

NARRATOR: JOHNNY AND YO NIIZAWA

INTERVIEWER: RALPH KUMANO

DATE: July 14, 2004

RK: Okay, this is an oral history project of the CCDC-JACL which is to be part of the Special Collection of the Henry Madden Library at California State University at Fresno, part of the Izumi Taniguchi Oral History Project in the Asian Studies division. I am here to interview Johnny Niizawa and his wife, Yo Niizawa, both Niseis, both seventy-nine years old, at Sanger in their home here between Fresno and Sanger on July 14, 2004. My name is Ralph Kumano and I'm with the CCDC-JACL organization. Okay, Johnny, where and when were you born?

JN: I was born in Turlock, California, in August 9, 1925.

RK: Okay, and your father and mother, where did they come from? Are they Issei?

JN: No, they are Issei, their father and mother both came from Karoshima, Japan, and we farmed in Turlock, California. We were cantaloupe and watermelon farmers.

RK: Okay. Now how many brothers and sisters did you have?

JN: I got six, a five brothers and three sisters.

RK: Okay, where did you fall in the family order?

JN: I was the first one.

RK: Oh, so you are the oldest?

JN: Yeah.

RK: Child, okay. Do you remember much about family life?

JN: Well, not too much because well, I was sixteen when the war started see and before that, all I did was work and in sports.

RK: So you went to the schools around Turlock elementary school and also high school?

JN: Yeah.

RK: Did your family have many hardships before the camp?

JN: Oh, hardships all the time.

RK: Yeah, farming is always up and down every year. Okay, how was the family structure, the discipline and responsibilities of when you were growing up?

JN: Well, being the oldest naturally I had to—I had to discipline myself so that I wouldn't bother the rest of the family but other than that, I kept out of trouble and did sports and what not.

RK: Now what high school did you go to in Turlock?

JN: I went to Hilmar High, Hilmar.

RK: Hilmar High School, okay. Did you complete the four years there?

JN: No, I accompanied three years.

RK: And so you said you went out for different sports and activities? What were some of the sports and activities?

JN: Well, baseball and basketball and football.

RK: Oh, okay. And what about any clubs or activities?

JN: Let's see, I was a Boy Scout then.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: And let's see. I guess that is about the main things.

RK: Now did you do any type of Japanese cultural activities like go to Nihon Gakko or?

JN: I just went to Japanese school Saturdays and Sundays.

RK: Okay, and then what about church?

JN: Church I went to Buddhist, once a month I guess, it was.

YN: Once a month?

JN: I used to come around once a month.

RK: Oh, okay, so you didn't go to Central Church in Turlock.

JN: We'd go up to Stockton I guess.

RK: That's a long drive, yeah, so they came out to the rural communities once a month, okay.

How do you feel about high school experience?

JN: Oh, it was pretty good. I had no problems.

RK: Okay, so you were treated all right?

JN: I was treated all right.

RK: And the teachers were good to you and also the students?

JN: Yeah. The students were all right.

RK: One of the reasons you only went three years was what? Is that because you had to leave?

JN: Three years because of the war.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: And then I had to go to camp to go one year of high school there.

RK: Oh, okay. Okay, now we're going to talk to Yo and also ask where and when were you born?

YN: In Selma in 1925, July.

RK: Uh-huh. And did you grow up in that Selma area going to elementary school and?

YN: Until we were evacuated.

RK: Now how many siblings were in your family?

YN: There is five of us girls.

RK: All girls okay, wow.

YN: And I'm the fourth one.

RK: Oh, you're the fourth?

YN: Yeah, my sister Kimi is the oldest.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: Then Faye and me and Cho, the youngest one, she just left for San Francisco. She was here for a visit.

RK: Oh, okay, that's good. What do you remember about family life when you were growing up?

YN: Nothing but work.

RK: Okay.

YN: You know, our parents all worked so—

RK: What did they do? What was their life, also farming?

YN: Farming, yeah, we never owned any property—

RK: Right.

YN: But you contracted or—

RK: Right, it's either contract farming or some type of leasing.

YN: Yeah.

RK: What did they raise?

YN: Grapes I guess and then we'd go and pack peaches and stuff.

RK: Yeah, I remember those days, okay. What did you do for entertainment?

YN: Nothing too much.

RK: Yeah, there was no TV back then so, listened to radio or just played regular games.

YN: Uh-huh, yeah, just make our own.

