

“Japanese American Farmers in the San Fernando Valley Before And After WWII
Oral History Project”

JAMES HIGASHIDA

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

San Fernando Valley

24 March, 2004

Interview conducted by

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AAS 390: Asian American Communities Field Practicum

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JAMES HIGASHIDA
ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW INTRODUCTION

Narrator: Mr. James Higashida

Occupation: Real Estate agent

Address: 9755 Valjean Ave, North Hills, CA 91343

Date of Interview: March 24, 2004

Length of Interview: 65 minutes

Session: One

Place: Mr. Higashida's home

Subject: Japanese Americans in the San Fernando Valley

Interviewer: Joseph Kim

Camera Person: Dinah Nghiem

James Higashida Oral History

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James Higashida

ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW ABSTRACT

The subject James Higashida was born in El Monte California on October 16, 1928. He currently resides in North Hills California with his wife. He is currently a real estate agent with Prudential working in the field for over twenty-five years. James has three brothers and sisters and has three children. He has resided in California for most of his life, and he had farmed ever since he was a little child. He is pure Japanese descent and he held a religious affiliation of a Buddhist. His parents were farmers and he and his two brothers and sisters had to help out in the farm in order to survive. His vivid memory of the landscape and surroundings of the San Fernando Valley in that time helped gain knowledge of not only the Valley itself but also of the residents that lived in California. Although it wasn't a diverse environment like the San Fernando Valley is today, different races lived in this environment and were able to share many experiences and work together as a group to survive these rough experiences.

The interview consisted of questions that began with information on the subject's parents and his experiences as a young child. It was very important to trace back to the beginning of a Japanese generation residing in the San Fernando Valley. Then the questions consisted of the subject's childhood through adolescent experiences prior to World War II and after the internment camp. After the internment camp, the subject tried to pertain the life he had before, but it was very difficult to get back on track with nothing they had established. It was interesting to acknowledge the interaction between other races. It was surprising that not much discrimination and stereotypes were exhibited on

James Higashida before and after World War II even though being from Japanese descent.

Mr. Higashida was a true San Fernando Valley farmer meaning that he has experienced and witnessed firsthand all the obstacles and struggles before and after World War II. Although discrimination was common with most Japanese American families, Mr. Higashida was fortunate enough to be associated with people who did not treat him with disrespect as much as the other people did to others. Mr. Higashida has worked in the farming industry since he was born to his adolescent years growing primarily green onions and carrots in North Hollywood and Sun Valley. He was had to live in portable houses and moved around from place to place trying to farm and go to school at the same time. Though it seems like a harsh thing to go through at a young age Mr. Higashida never had any complaints or excuses he just seems to go with the flow. Although there were a few instances where he felt discriminated against, most of the time he was just too busy with his own work and minded his own business.

Mr. Higashida's life story was very interesting. This transcript summary provides firsthand experiences through a first person narrator, which provides details never heard before. He was very cooperative and generous to do this interview. He hoped to further assist the Japanese American community by providing information On the past experiences of the Nisei, and hoped that the information provided will provide growth in the Japanese American community and also for the students taking Asian American Studies courses at California State University, Northridge.

Interviewee: James Higashida (JH)

Interviewer: Joseph Kim (JK)

Date: March 24, 2004

Subject: Japanese American Farmers in San Fernando Valley Before and After WWII

JK: Hi this is Joseph Kim, and I am here with Dina Nghiem and we are here at North Hills California at James Higashida's house on March 24th 2004 at 7:04 P.M.

Thank you for taking the time to help with this project. For this project, we are interested in the experiences of Japanese American farming families who lived in the San Fernando Valley, focusing on the experiences prior to WWII and immediately after WWII. Your experiences are very valuable to this project, which has not been well documented. This project was initiated by the San Fernando Valley JACC and SFV JACL. We are CSUN students helping them out with this project as part of our Asian American Studies class project. The information you provide will be used for research and educational purposes. This interview is voluntary. If there is any portion in which you do not want to discuss, feel free to let us know. With your permission, we will be taping this interview. Please let us know if you have any questions or comments.

[02]JH: Hi my name is James Higashida. I moved in the San Fernando Valley prior to WWII in 1937 and farmed in North Hollywood. During the war, we were relocated to Manzanar and relocated in 1946.

JK: Background about San Fernando Valley. I liked to get a sense from you what San Fernando Valley was like while you were growing up there. So can you tell me what it was and how it has changed?

JH: Well like I said, I been in the SF Valley, we moved from San Gabriel Valley in 1937, and at that time SF Valley was still trees and agricultural state. And we farmed in North Hollywood and we had small tenant farming acres there.

