

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

Japanese American Evacuation

O.H. 1339

SEIKO ISHIDA

Interviewed

by

Arthur A. Hansen

on

August 6, 1974

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INTERVIEWEE: SEIKO ISHIDA
INTERVIEWER: Arthur A. Hansen
SUBJECT: Japanese American Evacuation
DATE: August 6, 1974

H: This is an interview with Miss Seiko Ishida by Arthur A. Hansen for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project, at 9734 McNerney in South Gate, California, on August 6, 1974, at approximately 1:30 p.m.

I'd like to begin the interview, Miss Ishida, by asking you a little bit about your family background. When and where were you born?

I: I was born in Seattle, Washington, on January 26, 1910.

H: Had your parents been in this country very long?

I: My father came in 1906 and was in a railroad gang. My mother came over later as a picture bride.

H: Your mother arrived then sometime between 1906 and 1910?

I: Yes, because she had my brother in 1908. I was born when she was only nineteen.

H: So she was just a youngster.

I: Yes, she came over when she was around sixteen, all alone.

H: How old was your father when he came in 1906?

I: I imagine around sixteen or seventeen.

H: Did he ever talk to you about the reason why he came here?

I: Well, his family had difficulty. They had a rice store in

Hiroshima, Japan, and it caught on fire. His sister was burned to death, and so there was quite a struggle. He then decided to come on an adventure--well, I guess it's something like the Dick Whittington story; you know, everything is made of money here--so he promised his mother that he would work three years and then come back.

H: Now was he the eldest son in his family?

I: He was, but my grandmother married twice because her first husband died. By her first marriage, she had a daughter and a son that I know of, and by the second marriage she had two sons. My father was the eldest by the second marriage.

H: When he came over here, then, his original intention was to work for three years and then return to Japan. Do you know the conditions under which he came; did he come as part of a contract labor group or individually?

I: I'm not sure, but probably as part of a contract labor group.

H: Did he go directly to Seattle, or did he go to San Francisco first?

I: No, he went to Vancouver and then to Seattle.

H: And as far as you know, his entry into the country was legal.

I: Yes. What do you call it . . .

H: An alien visa.

I: From Japan; I still have it here.

H: He apparently stayed longer than three years, what happened?

I: Yes, he got out of the labor group and then he was in one thing after another in Seattle because he was in the strawberry field trying to farm.

H: Was this as a laborer, farm hand, or farm owner?

I: I think as a farm owner. He bought some land on an island.

H: Where, on Bainbridge Island?

I: Yes, but it didn't work out. That's why he knows many of the Bainbridge people and was very happy when he saw

them in the Manzanar War Relocation Center during the war again.

H: Isn't Bainbridge a small island just about eight miles off the coast from Seattle?

I: Yes, across from Puget Sound.

H: He did some strawberry farming. Apparently, most of the Japanese who were on Bainbridge did strawberry farming, right?

I: Yes.

H: How long did he stay on Bainbridge Island?

I: He didn't stay long as the weather made the crop fail, so then he came into town again.

H: Was that before or after you were born?

I: It must have been before I was born, because when I was born, he was a barber.

H: Where did he have his barber shop, on Jackson Street in Seattle?

I: I don't know where it was, but I was born around there, on Fifth, so it probably was. I really wouldn't know because when I was three years old, we got in the way of his working, and they sent us to Japan.

H: How many kids in your family were sent back?

I: My older brother and me; there are only two of us.

H: So you and your brother were getting under foot, and your parents decided to send you back to Japan? Was this expensive, to pay for the passage of the two of you back to Japan?

I: Well, I think my father borrowed the money. It seems that he knew some Caucasian people from the newspaper company and they trusted him; that's what it sounded like to me.

H: When he sent you back, was it in part because it was an economic hardship for him to raise two kids?

I: Yes, I would say that.

H: Who did you stay with when you went back to Japan?

I: His mother, my grandmother.

- H: His mother, back in Hiroshima?
- I: Yes.
- H: Wasn't this common, to have parents send their children back for a few years?
- I: Yes, in those days, many were sent back.
- H: Were you educated in Japan, too?
- I: Well, I only went up to the fourth grade because I came back when I was eleven.
- H: Then you would be classified as a Kibei, strictly speaking, wouldn't you?
- I: I imagine so; I guess I belong with the Kibei group.
- H: In the sense that they usually classify a Kibei as one who returned to Japan and had at least two years of education, you probably would've been classified as a Kibei. When you went back to Japan did you find it very difficult? Do you recall? Do you have memories of it when you were a little girl?
- I: Oh, yes. It was very difficult.
- H: What were your main difficulties?
- I: They had domestic problems too, and today I can see it.
- H: Oh, your grandparents did?
- I: No, my father and mother. This is after I was in Japan. While we were in Japan my mother came back--when I must have been about five. And my father also came back later. He thought maybe they would try to make a go of it in Japan, but she left and so he got remarried and came back to the United States. That didn't work out either, probably because he rushed into it.
- H: All this time you were staying in Japan, right?
- I: Yes, we stayed with them but there were a lot of problems at first. We were taken by her mother, and then when this trouble came up my uncle, his younger brother, came for us and took us back, from what I can remember.
- H: So you were being shuffled back and forth.
- I: Yes, and so it was quite difficult. When we first went

over we had a difficult time trying to get the relatives to understand what we wanted. Soon we forgot English, but still we were kind of behind, because it was hard for us to keep up with Japanese.

H: You mentioned the fact that there were some marital difficulties with your parents. Was this quite common among people in the picture bride system?

I: Well, it seems like there were many hardships, but I think many of them stuck it through for the children.

H: A lot of times they didn't simply get divorced but separated, one going back to Japan and the other remaining here.

I: There have been cases like that.

H: I did some reading where, apparently, a lot of so-called bachelors at the Manzanar War Relocation Center, were really legally married. They had for years been separated, and their wives were still back in Japan.

I: In Japan, you know, you just leave and that's divorce.

H: So you don't have to worry about separating.

I: Evidently not. I was too young to know the details, but that's what I understand.

H: What finally prompted your family to return you to America?

I: Well, we came back in 1921. Evidently, around that time there was talk about an exclusion act?

H: Yes, that came out in 1924, but they were talking about it for a number of years before.

I: Yes, it came in 1924, but there must have been talk of it.

H: Right.

