

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with VICTOR “FERRELL” KAMBE

Interviewed

By

Matthew J. Hoffman

On

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NARRATOR: VICTOR "FERRELL" KAMBE

INTERVIEWER: Matthew J. Hoffman

DATE: November 23, 1992

LOCATION: Torrance, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

MH: This is an oral interview with Victor Kambe by Matthew J. Hoffman for the Japanese American Project for the Oral History Program at California State University, Fullerton. The interview is being held at the Marriott Hotel in Torrance, California, on November 23, 1992, Monday, at approximately 12:30 p.m. in the dining room out by the pool. Can you tell me about your family and your early childhood?

VK: Well, I was the third child in our family. I had two older brothers, George and Charles and a younger sister named Esther. We were all born in Seattle, Washington. My older brother was born in 1913, the next one in 1915, I was born in 1919, and my sister was in 1921. My father had come to this country approximately 1910 and couple years later went back to Japan and met my mother, and they were married and returned to this country about 1912. All that time he decided to live in Seattle, Washington. He went into the produce business, I suppose, about 1915, after several years of odd jobs and things like that, and he continued in that business until about 1935, I think. He was successful at it. He made a special effort to try to Americanize us, so we resided not where all the other Japanese lived in Seattle, but he made a point of moving way out in the outskirts of town where it was all Caucasian. My mother would go to English class. My dad struggled—they both tried very hard to be able to read and write English. So, we lived in the north part of town, up in the University of Washington. The bulk of the Japanese in Seattle are, I suppose, later on about ten thousand Japanese, most of them lived in the south part of town. So, that was kind of my early— [recording paused] So, most of the children, the Japanese in Seattle, would attend Japanese language school on Saturday to learn how to read and write, but we never did go to it. At that time, we thought it was great, we didn't have to have to bother to do it because my friends used to complain about it. But, later on in life, I found out it would have been better if I had gone and learned how to write and read because today I can't read even the simplest Japanese.

MH: But, that's a typical kid though. You enjoyed having Saturdays free.

VK: Right. So, our school—we had very few Japanese. I think in high school of about 2,800 students, six were Japanese students. You want me to go into the school?

MH: Yeah, if you would like to talk about your high school years a little, some of the friends you had, some of the activities you did.

VK: I guess, I just covered the early childhood. Of course, my friends were all Caucasian, but to me, I really didn't know much difference, kids being kids. They don't—I guess they have no prejudice. I used to hang around the University of Washington when I was maybe eight, nine years old. I would go over there, and watch them practice football, track, or baseball, basketball. Wander around the golf course over there, picking up golf balls, making five or ten cents every time I retrieved a stray golf ball. I guess it's just the regular, normal growing up of kids at that age. At that time, we could make our own toys. We didn't have the money to go out—like the kids today.

MH: So, what was your neighborhood like? Do you remember the name of the street you lived on?

VK: Yes, well, I was born on 18th Avenue in Seattle. Then we moved down to a place on 15th Avenue, right across from the university. At that time, my dad taken charge of trying to organize a place for the college students to live, particularly, Japanese students, those that lived there in the state. I don't think they had too many that came from Japan. But, he organized this. They bought a big house, and we lived in that house. My dad and I suppose my mother were like the father and mother of the house. And we were just kids. We had, I guess, a couple of rooms in the first floor. And my dad was doing his regular business at the time. That must have been when I was maybe—from about 1924 to maybe about 1926. That had was just recently, within the last ten years, finally torn down. Lots of the people that used to go to that place—it was like a fraternity house—for many years people used to say, oh, your name is Kambe, pronounced Kambe, K-a-m-b-e. At school we used to say pronounced the name *Kambe*; everybody called us *Kambe*. But it not really the right pronunciation. But people say, Oh, you're a Kambe. I stayed. I remember you when you were a little kid, things like that.

My brother, George, worked with my dad in the produce business, and he continued on in that until he got evacuated and moved back east. My next brother, Charles, became a doctor; he studied medicine at the University of Washington. He proceeded to get his degree, graduated from college without knowing any means of how he would ever get through medical school. He didn't have the funds to do it, so he worked at the school teaching after he graduated for a year and got a scholarship to the University of Pennsylvania. It must have been about 1936 or '37. He graduated college there, medical school, and continued to live there. Got married and had three children; they lived in Philadelphia. He passed away about seven years ago.

And my younger sister, Esther, was kind of brought along by my mother. She was her only daughter, so my mother did a lot of things to raise her and learn all the things about cooking and sewing and housekeeping. That's what she became was

kind of a career wife because her husband was in the Army and become a career man. He retired from there. They presently live in San Jose. They have four boys. My brother, George, lives here in Los Angeles. He lost his wife about eight years ago, and he has three children—four children. One girl's passed away. Well, that kind of covers my family.

You mentioned high school. My brother, Charles, he was a very smart student and kind of set a good example for me. When I was going to high school, I tried my darndest to follow in their footsteps. I did graduate with honors in high school. I was a senior class representative in the student council and senior class treasurer, so I had two offices, which was very unusual. Usually, the person would get one and that would be it. I did get two. I might say that, within the class itself, I was pretty popular. I don't know whether it was because I was Japanese and one of the few that was there. It might have been a little different. I was well liked in high school. I always considered myself to be the same, except for dating. I never got enough nerve to ask for dates from any of the girls from my school. I knew I was a little bit different at that time. Part of that stems from the facts that my brother, Charlie, had entered college, and his freshman year—they call it rushing. They used to seek out students to invite to the fraternity. I guess they saw the name Charles Kambe, and they extended the invitation to him to come to the fraternity. So, he got all dressed up, and he went to the fraternity that night. He was met at the door by the houseman I think or somebody. He wanted to know what he wanted. He said, "Well, I'm supposed to be here by invitation." And they made a remark that they must have made a mistake. So, he left, and that left quite an impression at that time. It made us realize that we were a little bit different and maybe not accepted. Other than that, everything else seemed normal. We considered ourselves 100 percent American. We didn't know how to read or write Japanese. We did all of the activities our friends would do; sports, camping, hanging around the university, and getting into mischief in that way. That's more less the way it was. I went to college, kind of worked my way through college. Graduated in June of 1941. In 1939, I passed the license with the insurance in the state of Washington, and I was selling life insurance part-time. And then the war. That brings us all the way up to 1941.