JK: Were there any other Japanese families living in the area?

JH: Yes, as a matter of fact, my uncle lived just a few miles away. And there were several Japanese families living near by. The Yamashidas, Fujitas and our closer friend Imamoto and Itas, Odas, Sataguchis, Mayakawa and quite a number of farmers living near by.

JK: What occupation did they hold?

JH: Well, the majority of the people around us were farmers and there were several that farmed and others were produce farmers who hauled our produced after we reaped our crops and they will deliver it to wholesale markets in Los Angeles

JK: Were there any other ethnic groups living in the area? Chinese? Koreans? Filipinos? Mexicans? African Americans?

JH: Yes, as a matter of fact, predominantly Mexicans for the simple reason that where we farmed there was a Mexican community called Orcasida camp which is located north of Stagg and between Tujunga and Lankershim and most of our employees came from that camp so it was a convenient way to farm.

JK: I'd like to know more about your parents ended up in the San Fernando Valley. How did they decide to move to the San Fernando Valley? When did they arrive?

JH: Uh, like I said we were living in San Gabriel and we moved to SF Valley in approximately 1937. I'm not sure still, I was only in 1st or 2nd grade at that time so my recollection isn't really that great. But I believe part of it was from my uncle who moved to SF valley prior to us. So we just moved close to our relatives. That's one of the major reasons and I'm sure there were other reason but I guess I was too young to know and I didn't care at that age.

JK: So did you work at the farm when you were young?

JH: Oh yea, we were all helping out on the farm. We were doing many things, trying to help out the family

JK: Can you describe what the house looked like?

JH: Before the war, I have a picture which I took prior to the war in 1940. Our house was, we didn't have any toilet facilities and we called it a rabbit path to the rat house. When we moved to the SF Valley in north Hollywood, the house was kind of incomplete, and the house was tear down type of house, so we had to put in our own floor. So for the first

couple months we had the outside frame however our floor was dirt, and slowly we were able to gather some lumber and put a floor in. and subsequent to that we had floor

JK: In that area, what does that area consist of now?

JH: Mainly it is all residential. It is all grown, it is a really healthy community now, it's a really robust community. And it's doing very well

JK: What city is that?

JH: It's at the edge of North Hollywood, before the war it was called Roscoe but now it's called Sun Valley.

[05]JK: How did your parents become farmers?

JH: When I was born, they were farmer, from what I hear, they just became farmers by no other choice. That was only thing they were able to do.

JK: What kind of crops did they grow?

JH: Primarily it was carrots, green onions, I think green onions and carrots were the main crops they grew. Simply because the ground was very sandy low which grew very beautiful carrots so they were known for beautiful carrots so most of the farmers grew green onions and carrots.

JK: From my knowledge the more of like the Northridge area was lettuce and cabbage?

JH: Well, way back, before the war Northridge area was mostly citrus, lemons, grapefruit, orange and toward Canoga park, it was mostly dry farm because they didn't have any water facilities and that part of SF valley was lowest part of San Fernando valley so in the winter it was called black frost which would kill everything. So during the summer, they grew out alpha navy beans and that type of crops.

JK: Can you tell me what your mother's and father's daily routine was?

JH: Just before the war? In general? Well I think all Japanese families, they woke at 5:30 6 in the morning, made breakfast, for us made lunch so we can take to school and they were out. And they went out o the field and work all day, came home late at night, and mother made dinner then we had outside bath, while we fill up like a cannibal in break big tub with wood burning and make the water hot. And we all jumped in and it was the best part of the day for us.

JK: So did your mother work outside the home? Or she was working mostly with your father?

JH: Yea, she was mostly working with my father on the field.

JK: So she was responsible helping out with the farming and coming home and taking care of the kids.

JH: Exactly, exactly.

JK: Was the pay that your parents received sufficient enough to make a living?

JH: Income? That I can't answer simply because I was young, it was before the war, but I really seldom heard my parents complain about there income is not enough. If it was, they kept it away from us. So we had a very happy family.

JK: Who was responsible for the household duties and taking care of your brother and sister?

JH: We al had our own chores. I had two older brothers and a sister, sister being the oldest. She was kind of like head of the kids, she is the one when my mother came home late, she would be the one doing the cooking, she would see to us that we are not doing our duties. We had to do our certain chores, and that's what it was

JK: Did your parents have to hire anyone to work on the farm?

JH: Yes, like I said before, we were adjacent to a community which was mostly Mexicans called Orcasida camp. And so as far as getting labor assistance at the farm it was very easy. And we made a lot of real close friends who helped us during the time we needed extra help they would bring their friends and they were very very nice.

