

SEI MORITA

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is June 30, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to interview Mrs. Sei Morita whose home address is 5162 North Biola Avenue, Fresno, California, 93711.

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. MORITA: My name is Sei Morita. I was born in Osaka, Japan, on May 7, 1894. I have lived the longest at my present address.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did you come to the United States?

MRS. MORITA: I came to the United States in 1915, as a bride.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Had Mr. Morita lived in the United States before going back to Japan to marry?

MRS. MORITA: Yes. Mr. Morita was a contractor for a farmer named Mr. G and had saved a substantial amount of money before going back to Japan. He returned to Japan to seek a wife to bring back to America. His sister lived in Osaka-fu, Kichio-zashi. He went there, and through mutual friends of the family we were introduced according to traditional Japanese custom. This was the baishaku kekkon (go-between marriage).

I met his proposal with misgivings since I felt America was too far. I did not know anything about the foreign country. The only thing I knew was the pictures that I had seen of America. I did not want to leave my family. But my mother thought it was an opportunity for me. I don't know if she was ahead of her time, but she encouraged me by pointing out that America was a land of opportunity, that it was a vast country not crowded and small as Japan. Besides, Mr. Morita was wealthy. He told us that he had enough money to live the rest of his life comfortably without going back to the United States, but that since he had left his horses and farm equipment in the care of his friend, he needed to go back to dispose of them. He assured me that if I did not like living in America, we could come back to Japan.

I still hesitated, but upon my mother's insistence, I agreed to come, knowing I would be lonesome and hating to leave my family in Japan. We were married in March and arrived in Fresno in May 1915. Because Mr. Morita had a fortune, we came not as immigrants, as most Japanese, but as "Gentleman and Wife." We were in a much better position than most Japanese.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was Mr. Morita's first name?

MRS. MORITA: Noriaki.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did Mr. Morita first come to the United States?

MRS. MORITA: About 1908.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was Mr. Morita's occupation before he returned to Japan to be married?

MRS. MORITA: He worked for Mr. G , a German farmer, and his wife. They were good people and treated him fairly. When my husband decided to go to Japan for a wife, Mrs. G was very upset because she was sure he would not return. He promised to return, but when we arrived in May we found that Mrs. G had committed suicide in March. It seemed that Mr. and Mrs. G were always at odds and that my husband had been their peacemaker. So when Mr. Morita did not come back for so long, Mrs. G lost her faith and took her life! It was very sad.

I did not work in the fields as the other Japanese immigrants' wives since my mother had warned Mr. Morita that I was raised in the cities of Osaka and Kobe and could not work in the field. She was assured that he wanted me to keep house and raise our children when the time came.

Since Mr. G was alone and very lonesome, he was very kind to us. He built a new house for us and installed a large stove in the winter when it became very cold. He also delivered milk to our home every day. He lived near the labor camp near the railroad. He was very kind and generous, and to repay his kindness, I went up to his big, two-story home on Jensen Avenue, a landmark in the area, to clean his home once a week.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of work did Mr. Morita do for Mr. G?

MRS. MORITA: He was a sharecropper and managed Mr. G 's vineyard. We went back to Japan to visit after five years. During that time I was very ill after the birth of our third child, so that my mother took care of us in Kobe where she lived. When we got back to Fresno, our oldest son refused to go to school. So, when one of the men in the labor camp decided to go to Japan, we sent our son to my mother in Japan. Five years later I returned to Japan and brought our son back, and he studied here until he graduated from high school. Then he returned to Japan to go on to Waseda University and has since lived in Ibara-ken, Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old was your son at the time?

MRS. MORITA: He was about 5 1/2 years old.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long had he lived in Japan when you first took him back?

MRS. MORITA: About six months. At that time, I was seriously ill with the influenza and Mr. Morita's sister came to get our oldest son, so he stayed with her. Our second son and infant daughter were also ill with the influenza. It was the world influenza which affected people in all parts of the world!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was your husband with you at the time?

MRS. MORITA: Yes. He was at the hospital with our second son.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That must have been dreadful. What did you do?