RK: Make up your own fun things, yeah. I liked those days because I remember when I was growing up, it was kind of fun. Now were there strict rules in your family, discipline and responsibility that the girls—

YN: We had responsibility.

RK: The girls had to take care of the house also with the mother?

YN: Yeah, and then we had to pump our bath water.

RK: Yeah, uh-huh.

YN: Because it wasn't like this at that time.

RK: Now where did your parents come from? Were they Isseis from Japan?

YN: Uh-huh, Kooka.

RK: Oh, okay. Now when you were growing up did you participate in any church or—

YN: Yeah, we used to go to Japanese school.

RK: Okay, Nihon-Gakko.

YN: On Saturday and Sunday a couple of hours so we used to go after it was over to the Christian Church and to the Buddhist Church until our parents picked us up.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: Okay, I think they had one or two hours of each so we used to go to both of them.

RK: Selma had their own little church which later became the Selma Mission Church, I guess.

YN: Well no, it was—there is a park. They built a park there.

RK: Oh, okay. Now what high school did you go to?

YN: Selma High School.

RK: Okay, so you went to grade school as well as high school all through?

YN: Until 1940 when the war broke out.

RK: When the war broke out, okay. And what activities did you do at the high school?

YN: Nothing too much.

RK: Any clubs or sports?

YN: No.

RK: Okay, how were you treated there by the teachers as well as students?

YN: Good.

RK: Okay, no problems?

YN: No problems.

RK: With any of the—I imagine most of the children or school children were Caucasians?

YN: Oh yes.

RK: In Selma?

YN: But most of us at that time—Japanese stuck together, you know.

RK: Okay, was there a high percentage of Japanese compared to today in the community?

YN: Yes.

RK: Okay, so probably in each of your grades there were probably four or five Japanese?

YN: Oh yeah.

RK: Today it would probably be one or two if even that.

YN: See but nowadays, they mix with the haku-jins.

RK: Right, right there is a lot of more mixed.

YN: At that time we all had our own group of Japanese.

RK: Right. And then the Hispanics had their own small group.

YN: Uh-huh.

RK: Now Johnny, did your area have a lot of Japanese also?

JN: There were but just a small percentage of kids.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: But our high school in our class, we only had four or five.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: I still go to class reunion, would have been in 1943 but I didn't graduate there but they asked me to go.

YN: You just went the other day.

RK: Oh, okay, good.

JN: I just went the other day. A lot of—well, it was close to eighty people when we registered for the first one and there was only twenty-five in our graduating class and there is only twelve left, twelve or thirteen left, of that class.

RK: Wow, okay.

JN: They must have died, I guess.

YN: They went off to war, too.

RK: Yeah. Oh, yeah. It's been a while. How many were Japanese that were still—that came back to the reunion?

JN: Well, just me.

RK: Oh, just you?

JN: Yeah.

RK: Oh wow, okay, so there wasn't many others and also with the war, a lot of Japanese got separated because they moved to different areas.

JN: Most of them went to L.A. area.

RK: Right, okay. Now I'm going to ask—this is getting to WWII. When did you hear about Pearl Harbor and where were you?

JN: I was in Japanese school, I guess. It was Sunday.

RK: Yeah, Sunday was when the actual bombing happened, Sunday morning.

JN: I don't know. Just the course of in the morning, we used to go to Japanese school in the morning and we heard it in the morning.

RK: Yeah, it was by radio.

JN: By radio.

RK: And then the next day, I guess, the newspaper would put it on. And Yo, what about you?

YN: Well, we were in Japanese school, too. We were batting a basketball, a bunch of us.

RK: Oh, wow.

YN: Somebody came back and told us that. It was kind of a weird feeling.

RK: Oh, okay. You are right because the ramifications from all that didn't really sink in until a little bit later when they started trying to say that Japanese may be a threat on the west coast, and that slowly came about in the following whole year when there was all kinds of government meetings of what to do with the Japanese-Americans on the west coast so it was kind of like a transition time. When the war broke out, were you frightened of what other people would do?

YN: Yeah, after it was kind of set in our minds.

RK: And were there any taunting or name-calling or things like that?

YN: I don't remember any of that but we got busy throwing all the records and (inaudible) records and stuff.



RK: Right. So as far as this is what you both were in high school so did you still go to high school until the time when everyone was rounded up to camp or did you quit school.

JN: I did. I went to school.

YN: I can't remember.

JN: I went to school.

RK: Until the day that you—

JN: Got evacuated.

