

HARRY NOMURA

MR. TADAKI: Today is February 26, 1980. I, Wayne Tadaki, am privileged to interview Mr. Harry Nomura in Dinuba in his home, 355 South "K" Street, Dinuba, California.

Where were you born?

MR. NOMURA: I was born in Hawaii on Kauai, August 23, 1900.

MR. TADAKI: Oh, 1900! All right. Easy to remember there. So you were born in Hawaii. When did you come to California?

MR. NOMURA: Came over August 1923.

MR. TADAKI: What made you move to California?

MR. NOMURA: Well, I visit Japan before coming over to mainland. I married my former wife in 1921.

MR. TADAKI: Oh, a young man.

MR. NOMURA: Yeah, I was young. And I came over in 1923. During those days Japanese were having so hard times leasing farmland. They're not citizens so they can't rent land. I'm a citizen, so I can lease all the land.

MR. TADAKI: So you were different from most other Japanese?

MR. NOMURA: Yes, I was a citizen, born here. Japanese citizenship expired in 1920. We don't have any Japanese subject from 1920. Those days they had a hard time—those farmers, Issei, so I leased land for them, maybe a dozen of them. Then I had to live on the farm. I had a home in Sacramento, but I had to live on the farm.

MR. TADAKI: That was when Isseis first came?

MR. NOMURA: Yes, those days. I leased the land in American legal places, Sacramento. I started to raise potatoes, Irish potatoes. The first planting we had to get from Wisconsin, then we transplanted to the American River Basin, and that was my start.

MR. TADAKI: In the beginning when you started, did you get a lot of help from Americans or were you on your own?

MR. NOMURA: No help. I had some experience, though. Those days they didn't have much tractor. From 1915 to 1917 Kauai had nothing but pineapple farmers and our area was all pineapple. I was helping in operation of tractors. So when I started to farm this land in the American River Basin, I bought this tractor and started to plow, plant everything that could be tractored. And they didn't know how to do this, the Issei. So I made a nice start and everyone started studying my ways.

MR. TADAKI: So you were the one who brought in new techniques?

MR. NOMURA: Yes, plow, plant, dig potatoes with a tractor.

MR. TADAKI: At that time were many Isseis doing farming?

MR. NOMURA: Well, Sacramento was one of the best Japanese communities in farming, in shipping, in business. Something like Los Angeles, Sacramento was.

MR. TADAKI: Oh, the center of things, right?

MR. NOMURA: Far, advanced in the farming and shipping business. They had everything. Los Angeles just started after the Japanese built the 9th Street Market. When they started that everything changed. Everything was Japanese controlled.

MR. TADAKI: This 9th Street Market was produce?

MR. NOMURA: Yes, produce. That was the beginning of Los Angeles market. But in Sacramento we had shipping business. We had everything.

MR. TADAKI: When you were in Sacramento, where did you sell your produce?

MR. NOMURA: We shipped to New York, Washington, Canada, Seattle, shipping all over.

MR. TADAKI: You said you moved to California when you were 23. I'm interested in why you decided to come to California.

MR. NOMURA: When I went to Japan in 1921, I was listening to the mainland people going to Japan, and they said they made good money raising potatoes. So when I came back to the island, I said, "Well, hell, I can go to the mainland, so I better go." But it was pretty hard to come to the mainland in those days. You had to get immigration papers, transportation, everything. You can't come right away.

MR. TADAKI: So you were considered an immigrant yet.

MR. NOMURA: Yes, an immigrant. They were checking very close.

MR. TADAKI: In that early time, did you intend to stay here?

MR. NOMURA: Well, I went to Japan, and I saw how the people live in Japan, and then I came to the mainland. Then they had all this mess up with the Alien Land Law, lots of anti- feeling against us.

MR. TADAKI: Do you remember any particular instance?

MR. NOMURA: Oh, yeah. Like borrowing money, three or four thousand dollars. You had to have broad security otherwise you can't borrow. And even Sumitomo Bank say, "We are not loaning money for the Issei." No way of borrowing money. I bought this land from First Bank. This was Japanese Hall in Sacramento, then it turn out and I ask how much you want and they say \$10,000. That was 1927 or '28. Then I say, "Who's taking care of that land?" A lawyer in San Francisco name of Hunt, so I called on the phone and say, "How much you want for your lot?" And he say \$8,000, but Japanese pay \$10,000, so I paid cash. We were not smart enough in business, so I graduated from LaSalle Extension Universities. Then we made good in business, so we loan out to the farmers up to 1933, then we can't get no money to continue.