JK: Is there anyone else living on the farm?

JH: Yes, there was a family that my father kind of took in. they were apparently today's way of calling homeless. So my dad found a house adjacent to our ranch, we moved that house over, and they lived above about 50 feet from us. Maybe 100 ft from us. But hey didn't work at the farm they just lived at our house.

JK: Who made key decision in your family regarding movie, property, how money was spent, approval of marriage.

JH: Both of my parents father and mother

JK: Did you parents ever participate in any kind of strike or protest?

JH: No, I think because simply there's a saying in Japanese, both gama, which means endure and shikataganai which means that's the way it is. So the accepted as the way it is. Those two philosophies was embedded in us as well as my parents, so far as demonstrations so, very little is any at all.

[10]JK: What kind of hardships did your parents face from society?

JH: Sure there are discriminations, there are places where they hesitate to go, because my dad spoke very English. My mother was a Nisei, she went to grammar school where and spoke English very well. However, there was a certain amount of discrimination that were gama and shikataganai .came into play ,so it wasn't really bother to us.

JK: Is there one memory about your parents you would like to share with us?

JH: My dad I guess, he was from what I hear and what others tell me, he was a very diplomatic person, which I knew he was. Even though he was a farmer, most people respected him. They came to him for advice, anything they did as a group, they came over and discussed with him what was the best way, for that I was very proud of him. Other thing that sticks in my mind was this was at a funeral at one time. And for some reason the chairman was not able to attend, so they asked my dad to be the chairman of the funeral, and without any preparation, he gave a beautiful speech and even the reverend was really surprised at what he said and repeated what he said in his eulogy and that made me very very proud.

JK: Now I would like you to tell me about yourself? What was it like growing up in the farm?

JH: It was fun in a way. Before the war, being that I was young and not a care in the world, I did what I was told to do. Played with my friends from Orcasida camp. Helping irrigating the crops. My dad will stay in one end where the water would be coming from the barrel and ill stay at the bottom end I would raise my hand when the water would reach the bottom. And then they'll stop the water. And it was one of my jobs. But it was fun

JK: At what age did you begin to work?

JH: I guess from the very beginning

[15]JK: What was your daily routine?

JH: I went to school roscoe grammar school and I was at 3rd grade at that time. And up to 65th grade, came home and my chore was to drain the tub outside the bathtub, clean it, fill it with water and come back around 5 o'clock and I start gathering the water and burn the wood so we can make the water hot. And we jumped in the water at the end of the day and took a bath.

JK: Did you brother and sister help you with any other responsibility?

JH: Sure, we all had individual responsibilities

JK: Do you feel that your brothers and sisters were treated equally by your parents?

JH: Yes absolutely

JK: Who was the eldest and what role did she have?

JH: My sister was the eldest. And two brothers above me. She was kind of like the assistance mother if you want to put the label on her. She kind of took care of everything

JK: Did your family want you to grow up and take over the farm?

JH: No, that was never brought up. My dad said what ever you want to be, do it. But do it your best. Give your best. Beside that, get as much education as possible. Because they can step you from everything, wealth your personal but one thing you can't take away from you is education. So he was very strong as far as education was concerned. We used to go to grammar school till 3 o'clock and then from 3 we used to go to Japanese language school till 9. And then on Saturdays we started at 8:30 and be home by 4.

JK: What was your brothers and sisters aspiration?

JH: Keep me in line. I don't know. They had their own goals I suppose.

[20]JK: Was farming different for the Japanese Americans then it was for others living in the area?

JH: No I think the farming life was different in a way especially in SF valley there weren't many nationalities or people farming other than Japanese. I think one of the reasons is because they had no other choice. Because of discrimination perhaps. But majority of the farmers were Japanese.

JK: Can you describe the techniques you used to farm the vegetables, type of land?

JH: The type of land would be depending on the area but where we cropped it was sandy low. It was great for carrots. The techniques, we didn't have any tractors so we had horses. And like you see in old movies we had single plow so we had a team of horse pull the plow come all the way and then come back all the way down. To plow a whole acre it took a long time, about a week.

JK: Did you guys sell the crops in markets or trucks?

JH: No we had produce haulers. It was mostly Yamashitas and the Fujitas that used to collect the produce and haul that to the Los Angeles market.

JK: Did your parents have time to spend with you?

JH: They tried. We used to annually go to kumamoto, which is genginkai picnic which means all the Japan and southern Japan would get together and have a picnic.

JK: Which parent tended to be stricter and how so?

JH: I think as far as being strict, my dad was more on the education side and to do things that's not shameful not only for yourself but for the family. Mother would be more of a nice, don't get into any fights, which we usually do. We would come back from school with torn shirts which she wasn't too happy about.