RK: Okay, now when the evacuation order came in, you were still in Tulare [sic] and you were in Selma.

YN: Uh-huh.

RK: Did you go the same camp or how was that?

JN: No, I was in Turlock.

RK: Okay, so Turlock, where did they go?

JN: The Merced Assembly Center.

RK: Oh, okay, and then what camp did they eventually get sent to?

JN: We went to Colorado to Amache.

RK: Oh, the Amache Camp in Colorado, and since I think they said 168 was the border, north of Clovis went to a different camp and everything and south of that. So you were in Selma so you went to the Fresno Assembly Center?

YN: No.

RK: You went straight to camp?

YN: Uh-huh.

RK: Okay, so you went—

YN: One of the last to go I think.

RK: Okay, and so right.

YN: Across the highway, they went already.

RK: Right, they had certain lines of separation and certain people went to Manzanar and others went to Poston and then quite a few went to Gila in Arizona, that's where you went, okay. So we're going to talk about the camp years. How many years were you in the camp?

JN: I was in the camp a little over a year.

RK: Okay.

JN: And then I went off to work.

RK: Oh, for work release program?

JN: Work release.

RK: And where was that?

JN: Well, I was eighteen and I got four—4C and I became a 1A and I got called in September and took my physical, then I decided to go to Washington, the state of Washington.

RK: Oh, okay, wow, that is a long, long way over.

JN: I went there six months, I guess, trying to beat the draft.

RK: Okay, so even though you were in camp, they were still drafting people?

JN: Yeah.

RK: Oh man, that didn't make sense.

JN: So they caught up with me in Washington and I came back in '43.

RK: Okay.

JN: No, '44, I came back in '44 and I went into the service.

RK: Okay, and so you went into the service in 1944 and how, when did they ask you on the loyalty oath, to the two questions? That was back in 1943?

JN: Mine was both yes, yes.

RK: Yeah, that was back and then so once you went into the service, did you go back to Amache and then go into the service?

JN: Yeah, yeah.

RK: Now the Amache camp, what was the biggest city close by?

JN: Lamar, I guess. Lamar, Colorado.

RK: Oh, okay, and so how was the camp life?

JN: I don't know too much of the camp life.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: I went to school for about a year and—

RK: But other than for the work release, were you confined there? Did they have guards and barbed wire and the whole works?

JN: Sure.

RK: That most of the camps had.

JN: Yeah.

RK: The sentry posts. Oh, okay. And so did you ever get to go into town for special things?

JN: Yeah, I think Amache was kind of lenient.

RK: Oh, because it's so far away from the west coast, yeah. So it was probably a little bit more.

JN: And eventually I understand the kids used to roam all over the place.

RK: So you don't have any recollection of them treating you harshly, harshly or anything?

JN: No, oh no.

RK: So they were just doing their job and you guys were just confined to an area. What about Gila Camp?

YN: It was fun. Fine, you know, it was kind of fun, you know, because we were about sixteen or seventeen and all your friends, you are all together.

RK: All together, right.

YN: You didn't have to go to work.

RK: Now did they have a high school in the camp?

YN: Yes but we had to share books. We sat on boxes.

RK: Okay.

YN: 1943.

RK: Right.

YN: First, first high school, it was awful. We didn't learn a thing. And then I worked part-time at internal security until I left for Chicago.

RK: Oh, okay, so you didn't stay, how long did you stay at the camp itself?

YN: I guess a year.

RK: Oh, and then you were able to get?

YN: Yes, because my sister Faye was in Chicago.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: Then my sister Kimi went to Cleveland and my sister Cho went to New York. And then my sister Faye, she worked at the hospital, you know, so we were tray girls. It was a non-contagious hospital.

RK: Oh okay.

YN: So we were tray girls, you know. We fixed, put all the food on the trays.

RK: Right.

YN: So, I worked there.

RK: So you were able to a—was this a volunteer or was this a paid position?

YN: It was paid.

RK: And so—

YN: And I worked part-time there and part-time for American Optical Company in Milwaukee.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: I held two jobs. Crazy, huh?

RK: So as long as you had some type of job, they let you out of the camp to go to it, so that was pretty good?

YN: Yeah, we had to have a place where we would be.

RK: Like a sponsor type thing, exactly. Now do you recall anything about the camp, physical as far as the barbed wire or the sentry?

YN: Oh, yeah, it was just typical of any other camp.

RK: Yeah.

