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**TELLING OUR STORIES
Japanese Americans in the San Fernando Valley Oral History Project**

Transcript of

MICHI and TOM IMAI

12 November 2004

Interview conducted by

**Jean-Paul DeGuzman and Michael Razon
Asian American Studies 390: Field Practicum
Professor Edith Wen-Chu Chen**

Transcript prepared by

Jean-Paul DeGuzman

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This oral history was conducted by Jean-Paul DeGuzman and Michael Razon on November 12, 2004. The original transcript was prepared by Jean-Paul DeGuzman. It was part of an Asian American Studies 390: Field Practicum class with Edith Wen-Chu Chen. Final editing of the transcript for transfer to the Urban Archives Center was completed January 2006.

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Michi and Tom Imai were a retired school teacher and retired flower grower. They resided at 11314 Wheatland Avenue, Lake View Terrace, CA, 91342, where the interview was conducted. Michi and Tom Imai were interviewed about the Japanese American farmers in the San Fernando Valley before and after World War II, and also focused on the roles of women and interracial and interethnic relationships.

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MICHI and TOM IMAI ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW

ABSTRACT

This interview with Michi and Tom Imai was conducted on November 12, 2004 at their residence in Lake View Terrace, their home since 1941 (excluding during Evacuation). Their interview was filled with rich stories that both attest to the overall Japanese American experience, and tell of the minute details that make life interesting.

Neither of the Imais are native to the San Fernando Valley, yet their life histories are inextricably tied to Valley history and the experiences of other Valley Nikkei. Mr. Imai was born in Los Angeles and moved here with his family while still a pre-teen. Mrs. Imai was born in Montebello and came to the Valley after marrying in 1941. Both of them came from flower growing families. Mr. Imai's youth in the Valley was fairly typical of many other Japanese Americans: he grew up in an agricultural setting with a large family. He recalled that women were in charge of domestic affairs.

Their experiences immediately before, during and after WWII are focal points in the narratives of Mr. and Mrs. Imai. A reasonably young man, Mr. Imai was a self-employed flower grower, although he did recall hiring Filipinos to help the business. As a young couple both were active in the Los Angeles Japanese American Citizens League (JACL), but were instrumental in forming the San Fernando Valley JACL, the last chapter to be formed before evacuation. Mr. Imai was very proud to note that he was the first chair of the SFV-JACL. In fact their activities with the JACL caused quite during their war years, and the couple was shuffled between army camps and internment camps.

During the War, the couple was relocated to Chicago after leaving Manzanar. They spoke highly of their experiences there, as they were surrounded by sympathetic individuals who

were also descended from recent immigrants. Mr. Imai spoke passionately of leaving to join the army and befriending an African American soldier, who was the brunt of much racism. Life was relatively stable for Mrs. Imai during this time, as she was a nursery school teacher.

The Imais were reasonably lucky upon their return to the post-War San Fernando Valley. They were able to rent their home out during the war, thanks in part to a scrupulous White real estate agent, and came home “to money in the bank.” The Imais were able to start a family during this time. Mrs. Imai recalled this period very well as she took care of their son and later went on to a long career in teaching.

Michi and Tom Imai’s histories tell of hardship, but also triumph. Overall they spoke very positively of their experiences and the many supportive people, of all races, that have been a part of their lives. Truly, their small home on Wheatland Avenue is a veritable landmark for the San Fernando Valley.

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INTERVIEW NOTE

Interviewees: Michi Imai [MI] and Tom Imai [TI]
Interviewer: Jean-Paul deGuzman [JD]
Cameraperson: Michael Razon
Date: November 12, 2004
Time: 43.47
Subject: Japanese American experiences in the San Fernando Valley prior to WWII, focusing on interracial and interethnic relationships and the experiences of Japanese American women.

00:12

JD: Today is November the 12th 2004. We're here with Tom and Michi Imai.

00:18

MI: That's right.

00:24

JD: Residents of Lakeview Terrace. How are you two today?

00:26

MI: Fine. [To TI] Are you?

00:28

TI: Uh huh.

00:29

MI: [Laughter]

00:34

JD: Alrighty then, well both of us are CSUN students we're working with the Japanese American National Museum, the Japanese American Community Center in Pacoima and the San Fernando Valley Japanese American Citizens League.