JK: Your father was very strict and disciplinary?

JH: My father was very strict. When I came back from Japanese school, we had to read books several times and we had to get it right in order to close the book.

[25]JK: It seems like your parents had traditional Japanese culture as well as American culture inside the home. How did you react to that?

JH: I guess it came naturally for us. Because my mother was native born and my mother was born here. So, at home we spoke Japanese, but to siblings, we spoke English. My mother was Nisei, I spoke Japanese to her. I guess it's because that's the way it was. It was nothing we would think of not doing, we learned Japanese customs through my dad, and through school and my mom we learned English custom as well.

JK: Do you remember getting sick or any of your family members getting sick?

JH: Not a catastrophic kind of thing. It was just a common sickness. If I was sick either my mother or my sister would take care of me.

JK: When your parents didn't work ,what kind of activities did you do as a family, and what kind of occasions and holidays did your family celebrate?

JH: When my parents are not working, we would I guess clean the yard, sometimes we had a car and my dad used to drive us to little Tokyo to see Japanese movie. I still remember one time from a mount baldy and we saw the planetarium, the observatory there. I remember that and it was very exciting to me.

[30]JK: Can you tell me a little bit about your school experience? From elementary to high school?

JH: When we moved to north Hollywood my grammar school was roscoe grammar school. It's on Strathern and San Fernando Valley. I was a milk monitor, before the war we sang all kinds of America the beautiful and stuff like that as a class and then subsequent to that, I don't know what' it's called today but that time it was north Hollywood high school and I was able to go there for 2 months and then after that I went to Manzanar.

I really wanted to be a dentist. Really wanted to go to SC. But back in north Hollywood we had lack of funds, and so we worked and changed my direction

JK: When you were in school were there a lot of ethnicities?

JH: My grammar school was mostly Caucasian and Spanish. Very few Japanese. But my junior high school, I really don't know

JK: Did people treat you differently because you were Japanese descent?

JH: In grammar school I really didn't notice because I was too young. But after the war it was a little different look and the attitude in the Caucasian friends that I had. Also when I went to junior high school I noticed a great deal more.

JK: You mentioned you studied Japanese, did you attend school?

JH: It was a school but it was forced by my dad. I'm kind of glad I did, but I was young and I wanted to do other things.

JK: Did you enjoy Japanese?

JH: Not at that time. But right now I'm glad I learned it.

JK: What were some activities that you did for fun?

JH: We had a team called valley Nisei. We were sponsored by fire equipment dealer called so cal tractor and we played soft ball and volley ball

JK: Where you involved in any community activities?

JH: Yes my father was very active in church activities. Like I said before a number of my dad from church would come to my dad for advice and suggestions.

JK: Were you involved in any school clubs or organizations?

JH: No.

[35]JK: Can you tell me a little bit about dating?

JH: Dating and all that was after we came out of camp. I am a very shy individual so didn't date too much. I joined young Buddhist Association and there we made friends and had social gathering.

JK: Can you tell me how you met your spouse?

JH: Haha. I was introduced to her by a very close friend mine. George Syto. And he and I along with others was part of YBA association and from that he introduced me to her. And wah lah, stars and everything!

JK: What was the first job you acquired?

JH: I was just helping my parents I had no option at all. I didn't get paid or expect anything. And didn't want anything, I was very comfortable

JK: Did you experience any racial backlash or stereotypes?

JH: I remember one time my wife and I went to a Nisei Ball and there was a place and we went there to see and dance a named band. We paid our normal admission and the waiter took us way next to the kitchen and the great big pillar. And the stage was on the other side. When we were sitting there Harry Dela Fonte, anyway he was the one of the stars, a good singer, and he came from the kitchen and saw us sitting here, and said who put you here? And said you can't even see from here, and he tried to find another table for us, but apparently he wasn't able to do that.

JK: But he was more on your side, he was trying to help you.

JH: Yes he was.

[40]JK: Now I'd like to discuss the time immediately before Executive Order 9066. Can you tell me the social climate was like back then late 1930s up until the day of Pearl Harbor?

JH: Well, 1936, 37 I was very young, so I wasn't aware of anything until 1940, 41. And when that happened as a matter of fact I was on the field and we were doing our things harvesting our crop, and one of our helpers ran to us and yelled there is a war! I said who where why? And he said Japanese and America. Since then we see signs all over, curfew and all, and at night we see airplanes flying and they're practicing with searchlights. They're shooting the search light and spotting the planes. We see signs "Japs not allowed" we saw that we were going to a regular grocery store and we were kind of discriminated against that

JK: How did your family react to the news?

