

TOMIKO KUWAMOTO

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is August 5, 1980. I, Helen Hasegawa, am privileged to be in the home of Mrs. Tomiko Kuwamoto at 737 "E" Street, Fresno, California, 93706.

Before we get into the interview proper, will you please give us your full name, your place and date of birth, and your place of longest residency?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: My name Tomiko Kuwamoto. I was born on August 26, 1900, in Hiroshima-ken where my family had a needle factory making sewing needles as well as fish hooks. When I finished the 6th grade, I took the examination for entering the Hiroshima Kenritsu Koto-Jogakko and passed. It was unusual for someone as young as I to gain entrance into this extremely competitive, limited school. My family was so proud of me and overjoyed, that they gave me a big celebration with many relatives joining in and lasting for two to three days! I studied flower arrangement and tea ceremony. I left Japan in 1921 and have lived in Fresno ever since except for the war years. My husband came back to Japan so that we could get married.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Had you known Mr. Kuwamoto before your marriage?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Well, I didn't know him too well. In Japan, sometimes relatives acted as go-betweens, so they were the ones who arranged our marriage. He was a Waseda University graduate, which is one of the top universities in Japan, and where he majored in economics. We came straight to Fresno where my husband's older brother was managing the Aki Company, and my husband worked with him.

MRS. HASEGAWA: If that's the case, then he and his older brother had come several years earlier to America?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, they were old-timers. The main Aki Store was in Sacramento, which was founded by my husband's uncle, so they probably worked together there. Then they opened a branch in Fresno.

MRS. HASEGAWA: We were discussing the other day why the name is Aki Shokai (company) rather than perhaps Kuwamoto Store.

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Originally, before Hiroshima became a prefecture, there were two county-like areas adjacent to each other, Aki-gun and Bingo. Eventually these two "guns" were combined to form Hiroshima-ken. Our family originated from Aki-gun, hence the name Aki was taken and used for the name of the store.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you help at the Aki Store, or did you stay mainly at home?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: While the children were small, I stayed at home. We lived with my husband's older brother and his wife.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you feel when you first arrived in Fresno?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: It wasn't too bad, and we didn't suffer for anything. There was a Japanese town here. There were many stores already established all up and down on "F" Street from Kern to Tulare,

and on Kern and Tulare Street between "E" and "G" Streets. "F" Street had Saito's Fish Market, and Nihon Hall was also there. There were many restaurants, a couple of drug stores including Toshiyuki's drug store, Tensho-Do. They've been there a long time. The Aki Store was on Tulare Street then. It was next to Nishioka's movie house, Ryan's theatre, and next to that was Kagetsu Meshi-ya, a Japanese restaurant. The Lyceum, another theatre, was just around the corner on "F" Street. Aki Company was a big store, and when Kagetsu left, we expanded and took over the area. There was quite a number of pool halls and a dry goods store. The Ego family still lives in the very same house in China Alley that they lived in 60-some years ago. I understand the mother is still healthy and even cooks for a son and daughter. I seldom see her. They also had a Japanese restaurant.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you remember a hospital? Where was it located?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: There was the Okonogi Hospital on "E" and Mono Streets, and also the Nippon Hospital on "E" Street which Dr. Hashiba later took over.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Let's see now. What year was it that you got married?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I was married in Japan in 1921.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was your husband's first name? He was such a handsome, scholarly-looking man!

MRS. KUWAMOTO: His name was Shuichi. He died at the age of 53. He was so young, it was a shame. They found several kidney stones. One was unusually large and about one and a half inches long. Actually, he had had surgery three times. It was uremic poisoning.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That truly was tragic! To have lost him so early! And your children?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I have three children. Satoshi, Yasuyuki, and Teruko.

MRS. HASEGAWA: They all married Japanese?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes. I also have 10 grandchildren.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What do your children do for a living?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Satoshi and Yasuyuki are both managing the Aki Store. Teruko is married to one of the Uchiyamas of Fowler. Satoshi has three children. The oldest son is an attorney practicing in Los Angeles. The daughter is in business, and the other is going to graduate school. Yasuyuki's oldest son recently opened a chiropractic office in Fresno. The two younger sons are still in college. Teruko and Shigeru have four children, two of who are a set of twins. They are still in school. None of the grandchildren is married yet.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When was the first time you went back to Japan?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: It was when the children were small. Later, after he finished high school, Satoshi went to Japan for a vacation and stayed on

