it is very soft. Our priest says he likes it because it doesn't try to hurt the attacker but to protect them. Some of father's friends have seen or taken a few classes in Japan and from what I can see from their techniques, it doesn't look that soft. Father's friends at some of the other dojos are taking bets on how long this teacher will last and who will be the first to throw him. A lot of the senseis don't want a new art being taught in Hawaii and plan to challenge Tohei sensei to show that this new art isn't as effective as our traditional styles. Since my father has seen it demonstrated, I tend to believe him and will be there for the first classes.

March 23, 1953

Dear Diary,

Last night, we had our first aikido class. It seemed as if we would never get around to training. There were all kinds of welcoming ceremonies with tea and lots of bowing and speeches. A lot of the men who train in our judo class came as well as several from other judo dojos in Honolulu. There were a lot of non martial people from our temple there to watch as well as many guests from outside.

Since we sit by rank and everyone is a beginner, I got to sit in the first row, although down at the end. Sensei even called me up to play the part of the attacker for one part of the class. I got paired with Mr. Ju for the class. He's big! I don't know how anyone else did but I felt very awkward with the new style and Mr. Ju was hard to move. Tohei sensei smiled a lot and was very encouraging. He explained that Ueshiba Sensei didn't have names for all the techniques but that the key to learning techniques was to do them not name them.

I laughed when Mr. Ju was called up to play the attacker part. He tried to collect on the bet that had been made with the other judo students. He attacked sensei very hard. Sensei seemed to know that it was coming and easily threw Mr. Ju. In fact, if Mr. Ju hadn't been studying judo, he would have fallen on his face. He still hit the ground pretty hard. As he got up, she looked very surprised.

For a soft art, it sure seems hard. We trained for an hour and a half and my gi was soaked in sweat. I will have to wash it for sure and hang it on the line to dry in time for class tonight.

June 16, 1953

Dear Diary,

Word is apparently getting around. Since our beginning class after the tea ceremony, the number of students at the dojo has steadily increased. Tohei sensei seems to be adapting to our learning style and the influx of new students. He has started naming the techniques to help the first students remember them more easily and to give the new students a frame of reference. I know it helps me a lot. Before, he would just point to his wrist or shoulder and signal one or two hands for an attack. Now, when I hear him say a technique after an attack, I can even picture some of them in my mind and know what he is going to do.

We had a strange thing happen at the dojo/temple yesterday. One of the local karate doka came by in the afternoon. His name is Hatamoto. He is quite well known in our local martial arts circles. He is very good and has a temper. He asked for Tohei sensei and when told that sensei was not at the temple, he announced that he would not go until Tohei sensei came to see him. This is very rude.

We live close to the dojo, and the priest was able to reach Tohei sensei at our house. When Tohei sensei heard what was happening he walked over to the dojo to find out what the man wanted. I know I wasn't supposed to, but I was curious to see what the fuss was about and after giving Tohei sensei a head start, followed him to the dojo. Without being seen, I observed the following.

When sensei arrived, the man immediately challenged him to a contest to see which art was better. He didn't like the idea of a new art coming into town and taking students away from older dojos. Sensei asked him what made one art better than another. The karate man replied that whichever art made the opponent incapable of attacking was the best.

Sensei agreed that this was the case. He then asked if, in his style of karate his teacher believed that it was alright to break the peace and initiate or, if he waited to defend himself when another person attacked. Sensei stood in front of the man as he thought about the answer. It was plain that Tohei sensei would not be the first to move. Hatamoto had the choice of not violating his teacher's philosophy, or beginning the attack. The man stared at sensei for what seemed a minute or two and suddenly relaxed.

He actually apologized to sensei. He could not go against his teacher by breaking the peace and being the first to attack. Since he couldn't attack, sensei had shown him which method was most effective. Hatamoto said he still didn't know which art was more effective, but he knew what he wanted to learn.

Hatamoto was in class that night as a new student.

October 10, 1953

Dear Diary,

I love aikido. I train every chance I get now. I don't think I'm that good but sensei uses me a lot to take falls. I don't understand but he says that if I learn to take falls well that my throwing skills will improve also. I like practicing with Taguchi. He is closer to my size than some of the Hawaiian students in the dojo and is easier for me to throw. He is also good at the nage role. Maybe he has been listening to Tohei sensei.