[00:13:38]

MH: I was going to ask you, prior to that—let's go back a little. About the community, since like you said, you felt that you were, through your brother's experience, that you had a feeling that you were a little bit different. You're having reservations about going out with Caucasian girls. What was the mood of the community, per se? I mean, you didn't realize there was any kind of prejudice up until that time or were there any inklings?

VK: No, I don't remember any instance of prejudice at that time. I really never did notice. I really never thought that way. I was aware that I looked Asian, looked difference, but I really never was faced with any instance of prejudice. During the summertime, from the time I was quite young, every summer we'd go to a camp, where it was all-Japanese, and I would meet a lot of friends there. That was the summertime, and we

- used to have a lot of fun. The family would come out on Sundays, and they'd bring the picnic lunch. I was a big gathering. And a lot of those friends continue to be close friends today, probably closer than many I had gone to school with, the Caucasian students I went to school with. I didn't experience—I didn't feel different.
- MH: Okay, up until that time, you might have known you were different but didn't have prejudice directed toward you. You went through high school, you went on to college and graduated. That takes you up to 1941.
- VK: Right.
- MH: Now you're a year before Pearl Harbor. I think that was '42.
- VK: Forty-one, December 1941.
- MH: Forty-one, December 7, '41. Do you remember what you were doing?
- VK: Yeah, we were at a bowling tournament in Takoma, Washington. When I think back, I'm wondering—I guess the bowling tournament must have started at nine o'clock in the morning. That would have been, I suppose, six o'clock, in Pearl Harbor. I'm not sure. All I remember was I was there. I don't think the tournament actually started. Maybe we had just gone there to get ready. Then word came out that Japan had bombed Pearl Harbor. I think the tournament was cancelled—no, it wasn't. It couldn't have been because I went home. It was about five o'clock in the evening, four or five o'clock in the evening, and, at that time, we were quite upset that Japan would bomb Pearl Harbor. Our reaction was like everybody else, it's just an awful thing to happen. When I got home, my mother—everything, the blinds in the house were all down, and the house was dark. And, when I went in the house, my mother was crying. I said to her, "What happened?" She said, "Well, the FBI came by and had taken my dad downtown for detention." That was true in a lot of the families—I don't know how many families. There must have been one hundred families where the father that were active in the community, in the Japanese community—which he was. You know, they had their social clubs. They had what they call their *Ken*. *Ken* is like a state. My dad was born and raised in Hiroshima, so the people that were born and raised in Hiroshima, when they came to Seattle, they had kind of a club. And if they came from another *Ken*, then they'd get together. So, they must have been, maybe, six or eight or ten of these clubs in Seattle. I think my dad was president of that organization. Anyway, he was picked up by the FBI and taken downtown. It upset my mother a lot. So, that was the first big impact on our family, and with that went our livelihood because he was the one that was working. Well, I had graduated college, but now I was starting off on the insurance career.
- MH: That must have been quite a shock coming home from a bowling tournament and finding your father gone.

VK: Right. Well, I remember the next—I think that night I went downtown to try to find out what I could. There wasn't much that I could find out that night. They told me that I'd be able to talk to him the next day. The next morning, my mother, I took her in her car, we went downtown and we discovered that during the night, they moved him. They sent him away someplace. Later on, we found out that he'd been sent to Montana to some detention camp there.

[00:20:10]

MH: Just like that?

VK: Yeah. So, I guess they'd gathered up—now that I reflect back on it, they must have been ready and prepared to pick up certain people and [knew] what they were going to do with them because they really moved them out in a hurry. From there he was sent, subsequently, to another camp in New Mexico. And then, eventually, to a place called Crystal City in Texas where they had built a camp for families. My mother was able to go there and rejoin him. If I had younger brothers or sisters or a family that were dependent on him they would have gone to that camp to be with the family. They stood there, probably, two or three years. In the meantime, I think in about February of '42, February or March, there was this executive order—they talked about detaining. Since they made this first big sweep and sent the so-called leaders away, then there was conversation about how to remove other people. You know, to us, we were American citizens. It didn't even enter our mind that they were talking about us, or some of us will be picked up and sent away.

My draft status at that time was—I'd been 1A, but they had this draft and in our local board, they had forty-two hundred men that were registered. And they would draw these numbers to determined what sequence you'd be drafted. Certain numbers were first—it's like the lottery. And out of the forty-two hundred, my number was 4188. In other words, they are only twelve people that were going later than I was going. So, I was, probably, elated at that time. But, when the executive order posted one day, after a lot of rumors and things, and it said that all people of Japanese extraction—no, it said, *All people from Japanese, German, and French extraction would be removed from the West Coast*, that was really, really startling. We thought there must be some misprint or something was wrong. Someone must have meant people from Japan, Japanese citizens, not us because we are American citizens. We were supposed to be protected by the constitution. But, sure enough, they followed up and said, No, that meant *all* people of Japanese, German, and Italian extraction. And the first ones to be moves were those Japanese extractions, so that was the beginning of our evacuation to a camp inland, from the coast.