MRS. MORITA: Mr. Morita had just acquired new land and had just planted it to vines, and so he wanted to return to work, and he thought I should stay until I became fully recovered. But my mother thought it would be better if I took the two boys and return with my husband. She promised to take care of Fusa. I went back in five years and returned with Fusa.

I was afraid I would not be able to claim my daughter since mother had cared for her since she was an infant, but fortunately, she was returned to me.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old was Fusa when you brought her back?

MRS. MORITA: About five years old.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you fully recover your health?

MRS. MORITA: Yes. The doctor advised me not to work in the field. As you see, I am enjoying good health at this ripe age of 86.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You certainly do not show your age.

MRS. MORITA: Thank you. I am becoming slow in motion, but my mind is still very active.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you feel that your life was better than other Issei women?

MRS. MORITA: It would seem so. Some accused me for working in the field when my husband was known to be so well off. However, it was not always so. During the depression, it was hard on us, too. There were many times when I arise before dawn to pick grapes, taking my children with me before it became too hot. Then we would go out again after it cooled down in the evenings. I worked hard. I even learned how to prune vines.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you leave the G's ranch?

MRS. MORITA: Yes. Three partners went together and bought a 160-acre farm. We paid for two shares; and the other one, one share.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where was the property?

MRS. MORITA: In Herndon. We could not buy property individually because of the Alien Land Law, so we called it the Herndon Vineyard Company.

We had to sell the land after two years. It was financially unfeasible, so we sold out. We bought the present property in Biola in 1919. Fusa was born at that time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kinds of crops did you have there?

MRS. MORITA: All kinds; muscats, Thompsons, and Malagas. The Thompsons did well, but the others were not suited to the soil, so we gradually pulled those vines and replaced them with Thompsons. While the new plantings were small, we planted peas among the vines. My husband and I picked in the evening. We had a good crops and could pick three and four 100-pound sacks and sell it to the Chinese stores. They were such good quality peas that the merchants purchased all we produced. My husband and I laughed about having become pea pickers. So, although I came with no intention of working in the field, I did a lot of farming. No one told me to work; my husband never asked me to work since he had promised my mother, but I did it because I knew it had to be done.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who is now taking care of the farm?

MRS. MORITA: Our son Takashi Morita.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you live with him?

MRS. MORITA: No. My son and his wife built a new home, and I live in my own home nearby.

MRS. 'HASEGAWA: Do you have grandchildren?

MR. MORITA: Yes. They are successful. The older granddaughter Carole is 27 years old and is now a lawyer in Los Angeles. The next, a grandson, is 25 and is attending San Francisco Medical School. He is planning to go into research. The third is just graduated from Central High School and will be attending University of California, Los Angeles, this fall.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are some of your happy memories?

MR. MORITA: Since my husband passed away in 1951, it has been my pleasure to go back to Japan every two or three years to visit and stay with our eldest son and his family for a year at a time. Before Takashi was married, I could not leave, but now that he has a family I feel free to go.

Lately, I have been coming to Mrs. Mikami's (my daughter-in-law's) home on Sunday, attending church and staying until Tuesday evening every week. During this time my daughter Fusa takes us out to different restaurants in the area. We enjoy eating out.

I also go to the Senior Citizens' Hot Lunch Program at the Buddhist Church Annex. This is sponsored by the Nikkei Center. We meet our friends there and have a good time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are some of your recollections of World War II?

MRS. MORITA: I have never been one to worry much. At first I thought we were treated quite badly but trusted the United States government to be fair. And so, abided by the restrictions and rules set for us as aliens during wartime. I felt that despite the discriminations we encountered we had been law-abiding so did not feel we would be mistreated. I was grateful for the treatment we received in spite of our alien status. I could not complain.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did Mr. Morita pass away?

MRS. MORITA: After we returned from camp, in 1951. While we were still interned, Mr. Morita was anxious and worried excessively about his property in Fresno. There were rumors that his property would be confiscated by the government. He was very depressed. I tried to bolster his spirits by telling him everyone was in the same situation, and we were not the only ones being questioned.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did happen to your property?