Sensei has started traveling to other parts of Oahu to do demonstrations. It helps that we now have 25-40 students that started training at the temple several months ago. When one or more of them can't go to a demonstration, others can fill in so sensei always has an uke. Since he lives at our house and we have an extra car, I sometimes get to drive him when father cannot attend a demonstration. Then, I also get to take falls for sensei during the demo.

Our health group president says that he has received requests from places on the other islands that are interested in having aikido demonstrations and perhaps even starting dojos. Hawaii is a small place and everyone has friends and relatives on the other islands. It makes it easy to travel and stay. It also makes for fast communication. I think people are liking this way of training.

May 18, 1954

Dear Diary,

I just got promoted to 3rd Kyu. I still wear a white belt and no one in our class is close to having a black belt yet but I think I'm doing pretty good to get this far after training just a year. It's a lot of work doing school stuff, training and taking sensei around to other places. I even get to miss school sometimes because it takes a lot of time to get to the other side of the island where sensei has started teaching some new classes. Luckily, we have been able to share space at a community center where a judo dojo was already practicing. I say, "We", because I now spend a lot of time as sensei's driver and I want aikido to do well in Hawaii.

Sensei has quite a reputation now. He doesn't have to deal with the challenges to fight anymore. Aikido is pretty much accepted now and is in fact almost fashionable. He has started doing an exercise called "the unbendable arm". Sensei places his outstretched arm hands up on a person's shoulder. He then asks that person to pull his arm down with both hands over the elbow of his outstretched arm. Even the biggest jujitsu guys can't get him to bend his arm. He talks about "ki" extension. It's pretty neat. He does some other things like that. It makes for quite a demonstration.

October 12, 1954

I think sensei may have just started the first dojo on another island besides the one in Hilo where Kiyoshi Nagata is sensei. I traveled with him as uke to Wailuku on Maui. It turns out that members of the police department had heard about aikido and went to some demonstrations here on Oahu. They were impressed with what they saw and heard. It looks as if he will be making regular trips over there to work with the department when they have training days. We have a dojo member who is one of our higher ranking students who is going to be moving to Maui. He may be doing the police training and starting a dojo at the Buddhist temple in town. Tohei sensei has mentioned to us that he is scheduled to return to Japan for a time and that we will be responsible for our own training in his absence. Yamatmoto sempai will be in charge while he is gone. He has given us many techniques and exercises in this short time. I'm sure we won't run out of things to work on.

January 10, 1955

Sensei has finally returned from Japan. We just finished Kongeiku, severe winter training. Only in Hawaii winter isn't so severe so the sempai in charge of our training while he was in Japan made us work that much harder and we trained twice a day instead of just once. It's great to have sensei back. He is very energetic and is already teaching us things that we haven't seen before.

He has also been mentioning "Ki" a lot. Something that happened while he was in Tokyo seems to have kicked up his enthusiasm for training us. I think O'Sensei is happy that aikido has been started in Hawaii and that it is proving to be popular. Tohei sensei seems even more confident than he was before. We have started spending the early part of our practice time doing ki and balance exercises.

May 1, 1955

I breathed today! It caught me by surprise and I didn't realize I had done it until I replayed it in my mind. It just happened. I walked through the main doors at the entrance to our school and they opened so easily. They just FLEW open! I thought something was wrong. Then, it hit me. I had breathed out and extended ki as I pushed on the door handle. It was ki! Just like in class. Just like sensei had told us. Wow. Aikido outside the dojo. I think I can do this.

October 12, 1957

Although Tohei Sensei has only been back from Japan for a few weeks, we have already had kyu and dan tests. I can't believe it but I am now a shodan and wear a black belt. We had a great party at the dojo after the dan tests. Nobody has celebrations like Hawaiians!

I have to admit, I enjoyed the attention but getting the belt wasn't the most enjoyable or amazing thing about the experience. While we were at the party, I had a chance to talk to Tohei sensei alone. Out of the blue, he asked me how I would have answered the question he had posed to Hatamoto in the courtyard of the temple all those years ago. My mouth dropped open and before I could apologize for eavesdropping, he said, "I saw that your answer was the same as Hatamoto's. That is when you became shodan. Enjoy the responsibility." Then he walked away.

I have no idea how he knew I was there. Until that time, he had said nothing to me about that day even though we had traveled together and I had driven him all over the island.