I: He wanted us here, so, he called us back in 1921.

H: Was your dad single then when he called you back?

I: Well, he was still with his second wife, but it soon didn't work out.

H: What was he doing then?

I: I don't know if you would call it a store. It was on

Main Street and they had the fruit and things in the front, and the cigarettes, and then they had a counter for simple breakfasts and simple lunches. There was a pool hall in the back. So I don't know what you would call that other than a store.

H: Sort of a general store?

I: Yes, and then once in awhile they would have small wrestling matches down in the basement.

H: Why don't you elaborate a little about the Japanese American community in Seattle? What was it like when you were a little girl there; what can you recall?

I: Well, as far as I can remember, it was my experience that many of the Japanese made their homes in hotels.

H: Were they bachelors?

I: No, the married families. Main and Jackson were streets booming with Japanese stores.

H: There was a large population there?

I: Yes.

H: Now it's faded out quite a bit.

I: Oh, I've been back and it's really sad. There are a few Japanese still there, I think, but nothing like in the olden days.

H: And what else can you tell me about Jackson Street and the little community surrounding it there, aside from the people living in the hotels? What else do you recall from your childhood days there? Did most of your childhood friends come from that community?

I: Well, I still correspond with one friend there. Her family had a Japanese public bath down in the basement, but it was a laundry, too.

H: Oh, it doubled as a laundry and a public bath?

I: And then across from it there was the Toyo Employment Agency and a tailor shop.

H: Would you call it a self-sufficient community?

I: Yes, there were dime stores and then the grammar school. It was called Main Street School; it's Baily Gatzert School today.

H: Were there exclusively Japanese students there?

I: Yes, at that time.

H: But Caucasian teachers?

I: Yes, so, I was put in with the first grade at eleven years old--my brother was thirteen. So they had a special class. I couldn't tell you what they did in that class, but he stayed in that special class for one year.

H: Were any other girls in the same position as yourself, having returned from Japan and then finding some difficulty with the language?

I: Yes, but not many. A few of us were a lot older than the regular six year olds; still, we soon caught up. But I was two years behind by the time I finally got through.

H: Did you go to a Japanese language school, too?

I: No, it was popular, but I didn't want to stay with the first graders, so, I was very anxious to learn English and I didn't go. But my father had a tutor who taught me English after school.

H: Oh, you had a special tutor?

I: Yes, a Japanese fellow.

H: Did you learn pretty rapidly after that point and catch up to your class?

I: No, I didn't. I think what helped me was that they decided I should be in a Caucasian home as a "school girl"--that was very popular then. I was only thirteen, but I went with no pay.

H: Where did you go?

I: First it was a mixed family--a Caucasian wife and Japanese man. They had three children.

H: In Seattle?

I: Yes, in Seattle, and I went there for experience, so no pay.

H: Oh, there was nothing at all? Did you get board?

I: Yes, room and board and they sent me to school. But those were the trying days. I changed many homes, but I kept it up until I got through college.

- H: I have talked to some former "school girls" and they tell me that they worked very vigorously.
- I: Yes.
- H: The families really put them through the paces. Was that your experience?
- I: Yes, because I had to do the dishes and see that the kids were sent off to school before I went to school myself. Many times I was late to school, and the teacher reprimanded me, but I was too ashamed to say why I was late. By the time you get to high school, these families promise a study period at home, but you never find it after dishes are done and the children are in bed. By that time it's eight o'clock and you're too tired out, and that's when you have to study. So we had to go to high school with no study periods.
- H: You were only a little girl yourself, and already you were taking on a mother's responsibility.
- I: Yes. I went to school during the summer, too. In those days they just started a junior high, so grammar school went up to the eighth grade. I finished in five years.
- H: Oh, you did!
- I: Yes, and high school I finished in three and one-half years by going during the summer.
- H: So you went pretty fast once you got in there.
- I: I tried to. But, that English--I was the last one when I started in high school.
- H: So the language problem gave you difficulty right on to high school.
- I: Yes, it's always been a problem.
- H: Tell me a little bit about the Japanese culture in Seattle. Did you have a very large Obon Festival each year?
- I: Well, I was in Caucasian homes most of the time, so I wasn't too involved with that.
- H: Was this because of the "school girl" job?
- I: Yes.
- H: Was your father still living down in the Jackson Street area?

I: He was ill and spent a lot of time in the hospital after that business in 1923. When I was thirteen, that's when our home was broken. We each went our own way.

H: So while in high school you were totally self-sufficient?

I: Well, I had to be. By then I received ten dollars a month, if you call that being self-sufficient.

H: You were on your own though; there was no more family there. Did your father just leave you at that point, or did he stay in that area? Did you see him once in awhile?

I: No, he was in the area, but he didn't support us.

H: Did your brother become a "school boy?"

I: Yes.

H: So you were both out working and going to school at the same time.

I: Well, he eventually went to a nursery and cared for the plants. That's what he does today.

H: What kind of prospects, aspirations, or dreams were you having as to what you were going to do with your future life when you were in high school? What possibilities were open to you?

I: There wasn't much open, but I was determined that I wasn't going to go through life struggling. I've always enjoyed children, so I thought I could get into the nursery school or kindergarten work. And that's the reason I went to the teachers' college.

H: Which teachers' college was this?

I: Seattle Pacific.

H: Oh, did you have a scholarship?

I: No, I went with what little money I got from working.

H: Oh, you still stayed on as a "school girl?"

I: Yes, I still stayed all through.

H: And you went to Seattle Pacific; that's a Methodist school, isn't it?

I: I think it's Free Methodist.

H: And you weren't affiliated with the Methodist then, were you?

I: No. I'm affiliated with the Methodist Church now, but then in Seattle, I was going to a Congregational church.

H: You were Christian, and not Buddhist?

I: Yes.

H: How did that come about?

I: Well, when we had this problem with father getting ill and so forth, there was a missionary family, the Murphy's. They helped us find a job and saw to it that we were taken care of and secure.

H: You felt somewhat indebted to them?

I: Yes, very much.

H: So that caused you to convert to Christianity?

I: Yes.

H: Were you a practicing Christian at that time?

I: Well, in the sense that I had a Sunday school class and most of my activity was around the church.

H: Then you were pretty well tied in with the church activity.

I: Yes.

H: Was this a four year program?