MR. TADAKI: It was much worse after 1933?

MR. NOMURA: Well, up to 1935 was bad. In 1929 all the stock broke down, bank moratorium, banks were closed for about two weeks, so couldn't get any money. I think we loaned about 8 to 10 thousand dollars credit before hard times. When we got hard times, I sold my part to my brother.

MR. TADAKI: Was your brother living in Sacramento, too?

MR. NOMURA: He graduated and left home early, and was working in Honolulu, Sherman Garage, and he was a foreman and didn't know much about electrics, so he went to Michigan and he graduated 1918. In those days there was lots of Hawaiian Nisei go to Sweeny, Kansas to auto school. My older brother went to Michigan Auto School.

MR. TADAKI: How long did you stay in Sacramento?

MR. NOMURA: Oh, I stayed there about 15 years. I had this garage and I stayed about five years there and then I sold out and I got a service station again. All the frontier was nothing but automobiles, so if we hang onto the automobile business we know we can make money, so we came out pretty good. But our credit was too big, we had about \$8,000 credit, so finally I had to sell out and my brother took over. Then I started a service station again. During the summer days, I had my brother to help me. He was going to Sacramento College. During that time the Sacramento Vegetable Association come and hire me again managing the farmers. So I let my brother take care of the service station. Then the depression came and all the Japanese business people lost their businesses, bankrupt!

MR. TADAKI: How about the farmers, how did they do?

MR. NOMURA: They were having such hard times, they can't get 50 cents to buy bread.

MR. TADAKI: How did the Japanese live? Did they stick together?

MR. NOMURA: They'd stick together. Times come so hard that the farmers got together and opened a city market, growers market. Grow their own vegetables and bring to the city and sell on a lot from a table. Direct sales to consumer, nobody had money those days.

MR. TADAKI: So there was a lot of bartering or trading.

MR. NOMURA: Yes, everything was tied up. The bank loaned out too much money for real estate, and they can't sell the land, and can't get no money. That was terrible times.

MR. TADAKI: Did they pay you for fixing their auto by giving you food instead of money?

MR. NOMURA: Well, after I got tied up with all the money I loaned, I quit and sold out to my brother. I stayed there for 15 years, then I moved to Oakland. I still had my home property, farm. I had a 10-acre farm in Sacramento and a lot of interests there, but I think I better wash out everything and go to Oakland. That was in 1935. Then we start all over again. I was a pretty tricky guy to do business with. I went to Standard Oil Company and asked to get a credit and they say we can

give you about \$250 a month credit. In those days, \$250 was good money, so I went to these dealers, Chevrolet, Colliers, Cochranes, and I said I got credit from Standard for \$250 so they said if Standard loan you \$250, we, too, can loan you \$250. So I went to five, six places and I had \$250 with no cash money, just with good credit money.

MR. TADAKI: And that's how you could begin?

MR. NOMURA: So I located in a nice brick building. My brother was working in Los Angeles. I said, "Hell, you aren't doing nothing here," He wanted to get back to mechanics and to start again. So September 10th he came from LA, and I came from Sacramento. I had everything, rental home, everything, arranged.

MR. TADAKI: How did you get business? Just verbal agreement?

MR. NOMURA: Mouth, yes. And they found out we were just as good as Hakujin (Caucasians). Our set-up was good, like others.

MR. TADAKI: They didn't care that you were Japanese?

MR. NOMURA: No, no, they didn't care. They need us. Our customers, shipyard workers, they knew we were quick, service was so quick would come to our place. We had a good name from Colliers, Chevrolet, Cochrane. We made good for about four years, then we split. Then war broke out and we had to evacuate in 1942.

MR. TADAKI: Did you have any feelings before the war broke out? How was business at that time?

MR. NOMURA: We had good business all the way up to the war.

MR. TADAKI: Where did you go? What happened?

MR. NOMURA: We went to camp. I had my home in Oakland, and since I was in the business side I knew how to buy homes. I told my real estate lawyer to just pay the rent while I was gone. We were gone about four and a half years.

MR. TADAKI: What camp did you go to?

MR. NOMURA: Topaz, Utah. I stayed there two years and a half and I was working, Senior Accountant for Motor Pool. At that time my report was mailed to Washington, D.C., and the finance department thought I could be of help to the government by going to Chicago. So I did and went to Chicago. But you can't get good job.

MR. TADAKI: But you were working for the government.