YN: Barbed wire, sentry.

RK: Yeah, because there was some recollection that since you were in camp, the sentries were for your protection but the machine guns, they were saying they were always pointed inside rather than outside.

YN: That's true.

RK: So who are they protecting, you know? Were they protecting the Japanese-Americans or were they protecting, yeah, them from the outsiders but overall, you thought that camp life, there wasn't any dramatic bad parts of it other than—?

YN: No.

RK: Okay. Now getting back to Johnny, when you went into the service where did you go to basic training?

JN: I went to Camp Blanding, Camp Blanding, Florida.

RK: Florida, okay. And so how long were you there? You are usually there, basic training is about nine months, huh?

JN: I was there two—three—no, I was there about eight months I guess. I got, on my fourth week in bivouac, I got (inaudible) myself and had to come back in and then.

RK: Oh, wow.

JN: I went to another company and went on with them and I had a stiff neck and so then I came back and the third company I went to, I was all right and so then the war ended.

RK: And so you just stayed in Florida most of the time?

JN: Yeah.

RK: Okay, so this was into 1945?

JN: Yeah.

YN: I thought you went to Japanese school?

JN: Oh, yeah, I did and then from Florida.

RK: Once the war was over, what did you do?

JN: They took me to MIS.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: MIS and I studied there about four or five weeks I guess and then I went overseas.

RK: Yeah, because they needed people for the occupation in Japan. And the MIS School was where? Was that the one in Monterey?

JN: Minnesota.

RK: Oh, Minnesota, oh, so they had another.

JN: Minneapolis, Minnesota.

RK: Okay, so when did you go overseas? This is probably in late 1945 or was it '46.

JN: December, no November, I left November of '45, that was three or four months after the war ended.

RK: Yeah, because the bombs were dropped in August and also yeah, August within a matter of three weeks there, both of the cities. So where did you go to when you hit Japan? Did you go to Tokyo itself?

JN: Yeah, I went to—I forgot the name of the place where the boat landed. Well, we landed in Yokohama.

RK: Oh, Yokohama Harbor, yeah.

JN: But then we trucked into what the—I forgot the name of the place but I eventually ended up in NYK Building in Tokyo.

RK: Oh, okay. Now were you able to see the country?

JN: No, I didn't get to see the country too much. I had—I was a telephone operator.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: And listened to the conversations of "buddha heads" talking.

RK: Yeah.

JN: And—

RK: So mainly you are translating what they are saying?

JN: Yeah, I worked one—one full day twenty-four hours and then I rested two days.

RK: Wow.

JN: Yeah. I was doing—I was doing that but maybe I shouldn't say this but Black Marker, you know.

RK: Now, you were able to meet some of the Japanese people?

JN: Oh, yeah.

RK: Now how did they—what were their feelings because you were Japanese and?

JN: Well, they—

RK: They understood?

JN: They understood but some didn't.

RK: Oh.

JN: And some—I guess die-hard Japanese and it was kind of—we had no problems.

RK: Oh, okay. And so how long were you there? When did you leave?

JN: I was there until May. I didn't stay very long, and in June, I came to Beale and got discharged.

RK: Okay, so this was in '46.

JN: Yes.

RK: Beale Air Force Base?

JN: Yeah.

RK: That is north of Sacramento there.

JN: North of Sacramento, yeah. But I can't, but I got on on a hardship case. My mother was pretty sick, see.



RK: Okay, now were they still in camp when you got back?

JN: No, they had moved to right out here.

RK: Oh, in Sanger, so from Colorado they were able to come back here to the valley, okay.

And so your mother was sick and so you were able to get out early?

JN: Right. But my brother went in right away after that.

RK: Okay.

JN: Yeah.

RK: And so when they came back, how were your parents received? Were they able to get a place to live pretty easily or was it difficult or did they even talk about it?

JN: Well, they came with a bunch of Japanese to this Leonard Brothers Camp.

RK: Yeah, I remember the Leonard Brothers, yeah.

YN: But that was the only way they released you, if you had a place.

RK: Oh, like a sponsor exactly, yeah, okay.

YN: You don't remember all those Quonset huts that were built on Belmont?

RK: Oh, yeah, I remember those. That is what they are for, okay.

JN: Now we moved over here to that—

YN: That tank house.

JN: That tank house over here. It is still there, you know. It is between Highland and Leonard.

RK: Oh, okay. Yeah.

JN: On this side.