MRS. MORITA: We were involved with the Alien Land Law and although our property was registered under our son Tak's name, we had borrowed part of the money to finance the purchase of our land from my relatives in Japan. Their names appeared on the sales document and that was part of the problem. The court argued that although the property was in our son's name, his parents, Isseis, were deriving benefits as real owners

from this property. During the trial proceedings the U.S. Supreme Court declared the California Alien Land Law unconstitutional. Subsequently, the case was dropped, but we paid attorney fees of \$4,000. Son Tak was serving in the U.S. Military Intelligence at that time but was home for the trial.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I understand many people were caught up in the Alien Land Law controversy.

MRS. MORITA: Yes. Many people had difficulties. Some lost their land having spent a lifetime building their fortunes. I feel that these circumstances could not be helped.

MRS. HASEGAWA: The Issei certainly had hard times.

MRS. MORITA: Yes. There was a time when grapes went down to three cents a pound. The Depression was very bad. Our oldest son was just ready to graduate from high school. He asked us to get a pair of slacks to match his suit. We were unable to afford it. I explained to him that we were not being stingy but that the times being the way they were, if he could do without the extra pants we would appreciate it, but if it was important to him we would try to get it for him. He said he understood and that he had a suit, so it was all right. The next year when our second son graduated, we were able to purchase what he needed. Those were hard times, but on the whole, life has been good.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you or your children experience prejudice and discrimination?

MRS. MORITA: It has not bothered me too much. There were occasions, but it has not been too bad.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What school did your children attend?

MRS. MORITA: They went to Biola schools during elementary years. Our oldest son attended Kerman High School. During that time, the students in Biola could go to either Kerman High School or to Central High School in Fresno. But, later, the children who graduated from Biola Elementary were required to go to Central High School.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did the school bus pick up your children?

MRS. MORITA: Yes. I attended adult school for 13 years, but because I could not take time to study outside of class and because we spoke Japanese at home, I did not improve. My teacher thought my speech should be as good as my written English.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where did you go to school?

MRS. MORITA: To Biola School. And Ena Okonogi Sakamoto taught me for a long time. We had such a good time. She taught us how to read recipes. Many young men came to our classes but mostly to sample the cakes we baked! These classes were held at the Biola Japanese School.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you get to your classes?

MRS. MORITA: I drove the car and attended classes faithfully. Sometimes the fog was so dense that I had to lean out the window of the automobile

to see the white line on the highway!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Can you understand spoken English?

MRS. MORITA: Yes. I do speak and understand English, though sometimes I have trouble with the grammar.

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

MRS. MORITA: I would like to say that other Issei encountered more hardships than I, and I am grateful that my life was not as difficult as some.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you belong to any organizations in the community?

MRS. MORITA: I belong to the Christ Methodist Church and to the Nikkei Service Center. At one time, I also belonged to the Japanese-American Citizen League. I had been very active in a Japanese poetry club and attended class and meetings in Los Angeles once a month until a few years ago. My school is Kanze Ryu--the singing of noh poetry. There are no schools here in the Fresno area. The schools of poetry that are popular in Fresno are Kita, Kanre, and Hosho.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What changes have you seen in the Fresno area over the years?

MRS. MORITA: From a small town Fresno has grown to become a metropolis. I remember when Blackstone Avenue and Shaw Avenue were all vineyards and countryside. Now it is lined with businesses and shops; even to Clovis!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you still observe any Japanese traditional cultures?

MRS. MORITA: Mostly in the foods and eating habits. I cook Japanese cuisine such as vegetables and age (fried tofu) or seaweed and fish dishes and take them to my children's home. I feel that in these days as we grow older and worry about cholesterol and high blood pressure, it is more important to eat plainer Japanese foods which are very healthful.

I keep myself and my house in order. I am 87 years old, but I do my own laundry and cleaning and keep active so that I can stay mobile. In the morning I dress, carefully apply makeup and get ready for the day by reading the Bible and "The Upper Room" with time for meditation. I endeavor to live my life unselfishly and try to help others as one who has faith in God, and live a cheerful and pleasant life.

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

MRS. MORITA: I would like to see the United States and Japanese relationship to be compatible and our two countries be good friends. Who knows what 50 or a 100 years in the future will hold for us, but my wish is that there will be no more wars between our countries.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you, Mrs. Morita.