

MRS. SHINOBU MIKAMI

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is June 30, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to be in the home of Mrs. Shinobu Mikami at 818 "E" Street, Fresno, California, 93706.

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. MIKAMI: My full name is Shinobu Mikami. I was born in Tokyo, Japan on September 26, 1893. My longest place of residence is the city of Fresno.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did you leave Japan and why?

MRS. MIKAMI: I came to Fresno in 1914. I landed in Seattle, Washington on June 18, 1914 and came directly to Fresno. My father was the minister at the Japanese Methodist Church here, and I came as a yobiyose (one who was educated in Japan and called to America by one's parents). My father Reverend Morizo Yoshida was a minister here for a long time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long had he been here?

MRS. MIKAMI: My father Reverend Morizo Yoshida originally came to San Jose where he organized the Japanese Methodist Episcopal Church on August 13, 1895. That church is now known as Wesley United Methodist Church of San Jose. I attended the 80th anniversary of that church just recently. There are no survivors left from that beginning. They are all gone. After leaving San Jose, he served several years in Los Angeles. He was with the Pioneer Japanese Methodist Church in Sacramento from 1903 to 1908. In 1911 he helped to organize the Loomis Methodist Church. From 1913 to 1918 he worked with the Fresno Japanese Methodist Church, now known as Christ United Methodist Church. He was working with the Methodist Church in Riverside when he passed away on October 12, 1918.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Tell us about your mother.

MRS. MIKAMI: She was busy with the Fujinkai (women's organization).

MRS. HASEGAWA: You arrived in Fresno in 1914, just two years after your father came to the Fresno church.

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. And I have stayed in Fresno since then except for the war years.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then you are more familiar with Fresno than with Japan?

MRS. MIKAMI: It's been a long time since I left Japan, so I have forgotten about Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you go to school in Fresno?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. I graduated from Aoyama Gakuin in Tokyo and came to Fresno. My father believed that women, too, should have a college education so I enrolled at Fresno High School. It was located where the Chevrolet Garage is now. I went there for three years. I wanted to

graduate, but English was so difficult, I gave up.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Three years of high school is quite an accomplishment in a foreign language.

MRS. MIKAMI: I can read and understand English pretty well, but history and English exams were very difficult. I did well in algebra and other mathematics because the principle was the same in either language.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old were you then?

MRS. MIKAMI: About 20.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of school is Aoyama Gakuin?

MRS. MIKAMI: It is a Methodist sponsored school which begins in the primary grades and through high school. It was a Methodist Mission School and taught the Bible and specialized in English with many Caucasian teachers. Those that wanted to learn English came to that school. There were mostly Methodist ministers' children attending that school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who did you live with then?

MRS. MIKAMI: I lived at the dormitory for eight years. Then after I graduated, I came over to the United States as a yobi-yose.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was Fresno like when you arrived?

MRS. MIKAMI: Now the Methodist ministers get a good salary, but when I graduated from Aoyama Gakuin, my fellow students were envious of me, because they thought that I would be able to come here and live in a beautiful western home and wear smart western clothes. So I came with that anticipation. But when I got here, I was disappointed because it was a shabby, two-story church building. So I asked my minister father where our home was, still hoping for a beautiful western home. My father informed me that part of this church was our living quarters. That evening when I asked if I could take a bath, my father brought out something that looked like a garbage can. When I asked him what that was, he told me that he would fill it with hot water for me, and he proceeded to fill pots and pans with water and heated the water on the kitchen stove. He filled the tin tub with hot and cold water and told me to get in. Because I didn't know any better, I used lots of soap. Then my father became upset--he said that everyone in the family used that same water, and I had unwittingly dirtied the water, so no one else could use it. He took the water out to the back yard before I could do more damage by rinsing off the suds in the house! I was really disappointed in that western house! This was an American home? The ministers today get good wages, but in those days my father received a mere \$50 for a month.