YN: And that big house. Yeah, we lived in that big house.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: And they lived in the tank house and that big house was divided into two families.

RK: Yeah, that was a pretty large house.

YN: Yeah, Tsuji's. Do you remember the Tsujis?

RK: Yeah, yeah.

YN: The Parlier Bill and—

RK: Yeah, Bill Tsuji.

YN: Uh-huh, they lived on the other side. But they were the renters.

RK: See, my dad was the last to get out of the camp in early '46. And then he—the reason he came back to Sanger is that he had the constable stay at the house.

YN: Oh, see.

RK: And the constable kept the house, you know, he didn't have to pay rent, he just watched it and lived there.

YN: Oh.

RK: For four years so at least he got the property and the house pretty much intact.

YN: You were lucky.

RK: Yes, and then two or three other families were able to stay with us because they didn't have places to go until finally things got a little bit more settled. So some people were a little bit more fortunate, yeah. And I could see a lot of people and they didn't know anybody and what do you do when you are released from camp? Where do you go? That must have been a tough decision for quite a few. Now your case—where were your parents? You were in Chicago and they were still in Gila?

YN: When they wrote, my youngest sister in there, she was too young so anyway, she wrote and said they got notice to leave camp ,you know, if you wanted to, so all four of us

decided that it wasn't fair for one of us to go back to California, so all four of us came back.

RK: Oh, wow, that is amazing.

YN: So we knew we didn't have no boys.

RK: Sure, so that is pretty good that the sisters all stuck together and made that decision so. Where did your parents decide to come back to? Back to Selma?

YN: No, no.

RK: Oh, you came back to Sanger.

YN: Back to Sanger because of Leonard, you know.

RK: Right. Oh, so they also own that area? Oh, okay.

YN: Yeah. That is all owned by Leonard.

RK: Oh, okay. I thought, I know Belmont has a lot of Leonard.

YN: All of this and they had property in Fowler.

RK: Oh, geez.

YN: And you had to have a place to stay.

RK: So they were big, yeah.

YN: Oh, yeah, they were big at one time.

RK: Yeah, but they treated the Japanese pretty good then.

YN: Oh, yeah. They did.

RK: Yeah, so that was good. So once you came back what did you do? Well, how old were you at the time and what were you doing helping out your parents or did you look for jobs?

YN: We were working out in the fields but I had allergies so bad that I used to go to San Francisco during the winter and worked at the VA and worked at the state, but I'd come back when it was season time because we had to go pack grapes at the packinghouse, and then after that I found a job with Nor Vehicle, it was temporary and then I went to work for the Twining Laboratories and they were real good to Japanese, Mr. Twining.

RK: Oh, this is in Fresno. So you had a job.

YN: I worked there for about how many years, ten years or eleven years?

RK: Okay so, roughly between '45 and '55, somewhere in there.

YN: Yeah, and then from then I found an ad in the paper where you take a test and get a job at Sanger and I passed that because I was getting tired of commuting. Because we didn't have that many cars so I used to take Moyer bus.

RK: Oh, yeah, I remember the Moyer Stage, the black and white bus that used to go from Sanger to Fresno and back, yeah.

YN: And I got a job in Sanger School like, you know, and I worked there for eighteen years.

RK: Okay, now getting back to both of you. How did you meet each other? Now this is, you were in when you came back from Beale and you came back to Leonard's?

JN: Right across the drive.

RK: Oh, you were in the same area?

YN: Oh, yeah, they were in the tank house and we were in the big house.

RK: Oh, okay, so you met each other and how long was the romance, you know? Did you date?

JN: How long did we date?

YN: I don't know.

RK: Like my parents it was kind of like an arranged marriage where the family takes the— takes the female and arranges it in the situation with my dad so that's how he—he got married to my mother.

JN: Ours wasn't arranged, was it?

YN: No. (laughing)

RK: So you courted each other for a while.

YN: Oh, yeah.

RK: What year did you finally get married?

YN: 1950.

RK: Okay, 1950 so this is a couple years before the Korean War started?

YN: Yeah, but you know, my mother, my father was very lenient but my mother was very strict. She didn't allow us to go one date at a time. She always said don't do anything that would hurt the family. You know how girls are.

RK: Sure, now were both of your parents still alive at that time?

YN: Yes, but they both passed away very young.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: Sixty-seven and sixty-eight.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: They were only sixty-seven, sixty-eight, you know that's young?

RK: Sure.

YN: His mother died at forty-three.