MH: So, your evacuation was separate? Your folks were already gone?

VK: No, my mother was still there.

MH: Okay.

VK: My dad was gone.

MH: Your dad was gone.

VK: So, this takes us up to about March of 1942, which is about three months later. Just three months is quite a trying time. I really didn't know too much about it. Except, my sister—we had located my mother's diary. She had written from the time the war started; every day, she written this diary. We had it translated. She spoke of how her feelings were at that time, quite a touching story. But, she and my sister would go down to the train tracks where the pull cars rumble by, pick up _____ (inaudible), put them in their bags, and bring them home to eat. And how she very carefully had to manage money. My brother gave her a little bit because he was working, and I took another job working. Because right after the war, the insurance companies stopped writing insurance policies so there was no business for me to do. I could follow that, I majored in insurance in college, so I took a job in a clothing store. So our evacuation order called for us to be sent to an assembly center. I think they had ten relocation centers, but they must have had twenty five relocation *assembly centers* where they would gather your person and send you on to a permanent camp. So, we went to the Puyallup County Fairgrounds where we stayed for three months while they built the permanent camp. I think in Puyallup, there was five thousand of us. We were in a compound built out in the field. They'd built these barracks. There must have been forty, fifty barracks. They had this barbwire fence around the enclosure and guard towers. We stayed there for three months.

MH: How large were the barracks that you were housed in?

VK: They must have been about, I'd say, about 20 x 120 feet. They were broken up into 20 x 20 rooms. Each family had a 20 x 20 room.

MH: So, they had about six families per barrack.

VK: Yeah. At that time—when you speak to friends and people you talk to about it afterwards, it was kind of a period when they had no responsibilities. All of a sudden, you're in a place where there is no rent or food or anything to worry about. You just woke up, you had your breakfast, and then you'd try to figure out what to do with the day. We'd play cards or sit around or whittle on a piece of wood. Some people painted, some people sewed, so it was kind of a hang loose type of period. I remember I was quite upset about being there and the fact that, being an American citizen, I was in there. And the fact that my draft status had been changed now from 1A to 4F, and you protested that because 4F would be for the people that something physical was wrong with them. I think they changed it. I can't recall. I think they changed it to 4C, some classification. I was upset about that, so I wrote a letter to Eleanor Roosevelt, at that time, pleading my case and volunteering for the service. I wanted to get out of there cause I think, mainly, I felt so strongly that I was an American. But, she sent back a reply that, under the circumstances, they weren't taking anybody into the service.

So, but at this time, I had—back in 1938, '39, made acquaintance with my future wife, at that time. She was in Arizona in a camp, so we made plans to get together—we'd gone to Idaho so when I was in Idaho, I corresponded with her. We decided that we'd get together and get married because I wasn't going into the service. Shortly after that, we did get married, and then shortly after that they founded the Nisei, that's second generation, combat unit. Now, of course, not being single, just newly married, I decided I wasn't going to volunteer for that. So, we lived in Idaho just very briefly because we'd gone there, I suppose about June or July of 1942. I think this is in the spring of '43 that I applied for release from the camp because I think they started taking those applications about that time. So, with letters of recommendations from people I knew from the American Friends Service in Cleveland, I was able to get them to sponsor me, so I went to Cleveland, Ohio. The first bad experience I had—it was two other fellows and my wife, and I—they were leaving, and we were going to drive back east. So, we left camp with our bags and suitcase, and we stopped at Twin Falls, Idaho for lunch or breakfast. Lunch, it must have been. I remember sitting down at the booth and that table and the waitress came over and she threw the silverware on the table. Gave us a dirty look and just threw the silverware on the table. Didn't say anything to us, refer to us or anything, but just the fact that she did that—we knew why she was doing it, but, I guess, I don't remember other than we probably had lunch and paid or bill and left. But it was quite a start for our cross-country trip. But, we didn't face any other circumstances on the trip.

We wound up in Cleveland, Ohio where they had a hostel set-up. I suppose fifteen or twenty of us were able to stay there the first night. The next day I was introduced to the friends from the American Friends Society that took us into their home. We stayed there for about a week until I was able to locate a place to live. Another couple and us, we moved into a little two-bedroom place. We lived there for, I suppose, a year, and I went to work for the war production board. Let's see, now, that was a civil service job.

[00:33:33]

MH: So, you got a civil service job during the war?

VK: Let me think. Yeah, I went to work for the—I must have made the application when I was in camp. We had our first boy. Edward was born in February of '44 and our second son, Russell, was born in December of '45. At that time, I had moved out to Shaker Heights in the outskirts of Cleveland. Once again, this was all—well, of course, most of Cleveland was all Caucasian so there was no Japanese area at all so wherever I lived, I lived in a Caucasian area. But, I didn't feel uncomfortable because that's the kind of upbringing that I had. It was always in a Caucasian neighborhood. So, it wasn't hard for me to do that. Some of the others, they kind of hung around near the hostel, and they found apartments. So, that's where we moved first, in an apartment there, but I was one of the early ones that moved out into the suburbs. While out there, we took in three or four other Nisei singles, a couple girls, couple boys. And they were kind of roomers. They stayed there for room and board.

We lived until December of '45. Shortly after, Russell was born—he was still a baby—when the restrictions of living in the West Coast were lifted, and we were able to return if we'd desire. My wife's family had been farming in Central California, and they wanted to come back to California. So, we made plans to move back; we came to Los Angeles. I'm skipping something.

MH: We can go back, that's okay.

VK: I'm trying to think. Oh, in the meantime, my folks had been released from Crystal City. This must have been about 194—let's see, the war was over August of '45. So, shortly after that, they were released to me, and they came to Cleveland. He worked as a gardener; my mother worked as a cook and maid at this home in Cleveland.