When I started to school, my mother could not afford to buy clothes for me, so she went to a Caucasian's home and got some second-hand clothes and shoes. Mother remodeled those clothes to fit me and gave me a beautiful white pair of high heel shoes to wear. But because the shoes were fitted to a Caucasian's feet, they were too big for me. Mother stuffed the shoes with cotton, and I happily started out with the shoes. But when I got to the top of the stairs and began to come down the

stairs, the shoes flew off my feet, and I fell down the stairs skinning my knees. The blood dripped down my legs and the boys that were there were concerned and helped me. When I got home I told my mother that I would go to school barefooted rather than wear those ill-fitting shoes. So my mother bought me a pair of tennis shoes for 95 cents. I wore those to school.

In those days the ministers had it very hard. Now, the ministers are much better off than we. The second and third generation Japanese are more considerate of their ministers.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were there many Japanese in high school when you attended?

MRS. MIKAMI: I was the only girl. There were about three boys. I wasn't able to understand English, so had a very difficult time. In those days people were very kind to the Japanese and helped me. There was a teacher who was especially good to me and until very recently she asked me to come and see her, and I did visit her.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did the racial discrimination begin later?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. In those days, I was asked to wear my kimono and invited to parties. There was no discrimination in those days. They were good to us. But prejudice began to creep in as time went on.

MRS. HASEGAWA: After you attended high school for three years, what did you do?

MRS. MIKAMI: I met Mr. Mikami and was married.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was your marriage arranged?

MRS. MIKAMI: No. He was a member of our church, and we have lived here since then.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you ever work outside the family?

MRS. MIKAMI: No, not really. I picked a few grapes, but nothing to talk about. We lived in the Sunnyside area. Until we were married, Mr. Mikami worked in a drug store, somewhere across from the old White, Theatre near the Roos Atkins Store for a Caucasian owner. After we married, we farmed for a few years in the Sunnyside area. In the mid-20's my husband joined the Sun Life Insurance Company as an agent. He prospered and bought a house in town. Then my son Seichi began his travel agency business, and my husband conducted tours to Japan many times. While he was on a tour in Japan, he had a stroke on the train.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were you with him at the time?

MRS. MIKAMI: No. My daughter-in-law Fusa and her mother were with him. Fusa called me on the phone, so I flew to Yokohama to meet them, but by that time he was unconscious. That was in 1964. We had a large home on Mayor Street and Inyo Street, but after my husband's death I was afraid to live there by myself, so I sold that home and moved here next to my son's office.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many children do you have?

MRS. MIKAMI: There is Seichi born in 1919 and a girl Fumiko. Her married name is Matsuura, and she lives in San Diego. He is an architect. The next daughter is Etsuko Katsura, and the next is Taeko who lives in the east.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What schools did your children attend?

MRS. MIKAMI: They all went to Easterby Elementary School in the Sunnyside area.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Unlike other Issei women, you were able to understand the English language, so did you go to PTA?

MRS. MIKAMI: On Japan Day, my mother, who was adept with the shamisen, did perform and dance. We were quite active in the PTA.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you play the shamisen?

MRS. MIKAMI: No, I cannot. But my mother was very active in musical activities.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your children experience any discrimination?

MRS. MIKAMI: No, they did not. All the children played together. Only when the war with Japan began did we become frightened.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When were you aware of the bombing of Pearl Harbor?

MRS. MIKAMI: We were listening to the radio when we heard it and were so shocked and tears fell.

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

MRS. MIKAMI: We went to Jerome, Arkansas after being at the Fresno Fair Ground Assembly Center. It was so hot that we had a very bad case of food poisoning with mayonnaise that had spoiled. Many people became very ill, vomited, and were unable to be on their feet. I was fortunate because I don't like mayonnaise so I hadn't eaten the spoiled food. My husband was very ill. Dr. Hashiba took care of us. Many people hid their money in their beddings and various places. It was a frightening experience. I remember how sad and discouraged we were. We didn't cry very easily but we did then to think that we were being treated like criminals.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was your experience in camp?