RK: Wow, okay.

YN: That's young.

RK: You came back and she was sick so she passed away pretty closely after he came back?

YN: Compared to our days here. We're outliving our parents.

RK: Oh, exactly. Now right.

YN: We're all living too long.

RK: Living too long and some of the parents are outliving their kids. You know, because the kids die in accidents and things and yeah, you don't want to outlive your kids. That's not the way it's supposed to be but some of the older people are living a lot longer.

YN: How old was your dad when he passed away?

RK: He was eighty.

YN: Oh, he was eighty?

RK: Yeah, and in 1990 when he passed away and so he would have been ninety-four this year.

YN: Oh, and how old is your mom?

RK: And she was six years younger.

YN: Oh, I see.

RK: So she's basically eighty-eight right now. And so yeah, she's living much longer but in our family, the female lives longer. None of the males live real long. My dad was, that is pretty long for a male. But my grandmothers were both in their eighties.

YN: Oh, I see.

RK: And so my mother is still in her eighties going into nineties in a couple years. But then you have all the other complications like Alzheimer's coming in and so we are living much longer and a lot of these new things which probably didn't show up, are showing up and so we have to cope with other types of medical problems now.

YN: Yeah.

RK: Yeah, now getting back to Johnny, your—when you got out to Beale, how long after you came back, did she pass away? She was sick you said.

JN: She passed away that same year.

RK: Oh, the same year, so at least you got to be with her for a while, yeah.

JN: October of '46, 1946.

RK: And then your dad, how long did he live?

JN: He lived ten years longer.

RK: Okay.

JN: Ten years after that.

RK: But both were pretty young?

JN: They were pretty young, sixty-eight and sixty-nine that was.

RK: Yeah, okay. Now when you were married, did you settle in the Sanger area here.

YN: Uh-huh.

RK: And how were you treated as far as after the war years? Was there any discrimination or prejudice or things like that?

YN: No, we didn't have any. But he did I guess.

JN: I tried to get a job at PG and E and telephone companies and I couldn't get in because they kept telling me there is no job available. I know there is.

RK: Exactly. That is the easiest thing to say is, there is no job and then you see them keep on hiring other people.

JN: And so I hung around and worked for Leonard's and then I went to work for Pistachio Pump in Sanger.

RK: Oh, okay.

JN: And then I went into insurance and farming.

RK: So tried various different types of jobs, yeah.

YN: But Pistachio Pumps were very good to Japanese though.

RK: The Pistachio, yeah, they were good, yeah. My dad always had good relationship with the Pistachio.

YN: Yeah.

RK: They would always come over and fix our pump and yeah, they were good people. Now how many kids did you raise?

YN: Just two.

RK: Okay.

YN: You know, Janet passed away when she was twenty.

RK: And so there were a boy and a girl?

YN: Uh-huh.

RK: And they went through Sanger schools?

YN: Yep.

RK: Okay, and so she passed away at an early age?

YN: Yeah, when she was going to Fresno State. The boy was at Fresno State.

RK: Okay, and how is he doing right now?

YN: Well, he's with the State Parole.

RK: Oh, okay. That's pretty good.

YN: Yeah, he's got a good job. He got a state car.

RK: Wow, where does he live?

YN: He has a home in Clovis.



RK: Oh, okay. And does he have any kids? Is he married?

YN: No, he's not married.

RK: Oh, okay, so he's living a pretty good life?

YN: He says he's married to the Sunnyside Country Club.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: That's all he does is golf.

RK: Oh, okay. Okay, let me check on a couple other things here. Now you said the resettlement was fairly easy you think, or coming back, was it difficult? Did you individually have many problems?

JN: We had it pretty rough.

RK: Okay.

JN: There was eight of us.

RK: Exactly.

YN: And no mother.

JN: My mother died and I came back to help.

RK: Yeah.

JN: And my brother left for the service so it wasn't easy.

RK: Right, so you had to get together and help each other out, right. And help your dad out because you guys were living over here with the Leonard Camp.

YN: Yeah, but they were pretty good though, Leonard. The only thing they gave us. You know, we had nothing. What was it, beds of straw? I think were full of bedbugs.

RK: Oh, okay.

YN: It was awful.

RK: Yeah, anytime you have any type of mattress that's been around, bedbugs so.

YN: Oh, gosh.

RK: Oh, yeah. Yeah, those are some of the things you have to go through and thank goodness now we don't have to worry about those things.