MH: Kind of what they did in Washington a little at the little college house.

VK: They never did that—they called it domestic—it was something a lot of them did. They didn't follow up on the business that they had. They'd do something that didn't take much experience, and that would be to maybe drive a car, work in a garden, cook and wash dishes and clean house. So, that's what my mother would do, and my dad would do the yard. And for that I think they got maybe \$100, \$150 a month, something like that. And then, in December I left. They continued to stay there for probably, maybe, a year. In the meantime, I had moved to Los Angeles in December of '45, bought a house, two houses on the lot. My sister-in-law and her husband lived in one house, my wife and I, and her mother and the two kids lived in the other house. I tried to pick up on the insurance business at that time because now they had begun to take on Japanese business. Then my wife went to work as a secretary. That was for about a year, 1946. In 1946 she took ill with tuberculosis, and ah, at that time, '46, we had Eddie and Russell, about one and three years old. And I had to put her in a sanitarium, Maryknoll Sanitarium in Duarte. The cost in that, it must have been—well, I can't remember now. It must have been \$150 or \$200 a month, which was all about I was making. So, I had to take on another job. I worked two jobs to earn enough to keep her in a sanitarium, and I asked my folks to come out to California. They came out and stayed with me; my mother took care of the kids. My dad got another job as a gardener. Of course, now after a year, he was an experienced gardener. And then I suppose maybe a year later, my brother, George, who was in Philadelphia with his four children—or two children—they wanted to come out. So, I had them come out, and they stayed in the back house. My sister in law and her husband moved to another place. My wife was ill for about five years and passed away about 1951. I'd quit the second job I had. I was, now, just in the insurance business in '50, '51. Shortly after she passed away, then I started with the Kirby Company in the vacuuming cleaning business, and I continued that from 1951 to 1982—about thirty one years—as a distributor, quite a successful distributor at that time. I think I had forty four sales people and thirteen telephone appointment solicitors working for me. That was in Los Angeles. At one time, it was about the tenth largest distributor in the United States; out of about maybe two hundred. In 1964, I won a Lincoln Continental, among other prizes. In 1965, we won a Mustang

automobile and two other cars. That was fun. In the meantime, my dad passed away about five or six years later in 1956 or '57. My mother passed away in 1986, about six years ago.

[00:43:57]

MH: How old were your parents when they passed away?

VK: My dad was quite young. In '56 he was sixty-nine years old. My mother passed away at ninety-six. One of the things I regret most of all is not being able to talk to them about their early days, their childhood. I suppose they told us, but we really didn't pay much attention to it. We didn't record anything or make an effort to remember too much about where they were from, who their family was, and what they did. It's only now that you try to reconstruct or try to get some of this information—I suppose not so much for us, for down the line. There are going to be some generations coming along that will want to know who is who back in 1941 or 1950.

MH: Plus, like what you said, when you were younger, they wanted to raise you more as Americans so that could have been one of the reasons why.

VK: Could be. As I think about it, even now, I suppose, I say something, I find that my kids, they say, Yeah, yeah. I don't think it sticks. It not that interest that makes it stick.

MH: I have a few questions so we'll backtrack now. You said that when you went to Idaho, your wife was in Arizona.

VK: Yeah.

MH: How did she come up to Idaho?

VK: By this time, if you had a good reason to rejoin other members of your family or to get married, you could apply and get permission, which she did. She got a train fare I think put on a train and came up to Idaho, and we got married.

MH: And one of the other things that you were talking about, your dad left the night of Pearl Harbor.

VK: Um-hm.

MH: They took him away.

VK: Um-hm.

- MH: And then, you had three months before you finally went to relocation center. What were your feelings about—you obviously felt that you were an American. You didn't believe that they would take you. What was your feelings about them taking your father and other Japanese-born?
- VK: That seemed to be the logical thing. If there were dangerous people to the security of the country, and I know, at that time, we spoke about the FBI and how polished they were and how smooth they operated this whole thing. How courteous and well-dressed they were. My mom said they were very nice to her. In comparison to some of the people that were apprehended probably three and four weeks after Pearl Harbor. There were others that were apprehended after they got the so-called the nucleus of this possible subversive group. But, the others were apprehended by police officers. Some of them would come to your home and they were very rude. Some friends would tell me the things that by comparison was different from the way the FBI operated, which leads me to think that the plan for picking him up was one that was already well thought over, and there was preparations for it, which seemed to fit in—they used to say, that fact that the war started was something well known. The government was aware this was what was going to happen and was pushing Japan on the brink and forcing them to take action like that so they could mobilize this county to jump up and get behind it 100 percent.
- MH: So, you and your family had no problem then, since your dad and your mom weren't in Japan, had been rounded up? You could accept that?
- VK: Yeah, I had no problem with that. I knew—well, I can't say I knew. I didn't know. He used to be so pro-America and so intent on us being good Americans, it would be hard for me to believe that he could take that type of position.
- MH: Oh, I agree. So then, you and your family accepted the fact that your folks were being detained because they were Japanese-born. Did your folks feel the same way? They thought this is what they should do?
- VK: I remember my mother—I think even my dad would tell us that we should, because this is our country, and we should become good citizens and serve our country. Which must have been really hard for them to say maybe, but that's the one thought they tried to get over.
- MH: So then, your folks went down to Crystal City, and then you and your older brother—
- VK: Well, we went separately. I moved back to Cleveland in spring of '43, and my brother went to Philadelphia about a year later, I think. Everybody had to apply and, then they had to get letters from sponsors, references. I was one of the early ones to get up and get out. I realized that that wasn't the place I wanted to be. Some people were there the full term, three years, three-and-a-half years, until they finally closed the camp.