I: No, it wasn't. It was just changing to three years, so I was given a certificate at two and one-third years.

H: Was it a special certificate for teaching in nursery schools?

I: It was for normal school teaching; I was able to have a teaching credential.

H: I heard it was virtually impossible for Japanese Americans with teaching credentials to be employed during the pre-war years as a teacher. Were you then aware of that fact?

I: Yes, I was, but I thought I could work maybe in the church nursery school or something like that. Then I got the idea that maybe I could teach English in Japan.

H: Had you tried to get a job first in Seattle?

I: Yes, I did. I even tried in Hawaii.

H: This was when?

I: 1932. I finished college in June of 1932.

H: And there was nothing available to you?

I: They just said that they had their quota of teachers.

H: Did you blame this on the depression conditions, or the anti-Japanese sentiment that was in the area, or on both?

I: Of course, my father always said that high school was enough education for girls, so I went against his wishes; but I didn't feel badly, because I felt what I'd learned, nobody could take away. So that was the attitude I had.

H: But looking at it objectively, not whether you felt good or bad, do you think the fact that you were of Japanese ancestry had something to do with your not being hired?

I: Oh, yes. Yes.

H: There were girls and fellows that had graduated from the same school at the same time who were able to get placed in jobs, weren't there?

I: I couldn't tell you if they were or not, but I was the only Oriental in my class.

H: Do you recall going out to try to get a job in Seattle as a teacher?

I: Yes.

H: And how do you think the prejudice worked at that time?

I: Well, to you directly, they would just say they had enough teachers, but then I felt it was because I was Oriental.

H: Did you know of any Oriental teachers in the area?

I: Oh, no, no. There weren't any, except in these private nursery schools.

H: So, basically, you knew you were butting your head up against a stone wall.

I: That's right.

- H: So you then accepted what you felt was the inevitable, and decided to go back to Japan and try to get a job there. Did you have any contacts in Japan?
- I: No.
- H: Did you write in advance looking for a job?
- I: No, I just went at first to visit the relatives. And I found out that you're not accepted there either. You're like a foreigner there, I soon found out.
- H: So you were a person almost without a country there for awhile?
- I: I was much happier with a Caucasian group and, fortunately, they hired me.
- H: Who hired you?
- I: One of the missionary families with children.
- H: Oh, they just hired you as a private teacher?
- I: As a private teacher, yes. They set up a regular school in the attic.
- H: So then you were living with this missionary family; were they a Methodist family?
- I: Yes.
- H: And you were responsible for teaching how many children?
- I: Three, mainly, but they had five children. The fourth one was kindergarten age, and he didn't join the class, so, three mainly.
- H: Was this in Hiroshima, too?
- I: No, this was in Tokuyama shi, Yamaguchi-ken.
- H: How did you find out about the job?
- I: This minister had jurisdiction of that area, so he would come into Hiroshima, and I found out through another missionary family in Hiroshima. So we were just going to try it out. It turned out agreeable for both of us. So I stayed two years with them. But I had an apartment by myself, because they didn't want the children to feel that I was a maid or anything.

H: So you stayed there from 1932 to 1934?

I: No, I went to Japan in the fall of 1933. I was looking around trying to get a job between 1932 and the time I went to Japan.

H: Did you have another job in Japan before you came back to the United States?

I: No, that's all I did.

H: Just the one job?

I: Yes.

H: What prompted you to come back in 1936?

I: The missionary family was coming back on furlough, so I decided to come back too.

H: What was the political and social climate in Japan at the time that you were there?

I: At that time it was very suspicious.

H: Toward you, too?

I: Oh, yes.

H: How did this suspicion manifest itself?

I: Well, I wouldn't say to me especially. But the police were constantly on the lookout for the missionaries, and then they would question me. Every time the family would go somewhere, they'd ask me where they were going and how long they were going to stay. During the summer they'd go to Nojiri summer camp, and they took me with them. The police would be there, and they had a record of everybody up there and they mentioned me. I happened not to be there at the time. I was down at the foot of the hill, and it seemed they had been arguing over the fact that I'm an American, but they could see my name was Japanese; they couldn't understand that. When they saw me, they could see I was Japanese all the more, and it just upset them, the police.

H: Did you look up your mother while you were over there?

I: Yes, but I didn't see her.

H: You didn't see her?

- I: No, I have gone to Japan since and met her. But she had remarried and had a family so . . .
- H: I was wondering if part of the reason you went to Japan was more or less in search of your mother.
- I: Well, probably in the back of my mind. But . . .
- H: But in the front of your mind, you were going back to get employed. Was the salary that you were receiving as tutor enough for you to live on comfortably?
- I: I paid seven yen for rent and they paid me sixty yen. So, with the food and expenses, I managed on thirty yen.
- H: You took care of your own apartment, or did you have somebody help you clean it or what?
- I: It was just one little room with a little kitchen and bathroom.
- H: So when you decided to come back, was there any difficulty in your returning in 1936, or was it easy enough for you to get your passport and come back?
- I: Yes.
- H: Did you have anything waiting for you here? Did you write back in advance and tell somebody you were coming?
- I: Well, my brother and my father were here, and so they had a fellow waiting for me. In Japan, too, I had a Japanese style match mi-ai with several people interested in marriage, but I had no intention of making my life in Japan.
- H: Oh, some people proposed to you in Japan?
- I: Oh, yes.
- H: So you could've been married there at that time?
- I: I could have, but I knew that I couldn't take that rigid way of living.
- H: You didn't like the rigid social structure there, and this air of suspicion that you were talking about?
- I: The thing is, these Japanese people, they have a different outlook. They look at things differently, and give it a different meaning.
- H: In Japan?

- I: Yes, so I'm constantly misunderstood. For example, I didn't make any criticisms while in Japan, but you know how they have to get up early and start the fire to cook? I said, "Well, at home we just have to turn on the oven." They sure resented things like that.
- H: Like you were invidiously comparing their ways with American ones?
- I: It ended with them saying, "You better go back where you belong."
- H: And that was your opinion anyway. So when you came back, did you find a job right away?
- I: No.
- H: But your parents had a fellow waiting for you?
- I: Yes, so I went through that. I was twenty-seven by then. So I thought, "Well, I'd better try." I thought from being in Japan that I could get along with someone very strict. But it didn't work out.
- H: Did you get married right away?
- I: No, I came back in July, and I got married the next year in February.
- H: And this fellow that you married, was he an Issei, a Nisei or a Kibei?
- I: Well, he would be more Issei.
- H: He was born in Japan?
- I: Yes.
- H: And so he'd been in Seattle for quite awhile?
- I: Oh, no. He was here in Los Angeles.
- H: So when you came back from Japan, you didn't go back to Seattle, but directly to Southern California.
- I: Yes.
- H: Oh, I see. So you didn't even go by way of Seattle.
- I: No.
- H: Where did you live in Los Angeles?