YN: That's right. See but the haku-jins don't realize what we went through.

RK: Oh, exactly. Now how do you feel about the redress and reparations? Was that something that we deserved, do you think?

YN: Sure. More than that.

JN: We should have gotten more.

YN: Yeah.

RK: Now did you also get a letter of apology from the President?

YN: Uh-huh, yeah.

RK: I also got one but how do you feel about that letter of apology?

YN: I don't know, I just read it once and that's it so.

RK: Yeah.

JN: They just.

YN: Very simple.

RK: Yeah, it was very simple. I thought the idea was good but if they really meant it to be special, they would have put it on special paper.

YN: Paper, yeah.

RK: It was like it was just a Xerox copy with the President's emblem on it. It wasn't on special paper. Parchment paper would have been nice so you can frame it but I don't even know where my copy is so.

YN: Well, I have it filed.

RK: Yeah.

YN: But it was just a simple paper.

RK: Exactly, it wasn't something that you'd think would be more important than just a simply apology type thing but it was late in coming. I think it was something that should have happened much earlier.

YN: Yeah so.

RK: Yeah, and so a lot of people that were complaining about the reparations that Japanese should—Americans should not deserve any, but you know, we were American citizens.

YN: That's right.

RK: And a lot were taken away and especially for people that were even in camp, you are just living there and there is no income coming in, so if you had savings, you used it to buy extra things because they weren't giving you all kinds of items, you know, luxury items, just the basic that you had. Like in the Gila Camp, a lot of the rooms were just one room for the family. There was no partitions so you had to put up curtains and make your own privacy, and the same thing with bathrooms and showers. They didn't have—

YN: Partitions.

RK: Partitions and so, you know, all the toilet stools were just sitting there and you just look at each other where they could have at least put some privacy and made it a little bit.

YN: What block were your parents in?

RK: We were in 222B.

YN: Oh, see we were in 234D.

RK: Yeah, so we were both in the canal camp.

YN: Yeah, uh-huh.

RK: All the camps were basically built the same way, yeah.

JN: I think our camp volunteer—volunteer what do you call it—guys that?

YN: Resisters?

JN: No, we build homes.

RK: Oh, you mean the construction people?

JN: Yeah, they stole wood from different areas and put partitions in.

RK: Oh, so people were able to get some wood rather than having to put drapes or something, yeah. In other camps that's all they had because they didn't have wood, so they had to put blankets or something to separate and make it a little bit more private, exactly. Yeah, so the reparations and redress, I think was a long time in coming. So how are you spending your time now?

YN: Doing the least bit as possible. (laughing)

RK: Basically—

JN: Going fishing.

RK: Yes, retired life and just trying to enjoy it as much as possible.

YN: Yeah.

RK: Okay.

YN: That's all we can do.

RK: Right, exactly, enjoy life and be at peace.

YN: Because so many.

RK: As a final tribute we didn't mention much about your daughter, and so I am going to have you explain about Janet and this relay that was named for Janet, the Janet Niizawa Relays of Sanger High School.

YN: Let's see. I don't know what I should say but this was—they were called a baton relay for little kids but I don't know how they arrived at it but anyway, Bob Breshear was the principal at Fairmont and he called and asked if he could name her that after Janet because she was such an outstanding athlete. And so I said, well it's okay, you know, so that is how it started and it's been going on now for twenty-five years now?

RK: Right. It started I think in the late sixties I guess and they called the Baton Relays. Now Janet was an athlete in what sports?

YN: Let's see, relay, basketball, volleyball and what else? She has a record in high jumping.

RK: Oh, in track and field. Yeah. Okay. Wow, and she was the Sanger athlete of the year?

YN: Uh-huh.

RK: I think in 1975 or somewhere in there.

YN: And she was the captain of her, I don't know what team.

RK: Probably the volleyball team?

YN: Yeah.

RK: And then also she played basketball, too, so excellent all around athlete. Yeah, one of the things that happened to her was a disease that took her life.

YN: Yeah, she was in her first or second year at Fresno State. Yeah.

RK: But you knew about the disease earlier than that or not?

YN: No, uh-uh.

RK: Oh, so it was one of the sudden things after?

YN: Yeah, she was always tired.

RK: Okay.

YN: And the doctors couldn't even.

RK: Figure it out?

YN: Yeah.

RK: And so being an athlete and having lack of energy and fatigue, that was very strange.

YN: And they thought maybe it was Valley Fever.