MR. NOMURA: No, I was working now for private-calculating machines, adding machines, office machines. Pay was \$1 an hour. So when we could go back to Oakland, I left, about September 1st. When I came back, they said you can't have your home back. They still thought that was their home. They said Japanese can't get your home back, you're out. So I went to my attorney and said he should get them out.

MR. TADAKI: Did that happen to a lot of Japanese people?

MR. NOMURA: Yes, quite a few. During those days, they had claims for their loss. I had about \$2,500 claims, wartime claims.

MR. TADAKI: That was the most you could get for all your losses?

MR. NOMURA: That was the most. And I had seven children.

MR. TADAKI: Seven children? Were they all born in California?

MR. NOMURA: No, one was born in Hawaii, and rest in Sacramento.

MR. TADAKI: And they all went to Topaz and then Chicago?

MR. NOMURA: Yes.

MR. TADAKI: How did they adjust to camp life?

MR. NOMURA: Well, I was always chosen as block manager. I had lots of jobs, and they wanted me to organize a shipping shed and do bookkeeping and work at Motor Pool Department.

MR. TADAKI: Then they liked your work. When you were in Sacramento and Oakland, did your children go to English school and Japanese school?

MR. NOMURA: Oh, yes.

MR. TADAKI: Did they have mostly Japanese friends?

MR. NOMURA: Yes.

MR. TADAKI: Where are your children now?

MR. NOMURA: I have two in Los Angeles, three in Berkeley area, one in New York, and one in San Jose.

MR. TADAKI: What are your children doing?

MR. NOMURA: One daughter is in charge of office at San Pedro. A son is a teacher in San Fernando. One is married to Dr. Kiyasu, he is working at Columbia University. Their daughter is working in a laboratory, biology.

MR. TADAKI: So, that's your granddaughter. She's Yonsei already? So we have Gosei?

MR. NOMURA: Already do. Graduated from high school, 18 years old.

MR. TADAKI: Gee, I've never heard of that before, fifth generation.

MR. NOMURA: I was lucky. The children worked their way through.

MRS. GOTO: When did you remarry?

MR. NOMURA: 1959.

MRS. GOTO: And during that time you were alone? Mother and father to seven children!

MR. TADAKI: You mentioned that you were part of the group that started the JACL. What year was that?

MR. NOMURA: Probably about 1945.

MR. TADAKI: Do you remember most of the people that were connected with that? How did you get together in the beginning?

MR. NOMURA: Well, I was working in Oakland and whenever Japanese come they get ahold of people who are running a business. Whenever a Japanese training ship come first thing they come to us. We set up wrestling matches. In early days, wrestling was all around California.

MR. TADAKI: So you were a wrestler. That's how you got to know most of the well-known people.

MR. NOMURA: We had regular instructor from Japan. Paid him \$30 a night.

MR. TADAKI: Were you pretty hefty then?

MR. NOMURA: Pretty good sized. We had groups from Los Angeles, San Jose, San Francisco.

MR. TADAKI: Like wrestling clubs?

MR. NOMURA: Yes. Our group was good, too. When we went to LA, we beat them every time. In Sacramento, on the 4th of July, we had this wrestling tournament and they used to collect 2 or 3 thousand dollars.

MR. TADAKI: Were sporting events pretty important to the Japanese?

MR. NOMURA: Very. Help hold the community together.

MR. TADAKI: What other things helped to keep the community together? Was Judo important?

MR. NOMURA: Well, Judo was good, but we started with the Sumo, so if you practice Sumo it's hard on Judo. They had different ways of doing it, using it.

MRS. GOTO: Wasn't Kendo popular then, too?

MR. NOMURA: Kendo was, but not like that.

MR. TADAKI: When you came here, did you keep in contact with people from Hawaii?

MR. NOMURA: Quite a bit. Even today I have friends there I knew from grammar school.

MR. TADAKI: Back to the JACL. Do you remember how it began and why they wanted to organize?

MR. NOMURA: We had to have a strong Japanese community. We had to fight against the Land Law. We had to be in politics to fight against it.

MR. TADAKI: Before this the Japanese felt that they didn't have any power behind them?

MR. NOMURA: No, no power. We had no one to fight for us. They weren't united.

MR. TADAKI: What made you come to the valley?

MR. NOMURA: Well, I was getting tired of living in cities, so I thought I'd try farming. So I wrote to my friend in this area and told him to let me have some real estate company, so I got the name, I wrote to them, they wrote to me, and I got the land.

MR. TADAKI: That was where, Fresno or Dinuba?

MR. NOMURA: No, Orosi, in 1960.