I: Western and 35th, near Jefferson.

H: Were your father and your brother living in that area?

I: Yes.

H: So they weren't living in Little Tokyo then?

I: No.

H: And during the following February, you married an Issei, and this marriage didn't work out. Did some of the difficulty have to do with your being a Nisei and, perhaps, therefore, being a little bit more Americanized than your husband?

I: I would put the blame on that. I think I was too Americanized.

H: What sort of Japanese expectations did he have that you felt that you, as a Japanese American, couldn't fulfill with respect to your role as a woman or something? Did he expect you to be more subserviant than you were, or what?

I: Well, yes. I had to work, and the one day I had off I had to keep house and wash and clean, and I couldn't see that routine going on and on forever.

H: So how long did the marriage last?

I: Oh, about a year and one-half.

H: What were you doing for a job during this time?

I: Working in a market.

H: And was the market in the same area where you were living?

I: Yes.

H: How big was the Japanese community there?

I: It's the Normandie and Jefferson area; I couldn't tell you how big that was.

H: What did most of the Japanese do around there for a job?

I: Well, they worked as gardeners or in the market.

H: Was this on the west side of Los Angeles?

- I: I guess that's considered the west side. There were a lot of gardeners there, and there were two Japanese markets there.
- H: Was most of your life still being lived within the Japanese community at this time?
- I: Yes.
- H: You didn't have too much occasion then to go outside of the community, did you?
- I: No.
- H: So you were, actually, undergoing something of a change--because when you were up in Seattle, for awhile anyway, you were living pretty much in a Caucasian situation.
- I: That's right.
- H: How did you feel about being returned to an ethnic community, as such?
- I: Well, I didn't feel any particular difference with the Japanese that were here. We managed to get along pretty well. There was a church kitty-corner across from our home, a Japanese Methodist Church.
- H: Did you ever go into Little Tokyo in Los Angeles?
- I: Not too often.
- H: Why would you go in there, to shop?
- I: Shop for groceries or something, but then we didn't have much occasion to do that because there was a market in the Normandie Street area.
- H: What differences did you see and note between the Japanese community in Seattle and the one in Los Angeles?
- I: Well, it was pretty hard to get acquainted with the people here. What you had to do was to find some people that came from Seattle and get acquainted with them. But it was hard to be close friends with people who were already here.
- H: What kind of differences existed? Did the Japanese Americans in Seattle tend to come from one area in Japan more than, say, those in Los Angeles?
- I: The Japanese Americans from Seattle--those living in Los Angeles--probably had more in common. We talked about

Seattle life, and so forth.

- H: You didn't see any differences as far as to the occupations or the religions of the two communities? Was there a lot of migration from the Seattle Japanese community down to the Los Angeles one?
- I: Yes, I couldn't say how many, but there were quite a few.
- H: Did you look those people up and have a community within a community in Los Angeles? Were most of your close friends people that you had originally known in Seattle?
- I: Not necessarily, because I got acquainted with some people in church and they weren't all from Seattle.
- H: Did the church continue to be the center of your social life?
- I: Yes, when I was in that area.
- H: Did you stay working at the same job up until the war broke out?
- I: Well, when my marriage broke, I left that area. My brother was in Bell, California, so I moved to Bell and I worked in a market near there. I went to Gadds Market on Holmes Avenue and that was owned by Japanese.
- H: Were there other Japanese to speak of in the Bell area?
- I: No, not many.
- H: So there was no Japanese community there.
- I: There was one family next door.
- H: I see, was that about it?
- I: Yes.
- H: What were you doing in the market, working as a checker?
- I: No, at the fruit stand, just like the rest of the Japanese.
- H: How did that work; were you employed by an individual or did you have your own fruit stand?
- I: No, I just worked for the owner.
- H: Was the salary poor?
- I: Sixteen dollars a week. (laughter)

- H: Sixteen dollars a week. They were trying to unionize those at one time during the prewar period. Did they have any success?
- I: I didn't hear about it.
- H: You were never in the union.
- I: No, I didn't know if the employers paid toward social security.
- H: So you didn't have much economic security, did you?
- I: They probably did pay into social security. When I was in camp, it was enough to get my bare minimum.
- H: Did you try to get a job teaching when you were in Los Angeles?
- I: No, I didn't try; I knew it was useless.
- H: What were you doing at the time the evacuation to the Manzanar Center took place?
- I: I was working in the market.
- H: Were you single at that point?
- I: Yes.
- H: Do you recall your personal situation at the time that Pearl Harbor was bombed? What were you doing at that point?
- I: I was in the market; it was a Sunday, but I was still working. It sounded like a rumor, and when I got home and read more about it, it began to get frightening and I began to have a fear of going out.
- H: Had you been expecting a war between Japan and the United States for a couple of years?
- I: No, I had no idea.
- H: So this came as a surprise.
- I: I didn't see that things were going on. When I was in Japan, back in 1936, there was the Manchurian problem then, so I never realized that anything was happening with America.
- H: So it came as a shock to you?

I: Oh, it sure did.

H: Did you have any visitations from government authorities after that or not?

I: No.

H: They didn't contact you at all?

I: No.

H: And so what did you do from the time of Pearl Harbor to the time of the evacuation?

I: Well, I continued working at the market.

H: Did your boss have any problems of getting picked up or anything?

I: Evidently not; he stayed open until they limited the area, and then I just stopped working.

H: Did Pearl Harbor hurt your business? Did your boss have to lay anybody off?

I: Well, I was the only one working for him.

H: Did you notice the business going down? Weren't you serving a lot of Caucasians then?

I: Yes.

H: Did it affect your business or not?

I: Well, I didn't notice that much difference.

H: Were any abusive remarks directed at you?

I: No, there was no abuse or anything. We were afraid, you know, even to sit next to anybody in the bus for fear something would be said, but I personally had no unpleasant experiences. Then, talk of relocation started, so we just waited for that.