JH: We were on the farm and here comes the helper and we didn't know what he was saying. We thought he was joking and didn't believe him. And he brought a portable radio and that when we found out.

JK: Did any of your parents or family members get taken away prior to internment?

JH: No, not my family, but I've heard of others getting taken away. But fortunately we were not.

JK: You were taken to Mazanar around high school.

JH: Yes I was in 8th grade. In May of 1942.

JK: You guys were working in the farm so what happened to all your properties?

JH: Well, our crops and our personal things. Crops we had to let it go. Our personal things we just gave it to our employees. Only thing we can take with us was our suitcase. We had to leave everything. We came out in 1945. From 1942-45.

JK: Do you remember any Japanese Americans that didn't have to go to camp?

JH: Well my uncle volunteered and was sent to Utah. Those that didn't go to camp voluntarily left everything and moved.

[45]JK: What was it like at camp? Were they really strict and mean? Or was it like a jail type of setting?

JH: It was very very difficult. Apparently, the houses were ready and we came in busload. In May in Mazanar, it was cold and windy the wind was just horrendous. And right in the middle of the dessert, the dust was so fierce we had to put a handkerchief around our nose, and the barricade was shielded with felt paper and the floor they used green lumber but it shrunk and there were spaces between the wood and dust and sand came in. So it was very dusty. And our mattress was, we were given a mattress cover and we had to go to pile of hay and stuffed it in, and that was our mattress for about six months. And the bad part of that was there were ticks and we used to get bites and it was very difficult.

JK: I'd like to know about life after internment. Were any of your family members released before internment?

JH: no

JK: Where did you and your family go after internment?

JH: Our family was separate. My dad and my brother. Because my dad was active with the Buddhist church, they felt that he was one of the unfavorable so they sent him to Santa Fe, which is a camp outside, which is more restricted. And my brother, they didn't want my dad to go by himself, so he volunteered to go with him to Santa Fe. I went with my mother to Salt Lake called Clearfield, which was where my uncle was. He went to here to Utah and my brother stayed back for about six weeks to get everything together at camp. And then as we moved back from Salt Lake to north Hollywood that's when my brother joined us and then about a month later my dad and my other brother joined us.

JK: After the internment did you go back to your old farm?

JH: Not to where we farmed before. Before the war we farmed in north Hollywood, and afterwards we farmed at today it's called Arleta.

[50]JK: So you guys settled to a new area and started working on the farm again.

JH: Yes. Right. And continued on with the farming

JK: How big was the acreage?

JH: I think when we first started it was like 35 acres. But we were all grown now, so we were all able to help. I don't know if I should say this, but at that time it was very difficult to find houses, due to lack of housing, I don't think there was any discrimination, can't prove there was any. So my dad went to the army surplus store and bought two tents. And we put up a tent right on our farm ground. We were tenant farmers and we put up two tents and we lived in a tent for about a year.

JK: So there was no electricity?

JH: No there was no electricity. Neighbor farmer who's been farming for number of years, Italian by descent, was very nice. He said any time you want water you can get any water as possible so we would take three giant barrels fill it up with water and it will last us for three days.

JK: Can you show us some other pictures?

JH: Well these are 3 pictures of tractors we had. This is similar tractors to the ones we used. This is my brother and I. (shows another picture) this is me. Those hoppers are what we called pre-fertilizer.

[55]JK: In conclusion, is there one memory of growing up in the San Fernando Valley that is most important to you?

JH: Difficult to say any one memory, but I still remember the SF Valley was in the early 1946 when we came back from camp, it was mostly agriculture, citrus, dry farm and the valley grew today It is very very amazing to me how fast the valley grew. I recall back in 1948, acre of ground in Areida was about 90-100 dollars in acre. And they would sell it at that price. And basically an acre of ground would be about half a million dollars.

JK: Is there anything that you want to talk about that we haven't covered?

JH: Well, I'm very very appreciative of what you are doing. And I am very appreciative of what CSUN is doing. I hope that more universities and colleges would take heat in what you're doing and I hope that more people are aware of what the pioneer of San Fernando Valley have done, have sacrificed. And the 3rd and the 4th and the 5th generation

see this they would know how the family of the San Fernando Valley struggled to make into what we are today.

JK: Well, I would like to thank you for your time. And it's been a pleasure to have you as an interview. This will help us a lot with our educational purposes.

JH: I hope little contribution I've made to you is useful and it's been a pleasure for me too.

JK: We are going to close the interview now it is 8:05 on March 24th 2004. Thank you.

[End of Interview]