[00:50:00]

MH: And your sister went with your folks to Crystal City?

VK: No, she didn't. Her husband was in training for this all-Nisei combat team, so she left camp and went to get married down in Mississippi, where she stayed until they went overseas. And she moved up to Cleveland with, stayed with me. My sister-in-law, my wife's sister, she was also married to a serviceman. She moved to Cleveland and moved with me. I had a couple other girls whose husbands were in the service, and they came and stayed with us.

MH: Was there any kind of prejudice back in Cleveland once you got there, as far as you being Japanese and the war going on?

VK: I don't recall any that—I suppose, yeah. I might have not been looking for it because I might have been a little different and felt that I was part of the community. Others might have been more sensitive to it. Like maybe they were raised and always felt that they were different. I didn't find that.

MH: You touched on it earlier, when you first got sent to the relocation center, you said you couldn't believe it was happening to you because you were American.

VK: Right.

MH: Yet, they did this to you.

VK: Right.

MH: And then you went to the relocation center, you went to a camp, and then you got released. I would think that you might have some kind of feelings that I been through all of this. Then like you said, on the trip back, you went to the restaurant, they threw the utensils at you, but once you got back there, I would think, being a little bit more per se, being that you had been through all of that about people treating you different, knowing that you're an American.

VK: I don't recall instances like that.

MH: Would you compare Cleveland to Seattle pre-war as far as the way you got along?

VK: Well, it was different. We had no friends there; we had to start out on a whole new base. You don't know anybody, so you're starting up from scratch. You're basically around people that you work with. I suppose, when I would catch the train to go home, I buried my face in the newspaper and read the paper. Maybe, maybe, during that period of time, while we were at war with Japan, I suppose we kept more of a low profile. I don't think we went out of our way to cover the town. I do know that—I'm trying to remember, when I would go to a bar, and would sit at the bar and

feel that all the eyes were on me, that actually happened later, subsequent, when I came back to California. When I was back east, I didn't see that too much. A lot of the people there, in many cases, had never seen an Oriental before, and I don't know what they thought. I remember the men who lived next door to me, Caucasian, we used to sit and shoot the breeze all the time. One day he said, "Hey, Vic," he said, "I got"—I can't remember the fellow's name—he said, not a relative but this fellow that used to work for him, "He's come back on leave." I said, "Oh, yeah?" He said, "He's served at Guadalcanal, and I don't know how he's going to feel about you." It really made me kind of scared. But, he came back, we fit right in, there was no problem. I suppose maybe he was surprised that I spoke English. (chuckles)

MH: (laughs) So then, you were back in Cleveland for forty—

VK: Went there in '43 and left in '45.

MH: So, you were back there for two years, then?

VK: Yes, about two-and-a-half years.

MH: You left the camp with basically what—

VK: What? Money-wise?

MH: Yeah.

VK: Oh, very little. I can't remember what they gave us. They might have given us \$25 apiece, something like that. I'm not sure. Of course, \$25 took us quite a ways.

MH: And then you said you drove?

VK: Yeah. I didn't drive. One of the fellows there went with us—I don't know where he got the car, or how we happened to be in the car, but we went to Minneapolis and on down to Chicago. I think that's where we left him. I think my wife and I went on to Cleveland; it's kind of vague to me.

MH: So, you had to start over with basically nothing?

VK: Right. Well, we started-out and went to the hostel. Oh, before we left the camp, we would go out on labor / work leaves. We worked in the farm, sugar beet fields, and topping onions. We had the chance, I suppose, to save a little money, maybe had a couple hundred dollars. So, when I left camp, we might have had, between my wife and I, \$200 to \$400, \$500. Which today it's like, it could be like having \$5,000 or \$10,000. But, we went back there. She went to work. I went to work. So, in a couple of weeks, we both had a paycheck coming.

MH: So, you got started over back then, you started your family—

VK: Yeah.

MH: And then—

VK: One day, I called into the office with my supervisor. He said, “Vic, I got some bad news.” I said, “What?” He said, “We are going to have to let you go.” I said, “Why?” He said, “We went to check your work clearance in Washington, we found that you didn’t pass.” I said, “Well, what’s the reason?” “They didn’t tell us anymore.” So, I went to the Civil Service Office in Cleveland, and I asked about that. They said, Well, you can appeal this if you’d like. “Yeah, I want to appeal it.” So I went to Washington D.C. to the Civil Service Board to find out what this was all about. Now, when I think about it, I can’t place a timetable to this, but I went to a little interview room there. A couple of people there were talking, and they started asking me questions about where I was born, my early childhood, different questions. Then he asked me my name. I told him my given name, Victork, and I had a Japanese name, Masaru, which is my Japanese first name, and my last name. So then, they said, Have you ever gone by any aliases? I said, “No,” and he said, “Why do you go by the name of Ferrell, F-e-r-r-e-l-l?” I said, “I don’t go by that name. I recall that when I was a baseball fan, there used to be two brothers that played baseball—I can’t remember what team—but it was Rick Ferrell and Wes Ferrell. One was a pitcher, one was a catcher. And the name just fascinated me.” I had a Japanese middle name that made me feel uncomfortable, and I wanted an American middle name. So one day on some paper, I signed my name Victor Ferrell Kambe. Well, based on that they I was suspect and unable to pass the civil service security clearance, so I got laid off.

MH: Even with the explanation?

VK: Oh, yeah. So, I got a job in a carbon and paper plant making carbon paper for typewriters. That was an odd experience. I’m curious now. I think I’m going to write to Washington because it’s possible now under some kind of freedom—

MH: Freedom of Federal Disclosure and Information Act.