H: When were you relocated to the Manzanar War Relocation Center?

I: On March 24.

H: Oh, you went early, didn't you, because I think the first group of volunteers went on March 21st? You were there three or four days after it opened.

- I: No, it was probably in April.
- H: So when you got there the place wasn't totally built?
- I: No, it wasn't.
- H: They didn't have all thirty-six blocks constructed yet?
- I: No, even the barracks where we were sent to still had the open ditches around it.
- H: How did you get relocated; where did they pick you up; and how did you travel?
- I: We had moved to San Fernando so they had buses pick us up, but I can't remember where because I'm not too familiar with San Fernando. My brother's wife is from there and that's why we moved.
- H: Oh, so you lived with them?
- I: We went to live with them so we could move as a family group.
- H: Did you go by bus to Manzanar?
- I: Yes.
- H: Do you recall what your feelings were at the time that you arrived at Manzanar?
- I: It was a real bad windy day. Oh, it felt very saddening too, going there with just enough for yourself--one suitcase. They didn't allow us to take a lot of extra things but they didn't check our baggage. They issued us mattresses filled with straw to use to sleep on the cots, and for meals, we lined up for pork and beans; it was sure discouraging. But it didn't matter to us that much.
- H: Who do you mean by us, you and your family or the Japanese Americans as a whole?
- I: No, not as a whole. Adults didn't mind it, but there were no provisions for families with children and babies. So, they had to fulfill their needs as they came and it took time. Eventually, they did provide dieticians for the babies and so forth. Still they had no plans for schools either.
- H: How do you feel about the evacuation? Being an American citizen, do you feel a loss of respect for the American democratic principles?

I: No, I don't take it that way.

H: Did you at the time?

I: No, to me it was more protection for us. I think we would have had more hardships being out of camp.

H: Do you think the government did it for your own good, or do you think it just happened that way?

I: I couldn't say, but I feel that it was for protection.

H: You think it served that purpose, or do you think that was the intent of the government? Do you think the government had it in their mind to protect the Japanese American people when they put you in camps?

I: Well, no, but maybe they were trying to avoid too much antagonism during the war.

H: Do you think that the authorities involved handled the evacuation procedure very well?

I: I think they did the best they could.

H: So you don't feel they could have protected property a little more carefully than they did?

I: Well, if people trusted the government, they would have been much better off. It's the people that felt distrust and left their property with private people and in private areas--they set up churches to store belongings and so forth--who had property damaged.

H: So you think that those people who used the government's storage areas came out better than those who resorted to private or voluntary group facilities?

I: Yes.

H: When you got to Manzanar, what was the living situation for you? Who lived with you in your apartment and what barrack were you in?

I: I was in Block 8, Barrack 2, in Section 2. When we first went, as I told you, it wasn't set up for everybody yet, so we had to temporarily go in as a family group, as we came. And as I said, we went in with my sister-in-law's family and her brother and sister; she was the only one married at the time. So that made ten of us. The barrack was divided equally into four apartments.

H: And this was in Block 8, right?

I: Yes, Block 8, I think. It was just enough to put ten cots--five one way, and five the other, with no partition or anything.

H: You really only had sleeping room, and that was about it.

I: We managed that way, and I can't tell you how long we did that. But as soon as they were able to, my sister-in-law's family found another apartment and so that relieved us.

H: Then you got reduced to how many people?

I: Six.

H: And that was several months after you arrived?

I: Well, my brother left in nine months, so that's the way we were for nine months.

H: He was there at least from April, to maybe the next January?

I: Yes, when he volunteered for the service, he went to Fort Snelling. So he took his wife and their little three year old boy, so that just left my father and I then.

H: During the time that you were at Manzanar, what were some of your vivid recollections of that earliest period? You've outlined the crowded conditions in the barracks and I think like most people, you no doubt remember very vividly the dust storms that you had. Do you remember a lot of complications or problems that you had with food and other things? What were your major grumbles at that time; what do you recall that you chiefly objected to?

I: Well, soon after we got our block established, we had a block leader. We were supposed to go to him for all our needs and problems.

H: Who was your block leader? Do you recall his name?

I: Mr. Ozaki was one, and Mr. Sakuma was another--I don't know which one came first. I think Mr. Sakuma was first, and then Mr. Ozaki. One of the complaints, of course, was the food. As Orientals, we requested rice and it was granted. So as far as our block was concerned, I don't think there were many complaints with the food situation. Naturally, they call it "slop suey." And then another thing, dinner was at five o'clock. That was rather early, so people got hungry afterwards and many families began to cook around ten o'clock and eat again on their own.

- H: They weren't supposed to be able to have hot plates in the barracks, but they did anyway.
- I: How did they do that?
- H: Well, some people smuggled them in; that was common. Do you recall if you had a hot plate in your barrack?
- I: No, I went to somebody else's barrack. I don't believe anyone smuggled anything in since our baggage was not checked. Also, people visiting brought things they asked for.
- H: Oh, you would just go to a different mess hall?
- I: No, to some friend's barrack. But it wasn't every night because I was too busy.
- H: What were you doing that kept you so busy?
- I: At first I worked in the nursery school. The recreation department opened a nursery school.
- H: Now this was before the schools opened, right?
- I: Yes.
- H: They didn't open the schools until September. This nursery school was operated by the recreation department?
- I: Yes, during the summer, but it continued on.
- H: Was that your first job at Manzanar?
- I: Yes.
- H: Were you paid \$19 a month, the top wage on the salary scale?
- I: That's right.
- H: What were your responsibilities? How many children did you have in your nursery? Was it crowded, and did you have a lot of teachers working in there with you?
- I: It didn't seem that crowded, but we had nothing. People were moving in and we'd see a lot of carton boxes. We opened them, and the students sat on them. Then we stayed after school and collected old lumber and made benches, so we just started with nothing.
- H: Were most of the people working in the nursery internees, or were there also Caucasian personnel?

I: All Caucasian personnel were at the head, but they employed anybody interested. When they established the school, there were Caucasians, but I would say in each grade there were three classrooms. One had a Caucasian teacher, and the other two as a rule were taught by internees.

H: Did you stay at that job for quite a few years while you were at Manzanar?

I: Yes, I stayed right through.

H: Oh, the whole time in the same job?