I think I have just started to learn this art.

February 28, 1961

This has to have been the greatest day in Hawaiian Aikido. After all these years of hearing about O'Sensei. We have finally had a chance to see and hear him. He has come to Hawaii to dedicate our new concrete dojo. We now have a separate place to train and our Hawaiian headquarters will no longer have to share space with any other activities. We have had people from our organization travel to Japan over the years and they have had a chance to see and train with O'Sensei over there but this gives all of us who have trained in Hawaii from the beginning a chance to see for ourselves what Tohei sensei has been talking about and demonstrating all this time.

O'Sensei's visit is a big deal throughout the islands. It has been announced on the radio many times and been in the papers frequently. He has even received formal invitations from Governor Quinn and Mayor Blaisdell.

Although he is honoring us by being here to dedicate our new dojo, I suspect he is also here to see for himself what Tohei sensei has built in terms of community and infrastructure.

The instructors who have come from Japan from time to time must have said some good things when they returned from Japan. We can see that Tohei sensei has gotten even better than when he first came. O'Sensei must have noticed it too. Tohei Sensei has been promoted to 9th Dan.

I can see that we are to be a template for the expansion of aikido to other parts of the world. Tohei sensei has already started teaching classes on the US mainland and there are going to be dojos established in Europe. In one of his speeches during his visit here,)Sensei referred to a "Silver Bridge" that has been built as aikido spreads to other places outside Japan and unites the world in peace. He said he built a Golden Bridge in Japan that united with the harmony and love in aikido. Hawaii represents the first span of the "Silver Bridge".

He didn't mention it but it seems that aikido has made another bridge to other parts of the world. At the demo, two segments are to be performed by women. Haroko Aoyagi and Helene Tanaka from our dojo are to be included. This is a nice step.

Tohei sensei also could be seen as a "Silver Bridge". O'Sensei chose him to be the first to build a system of dojos outside of Japan. He came with only an invitation, a place to train and the knowledge that he did not have the option to be anything but a success.

April 24, 1969

We received the news today that O'Sensei has died. The phone call came very early in the morning from a friend of Dad's in Japan. My father will be representing the Hawaiian Aiki Kwai at a memorial service that is to be held in O'Sensei's honor. He will be flying all the way to Japan.

June 15, 1969

There is a big buzz throughout the islands. Hawaii Aiki Kwai has been waiting to find out what was going to happen to Aikido leadership after the passing of O'Sensei. We have heard rumors that Tohei sensei would be the new doshu of world aikido. This is not the way it turned out. The new doshu is O'Sensei's son Kisshomaru Ueshiba.

Now, there may be a big split among the dojos here in Hawaii. Because a lot of Hawaiians have had Tohei sensei as their only instructor since we started training in aikido, they will follow him if he starts a new organization. Others will also be following Tohei by staying loyal to the organization he introduced to them with the headquarters being at Hombu dojo in Tokyo. This seems logical. I know it will be a difficult decision for all the dojos in the islands and it may mean the end of some long friendships.

I don't think that's what O'Sensei would have wanted. He chose who would succeed him and how aikido was to grow. He also recognized a special quality in Tohei sensei and even promoted him to 10th dan before he passed away.

I think it was O'Sensei's way of letting Tohei Sensei know that he was on his own. He had reached a place where he was breaking new ground and exploring a special area of our art. O'Sensei saw that aikido could not grow only in this direction and needed a different kind of leader. When O'Sensei was studying aiki jujutsu, one of the things that put him on a new path was when he started focusing on the "aiki" part. Once again, Tohei sensei was to be a "Silver Bridge". This time he was building aiki spirit in his own unique way. He has been focusing on "ki".

I know our dojo will be following the new doshu. I will miss O'Sensei and am sorry that he is no longer here to inspire us. I'm sure he knew what he was doing when he made his choice. I will also miss my teacher Tohei sensei. I would like him to know how much I learned from him and how much fun it was to drive with him and train all those years ago.

*Thank you for helping me find John's daughter and seeing that she receives his diary. I don't know what else she may have been left that was her father's. I do know that these diaries meant a lot to him and that his experience with aikido changed him as a person. I hope that she will contact me so that she can learn about him as a young man and what built him into the person that she knew as she grew up.*

*Sincerely,*

*John Fujiyama*