VK: —I’m able to get my file, and I want to know—well, I’m sure it’s in the file. If they have it, they should also have my letter to Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt demanding that I be taken in the service and they refused.

[01:00:10]

MH: So, had you not gotten married, you would have gone into the service when they had that?

VK: Yeah, because all my friends, they all volunteered.

MH: So, when you were back in Cleveland, were your wages comparable all the other people?

VK: I was making \$1,440 a year, so that's about \$120 a month. I think my wife was making the same thing; we were the same civil servant grade level, I think, at that time. I guess we had \$200 something a month.

[recording paused]

MH: So, you were in Cleveland for a little over two years?

VK: Two-and-a-half years.

MH: And then, you came back to California?

VK: I never lived here. I lived in Seattle, Washington. My wife did, lived in Arroyo Grande up in Central California. She'd gone to city college in Los Angeles so they wanted to come back to come back to California.

MH: So, you came to Central California, you said?

VK: No, we came to Los Angeles.

MH: To Los Angeles. And that was forty—

VK: Forty-five, December '45.

MH: So, the war ended two or three months earlier in August. Do you remember what your impression was of Los Angeles when you came back for the first time?

VK: Not really, I don't remember too much about that. Her sister, my wife's sister and her husband lived in East Los Angeles, so we had a place to go when we first came here. That helps, I guess. You know that when you're coming to [a new] town, you don't know [anyone], and that gave us a couple of weeks to get settled.

MH: Was that a Caucasian neighborhood or Japanese American?

VK: It was a Hispanic neighborhood, heavily Hispanic. I think within a month I had located the place to buy, I bought a house; off of Olympic and Kenmore just south of Wilshire district. There were two houses on the lot. I paid \$8,500 for it.

MH: And that was right after the war ended. Were you a little apprehensive coming to the West Coast having known what it was like prior to the war when you left?

VK: I don't remember that. I don't think so. I was always able to take care of myself, I suppose and never had any unpleasant incidences. And it didn't usually take long if

- somebody gave me a dirty look or said something, when I responded—and if you responded in English, they were kind of taken aback. Sometimes they don't know who they are taking to, and you could challenge them. I challenged them. They'd say, Hey, you speak good English. I'd say, "It's the only language I know. Where are you from?" So, you kind of—every once in a while you'd get a real redneck from some place, but I always consider them somewhat ignorant. Just consider the source.
- MH: Did you have any people that you kept in contact with from the camps? That you made friends with in the camps that you stayed in touch with after the war?
- VK: Well, that is kind of a common thing. All of us, everybody that went to camp, 120,000, I suppose the people—even today, whenever you meet somebody, "What camp where you at?" Because it gives you something to talk about. And they mention the camp, you say, "Oh, yeah, you know so-and-so?" "Oh, yeah, I know them." But, I suppose that's one of the most kind of interesting things that came out. It seems like everybody got the same start. We were all in the camp. We all know what it is like. It's like, everybody was undressed; you start from zero. It didn't make a difference what you did or how much money you had, we were all there. And you had to get up and go to the mess hall and eat the food that was thrown on the plate. You take the dirty dishes, take them over to the dishing counter, leave them there, put the silverware here, put the dishes there. You'd go back to your card game, back to whittling your wood, back to shooting the breeze, or whatever it was. It seems that there is always that conversation that goes on.
- MH: And while you were in camp, what was the communication between you and your folks?
- VK: Well, my mother would write to my dad. Of course, those letters were censored, so sometimes she would get letters and half of it would be blacked out. They were able to carry on that communication, and eventually she was able to move back and go to Crystal City with him.
- MH: And between you and your folks, did you continue corresponds when they were still in camp and they were in Crystal City?
- VK: Yeah, I think so.
- MH: And then after you got out of camp, you sponsored them, correct?
- VK: Yeah, they came to Cleveland.
- MH: Okay, we touched on it before. Let's go back to what your life was like—we'll will bring it up before the end of World War II, again, with your folks there in Cleveland. How did they feel after they got out of camp about there experience in camp? We talked about earlier, when they first went, they said, You should be good Americans.

Do this, this is your country, and then they spent three years in an internment camp. How did they feel when they got up to Cleveland?

VK: I can't remember anything in particular. They were always able to—because of where we lived in Seattle, they didn't feel uncomfortable being in among all Caucasians. So, they adjusted to being in Cleveland quite simply. They were there for only two or three months when I packed up and came to Los Angeles, and they stayed there for a year, a year-and-a-half, maybe two years. I can't recall. But, they handled that all right.

MH: What are your feelings about your redress movement?

VK: Nothing too much. I never expected to be reimbursed for it, although, it disrupted a lot of things. Some families, and for the life of me, I can't understand why we didn't, but a lot of them put all their stuff in storage, rented their house, or had someone take care of their property. When we left Seattle, now I'm a fairly intelligent person, but when we left Seattle I was almost absolutely sure that we would never see Seattle again. I thought that that was as one-way ticket. We were going to go to the assembly center, then to camp, then away we go, we'd never come back. So, we sold everything, whatever we could get, converted it into whatever money we could. My mother's diary carried some real heart wrenching stories about what people would come and offer her for such-and-such a thing. And we sold the house, so when we left Seattle, all we had what we had in a couple of suitcases. What was the question you asked me?

[01:10:05]

MH: How you felt about the redress movement. This is fine—

VK: When I reflect back on it, we took a real beating that the house—if thought like they did in some places—like in Los Angeles, they kept the houses. They kept everything. I suppose we'd been better off if they done that, but we didn't. We liquidated on my advice. “No, we are going to sell. We are going to this. We are going to do that.” I was wrong, I guess.