MRS. MIKAMI: There were lots of rattlesnakes in Arkansas. Someone went to the shower and slipped on a snake--what an experience. In the winter it was severely cold. I worried that I might have to live the rest of my life in a place like that! But after we became settled we began to lose our anxiety. We felt that we were safer there, since we heard that the people on the West Coast were hostile to the Japanese-Americans, though the war was not our fault. People that had been our friends before the war became our enemies after the war began. They would stare at us, and we were afraid.

About that time, my son was married, but we couldn't even have a wedding

celebration since we were not permitted to congregate. So we had a very quiet family wedding. They couldn't even go on a honeymoon.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you come back to Fresno after Jerome?

MRS. MIKAMI: No. That camp was closed, and we then were sent to Rowher. Then we returned to Fresno in 1945. The United States Government let us come back because the Nisei soldiers proved their loyalty in the battlefields. We were so happy to be back.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you do some kind of work in the relocation camp?

MRS. MIKAMI: I was the United States postman. My husband was the block manager, so I took care of the mail and delivered it to the people in our block. I was the postman and received \$16 a month.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you returned to Fresno, where did you live?

MRS. MIKAMI: We returned to our big house on Mayor Street. It seems there were many soldiers living in our home. They vacated the house when we returned. They wrecked everything; the Bendix washing machine, the sewing machine, and all those other appliances. We had to replace everything. We had rented it for about \$25 a month. It was so dirty we had to repair it and repaint the house. It was a terrible thing.

MRS. HASEGAWA: But you were fortunate to have somewhere to come back to.

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes, we felt that way.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What happened to those that did not have places to come back to?

MRS. MIKAMI: We put up many people at the Methodist Church whether they were Christians or not.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many, would you say?

MRS. MIKAMI: About five families.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did these people have money to buy food?

MRS. MIKAMI: They must have had savings. They went out to work in the fields and used that for food.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who was the minister at that time?

MRS. MIKAMI: Reverend Hashimoto. He is in Oregon now. He was a good minister. Many people also stayed at the Buddhist Church.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where was the Methodist Church located?

MRS. MIKAMI: The freeway now runs through the former church property. It was on Kern and "D" Street. With the money we received from the property we bought the former St. George's Greek Orthodox Church and built a sanctuary addition.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you been a member of that Methodist Church every

since you arrived from Japan?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes, with all the changes in ministers. When we returned from camp, Reverend Hashimoto was here, then it was Reverend Seijiro Uemura, then Reverend George Uyemura, Reverend K. Harper Sakaue, Reverend Thomas Nakagawa, Reverend Yoshio Ohtomo, Reverend Jonah Chung, Reverend Sadao Masuko, Reverend Matt Ishihara, and now Reverend Bill Kobayashi.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What changes have you seen in the church throughout the years?

MRS. MIKAMI: The church has grown. The children got married, they have children, although some have moved away.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are there more people from the city or from the surrounding countryside?

MRS. MIKAMI: Mostly from around the city. Long ago more people came from the country, but now there are more from the city. The Reedley people started their own church, so we lost them. The Wakes and the Kitaharas of Reedley were two of our old members before they separated from the Fresno church.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What role did the church play during the earliest years of its inception?

MRS. MIKAMI: Many immigrants came to the church where they lived. The church helped them to find places to live and employment. The church was important in those days. If the immigrants became sick or were in trouble, the church help provided their needs.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I understand there were many gambling houses here, was that true?

MRS. MIKAMI: There were rumors, but I cannot say.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How do you spend your days now?

MRS. MIKAMI: Our children are very good to us, so I am grateful for all they do to make my life pleasant in my old age. I try not to be a burden and a bother to them.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How are you involved with the church?