to study for a short while. He stayed with my older brother in Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: The sister-in-law with whom you lived, went back to Japan rather early. Didn't she go with her son?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, but she came back here before the war, alone. She was here during the war. She passed away about three years ago. She went back to Japan before she died.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Does her son Takeo Roy ever come back to Fresno?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: About two or three months ago he went to New York. He telephoned saying he couldn't stop here, but that he had sent some gifts.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many times did you go to Japan?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: The last time I went to Japan was in 1970. My sister Akiko Suda and I went together.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was there some kind of celebration that year for the Buddhist Church?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, in Osaka.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you notice any changes on your last trip?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Oh, there were many changes. Yes, there were changes. The city of Hiroshima had gotten larger, spread out. Living conditions had improved.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you notice any prejudice before the war?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Not especially. There were none that I had experienced. Before evacuation we had to sell our properties at lower prices, had to store the merchandise in a drugstore next door. While we were in camp, they told us that they had to move, and so we left everything in their care. Many things disappeared.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did you do with this home?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: We rented this house to a person who used to come often to our store, for \$13 a month, hoping he would watch over our things. We put all the belongings into the basement and a storage room behind the garage. We returned after the war and discovered they had thrown things out.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are these musical instruments?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: That is a biwa, a "Shure." "Shure" is a person's name. He was a master biwa player. It has his "mon" on the instrument. It is a rare item like a Stradivarius. I just had to have it!! The Satsuma biwa is very rare. The Chikuzen biwa is more common as there are many of them. My husband loved to sing to the biwa; we have a boxful of music books. None of the children played the biwa.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was this biwa stored in the back with the rest of your belongings? It really is beautiful!

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, it was stored. I cleaned it. I guess they didn't want it; didn't realize its worth. They had gone into the basement and had taken many of the other valuables.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I see you also have two kotos. Did they leave these behind?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, I cleaned those, too. You can still find kotos such as these on the market, but I guess these might be considered valuable, too.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you play the koto nowadays? I heard that you were an excellent performer!

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I don't have the time. I go to the store every day.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I would love to buy a biwa or shamisen in Japan, but I imagine they would be difficult to find.

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I'm sure you could still find them, but they must be very expensive now.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long did you study the koto? Did you begin when you were a little girl?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, I started to learn when I was young. I had to go to the teacher's every day for lessons and practiced there till noon.

We learned all our music by rote in those days. There was no system of notation as they have now. I think it is much easier now to teach or learn to play the koto.

MRS. HASEGAWA: To what relocation camp did you go?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I went to Gila Camp. Many from Fresno went to Arkansas. We were especially sent to Gila along with Asada-san, my older sister and her family.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did Mr. Kuwamoto pass away before the war?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: No, we were together in camp during the war. He was not interned in the other camps for enemy aliens as many others had been.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long were you in camp? Did you stay there from the beginning to the end?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, we stayed in camp all the time. But after a while, the two boys were able to go out and went to Missouri to attend school. Teruko left for Ohio after she graduated from high school in the camp. She attended Toledo University for one year before returning to Fresno.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How was Fresno when you returned from camp? Were you able to get into your home right away?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, we got into the house, but we had to reopen the store in a different location. We found a place on Kern Street near the China Alley, formerly occupied by Masuda Dry Goods Store.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I imagine you had to purchase all new merchandise to stock your store?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: No, we had some merchandise stored in the International Drug Store next door to our former store on Tulare Street.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long did you stay at that location, and when did you move the store to its present location?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Not very long. Around 1950 we moved to the corner of Kern and "F" Streets, presently occupied by the California First Bank, and before that the Bank of Tokyo. A few years later we moved to the present location just across the street on the opposite side, formerly occupied by Kingen's Department Store. It's a much bigger store.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Wasn't there a garage or something there at one time?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, there was the Westside Garage, owned by Mr. Taketomo and Mr. Sayegusa.

MRS. HASEGAWA: While you were in camp, what type of work or activities did you do?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Mostly needlecraft. I crocheted many articles. I crocheted a tablecloth to thank a friend, but she sent it back and wanted a bigger tablecloth! Imagine! I did enlarge it and sent it to her. Then another thing I crocheted was a large bedspread. I still have it. I've never used it because it's white. Laundering it would be a big problem. I couldn't do it, so it's put away.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Perhaps you might give it to your daughter. Did your husband teach others or give singing lessons?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: People who passed by our barracks often commented on lights that were on late into the night. My husband's one desire or goal was to write down all the songs he remembered. So, he was very busy teaching and writing the songs. He was also busy writing books of utai for others. He just loved to sing!

MRS. HASEGAWA: What is utai? What kind of song is it?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Utai is the background song sung behind the Noh players. It tells a story, describing the action or drama going on. It is different from the Shigin, which seems so popular now. It is really not a song, but somewhat like a chant or declamation or a recitative, telling a story about famous historical people.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What social and economic changes have you seen in your local community over the years?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I think the Japanese image has improved. Their merchandise is generally excellent quality. They make good cars, and I think the other countries have more respect for the Japanese. I notice that people are more relaxed. They seem to have more money. The Issei have regular income from Social Security. Many Japanese now have their own homes, farms, so it has all worked out well.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are you involved in any organizations?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I belong to the Bukkyo Fujinkai, also I go to the Issei Center everyday to have lunch. Even though there's many Hiroshima-ken people here, I don't think they ever organized. Probably everyone was comfortable in this community since there were many of us Japanese. It seems very lonely these days because at one time there were so many Japanese in this area. Many activities centered around the Buddhist Church and created a sparkle in our daily lives.

MRS. HASEGAWA: There were many Japanese homes on "E" Street in those early days, weren't there?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: They were mainly Japanese then. Right now there's Okawara-san, Mr. Sakamoto's daughter is still there. And Kawai-san was there from the early years. That's about all. A lot of Japanese have moved away. I hear the elder Mr. Komoto still lives there. Mr. Miyamoto was here, but passed away recently. I hear Mrs. Miyamoto is now living in the country. I guess that's about all that's left. It's getting to be a lonely place.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you still live by yourself?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: During the hot days I stay at Satoshi's place.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you still go to the store every day?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, it's better. They tell me to take it easy and stay home, but if I have to sit at home I'd rather go to the store and sit!

MRS. HASEGAWA: So you still observe some Japanese customs?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, I guess I do observe a few customs, but not like in the old days.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How was it in the early days?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: New Year's used to be a big celebration, but now the Nisei have Christmas. On Thanksgiving we go to Yasuyuki's place, and on Christmas we celebrate at Satoshi's place with a party.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I guess if we live in America, we have to follow some of the American customs. I hear stories of 60th and 88th birthday parties of many friends.

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Well, I have heard of 77th birthday celebration. When I turned 77 I had a big celebration. Kanreki is 60<sup>th</sup> birthday, and they do have birthday celebrations.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What is the meaning of Kanreki? Does it have anything to do with the Japanese calendar?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: Yes, starting with this year--mouse, cow, tiger, rabbit, dragon, snake, horse, goat, monkey, bird, dog, boar. I don't know the reason for these names. 77--kiju--means happiness. 88th birthday is beiju. Very seldom do you hear of a person reaching the age of 100. That would be extra special.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you know Mr. Mori of Sanger? He recently celebrated his 100th birthday. He is still healthy and alert although his hearing and eyesight are not what they used to be. Also, there is a person named Saito-san in the rest home, a member of the Christ Methodist Church, and she'll be 102 this year. Isn't that something? When I stop to visit her, she recognizes me, and we talk a bit, too.

MRS. KUWAMOTO: I saw her recently. How alert and well she looks!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Speaking of customs, your daughter Teruko was telling me about the custom of "o kai shim (returning). The Japanese are known for returning something in appreciation for having received a gift upon the birth of a new baby or for getting well from an illness or accident, et cetera. It was also the custom at times of funerals for the family to give cans of tea or coffee as an acknowledgment, to each person or family that had given koden. She recalled how busy they used to be at the store wrapping these many, many cans--sometimes well over 100 or 200. When her father, your husband died, his funeral was the first to be held at the Buddhist Church after the war. There was much discussion, pro and con, as to whether to continue this custom. The various members of the family wanted to continue, but Mr. Sakamoto and a group helping to make the arrangements thought that it would cause hardship to many families just returning from camp and still not settled if they felt they had to follow the prevailing custom. So, your family was the first to stop this practice. However, she noticed when she sends koden to a family in the Los Angeles area, she received a book of stamps in appreciation for the remembrance.

Do you remember anything else about Japanese-American history you would like to discuss or is there anything you would like to say to the Nisei and Sansei?

MRS. KUWAMOTO: You know, these days the Americans are studying Japan and its history, and learning to speak Japanese, so I tell my young people that it would be so nice if the Japanese Sansei would study their own country and know it better than the Americans. This, I hope, the new generation will pursue, especially the grandchildren. I'd like them to learn the good qualities of the Japanese people and their culture. There's so much good to learn!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Oh, that's very good! Thank you for this interesting visit, Mrs. Kuwamoto.