00:48

MI: Well, you cover quite a big area.

00:52

JD: I know.

00:52

MI: [Laughter]

00:54

TI: I was the first president.

00:55

JD: Really!?

00:56

TI: Of the [San Fernando Valley] JACL.

00:58

JD: You were the first president of the JACL?

1:00

TI: Formed just before we had to move out.

1:04

JD: Oh I see. Wow well uh we have lots of other interesting things like that to talk about today. We're actually pretty interested in Japanese Americans living in the San Fernando Valley before World War Two, right before World War Two and right after World War Two...We're kind of focusing on what was like the roles of, experiences of Japanese American women and relationships between Japanese American folks and Mexican American folks and any other ethnicities. Mr. Imai, I think you said you hired some Filipino fellows back in your day...

1:47

TI: Yes.

1:48

JD: Well this interview is being taped; if there's anything you don't want to talk about that's fine with us, just say the word and we can move on, but without further ado, I'd like to get a sense of what the San Fernando Valley was like when...

2:06

MI: Now he came to the San Fernando Valley when he was twelve years old, so why don't you tell them...

2:16

TI: Well it was mostly from farm country. They lived over there...my brother passed away, we moved over here when we got married. We had nice neighbors, Italians. So we had sympathetic neighbors when the war broke out because Italy and Mussolini you know. We had lots of Italians...Leonardo in the canyon.

2:52

JD: ...You said there were lots of farmers, was your family in farming?

3:00

TI: Well I used to go cut flowers with my brothers, two brothers. They both passed on.

3:10

JD: Oh, I see. Did your family live just in a regular house or on a farm?

3:15

TI: We had a house over there. The house is still there.

3:20

JD: Oh wow, really?

3:21

TI: Yeah, one of the oldest houses around!

3:23

JD: Wow.

3:25

MI: About a block and a half from here.

3:30

JD: So when you were growing up Mr. Imai, what was it like growing up...what was an average day for you? '

3:42

TI: Well, when I went to school you mean?

3:43

JD: When you were a young kid here in the Valley.

3:48

TI: Well we used to go by bus. But I don't know how much it was. It was very reasonable compared to today's money. They pick us up, pick up all the kids along the street of San Fernando. There was San Fernando High School and then there's Owensmouth, Van Nuys, North Hollywood, Burbank, in the Valley. That's all there was. Owensmouth's Canoga Park no, but those days it was Owensmouth.

4:28

MI: You went to school

4:30

TI: I went to a junior high in San Fernando; combination junior high/ high school. It's separated now. Junior high was located where the old high school was. They remained there but they got a new campus for the high school.

4:51

JD: On the topic of high school, could you tell me a little bit about your friends in high school?

4:56

TI: Well, we had a lot of friends. Everyone was friends, friendly.

5:06

MI: How about your trips?

5:09

TI: My what?

5:10

MI: Trips. You had a group of people that went on trips all the time.

5:15

TI: Oh trips, you mean camping. I took a forestry course in Los Angeles... [Mr. Imai proceeds to talk about camping in the mountains for several minutes]

6:45

JD: Well, you know, I was also kind of interested, we're talking about growing up in the Valley. You mentioned you had Italian American neighbors and they were pretty sympathetic to you. Did you recall any other neighbors you might have had that might have been Mexican or Filipino?

7:06

MI: They worked for you, didn't they?

7:09

TI: We had some Filipino boys working.

7:11

MI: Where did they come from?

7:12

TI: There's Yaheen [sic]¹. Yaheen was working for us when we had to leave. He kept things going for they guy who took over... Fortunately we owned the property so we could come back. Lots of people lost everything you know.

7:33

JD: And you were able to own the property because you two are American-born?

¹ The name was unclear. Perhaps the name was Joaquin.

7:37

TI: Yeah, well, we were kids. Got around that by uh, we had uh, an attorney that was guardian because we were little kids you know. And this Alien Land Law at the time our parents couldn't purchase anything, property.

7:58

MI: We were married in June 1941 and the war broke out in December and we built this house and was in it only about three months, I guess. All my wedding things you know, got settled, and we had to evacuate.

8:24

TI: We stored all our furniture inside our brother's house.