RK: Yeah, Valley Fever would have been a prime guess in this area.

YN: And what is it, the bone marrow. They did everything and finally a bunch of doctors got together and decided.

RK: And found out, yeah.

YN: Yeah.

RK: And so this year the *Sanger Herald*, which is the community newspaper, had this excellent article about Janet and her legacy and naming the relays after her so we would like to thank the *Sanger Herald* for doing such a fine job on the article. It is an excellent article and then we would like to commend you and Johnny for having such a fine daughter. That is remarkable and finally in the prime of her life, she had to go to another place which is kind of sad because she had everything to look forward to.

YN: That's right.

RK: Yeah, so her legacy, this relay will be a remembrance to her so hopefully it will continue on for younger athletes in our community and will help us remember her.

YN: And it's nice because it's all these little kids who doesn't have the opportunity.

RK: Exactly.

YN: To come out, you know.

RK: Because a lot of them can't, you know, this is the first time they are doing track and field and learning how to run and jump.

YN: And we give them the t-shirts with the first, second and third, and before it wasn't so that but now JACL has donated, you know, towards it so for every event they give first, second and third.

RK: Yeah.

YN: And for four hundred, they have winners on their back, you know, first whoever places first on all those events. And you should see how happy those kids are.

RK: Oh, sure. I know one of her coaches I guess at Lone Star, Don Hall, would come from Dunlap and every year in the spring and would run the relays.

YN: Yeah, he showed up.

RK: He fires the gun. So that is also a tribute to, you know.

YN: And one year he had knee surgery and he came with his knee all bandaged and all and he still, he said, "I wouldn't miss this for anything."

RK: Yeah. Okay, that is great. It is too bad that we miss having her in her older years because she would be such a credit to society but, you know.

YN: We never know, you know.

RK: Yeah, we never know what happened but I'm sure she would have been tremendous at anything she's done.

YN: Yeah, she was one of those that never liked to give up. She had to be a leader.

RK: Yeah, so this is the legacy to her and so we appreciate both Johnny and you for having such a fine daughter.

YN: Thank you.

RK: And so thank you and that would end the interview for the oral history. Thank you.

What do you do being able to bury it and come back and find it, that is pretty good. As long as you remember where you put it. Okay, we are nearing the end of the interview, is there anything that you would like to say.

YN: No.

RK: Other than overall how do you think your life was with all the hardships and tribulations? Do you think it was okay on the good side?

YN: We're okay.

JN: We're okay.

YN: We are fortunate that we're both still healthy but he had his stroke but it was mild. To live this long.

RK: Exactly, well, anything probably that you have any feelings as with your daughter because she died at a very young age.

YN: That's right.

RK: And she had everything to look forward to and then also your parents and grandparents because they had the main hardships here.

YN: They really had to work.

RK: Exactly, they were—you would have to commend them for what they went through and had to put up with and be able to cope with it. A lot of them didn't even speak the language, you know, and they spoke broken or pidgin, we call it pidgin English. And were able to get by and so they expected the Nisei to be the one to help them out.

YN: Yeah, they relied on the Nisei.



RK: Exactly, so being the first generation over to the new country as immigrants must have been real tough?

YN: Like you say, we must have grew up by ourselves because they were always working.

RK: Oh, they were always working.

YN: They were always working.

RK: The thing about it is that we turned out okay.

YN: Yeah, really.

RK: Because they instilled the discipline and the respect and honor and there is something to say about the Japanese family code. I think it's something that should be passed on for generations because you notice even in the daily papers the Japanese, they are not high in crime and most of them are educated you know, if they have the chance. And they try to do well in the society here.

YN: And that's right and you know, I guess we had to work so there was no idle time for us to get into trouble.

RK: Exactly. Yeah, but even if there was idle time, I don't think that we would get into the trouble where, you know, you go to the extreme like some people.

YN: Yeah, especially the Mexicans. The paper is full of them.

RK: Okay, so we'll end the interview and I would like to thank Johnny Niizawa and his wife, Yo Niizawa, for helping us with this interview and hopefully this will help out the future generations of Japanese-Americans and other than races coming up and growing up in years where their parents were immigrants and trying to go through hardships, and this is a story that is very important and I hope our future generations will learn from both of

you and so I thank you for sharing your family history with us. And this can be preserved for other generations. Thank you.

YN: Thank you. You know, I bet it would be interesting to interview a Sansei, huh?

END OF INTERVIEW