

I: Interviewer
K: Kiyō
F: Francis

Interviewer introduction: August 10th 2006, I'm interviewing Francis Lyon and Kiyō Fujimoto. My name is Leticia Montoya.

I: What do you know about your family's immigration from Japan?

K: Our grandfather came...

F: Which grandfather? Ishii or Fuji...

K: Fuji...19, no 18...1890s...1880s...he was married...(not audible) Okay?

I: Okay

K: Our grandmother,

F: Which side of the family?

K: I'm staying on the same side Francis, I'm going all through, through our mother's side. Our great grandmother or grandmother was a picture bride and she came thru Seattle and met my grandfather and they settled in the bay area

I: Okay

F: They had three children, three girls

I: Okay

F: And the oldest died, uh...how old was she?

K: Before mom was born

F: Yeah, my mother was born in 1904 and then her sister was born in 1906

I: Okay, your father's side

K: Where they married before they came? In Japan?

F: They were married in Japan and I don't know exactly when they came...had to be the late 1890s and every time they had a child our grandmother would go back to Japan to have the child, our father was the first one stateside that they didn't leave in Japan they had intended to go back to Japan but I guess after a while they decided they wouldn't.

I: How did they settle into Long Beach?

F: Let's back up a little bit

I: Okay

F: First, they settled in San Francisco

I: Okay

F: And then the earthquake, and they, the earthquake upset them so much so they decided they didn't want to live in earthquake company

(all laugh)

I: I can't blame them!

F: So, then they move down to long beach and I don't remember to this day why they chose long beach, do you?

K: uhum (shaking head no)

F: It could be they picked a place

I: Picked a spot...

F: They moved to long beach, they didn't move some place else and then moved to long beach from there

I: Okay

F: So we tell everybody they've been here in Long Beach since, what date do we use?

K: I don't know but it's in 1906, at that time they had two boys and a girl, boy, girl, boy, then our uncle Joe, the youngest boy was born and he made the press telegram cause he was the first Japanese or Asian?

F: Japanese

K: Japanese to be born in Long Beach and by the time, it would say ten years ago, fifteen, twenty, and when he hit fifty he said I guess I'm not going to be in the paper anymore.

(all laugh)

I: And that was Uncle Joe on the...

K: The Ishii side

I: On the Ishii side

K: It was Frank, who is our father, Lucy, Bill and Joe.

I: Okay, and what kind of business were your parents in when they initially came?
F & K: Our grandparents
I: Your grandparents
F: Um, Ishii grandfather set up a store in the farmers market, and they sold produce and he saw somebody else in another store selling flowers and he thought that looks a lot easier and more profitable than produce so they eventually switched over to produce...
I: To flowers?
F: To flowers and
K: When did they open the store?
F: I don't know, I vaguely remember and Karen was asking me if I had any, I vaguely remember the letterhead saying established in 1923
I: Okay
K: So that's after dad was through with college?
F: Yeah, so where was our grandfather with his business
K: He kept, he stayed at produce, I mean at the market
F: I guess, I don't know
K: He was not a florist he was just selling flowers
F: Yeah
I: How long was he in produce, do you imagine?
(Intercom, Kiyoo on the phone)
K: We don't know, we do know, if she says the store was established in 1923 that was the year after our father graduated from college
I: where did he go to college?
K: Stanford
I: That's very nice...and your father continued to do business in flowers or in produce?
K: Florist
I: As a florist
He called back to, his father became ill, so he was asked to come back to help with the family business because they needed to be able to feed the younger children, there weren't any born after Joe but still
K: I can't remember when grandmother Ishii died? It's on the, on the gravestone
I: Okay, what did your mother do during this time? When....
F: They weren't married yet
I: They weren't married yet...when did they meet?
F: mother was still up north and she, she started out at Cal Berkeley and to work for a shipping, Japanese shipping company over in San Francisco, and um, I guess friends thought that they should meet, is that right?
K: They met by shapone (?)
F: Yeah, but it wasn't really
K: Well, it was a marriage broker, matchmaker; I don't know how you explain shopone(?)
F: Except it wasn't a formal thing like picture bride kinda thing
I: No
F: No, two people thought that they would make a nice couple but he down here and she was up there (phone rings)
I: Okay, do you know about when that was?
F: It would be late 20s...1930...1929
K: They weren't engaged that long, they were got married on January 31 so it must have been sometime in 1930
I: January 31 was...
K: 1/31/31
F: And that's what they looked like (shows wedding picture) handsome couple don't you think?
I: Very much so
(Intercom)
K: 1/31/31 and by that time my father was established as a florist and his business was downtown long beach, um, fifth street flower shop that would have been between pine and locust because Strickland's was on the corner, Jones' cafeteria was over here and the dining room was here and dad's was right in the middle by the alley