8:29

MI: In the garage.

8:31

TI: The reason why...they had a garage, side room. We packed everything in there and the lady next door moved in and took care of the property.

8:46

MI: And we rented this house.

8:48

TI: We had a very nice man. A real estate man in San Fernando. He took care of renting this place and we got money in the bank when we got back [laughter]. Paid off because we paid cash when we built it. Wasn't that much money in those days.

9:11

JD: The real estate man and the women who moved in; do you recall, were they European American or Mexican?

9:21

MI: The person who last rented this place liked it so much, they bought the property below and built their home.

9:34

TI: The husband died not too long ago. But Frances Sieber [sic.] is still living next door and she's a couple years older than we are.

9:45

JD: Wow, I see. You know I think it's really interesting, you mentioned that the Filipino man kinda watched over things...was he a single, a farm laborer...

10:01

MI: Yes, a laborer.

10:02

TI: Nice guy. He'd invite us to some dinners or something every once in a while. We ate Filipino food!

10:12

MI: I didn't know that!

10:14

TI: Don't remember? You don't remember!

10:15

MI: I went?

10:16

TI: Sure!

10:19

MI: Oh, I don't recall (laughter).

10:25

JD: I see, well that's nice. Do you recall what happened to him?

10:30

MI: Never.

10:35

JD: Were there other laborers that you or your family hired?

10:40

TI: Well we had several guys working, but I don't know whatever happened to 'em.

10:44

JD: I see...Is there anything else? Are there any other stories you'd like to share about growing up in the Valley?

11:11

MI: You had to help...

11:13

TI: There's not that many left from our class, I know that...I got a call not long ago from Mary Varneys. I thought she was dead, but she and her brother are living around Vista some place. She was asking me how many people are still alive from our class. Most of 'em died off and all I know is she, May and I are the only ones left. This guy in San Fernando, Lee Hamer, the Toyota man, was a classmate. He was the only one that got really rich I think (laughter)!

11:58

MI: Didn't you have to come home and help your folks with their flower business?

12:06

TI: Well, yeah.

12:08

MI: Well you didn't tell them that [laughter]!

12:12

TI: Well, we worked...were kids man [inaudible].

12:15

JD: That's really interesting, your family had a flower business, you say?

12:19

MI: Uh huh

12:20

TI: My father

12:21

MI: He was a sweet pea specialist

12:26

TI: When we were in, lived in Hollywood, East Hollywood on Los Feliz Boulevard, just below Griffith Park, uh, he grew flowers there. He had the first flower shop on the Los Feliz.

12:42

JD: Oh ok. Did you have a flower business here in the Valley?

12:46

TI: We sold our flowers at the wholesales market in Los Angeles.

12:50

JD: Oh I see.

12:50

TI: Wall Street. I haven't been down there for a long time. Nobody alive that I know!
(laughing)

13:04

JD: Was helping out with the family business, did everybody help out?

13:09

TI: Oh yeah.

13:10

MI: In those days you know everybody worked together

13:14

JD: Even in the home would everyone work together? On things like doing the laundry and cooking?

13:22

MI: Sisters.

13:25

TI: I had sisters. They always said boys outside girls inside (laughing).

13:31

JD: Oh your sisters would say that?

13:35

TI: Oh that's alright. They did the cooking and the laundry and whatever.

13:38

JD: Uh huh. What kind of things did your mom do?

13:42

TI: My mom died early you know, she's in the 50s I guess. She helped in the fields.

13:54

JD: I see, I'd imagine.

13:56

TI: When they first came out they didn't have anybody, it was a family affair.

14:03

JD: That makes sense yeah I see. Mrs. Imai...I know you moved here to the Valley in 1941.

14:10

MI: Uh huh.

14:11

JD: So...were you a school teacher here?

14:15

MI: I taught North Hollywood. A nursery school, when my son was in elementary grade. I was working quite hard in a nursery school. I'd have to meet with the parents and had to talk and conduct various speeches. You know. And I figured I was working quite hard in a nursery school situation. So I went to the principal at Stonehurst Avenue School where my son was going and I asked if I could, uh, observe a first grade. So she said, "why don't you come teach?" I thought, "well teaching at the same school my son was attending wasn't such a good idea, but she said well it doesn't matter, it depends upon the person and she encouraged me and told me what I need to do. I had to pass exam and had an interview and so on. And she helped me along and I taught 22 years or more.

15:44

JD: Now, I'm sorry, was this before or after WWII?

15:47

MI: After...After my son was born. He was born in 1946. He started kindergarten, until then I stayed home, took care of him. And then when he started school I decided to go to nursery school because I saw in the newspaper that they needed a teacher in North Hollywood and I thought, "Why not try it!?" So I did and I taught 3 years here and after that I went into public school work.

16:25

JD: Well, when you were working in North Hollywood were most of your students...could you tell me about your students?

16:31

MI: They were all students of the members of the church, Christian church.

16:36

JD: Oh I see. So were most of the kids...

16:44

MI: Were Caucasians.

16:47

JD: I see. May I ask, what did you do prior to World War II? Did you help out with your husband's flower business?

16:54

MI: No, I uh, my parents were in flowers business...They grew carnations and roses. I helped at home, but I taught at a nursery school soon after I graduated college and taught for 3 years in Los Angeles. So when I went to Chicago during Evacuation, I taught a nursery school there.

17:27

JD: I see. Did you have any family in Chicago?

17:33

MI: No. I had our son after we returned.

17:40

JD: In 1946?

17:44

MI: Yeah [laughter].

17:45

JD: Okay, let's see here...so actually I just kind of want to jump back a bit. I think its really interesting how you were talking about your neighbors here in the San Fernando Valley, who...You had Italian Americans who were sympathetic and you had the Filipino American who worked on the farm...do you have any other stories, recollections of...just your neighbors?

18:22

MI: Well, it was a real country! In fact, we didn't have paved roads you know at first. It was...

18:32

TI: It was paved!

18:33

MI: No it wasn't!

18:35

TI: It was too!

18:36

MI: [Laughter]

18:39

TI: There was only two lanes: one each way.

18:42

MI: Oh, I'm sorry! [Laughter] Well any it was orchards...lemon orchards, all along here.

18:57

JD: I see, um...and so you know our school was built on orange orchards.

19:12

MI: Uh huh, I see them...

19:13

JD: The Muranaka family used to have...

19:17

TI: Our son went to Northridge.

19:19

JD: Oh wow, that's a nice connection.

19:22

MI: And we go the Gold's Gym right there...He goes four times a week and I go twice.

19:28

TI: Keeps me alive!

19:29

MI: [laughter]

19:33

JD: So, let's see. I think that's really interesting there was the flower business right before the war and uh you had just moved here before evacuation. Are there any other experiences before evacuation...Do you remember what it was like right before Pearl Harbor?

20:05

MI: Well, the day you had Pearl Harbor my women's group got together. We had dinner at a nice restaurant and we got the news and that night my father was taken. He was the treasurer...

20:30

TI: Of a Japanese association...

20:35

MI: In LA.

20:38

TI: He was a dangerous character! [Laughter]

20:42

TI: The FBI or whoever it was grabbed him and sent him to...[inaudible]

20:50

MI: He was put in jail.

20:53

TI: Where they sent a bunch of 'em.

20:55

MI: But he was sent to jail that night by the Montebello Police....and he spent a night with a Black prisoner.

21:07

JD: Really?

21:08

MI: And after that they sent him to various camps.

21:12

JD: Oh, I see.

21:15

MI: Yeah. They had one, La Tuna Canyon and they went to Missouri? What's that, Montana?

21:22

TI: Missoula, Bismarck, some place.

21:25

MI: Yeah, he was sent all kinds a place and ended up at Santa Fe, Mexico, New Mexico and my mother was in Hart Mountain with her...

21:39

TI: Family.

21:40

MI: Her family, and um, he was finally released to take care of her because she had cancer and died in the camp.

21:54

JD: I see.

21:57

TI: We were at Manzanar and uh they had quite a few disturbances there and we were active in the JACL and things... they grabbed us and took us out. We spent couple nights at they army...

22:16

MI: Camp?

22:18

TI: Army sentry camp...where the sentries were camped. Then they took us to Death Valley Camp, out there, there's a bunch of us went to Death Valley, from there we were relocated to Chicago.

22:40

MI: And I do want to say that the American friends were super. They helped us...

22:47

TI: Very nice to us.

22:49

JD: I'm glad, that's good. Since you mentioned the JACL and at the beginning we were talking about how you were president of the Japanese American Citizens League in this area...

23:00

TI: That was before the...we were the last chapter to be formed before we had to move, evacuate.

23:14

JD: Would that be the San Fernando Valley chapter?

23:17

TI: Yeah. We were active n Los Angeles before that. But, uh, this guy, Slocum, he was born in Canada. Japanese guy adopted by American family I guess, Canadian family, he had the name Slocum. He was a World War I veteran and he was member f the American Legion in Van Nuys or North Hollywood. I think it was Van Nuys. Anyway, through his influence we obtained their legion hall for our inauguration diner. It wasn't anything big. The girls chipped in and made spaghetti dinners...with all the trimmings. It was real nice.

24:16

JD: I see. Are they any other memories you have of working with the JACL?

24:32

MI: They used to have their meetings at our house.

24:40

JD: Did you host the meetings and plan them out?

24:49

MI: I can't remember that far back! [laughter] I'm sure I had to serve refreshments.

24:49

JD: So...

25:12

TI: In Chicago we were working at this settlement house and all the people around the area were Italian, German...

25:25

MI: Polish.

25:26

TI: Polish...Lithuanian.

25:27

MI: Mainly Polish.

25:30

TI: And their parents all came...

25:33

MI: From a foreign country.

25:35

TI: Were immigrants so they understood our situation pretty good...we were Americans.

25:40

MI: They didn't even know...

25:42

TI: All the kids spoke their parents' language.

25:45

MI: They didn't even know what was happening in California and I was teaching in the nursery school and what do you suppose? All the sailors and soldiers children were attending the nursery school and we had no problem at all. They were very nice to us.

26:16

JD: Oh that's good. I think that's very interesting that as immigrants they could, you know understand your background.

26:27

MI: And they accepted us very nicely and he was coaching...

26:31

TI: I had a brother...she had a brother in that area. He had gone to language school or something. Both in the army. My brother's working in a hospital there. They'd come and visit us at the settlement house. People knew we had brothers in the armed forces...and a neighbor over here was a colonel in the army....he was procurement of something [inaudible] he came to visit us, had dinner with us one night, and we walked him to the street car and waved with all of our friends in the neighborhood [laughter]. Very nice people.

27:27

JD: And that was in Chicago?

27:27

MI: Uh huh.

27:30

JD: What was it like you uh...did you come straight back to the San Fernando Valley from Chicago?

27:36

MI: Yes we did.

27:37

TI: What?

27:38

MI: We came back.

27:39

TI: Yeah.

27:40

MI: But you know, he had a interesting experience...he was going to go into the army, so he came to California from Chicago to settle business and in coming to California, you made friends with a Black fella?

28:04

TI: Yeah, a young Black boy!

28:08

MI: Was he in the military?

28:09

TI: He was in the army.

28:10

MI: The army.

28:12

TI: We stopped in Las Vegas. I was gonna treat him to lunch and they wouldn't serve this guy, he was in the army! Oh man! I asked 'em, "we'll get ourselves a couple of hamburgers and take 'em with us." That was something. So finally...he was a Chinese cook! So finally they gave us a couple of sandwiches and we paid for it ... we got on...[inaudible].

28:51

MI: That's how bad it was for those Colored people...the South was just terrible you know and even coming to California he couldn't eat! They really had a miserable time those Black people. No place to stay no place to eat when they traveled. It was a shame.

29:21

JD: Did you know any other Black folks around this time, or just...

29:27

MI: No, he happened to have that experience.

29:30

JD: I see. Actually...did you encounter any prejudice or discrimination that was...

29:45

TI: We hear a lot about other people maybe, but...

29:53

MI: No problem...I went to Whittier College...and mixed organizations and everything...had no problems at all.

30:03

JD: I see, what kind of organizations were there at Whittier?

30:10

MI: Well, instead of ...fraternities, we had societies and I put down I belong to Palmer Society. I still hear from them.

30:30

JD: Oh yeah, so I guess there were White women?

30:37

MI: Oh yes, mostly.

30:38

JD: Were there other Japanese American women?

30:40

MI: Well there were a few, but it wasn't you know, separated or anything.

30:53

JD: Were there any other organizations like that aside from your college years that you were a part of?

31:05

MI: Well, in the Valley right now, I belong to California Retired Teachers and then they have Valley University Women and they have activities throughout the year.

31:22

JD: I see.

31:23

MI: [Mrs. Imai proceeds to talk about her work with the Descanso Bonsai Society, during her retirement]

[The Imai's grandson, Steven, enters the room; pleasantries are exchanged]

32:52

TI: He's hapa!

32:55

MI: [Laughter]

32:58

TI: Hapa...half and half.

33:02

JD: So he's your son's son?

33:05

MI: Grandson.

33:06

TI: Mama's German-Irish-Scotch

33:08

JD: Oh wow...actually, were they any hapa children when you were a young couple here in the Valley?

33:17

TI: No...It was a no-no those days, I guess.

33:24

JD: Oh, do you know of any Japanese folks who even dated White folks or Mexican folks?

33:29

MI: In those days, we sorta stuck to our own race I think.. But after evacuation and all when they came back...all together different.

33:48

JD: Yeah, things change.

33:50

TI: Did you interview Fred Yamashiro, a plumber, you hear of him?

34:00

JD: Mike and I actually haven't but someone in our class might have...what's his story?

34:10

MI: No...he's a good plumber, that's all.

34:14

TI: One of the richest guys around! A plumber, he had 3 sons, all professionals now. They all married hakujin.²

34:24

JD: Oh.

34:29

MI: [Laughter] How about you fellas?

[Mr. and Mrs. Imai inquire about the personal lives of the interviewers]

35:45

JD: What kind of work did you two while you were going through school...high school, or when you were at Whittier?

36:03

MI: Well, I didn't work. I helped my folks whenever I could because they had quite a big business growing carnations and that took quite a lot of work.

36:03

JD: Yeah, I'd imagine.

36:07

MI: But most of us, there was 7 of us, most of us went to school until evacuation and our 2 young brothers couldn't go, but the rest of us went to college.

² Hakujin = Caucasian

36:27

JD: Well, I think that about does it for the questions I have. Is there any particular story you'd like to share, either of you, about...here in the Valley...

36:44

MI: Well, I came just before the war, so...

36:48

JD: Did you find it a big difference from Montebello?

36:48

MI: Well I'd say yes. We were closer to town there in Montebello. This was really country.

37:09

JD: More populated in Montebello?

37:22

TI: We have nice neighbors here. Across the street...Thai gal, married to German guy.

37:36

MI: This is a nice street...been improved a lot.

37:43

JD: And how long again have you been living here?

37:44

MI: 1941...and we've been married that long

[The Imai's joke with Mike Razon about married life]

38:18

JD: I'd imagine lots of things have changed around here since 1941.

38:23

MI: Oh yes, definitely.

38:25

JD: I see you've got the freeway.

38:27

MI: Yeah, right! We have Handsome Dam³ and a fishing...what do you call that? Pool? Fishing lake and a huge swimming pool, soccer field, baseball field. We have a library, and do you know, Koreans have built a big compound up there...All Nations Church, they call it All Nations Church, but it's run by Koreans.

39:07

JD: I've never seen that.

39:08

MI: Yeah, quite a big you know...and we've got a golf course. And we've grown a lot.

39:17

JD: From just a lot of...

39:18

MI: Yeah! Have a library!

39:24

JD: Alright, any other memories you'd like to share with us that you'd like to pass along?

39:30

MI: I think we've said enough, don't you? [Laughter]. It's time for you to go home!

39:46

JD: Alright then I guess that will conclude our interview. We thank you again very much...

39:50

³ Mrs. Imai was most likely referring to Hansen Dam.

MI: Well, I had no idea what you were gonna ask, and what you gonna do with 'em!

40:00

JD: [Interviewer explains the transcription process and end result of the “Telling Our Stories” project]

41:09

MI: [Mrs. Imai talks about painting classes she took at California State University Northridge, during her retirement and some traveling experiences]

43:47

JD: Well, in that case, that about wraps it up...

END OF INTERVIEW