MH: _____ (inaudible) There were some people that lost their property to others, and they went and sold it out from under them, too. There was a couple of people in San Diego that—

VK: That's true. That's true there's—but we didn't leave anything to anybody. Like my present wife, her family _____ (inaudible) in south Seattle. There was a big research and development building for Boeing. You know, they had that little ranch market and farm, which was only a couple of acres, but if they had that, who knows what it could have been converted to. Where we lived, by the university, is all part of the University of Washington today. I don't know what—well, I had just gotten out of college, twenty-one, twenty-two years old. I was prepared to a career in the

insurance business, and that never really took off. My brother had left earlier, back east, he had gone to medical school, so he never did experience evacuation himself. He didn't participate in redress either. But, interrupting a career was quite costly. If you were to convert those dollars into today's dollars, \$20,000 today, maybe a couple thousand dollars in those days.

MH: And your families possessions, and like you said the disruption of your lives—

VK: Yeah. Well, my mother, when the war broke out, she was down in the basement throwing stuff in the furnace: Japanese dolls, Japanese antiques treasure and treasures, and things like that, anything that—after my dad was taken in, she was just distraught. Anything—well, all kinds of things she burned, destroyed. She didn't want to—she had no idea what was going to happen. We had a lot of things, lots of dolls. Every New Year, she had this big display for the benefit of my sister, the girl; it was expensive dolls. I suppose, in that way, it was kind of a token thing.

MH: Did you receive your redress payment?

VK: Yes, I did, a couple years ago. The older ones got theirs first.

MH: Your one brother didn't. Did your other siblings, your wife, did they all receive theirs?

VK: My present wife received hers this year. My brother? Yeah, he did.

MH: And your sister, too?

VK: My sister, yeah.

MH: When we were talking about the evacuation and the amount of time that you had after the notice, did you have roughly thirty days to sell all your belongings? You sold your house?

VK: Furniture. I have one friend, he said, "I remember you giving me your old baseball glove." I couldn't even remember that story, but he told me I'd given it to him. It's a Caucasian friend in Seattle. We went back to our fiftieth high school reunion, and he pointed it out to me. "I remember you gave me that old baseball mitt."

MH: So then, you did keep in touch with some of the people from Seattle after you—

VK: Not really, no. When we went to this reunion, his fiftieth class reunion, five years ago, I saw some of them, and they wanted to know what had happen to me. I didn't keep up in correspondence with them.

MH: Through all of this, through the relocation and evacuation, what really hit home to you about what you experienced during that part of your life?

VK: I suppose the one thing that I accomplished was that that it took a large group of people—first of all, I firmly believe that I don't think they could have taken any other group of people and thrown them into a camp this way and got the same degree of cooperation. In the camps, they would run _____ (inaudible), just your cooperative efforts. I don't know what it is. Now I might be wrong, to me, it just seem like a remarkable thing that it worked that way. It seemed that we all got thrown in, everybody cooperated. Teachers taught school, doctors practiced medicine, nurses worked in that, everybody helped out. We got paid either \$16 or \$19 dollars a month, which is okay, because we didn't have to spend anything. The only thing we needed that for was for cigarettes or candy. We weren't trying to make money. We were just trying to stay even. The big thing was the Sears Roebuck catalog. People would get that, thumb through it, look for something to buy. We made furniture, tables. No cameras so we didn't take pictures. Some people that were able to draw, they drew pictures. I have nothing from camp. I don't think I kept anything. I think when I moved out, I moved out, just took clothes and left. But, it did take a group of people, threw them from coast to coast, they tried to release and place them someplace, but they went all over. When I was in Cleveland, they were people who had never seen Japanese before. I'm sure. They'd go to little towns, wherever they went: Missouri, North Dakota, South Dakota, Louisiana, and wherever they went. I don't know where everybody went, but they went to the four corners. A lot of them came back to California and the West Coast, but a lot of them stopped. They are still there. So, that was good.

MH: I remember now what I was going to ask you. You said when you first heard about that you were going to be relocated, your thought was that you weren't going to come back to Seattle, ever. That that was is, you were just going.

VK: My first thought was they were going to round us up and put us into assembly centers.

MH: Okay, did you think that this was going to be a long term?

VK: I thought it was going to be a permanent thing. By that time, it came down to that, I went to the _____ (inaudible). This is impossible, they can't do this. They are not going to do this. They can't do this; we are citizens. But, when I finally came to realize it was really going through, which might have been a week before we left, then I thought, geez, this is really serious. They want to get rid of us. You know, you can't put this stuff in storage, for what? For how long? Might as well convert it into money.

[01:20:27]

MH: I can imagine that would be, like you said, up until that time they can't do this, we are American. When it finally did come down that they were going to round, you all up, you were probably surprised when you first got out of camp, to go back.

VK: No, once you got into the internment camp, I worked in the—I can't remember what they called it. I was working in the administrative office, and one of the things that came through was this program is getting released. The timetable of this thing—the war broke out in December, and the next ninety days or so, we got sent to these assembly centers. [They were] kind of a thrown together, like lots of times you lived in the stables in the fairgrounds. So, in ninety days they were able to prepare a place for us on the Tanforan Race Track. In the meantime, they started building these permanent camps to be occupied maybe June, July, August. As the facilities were completed they were able to send out more to the assembly centers. But, by the time we got into the assembly center, and started to—I think the idea that there wasn't danger in a large group of us. But since they got it all started, and they had 120,000 people here, they said, To run 120,000 through the duration of the war is going to be a lot and a lot that shouldn't be in there. So, they started this program to release those that applied, that had a place, and letters of recommendation. I got my letters of recommendations, and I was in the front end of this. I knew this was starting, so I got my application, so I was one of the early ones to get out.