F: And uh, his landlord was um, one of the uh, um, movers and shakers of Long Beach, his landlord was Mel Campbell, M-E-L C-A-M-P-B-E-L-L, and he and my dad just hit it off and he was his landlord as long as I can remember right?

I: And what kind of organizations did they become involved in?

F: The Japanese Americans Citizens League

K: He was the first president of the Long Beach chapter

F: as a matter of fact John was in here the other day and he was asking me if I was up at the long beach, Japanese, national museum, and he said when you go over there, there is a big picture of the convention in Long Beach, 1939, 1940 and dad is right there in front.

(Kiyo laughs)

I: Wow

F: I was born in '32 and Kiyo was born in '36 and my mother was a homebody, my paternal grandfather became ill...did they always live with?

K: They always lived with 'em

F: so that was kinda of an unusual marriage, a hard marriage I would think for a woman, she's away from home, her home, and she comes into a new marriage and she then she's got her father in law who is ill living with her and..

K: Well, I don't think he was ill then...

F: No, no and our paternal grandmother had died already my mother never met her. They are buried at the cemetery also

I: At Sunnyside?

F: Yeah, and so the dates will be on the gravesite, I forgot about it

I: Everyone then is, your grandparents, paternal grandparents, and your mother and father are...

F: All buried at Sunnyside...

I: Okay

F: Maternal are over in...

K: Westminster

I: Can you tell me what you remember of the internment?

F: Quite a bit...as Kiyo told you we were very young when it happened but um, because we didn't know very much I went to a school where you had to do an independent study program for graduation, so I did a research paper on evacuation and I learned quite a bit about what happened but I found that my parents were very unique because they were in their forties and were able to speak English so they worked with the officials like the people in the army and everything like that and tried to communicate between the army and the people that could not speak English, my mother was fluent in Japanese, she was able to help them. So I can vividly remember our dining room table would just be covered with papers all of these people coming in and trying to help them with their paperwork, trying to get through the evacuation process. As a result, our family was the last one to leave long beach we were evacuated on Easter Sunday 1942. And were sent to Santa Anita...

K: And we were in Jockey's quarters, we were lucky...cause some were in horse stalls

F: that's in...we were there for a short period of time, Santa Anita was considered an assembly center and they were kinda sorting people out and trying to get them away from the west coast, and they were sending them to different parts of the United States and we ended up in Arkansas, its kinda interesting cause Kiyo got sick and uh, my dad and mother were talking about that.

I: Do you know when that was that you were sent to Arkansas?

F: That would be 1942 also

I: Okay, later in the year

K: I got sick so my mother and I got a compartment going to Arkansas. (laughs) That's conveniently sick I'll tell you, I remember having to be under the card table and the steam....

F: Really?! (laughs) I don't know anything about that because I guess dad and I were somewhere else on the train.

K: Yeah you were, you were on the regular seat part.

F: Coach...we weren't in Arkansas very long, my father was on, I guess you could say a hit list, and there were a lot of radical people in...well, first you have to remember everybody was forced to go into these camps whether you wanted to or not and so they had to blame somebody, so people like my father who were leaders in the Japanese Citizens League were being accused of being responsible for everyone having to be there. And he got a letter from someone saying try to get out of camp cause it's not safe for you to be

there so through friends here in Long Beach and Chicago area we eventually were able to be evacuated to the Chicago area...