I: Yes.

H: Oh, that kept you busy then? So you had mostly little Sansei there in Manzanar?

I: They kept us after school to make things to use in our classrooms. They had established a carpenter's shop, eventually, but they were more urgently needed in other areas so it got to us quite late. I'd say the last year is when we had a situation that looked halfway like a classroom.

H: So, in the meantime it was makeshift at best?

I: Yes, we did the best we could.

H: I've heard, that at least during the early period at Manzanar, there seemed to be quite a bit of discrimination, from both the administration and the Nisei, against Kibei-- especially, the young, male Kibei who had returned somewhat recently, about the time of your second return from Japan. They were thought to be pro-Japan in their sentiments, and were regarded as troublemakers. They also weren't allowed certain privileges. For instance, they weren't allowed to relocate or to go out and get paid positions for quite awhile. There was, in short, apparently a lot of Kibei resentment in camp; do you recall that situation?

I: At first it was just rumors, and it didn't amount to too much, but it began to get pretty bad. Now, I remember one time somebody was taken in to . . . well, I guess, they call it jail.

H: Are you going to get into the Manzanar Riot?

I: But they didn't publicize the matter; I have to take it on the basis of my hearing rumors. It seems he was in the mess hall and was taking some of the food home for his own use, or something, so, he was put in jail. But many

resented that, and they rushed to personnel to get him out. So, by evening they threw tear gas, but I didn't go; our room was near the personnel area so I could see that creamy smoke coming. I shut myself in my room and didn't go out at all. I slept with my clothes on that night. Then another time, my brother volunteered for the service and he had a furlough. He came back and the block people decided to have a little party for him. They had refreshments and these Kibei came and upset the whole party.

H: Can you recall what year that would've been?

I: He came back around 1944. Soon after that, during the loyalty oath, they had the choice, so, they already had people who wanted to go back to Japan. Soon after that they concentrated them and sent them to the Tule Lake camp.

H: I want to back up a little bit and discuss what you were mentioning earlier, the so-called Manzanar Riot of December 6, 1942, when two internees were shot and killed and ten others were wounded by gunfire from the military police. Apparently, the riot was originally set in motion on December 5, 1942 when one of the prominent Nisei leaders in the camp, a man by the name of Fred Tayama, had returned from a conference in Salt Lake City, Utah. Many of the internees felt that Tayama, at the time of evacuation, had turned over the names of Issei leaders to the FBI [Federal Bureau of Investigation] for a fee of \$25 or \$50, or whatever. During the time Tayama was in camp, he was also branded an inu by most of the people for supposedly leaking information to the FBI; for being given special privileges; for both his brother and he taking certain kinds of privileges through the mess hall; and one or another thing. There were a number of other JACL [Japanese American Citizens League] leaders, among them Togo Tanaka, Joe Grant Masaoka, and Hiro Neeno and a few others who were prominently branded as dogs, or inu, by the people. So when Fred Tayama got beaten up on the night of December 5, 1942 the authorities in the camp arrested Harry Ueno, who was the head of the Kitchen Workers Union. Ueno had come to the attention of the administrators--the Assistant Project Director, Ned Campbell and Chief Steward Joe Winchester--of stealing certain rationed goods, such as sugar and meat, and selling them on the black market. Ueno got arrested, and Campbell was the one who personally picked him up and brought him to jail in Independence, making Ueno the first internee to be jailed outside of the Manzanar camp. Naturally, people felt Ueno was just being arrested so he would be shut up and unable to continue his

accusations, and, therefore, they were very irate. They formed a committee that demanded that the new project director, Ralph Merritt, return Ueno immediately to the camp, which Merritt did. He said he'd return him if the internees would agree to certain conditions: one of them being a prohibition against staging any more mass meetings. They brought Ueno back to the camp, and they put him in the Manzanar jail. Then the committee of internees went and told the rest of the people at a mass meeting that Ueno had been returned to the camp as promised. But people weren't satisfied with this; they wanted Ueno released from the jail. Therefore, they went in a mass body to the jail on the night of December 6, 1942 and there they sang the Japanese national anthem and they also made some menacing gestures at the soldiers who were called in to protect the jail. It ended up with gunfire coming from the National Guard and two of the internees being killed. Now, on that same night, part of the crowd had broken off and it had gone to the hospital where Fred Tayama was convalescing. They were bent upon rooting Tayama out, and killing him. But, apparently, he was hidden under a bed and they couldn't find him. Then they went after Togo Tanaka, and a couple of the other JACL leaders like Tokie Slocum. But the whole night ended with this shedding of blood of the internees. Now, I want to ask you, if you as one of the internees, happened to be aware of the resentment that was building up in the minds of people in the camp towards these so-called inu? Did you hear about this?

- I: Oh, not particularly of the Caucasian group, but resentment and, as you say, they were hidden here and there. There were rumors that they were hidden and so forth, but I was too busy with my work so . . .
- H: You heard rumors that they were being beat up?
- I: Yes, and so forth, but eventually they were taken out--the loyal group--and established in a relocation center elsewhere. I never did find out, but I understand that it was in Death Valley.
- H: Yes, they took them to a camp in Death Valley and then from there they went off to Chicago and other places, and resettled.
- I: But they stayed there quite awhile and helped the rangers there.
- H: Yes, they worked for the Forest Service. You called them loyal; do you think it was a question of just loyal versus disloyal between these different groups?

- I: No, it's citizen against non-citizen, I guess.
- H: Nisei against Issei?
- I: Well, because we don't know anything more than America. I know a little about Japan, but these Nisei, many of them have never been to Japan, so, they don't know anything but just this country.
- H: Do you think that the JACL leaders were representative of the average Nisei though, or do you think they were somewhat different?
- I: To me they were representative.
- H: They weren't any more pro-American than say, the average Nisei, in your opinion? Yet, they were singled out for the beatings; how do you suppose this came about? Why weren't say, you, beaten up rather than them?
- I: We were the silent, loyal group. We didn't speak out. Now those people spoke up, and I believe that's why; we just took it quietly. They started to send them out to work, and started getting them out . . . well, all along, if you had a place to go and a job, you were allowed to leave.
- H: Do you think there was some resentment during the early months of the camp before this riot occurred, due to the fact that what the government did essentially, when they set up these relocation centers, was to deal, by and large, with the young, Nisei leaders instead of the dealing with the older, established leaders of the community, the Issei? Do you think there was a lot of resentment on the part of the Issei, that all of a sudden these young Nisei, these JACLers, were now put in positions of predominance within the camp, and that the Issei were put in the back seat?
- I: Older Issei did not have much voice, because after all, they're Japanese citizens; they weren't allowed citizenship.
- H: But they had most of the voice within their communities before the war. They ran the Little Tokyos, didn't they?
- I: As far as activities go.
- H: Right.
- I: But when it comes to American ways and knowing the American rules and regulations, they had to go to these older Nisei.

- H: Yes, for the leadership. But you can see that there might have been some resentment on the part of the Issei, can't you?
- I: Well, I don't think the Issei resented it.
- H: Why were they so anxious, then, to support the beatings of these Nisei?
- I: The Issei?
- H: Yes.
- I: Well, I thought they were the Kibei, weren't they?
- H: Well, I don't know. It's kind of unclear as to . . .
- I: It seems to me it was more of a clash between them and the Kibei.
- H: Why do you think the Kibei resented the Nisei? After all, most of the Kibei came here because they were escaping the draft in Japan. Do you think they were mistreated by Nisei, or looked down on by Nisei because they were too "Japanesey?"
- I: No, I don't think so. But they began to--from being raised in Japan--stand up for Japanese rules and regulations. So the first chance they had to leave, they were willing to go back to Japan.
- H: So you would say then, that the riot situation was basically a clash between pro-American, older Nisei and pro-Japan Kibei, and that by and large it was a question of pro-American versus pro-Japan as represented by these two groups?
- I: Yes, it seemed that way.
- H: Following the riot, not only did sixty of the pro-American Nisei group go out to Death Valley to this abandoned CCC [Civilian Conservation Corps] camp, but also the so-called leaders of the pro-Japan group were sent to special camps.
- I: Tule Lake?
- H: No, not first to Tule Lake. They were sent to a camp in Moab, Utah, then they were transferred to New Mexico, and many of them went, eventually--when they set up Tule Lake as a segregation center--to Tule Lake. At the time of the riot, Tule Lake wasn't set up as a segregation center yet; it was just a relocation center.

I: That came later, yes.

H: After they got these two groups out--got rid of the factionalism--did you find that the camp settled down more into a harmonious living situation?

I: As far as working with the Caucasian group in the schools, there wasn't any clash. We didn't have any problems with them. Inwardly, I had hardship because I was trying to do exactly what the Caucasian teachers did with their government salary. If they gave a party and provided ice cream for the kids, well, I felt I couldn't deny my kids. So I had to do it with my \$19 a month.

H: Did you resent that?

I: Well, I didn't speak out about it, no.

H: But you privately resented it because you had the salary differential.

I: Yes. It was hard to keep up.

H: You were expected to do the same thing?

I: Yes, but they did provide extra for us.

H: So whatever extras were bought, came out of this small \$19 a month salary, right?

I: Yes.

H: How much more were the Caucasian teaching personnel getting than you?

I: I have no idea, but it was governmental salary just as if you went overseas.

H: In the civil service, right?

I: Yes. But they were mostly real nice people.

H: The people that you worked with?

I: These Caucasians, too.

H: Who was your immediate supervisor?

I: Miss Fairmen was supervisor for the primary. She worked real hard, too, but Mary Shauland was the supervisor of the nursery school.

H: So you got along quite well with the people in charge?

- I: They were all real understanding people as far as I could see.
- H: Do you remember the changes going on within the camp as the Nisei increasingly started to leave? It was pretty much a camp at the end which was composed largely of older people and younger people--the older Issei plus school children. Was the camp much different than it had been in the earlier stages, when you had more of the middle aged Issei and the Nisei of eighteen, nineteen, twenty, up to thirty years old?
- I: Well, when they were all there, they were busy with their own. It was the people that resented the situation and didn't work. They had lots of time on their hands to cause trouble. Most of the people, in general, were busy and I find it real interesting because there were various things going on. There were talented people, and we were able to learn sewing and tailoring. As relocated people settled, they informed those back at the camp of the situation and helped others to leave. Many left for Seabrook, New Jersey.
- H: Did you take any adult education courses?
- I: Yes, I took these classes whenever I had time. We were allowed even extension courses.
- H: Would you call it a more interesting time in your life than, say, the four or six years before you went into camp? As I remember, you were here in Southern California from 1936 to 1942 working in the vegetable market.
- I: Yes, it gave me more challenge because it was something I wanted to do. So maybe that's the reason that I feel it was a more interesting period of time.
- H: Some people, in books written about the evacuation, say that there was something of a women's liberation for the Japanese women in the camps. In some cases, the Issei husbands were gone and sometimes they were off on work furloughs, or whatever, and this meant that the women, now for the first time, were not as enslaved in the home. They did some of the things that you're talking about. Did you see this as a general thing over and beyond your own personal experience? Did you talk to any women about it at all? Do you remember any women saying that they liked being able to go out and go to school, or not having to be tied down all the time to the house and doing all these jobs like working in a hotel or at a fruit cart or whatever?

- I: Not in words, but they seemed to be happy in getting into various work and socializing.
- H: Do you think the women were happier than the men in camp?
- I: Well, men did the same. They collected this dry bark and material and made beautiful things out of them. There was also interest in the music field.
- H: Why did you stay in camp as long as you did? Why didn't you resettle?
- I: Well, for one thing, my father said it was still dangerous to go out. But I suppose if I wasn't happy, I would have gone anyway. Teaching was giving me a lot of experience, so I just stayed.
- H: Were you sad when it came to an end?
- I: No, because I had another new challenge, that of going into the teaching field and the feeling that I could be on my own again.
- H: Who set you up in that?
- I: The War Relocation Authority.
- H: Oh, they did; they provided a job for you?
- I: Well, before they allowed us to go out, the WRA found jobs for us. They found some prospects and allowed you to go out. So I did go out on August 6, 1945. And I didn't even know about V-J Day, but I was in Santa Barbara interviewing and they accepted me. It was a school for mentally retarded children, and, before I left, it seemed that they changed their mind. There was celebrating that I saw while I was waiting for the bus. I didn't realize what was going on until I went on to my other interview in San Francisco.
- H: So the Santa Barbara job fell through, then?
- I: Yes. I got through, but it was kind of frightening. I stayed in and I had my interview, but I already was accepted. So it was easy, but I thought I'd at least see what it was like.
- H: In San Francisco?
- I: Yes, but it was sure frightening. I spent the night in my YWCA room and I sure left as fast as I could. I saw broken windows in the morning.

H: It was frightening?

I: Yes.

H: Not because you were Japanese, but just because of what was going on--the celebrating?

I: Yes, I didn't know what it was all about.

H: Another thing that I've encountered in my reading on the subject is that during the last year or so in Manzanar, there were persistent rumors that the government was going to close down the camps.

I: Yes.

H: A lot of Issei, especially--not so much the younger Nisei--were quite against the closing of the camp because they had become accustomed to a new community and they felt that having to leave represented a second relocation. Did you find that to be the case?

I: I felt that the people, the ones who were left, were getting that attitude.

H: Was there any kind of pressure put on people at the end? You were there to the very end, weren't you?

I: Well, not exactly the very end. I knew they were going to close, so during the summer I helped to pack for the nursery school department. All their materials were to be shipped to Tule Lake. Then on August 6, I left and I came back, because the job offer was turned down. So, I said that the next job that came--wherever it was--I was going. I got an offer in New York, but one thing hindering me was that my father didn't want me to go that far. But I decided the next job that came I was going to go no matter where it was. It took some corresponding, and when I got the job I left.

H: So you went all the way back to New York? What was your job back there?

I: It was at a boarding school for the mentally retarded, but it was very nice.

H: Did it pay well?

I: Room and board plus \$125 a month. That was pretty good, I thought.

H: Yes.

- I: At first I didn't mind the work, but the children, you had to eat with them--and Mongoloids too. That was the first experience I had. So I had a difficult time for a month in getting adjusted. There was one Japanese girl that came. They tried to give her different things, and she finally left, so, I don't know what happened to her. But the WRA representative came to check to see if you were happy there, or if you were treated right and so forth.
- H: The WRA was still functioning, then, during the first few months while you were teaching. How long did you stay?
- I: I stayed with them two years. They wanted me to stay permanently. I enjoyed it but it's kind of monotonous--the same routine everyday. So I decided to go to college because I hadn't met my four year requirement for teaching. I decided to go to college while I was in New York. I was interested in early childhood education and it seems that in New York each college specializes. I went to one that specialized in early childhood education in New Paltz, New York. I attended New Paltz State Teachers College. Have you heard of Dr. James Hymes?
- H: No, I haven't.
- I: He was a professor there, and I stayed in his home because I couldn't study in the dormitory. I stayed in the Hymes' home and cooked for them; they were expecting a baby. I didn't get paid. I received board and room and that helped me a lot. So, I went through school staying there.
- H: When did you finally get back to California?
- I: I enjoyed being in New York. They're real friendly people and I didn't feel the prejudice like I would out here, but I decided to be near my relatives.
- H: You missed Southern California weather, too, didn't you?
- I: Yes. In the meantime, while I was there, I contacted the Board of Education in California and tried to meet their requirements, and I came back.
- H: Did you get a job?
- I: I didn't get it right away.
- H: What did you do?
- I: I had to go through taking the test and physical; it took six months.

H: But didn't you get a job?

I: Yes.

H: In what district?

I: They sent me to San Pedro.

H: Where in San Pedro?

I: Do you know where the end of the Harbor Freeway is?

H: Yes.

I: It used to be a hill. That's where I taught, in the housing project.

H: Were there Japanese back there in San Pedro after the war?

I: No, evidently I was one of the early ones to teach. So a newspaper contacted me and they wanted to write about me to avoid the possibility of community antagonism.

H: They wrote an article about you in the newspaper?

I: Yes, they called the school and they interviewed me; nothing happened.

H: How long did you teach in San Pedro?

I: For two and one-half years, and I would've stayed longer but dampness affected my allergy.

H: Where did you transfer to then?

I: I looked for a job in the central Los Angeles area. And they sent me west, east and everywhere at first.

H: Are you still teaching?

I: No, I'm retired. So, I finally got a job at the Sixty-sixth Street School. At first, I didn't know it, but before I left San Pedro I received my permanent status. And still, when I came here, it seemed that they placed me as a substitute, because I was replacing another teacher. So after one semester, they said if I still wanted to continue teaching kindergarten, I'd have to go to another school, or take another grade.

H: They circulated you all around?

- I: I had to be satisfied and take what they gave me, so I took the first grade. So I was changed around and I went up to second grade, and took several years before I had a chance back in the kindergarten and finally enjoyed my work. I was there twenty-one and one-half years.
- H: Where exactly is the Sixty-sixth Street School located?
- I: At Sixty-sixth and San Pedro Streets, between Avalon and San Pedro.
- H: But that's in the Los Angeles school system, isn't it?
- I: Yes.
- H: So you were there for twenty-one and one-half years. Part of it was as a permanent substitute, being shifted around from one grade to the next.
- I: My permanent status credential was not removed; I filled a temporary vacancy for awhile.
- H: When did you retire?
- I: Two years ago. I became sixty-two, so I thought I better quit.
- H: So you lived here, in this general area, for quite awhile, then?
- I: I was in Los Angeles, but I moved in 1966.
- H: Getting back to the Manzanar situation for a second, I understand your situation, being relocated and resettling in New York and getting a job there, but what about your father? What were his prospects when he came out of camp?
- I: He had no prospects; he was pretty old, too. He just left with the last group and stayed in a hostel.
- H: Did he ever get a job again?
- I: No. He became ill again, and ended up in Harbor General Hospital.
- H: When did he die?
- I: In June of 1961.
- H: But he lived sixteen or so years after the war without any employment. How did he live; did you or your brothers support him?

I: No, I guess he went on welfare.

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H: Now, if the war hadn't come along--don't you think it would have made a great difference to your father's career if he hadn't have been evacuated? What was he doing at the time of evacuation?

I: Well, he was helping my brother with the nursery. He probably would have gone on with that, the nursery business.

H: So you can see, maybe, where the evacuation had a harsher effect upon your father than upon yourself. For him, it meant the end of a career, and for you, in a way, it meant something of a beginning.

I'd like to thank you very much, Miss Ishida, on behalf of the Japanese American Oral History Project at California State University, Fullerton. Both your time and your cooperation are greatly appreciated.

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