MH: Did you think that it was quite ironic that when you got to Cleveland you were working for the civil service, the same government that months earlier put you in the camp?

VK: (pause)

MH: There is no irony, there, to you?

VK: No. _____ (inaudible)

MH: I agree with you. So, when you got to Cleveland, you still thought you were an American, you were going to go help the war effort.

VK: I thought they knew, now, that it was a mistake I was even in there. And we wanted to get out of there.

MH: Do you have any feelings about the people that were kept longer? Did you think that that was unfair?

VK: They were kept longer, they stayed longer because they really weren't motivated to get out. I was—there was a certain percentage of people that were highly motivated to get out. And there were some that said, you know, this is a good life, let's stay here, just not worry about a job, rent, or all that stuff. There some people that were having a good time.

MH: To recap very briefly, here, because we are nearing our time. You were raised in Seattle, Washington.

VK: Um-hm.

MH: You were born there.

VK: Um-hm.

MH: When were you born?

VK: In 1919.

MH: Then you went from Seattle to—

VK: Puyallup Washington Assembly Center.

MH: Then you went from Washington to—

VK: Minidoka, Idaho.

MH: Minidoka, Idaho, where you stayed and got married with your wife there.

VK: Right.

MH: And you went to Cleveland for two-and-a-half years. You're reunited with your parents from Crystal City, Texas.

VK: Right.

MH: And then, you came back with your wife—

VK: On December '45.

MH: And resettled in Los Angeles.

VK: Um-hm. Bought a house, then my parents came. Then my brother and his family came.

MH: So, you started over for the second time? You had to start all over again in Cleveland, and then you came all the way out to California and started over.

VK: Um-hm. When I was selling insurance, I didn't have a car. I bought a car—when I left Cleveland, I bought a car with the intention of driving it across country and selling it when I got to Los Angeles, which I did. I bought a car. Let's see, I came in December of '45, so it must have been a 1946 Pontiac. I sold that when I got here; then I had no car. I was selling life insurance, I would catch the bus or the streetcar and go around that way. It seems like if I had to do that today, it would be an impossible way to work.

MH: Is there anything else you would like to add to the interview that comes to mind now, or that you would like to elaborate further?

VK: No, I can't think of anything special. (pauses) I think this is a kind of interesting thing that you're doing. From time to time, I read some people's impressions of camp. Some things I agree, some things I don't.

MH: Well, you have your own perspective.

VK: Well, the biggest thing I always thought, it—I just marveled at what we accomplished in camp, this ethnic group with Japanese extraction. It must have been something our parents instilled in us, something like working hard, cooperating or whatever it was because I don't think they could have taken it if someone else had done the same thing. I can't believe that anybody could have done any better.

MH: I agree with you.

VK: There was no trouble—well, crime was negligible in my generation and the characteristic of working hard, being honest, those were just pounded in by our parents. And I think when we got to the camp, we just made up our minds we were going to do the best job we could. It's remarkable what they did.

MH: It was a different generation back then, too, when you listened to authority.

VK: Well, young people today, they say, What the hell, why did you let them do that? They would have never done that to me. Everybody thinks they would have done it differently. You actually had to be there, live there to know. It's a lot like this riot we had here, early part of this year. They had a lot of looting and burning in the Koreatown. And the blacks—they had bitter rivalry to blacks and the Koreans. And they would burn a lot of the Korean shops, stores, liquor stores. So, I told Kevin one day, I said, "Under those circumstances, you think you would have gone down into Koreatown, walked around with a bunch of blacks driving up and down the streets looking for something to torch or burn or shoot? With that type of feeling going on, you think that you would do that?" I told him, "When the war broke out and this story of evacuating and these stories of the danger we presented to the West Coast, and sabotage, and espionage, and bombs, and all of that, it kind of raises to fever pitch." So, it kind of became a thing that we tried to take a very low profile, stayed away as much as possible. And when we did appear during the day to work or something, it was very quietly. I would catch the bus to downtown to go to work and come back and come back in the daylight. You wouldn't come back at night. I don't think we went around on the weekends to find to have a lot of fun. So, it was kind of a scary time.

When the story come of evacuating, there were two feelings. I suppose some people say we were removed far for our own safety, which in a way you might say was true, but that should have never occurred. But I think it was the Hearst newspaper used to really build that up to scare people into thinking that all these

potential dangers existed. So, as an ethnic group, we were look upon very dangerously, and it was better to get them out of here. But after we left and a lot of the businesses were purchased or repossessed or bought up by people that took over maybe the farming, the lettuce growing in central California, which was predominately, at that time, all Japanese farmers—but they had to leave, so they say that these people helped engineer all of that. But, in some ways, there are good things that happened, but I acknowledge that it wasn't, in hindsight, the right thing to do. I guess that's why the redress came around.

MH: They certainly uprooted a lot of live and a lot of families.

VK: And a lot of lives that were young. I think about my parents, in 1942, my mother would have been fifty-two; my dad was fifty-five years old. You look at someone today that is fifty-five and fifty-two, many of them are at the peak of their career. Some of them haven't even gotten there yet. They certainly were disrupted and their lives—my dad died in—that's fourteen years, so I really don't know how he felt. I'm sure it didn't feel good, but he was never one to indicate displeasure about that. He'd always speak of the good things that resulted from that. Same thing with my mother.

MH: And you carried that on. You put a good light on it too for the most part.

VK: Oh, I tried.

MH: Well, I'd like to thank you for myself and on behalf of the oral history project for allowing me to interview you and the memories that you've shared. And I hope this will give students and historical researchers better insight into an understanding in this period in time. So, thank you very much.

VK: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW