

AKIKO MATSUI

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is September 21, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to interview Mr. and Mrs. Nobu Matsui in their home at 1435 West Vassar Avenue, Fresno, California, 93705.

Before we get into the interview proper, I would like to have you give us your full name, place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MRS. MATSUI: My name is Akiko Kamikawa Matsui. I was born in Fresno on September 29, 1917. My longest place of residence is Fresno.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Will you please tell us a little about where your father and mother come from and why they decided to settle in the Fresno area?

MRS. MATSUI: My father Koichi Kamikawa, born October 25, 1886, came from Hiroshima; and my mother Kaoru Shimata, born July 29, 1891, came from Iwakuni. In 1899 my father took his oldest brother Riichi's advice and came to Fresno. Riichi and his next brother Mitsuji came to Fresno seven years earlier, worked on the railroad, and made a little money. Another brother Masuichi came two years before my father.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of a store was it?

MRS. MATSUI: In 1900 the four brothers Riichi, Mitsuji, Masuichi, and Koichi founded the Kamikawa Brothers Store at the corner of Kern and "G" Street in Fresno, California. It was a general merchandise store. They prospered despite considerable anti-Japanese sentiment prevalent at that time. They established branch stores in Selma, Del Rey, San Francisco, and Japan. In 1902 the Kamikawa Brothers founded the Nichi Bei Ginko, the Japanese American Bank in San Francisco, and in 1908 opened a Fresno Branch.

In the panic of that time, banks everywhere were closed, and so did ours. But the Kamikawa Brothers, with savings and profits from the stores, paid off all the depositors' dollar for dollar and with interest.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Can you tell us /more about your father?

MRS. MATSUI: My father attended high school in Fresno and Heald's Business College in Oakland, California. In 1908 my father was placed in charge of the branch Post Office opened in our store by the then Postmaster George W. Turner. The Post Office was put there as an accommodation to people living in West Fresno.

During World War I my father, as a foreigner, was appointed to serve on the Fresno Liberty Bond Committee. In 1920 he testified before the Congressional Committee studying charges of large land ventures involving Japanese and accusations Japanese hand labor were getting jobs to the detriment of American workers. On July 22, 1920 my father told the investigators, "The only solution for racial difficulty is the promotion of better understanding between the two people. Unless this is done, I predict an undesirable conflict may arise in the future."

My father also was the President of the Nihonjin Kai, Japanese

Association.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Can you tell us a little bit about your mother's marriage to your father?

MRS. MATSUI: In 1910 my father's oldest brother Riichi went back to Japan and brought back to Fresno a bride Kaoru Shimata for my father and a bride Kazu Matsumoto for my Uncle Masuichi. They had a double wedding by proxy in Japan and a double wedding reception in Fresno on January 6, 1910.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When they came to Fresno, where did they live?

MRS. MATSUI: They lived above our store on the second floor. In the basement there were rooms for immigrants arriving from Japan. They all slept on the floor for 5 cents a night. They were all single men looking for work. Uncle Mitsuji passed away in 1908, and Uncle Riichi and his family returned to Japan in 1920.

The Kamikawa Brothers Store withstood the Depression, but everyone was buying things on credit. The big farmers promising to pay after the next crop season, but never paid their debts. Our store could not continue business under these circumstances and finally closed the store in 1937.

Our family moved to the country and worked out in the fields, cutting peaches and picking grapes. We worked very hard and accumulated some money. My father again ventured into merchandising business and opened a small family store. Our entire family helped in this operation.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many brothers and sisters do you have, and what are their names?

MRS. MATSUI: One brother Tom Taneichi Kamikawa and three sisters Mitsue Hurlbert, Sumiko Murashima, and Satoko Higashi.

This store did not last very long, because when World War II broke out, we, like all the other Japanese, were interned. We were sent to camp in Jerome, Arkansas. In July of 1944 we relocated to Seabrook, New Jersey where everyone worked at the frozen food cannery.

On February 1946, we returned to Fresno County. My father and my brother Tom opened Kamikawa Food Store in Fowler, California. Many Japanese families returning from the evacuation did not have cars so my father and brother delivered fish and groceries in the rural areas.

In 1951 my father retired from business and my parents moved to their new home in Fresno. He spent his days puttering around a vegetable garden in his yard. He enjoyed playing a game of "GO" with his friends.

In 1954 the law was passed enabling the Japanese to become United States citizens. Soon after, in April 1954, my father became a citizen of the United States. A year later my mother also became a citizen. My father said the American system of government is the very best in the world and was sorry that his advancing years precluded his being active in some phase of governmental work.

He continued to go to the citizenship classes to help teach the Japanese aliens who could not understand the English language very well. They

said it was difficult to understand the English teacher but could understand my father's English, so he helped them until his health started to fail in 1959.

The Japanese government awarded my father the Fifth Order of the Sacred Treasure. This was given for outstanding contributions to the United States as an Issei (first generation) pioneer, but regretfully arrived two days after my father had passed away. He would have been very happy and proud of the special recognition.

My father died May 26, 1960, and my mother died October 4, 1966.