

“Japanese American Farmers in the San Fernando Valley before and After WWII Oral History Project”

“Oral History Project”

TELLING OUR STORIES

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW
San Fernando Valley

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TELLING OUR STORIES

TRANSCRIPT:

The Japanese American Farming Experiences in the San Fernando Valley Pre and post-World War 2.

A project for Asian American Studies

Spring 2004

[00] **Narrator:** The history of the Japanese in the San Fernando Valley is not well documented despite their significance. For this project we are interested in the history of the Japanese American farming families who lived in the Valley focusing on their experiences prior to World War 2 and immediately after. Prior to World War 2 there were 3177 people of Japanese descent living in the San Fernando valley. Half of those were American citizens. Prior to their internment approximately 1000 Japanese American families lived in Sylmar alone. Even the land that CSUN currently sits on was once farmed by Japanese American farmers.

[01] **Narrator:** The Valley consisted mostly of Caucasians. Generally most people of color were unwelcome in the Valley. Most people of color lived in or around Pacoima which is the Valley's unofficial minority district. Various difficulties made farming especially challenging for Japanese American farmers. The alien land law act and the local laws limited them from owning or leasing land. Japanese American farmers along with those of Chinese, African and Mexican descent were all prevented from owning and leasing land. Japanese Americans in the Valley were subjected to discrimination.

[01] **Ritsuo Takeuchi:** Discrimination was bad all the time until even after the war. One of the best things that happened during the War years, a lot of the people were able to break in with the Caucasians. Jobs were scarce prior to that. We had to work for a Japanese farm or an oriental fellow. Very seldom were you hired by a Caucasian, even if you had a degree. The only degree that was of any help was probably a doctor's degree, Ph.D. Then you went into business yourself. Most of them couldn't get any work, so they worked polishing apples, worked in a fruit stand, working for all

before the War and by the time the War started for about 25\$ a week was common. After the war, a lot of boys left for War and became soldiers, had to go off to war and so there were a lot of openings for people that had skills like a chemist or an engineer or anything of that name, college graduates. They had a opportunity to get a job real quick because they needed them. I think that opened up the job market for the minorities. Even the Chinese and the Koreans hung around together. It was hard for them to break into other areas. Most of the minorities were that way.

[3:50] **Narrator:** Despite the discrimination, Japanese farmers worked long hours to make ends meet. In time some Caucasian farmers reluctantly allowed the Japanese farmers to farm on their land. Some Caucasians were more understanding of the plight of the Japanese and other ethnic minorities so they allowed for the leasing of the land. These Japanese farmers took advantage of the situation and worked hard at refining their skills in farming which helped facilitated some successes. Japanese farmers grew fruits such as strawberries, apples and oranges while other farmers grew vegetables such as corn, green onion and cabbage. Yet still some Japanese farmers were flower growers.

[4:37] **James Higadisha:** they got up early in the morning, made breakfast for us. They made lunch so that we could take it to school. They went out to the field and worked all day, came home late at night and mother made dinner. Then we had an outside bath where we fill up a great big tub and put wood underneath it. You burn the wood to make the water hot. Then we all jumped in , that was the best part of the day for us.

[5:17] **Narrator:** During the harvesting season Japanese farmers were diligently gathering and bunching the crops. Once harvested, the Japanese American farmers would take their fruits and vegetables to the downtown Los Angeles market place. Flowers were taken to the farm to be sold. For example, Long Beach was the place for flower growers to sell the flowers that they grew.

[5:39] **Chiyo Muto Shibuya:** it was not only the gladiolas, there were other varieties of flowers that my dad grew. Other than gladiolas, we had pansies, sweet peas. I remember that clearly because I remember as a young girl we were all out there picking sweet peas for the market in Long Beach. That I clearly remember.

[6:15] **Narrator:** Although family life required long hours working in the fields, they also made time for leisure and celebrating. Some of the leisure activities they did

enjoy included picnics, baseball, football, fishing and going to the beach. Japanese farmers also celebrated all major holidays and special occasions and kept them short and sweet. However when they were able to get get-togethers they went all out and made it an occasion to remember. Notice how the Japanese dressed up for these occasions. The men wore the fancy suits and women wore dresses, even at the beach.

[6:58] **Jane Muranaka:** New Years was always a really important holiday for my dad. My dad made these elaborate flower arrangements with peach blossoms and bamboo. He would always buy the big fish, I don't know what kind and tie it up so it looks like its flapping its fins, that was always a traditional thing. He would always get the big red lobsters. We would always have our relatives come over and our neighbors and our close friends. It was always an all day celebration. It was really important to him. I guess the only other holiday was 4th of July. We used to go annually to the beach and have a barbeque at the beach.

[8:05] **Roy Muranaka:** I remember going to the beach once. I think her family used to go the beach pretty regularly. The reason I remember going to he beach is because I stepped on a sparkler that had just burned out and it burned the heck out of my foot. It was burned into my foot and it hurt to take it out.

[8:22] **Narrator:** Many Japanese American children attended public schools in the San Fernando Valley. In addition to their regular schooling, they attended Japanese language schools as well. Medical care was not readily available for Japanese Americans. Mothers would often care for the family when someone got sick. For serious injuries, people would have to travel long distances for treatment.

[8:46] **Narrator: Internment 1942-1945**

Upon executive order 9066, many Japanese American farming families in the San Fernando valley were forced to leave their land, property and belongings. A few families were fortunate enough to have family friends watch over their property when they were interned. For many other Japanese American families, who were uprooted from their homes and interned, adjusting to camp life was very hard. Some Japanese American families resettled in the San Fernando Valley after the War and began farming. Others returned to find their land completely gone and were forced to find other occupations. For those who lost their land, many ventured into the gardening business.

[9:28] **Roy Muranaka:** So they never had an opportunity to go back, almost all the farmers, ex farmers were small farmers, 20-40 acres land. That's what they did and they lost everything. I know one of the old family friends used to farm in Saugas. My good friend's father used to farm up there by the Van Norman reservoir. We had no contact with the San Fernando valley until after the war. There was a lot of farmers in the San Fernando Valley that lost everything. Its terrible.

[10:08] **Narrator:** Many Japanese American families who settled in the san Fernando valley encountered discrimination in some form or the other. Some children were teased at school for being Japanese and adults were not able to purchase homes in certain areas. Even though the war had ended, the Japanese American in the valley, still faced a harsh reality.

[10:27] **Hayako Kihara:** We went to buy a house, we went to Sepulveda and went to a real estate. I said we want to buy a house on the other side of Sepulveda like where Granada Hills is. He says I won't look for anything on the other side of Sepulveda. You better buy something that's on this side of Sepulveda.

[11:08] **Narrator:** As you have just seen in this documentary the history of Japanese American farmers is important. Their experiences are a vital part of the history of the San Fernando Valley.

END OF TRANSCRIPT.