K: Yeah, he was kinda on a pilot program to see if it would work

I: Well, just to clarify, it was the Japanese that were upset at your father because they thought...

F: Yes, people in camp with us

I: okay

(small talk between the sisters)

F: In my fathers mind, the Japanese were never ever going to win the war, so he wanted to come back to California....(shows picture) this is when we were in Oak Park Illinois. And this is when we were in camp, and can you see that three seven?

I: three seven D?

F: That was our address

I: You were both so very cute (laughing)

F: Of course. (handing me letters) This is the woman that arranged for us to live in her garage apartment...

I: In Chicago?

F & K: In Oak Park

(more sister small talk)

F: I'm trying desperately to find the letters that I came across because I think the Historical Society would be very interested in having it. My father was trying to find business opportunities and places to live here in Long Beach he still had a lot of contacts here and he wrote some letters, and one of the letters said that, with a heavy heart, they just didn't think that it would be a good place...that the climate was good for us to return here to Long Beach. So, I thought that would be of interest to the historical society and I put it in a safe place and I don't know where that is.

I: How long were you in Oak Park?

K: '43-'45, June of '45 we went to Berkeley

F: Maternal grandparents had a home there, my dad was still trying to get reestablished in Long Beach, but the war was still on.

I: You came back to Long Beach in '46?

K: Yes, we never traveled during the school year so it was during the summer of '46

F: Kiyo was enrolled in Barnett and I was enrolled at Hamilton, which is now Long Beach City College

K: Barnett is still on Atlantic

F: My folks finally got reestablished at 2294 Long Beach Blvd., with the help of some old family friends. We lived on the second floor above Model Cleaners, owned by Jack Grogen. They were famous for their mini horses. I remember asking my father if he regretted not using his college education, and he said that he was too young to appreciate all that he learned.

K: Our dad was educated at home, he didn't go to school until

F: He was about ten

K: He was bumped four years in school

F: He graduated from high school when he was sixteen. Soldiers were returning from WWII and attending college, so there was a large gap in age between him and the other students.

K: Frank was born in 1901, December 31 but they didn't register him until the 15th of January.

K: He had a photographic memory, he had very good grades. He took the Stanford test and they didn't believe the score so they made him take it over and he would get a better score every time they made him take it over.

F: He was a very centered person, he had many wonderful things happen to him during his lifetime, but his invitation to join the Long Beach rotary was one of the more outstanding things. He really enjoyed it.

K: He had very little time off so this was time to relax and be more social.

I: Do remember about when that was?

K: I was still in college...

F: It had to have been the mid 1950s, his rotary sponsor delivered the two of us.

I: What other organizations beside the rotary and the JAACL?

F: Well, my mother was a homemaker and she put her family before her self until the day she died. She was the first person of color to join the children's auxiliary at memorial hospital. She was active in the woman's circle at the first Methodist church. We were active in the women's circle here in town and we started the meals on wheels program, and she was the first to volunteer. She put the meals together. The homemaker turned into an active volunteer.

K: Mom helped in the store after the war, but after my dad died she sold the store. When she sold the store she became an active volunteer. She would make deliveries for the store, so if we ever needed to know where anything was we would ask her.

F: Mother drove well into her 90s. She drove like a bat out of hell! You could hear her lay rubber. My dad was really tall for a person of his age, he was about 5'10"

I: When did he pass?

K: October 21, 1960, three days after my mother's birthday. They had just started going on vacation, they had just got back and three days later.

F: He had a stroke at a rotary function. There was no way he could have survived.

K: Mom died November 26, 2000

I: How long did she keep the shop for after he died?

K: Just one year, then she sold it to our Uncle Joe Ishii and it became Belshore florist.

F: So it's still in the family so to speak, he and his wife ran it for a while. We always felt apart of the Long Beach community because of my parents. Mostly because my father owned a business and when you own a business you become involved in your community more than if you work for a big corporation.

K: I remember when my father came back in 1945 or 1946 to re-establish his business my dad said it took him 20 minutes standing on the corner of 4th and Pine to come across anyone he recognized. That's how much the city had grown.

F: My family is very honored that you want to honor them that way, especially my mother.