

Sixty Years After as an AFS Exchange Student at Conard

by Mitsuaki Okabe

The year 1961-62 is certainly one of the most memorable years in my whole life. It is because I, as a Japanese student, had an exceptionally fortunate academic year at Conard High School in West Hartford, Connecticut, USA, experiencing a very special academic and social life in completely different language and culture.

In fact, it is not only I that had such a fortunate experience in that academic year, but the total of one hundred twenty-five Japanese students who enjoyed the similar experience as I did in the US. And we all have cherished that special year ever since. So that we occasionally have had gatherings in Tokyo to mutually share our experiences. This year, 2022, is naturally the 60th anniversary for those Japanese AFS students, as is for the "Conard '62".

On this occasion, Elaine Switz Stevens, the editor of this *POW WOW*, kindly suggested me to report activities of the fellow Japanese AFS students. Therefore, let me first begin to tell a little bit of my AFS experience, then go on to the collective activities of the former Japanese AFS collegues.

For the period of one academic year, I stayed as a family member of the Hopkinsons. John ("Hoppy") Hopkinson was my "American brother" of the same age (Fig. 1). After spending a quite memorable year at Conard (see Fig. 2, for example), all the AFS students in Connecticut coming from many foreign countries, including two other Japanese students in this State, met in West Hartford and began a "Bus Trip" in one bus in June and July 1962, extending for three weeks. During this trip, we visited six Eastern and Mid-western states. In each stopping city en route, we stayed for a night or two with the local hosting families.

The trip ended in Washington DC, and on July 11, according to my diary, the moment which we so dearly looked for came. Namely, President Kennedy spoke to us for about ten minutes at the South Lawn of the White House (Fig. 3). He said that he would expect that in future we the AFS students would be serving as a bridge between our own country and the United States.

As President Kennedy wished and predicted, many of us, the Japanese AFS students, pursued the career to serve as diplomats representing Japan, or to work for some of international organizations. The late Mr. Kenzo Oshima, is a good example, because, after serving as a Japanese diplomat, he served internationally as a Deputy Secretary General of the United Nations.

Besides diplomats, former Japanese AFS students have pursued such other areas as journalist, manager of large Japanese or international corporations, researcher in various academic fields, medical doctor, lawyer, translator (book translator or simultaneous oral translator), director of Japanese AFS associations, to mention some examples. What everybody is saying is that "My life would have been completely different, if I had not been an AFS student." This is of course true for me, too.

After returning to Japan, we, the Japanese AFS-returnees, have had meeting occasions to see each other. On the 40th occasion, a fairly large number of us met in Tokyo in 2002 (Fig. 4). But for the 60th year, i.e., this year, we could not have an onsite reunion due to the Covid-19, but had instead an online (Zoom) re-union (Fig. 5). I am wishing (at the time of my writing this essay in September) that the Conard's 60th Class Reunion, planned on October 13 in West Hartford, will be a wonderful and memorable one for all the participants.

For me, the experience at Conard as an AFS student was certainly a big stepping stone in my career, for which I am deeply thankful (for the detail, see *POW POW* 6(2), August 2018). Finally, let me add that, in June this year, I could fortunately publish a very thick book (in Japanese) integrating my research over the last ten years on humanity and economics (Fig. 6). And I am hoping to have some more energy left to publish the English version of it, before my life ends.



Fig. 1 John ("Hoppy") Hopkinson and I (December 1961)



Fig. 2 Conard marching band in the Football field (1991)



Fig. 3 President Kennedy Spoke to AFS Students



Figure 4. The 40th Reunion of Japanese AFS students, held in Tokyo in 2002
<My location (initially shown by circling) does not appear, for some unknown reason.>



<This picture is simply as an information to show my location in Figure 4.>



Fig. 5 The 60th Online (internet) Reunion, held in July 2022.
<My location is indicated in a circle.>

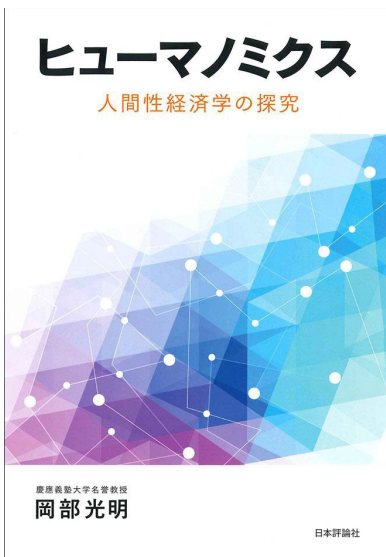


Fig. 6 My Recent Book on Humanity and Economics, published in June.

* * *