MRS. MIKAMI: I have served as president of the Issei Women's Society, but now I am not as active. We have turned everything over to the Nisei. They are very capable. No matter how much we want to keep control, the Issei are all getting very old.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you receive your U.S. citizenship?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. After the war we studied hard and passed the examination and received our citizenship in 1947. The first ones to get their citizenship were Mrs. Abiko, Mrs. Ohara, and Mrs. Kazato. We were in the second group. I understand that now you don't need to take an exam, but in those days we memorized everything. The day of the exam we had to stand on an elevated stand. We were all so nervous, we shook

with anxiety. We were interrogated in English. We were young then, so we were able to memorize the answers. There were many questions, but we were able to answer 100 percent. It was such a happy day. It makes a great difference in our treatment and status now, especially when we travel to foreign countries.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you been back to Japan?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. Since my husband and son ran the travel agency, I have been able to go many times.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you noticed any changes in the treatment of Japanese people over the years?

MRS. MIKAMI: There has been a great change. People are very good to us now. We feel better. Before the war, whenever we went to a Caucasian restaurant, we were conscious of stares. But now, people open doors for us and are courteous and kind. I am grateful. I feel this is because the Nisei have done so well, giving up their lives for us. Before we left camp, we were told that we could go back to our homes in California, that the higher-ups in Washington, D.C. recognized the sacrifices of the Nisei who fought for the United States during the war. But, when we returned here, the common people did not welcome us back. Some of the people here who had lost their sons and husbands in the Pacific War held grudges against us. In a few cases some Japanese were shot or had their homes shot at soon after we returned.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you belong to any other organization besides the church?

MRS. MIKAMI: Only the Nikkei Center now.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you observe any Japanese customs?

MRS. MIKAMI: I prepare New Year's food. We celebrated Girls' Day and Boys' Day long ago, but not now. We explained the customs and raised the carp flag on Boys' Day.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MRS. MIKAMI: I went to see the World Fair 1915. There were representatives. That was a happy time. My happiness is that my children are well and happy, and one of the happiest moments was when I returned to Fresno when I really didn't think we would be able to do so. Even the dog that was left was so happy to see us. The children ran around the house, they were so happy.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there any advice you would like to add?

MRS. MIKAMI: I hope that our grandchildren will not forget that they are Japanese, and, hopefully, they will marry Japanese. But that is asking too much. As long as they are happy, it doesn't matter. After all, this is America, but I am afraid with intermarriage the Japanese culture will disappear. The Nisei married Japanese spouses, but it is too much to expect of the third and fourth generations. It cannot be helped.

Long ago, the church was different. On Sundays the country people would

pack a lunch and start out early in the morning in their horse and buggy or wagon and stay all day. After the morning service, we would have lunch together. After they would leave, when we cleaned the church, we would find dirty diapers under the pews. So my mother would wash them out and the next Sunday they would be claimed by the owners. Now, all these children are successful adults. They all look forward to coming to church on Sunday, for they would eat their lunch, do their shopping, and then go home in the horse and buggy. The children were happy to come to church on Sundays to meet their friends. Sunday was the happiest day of the week. If a member did not show up Monday, we went to see the family. The minister and the congregation were very close in those days. We were all like a good family.

My parents had four or five male students from Japan staying at the church. In the morning before school, mother would make hot cakes and the boys would eat it all up. When I asked for my share, mother would say, "I'm sorry, they are all gone. You'll just have to eat this bread." The bread was stale and dry, but in those days, the boys were at their hungriest, and so the minister's family were the ones that were deprived.

MRS. HASEGAWA: The minister's family seemed to get the short end every time.

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes, that's true. We felt we had to help the others at the expense of the pastor's family. When I think back, those were good, happy days. On Sunday morning, we would awaken earlier and cook a big pot of rice and make onigiri or rice balls.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you get the mission barrel that one hears about?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. The Caucasian First Methodist women used to bring cast-off clothes to us. We distributed them to our congregation.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you observe Thanksgiving here?

MRS. MIKAMI: Yes. We had a member who had a restaurant, so he would roast three large turkeys, and we would get the congregation together and have our Thanksgiving feast.