MR. TADAKI: So, you've been here about 20 years.

MR. NOMURA: Yes. I just moved from Orosi to Dinuba. In those days my kids say, don't go big.

MR. TADAKI: You were the daring type, took risks, huh?

MRS. GOTO: What kind of farming did you do?

MR. NOMURA: Orchards.

MRS. GOTO: Like plum, peaches, oranges?

MR. NOMURA: Grew lots of tomatoes, too. Learned through experience. I knew about farms and about machines, supplies, so not that bad. Just had to learn how to spray the fruit, time to pick, those things. Every day you learn something. In five years, I know all about grapefruit, lemons, peaches, what is productive, what helps you.

MRS. GOTO: You have all these pictures here. When did you start this? When did you have time?

MR. NOMURA: I didn't care for school, so I always kept busy. When I was 15 I started peddling rice. I never had any help from my parents. Went to Japan three times, paid it all myself.

MRS. GOTO: When you married the second time in 1959, was she a widow?

MR. NOMURA: She was a widow. We were in the same church from early day. She lost her husband during the war.

MR. TADAKI: When you came to Orosi, who was prominent during that time?

MR. NOMURA: Quite a change after the war, you know. Frozen food changed what the farmer would raise. Biggest change after the war. Japan came to study methods and set up same way.

MR. TADAKI: In the early days were there many Japanese on the railroads?

MR. NOMURA: There were quite a few in Montana. After the railroad was completed, they came into farming or to LA or San Francisco to start business. They say the Japanese living in Seattle really made good in

business. They traded direct from Japan to Seattle. From Seattle they shipped by railroad to East, had good connections. When business got bad, all the businessmen in Seattle moved to LA.

MR. TADAKI: What kind of businesses were they involved in?

MR. NOMURA: Well, all kinds; hotel, stores, restaurant. Then a community developed. LA was the best place for Japanese alien to start, because Japanese were starting everything. In San Francisco, the Italians and Jews don't like the Japanese coiling in and starting business, anti-Oriental.

MR. TADAKI: Because they were already established?

MR. NOMURA: Yes. They didn't want Japanese to compete with them, so it was hard to start business, so they went to LA.

MR. TADAKI: They say most Japanese came to California and Hawaii with the idea that they would work, make money and go home. Of these people, how many would you say went back?

What percentage?

MR. NOMURA: Probably very, very few.

MR. TADAKI: What were the reasons they did not go back to Japan?

MR. NOMURA: Didn't make the money. Most of the Issei changed plans when Japan lost the war. They were too old to start over and they liked to stay with their children. So they bought land to work with their sons. As for me, I wanted to make my home in California. I'd seen Japan and can't live there, so their ideas and mine were entirely different.

MR. TADAKI: So lots of dreams didn't come true then?

MR. NOMURA: Like my father. He made a big mistake. Instead of bringing all the money he made on pineapples to Japan and buy a small one-acre place and build a home there, then he passed away in six months. He should have used that 40 or 50 thousand in Honolulu in rental home or apartment he would have been rich. But few of them went back to Japan.

MR. TADAKI: When the Issei came, they were young men in their teens or 20's, so they had no older Japanese to guide them. They had to get leaders among them.

MR. NOMURA: Yes, no leaders. They organized their group. The first thing they form in Tanamoshiko.

MR. TADAKI: Can you explain that?

MR. NOMURA: Tanamoshiko is every time they had \$20, every month, they had 20 persons in a group and they put the money together. Whenever they needed to use the money, they had to bid, highest one got the money.

MR. TADAKI: You mean the whole kitty?

MR. NOMURA: Yes, all of it. Then next month, somebody else. But every month they had to pay \$20 or \$25, like a bank. So if you like to start a

business you can get Tanamoshiko and start. Dollars right there. It was a good idea, but sometimes they can't pay so they just walk away, but they had to have a witness to sign for this person. Like a co-signer.

MR. TADAKI: Did that continue until the war?

MR. NOMURA: No, no income, so it was dissolved. But it helped in money circulation.

MR. TADAKI: Did any of the Issei send for their parents to come to live in Hawaii or California?

MR. NOMURA: Lots of island people did. Later they came to mainland. On island they had to have a contract for three years. Nowadays, immigrants go to Argentina or wherever and are financed by the Japanese government. Early days, no help.

MR. TADAKI: How did the Japanese find out about contract opportunities?

MR. NOMURA: They had a certain organization that came to prefecture. Said we want this number of family, island government or industry sent them to recruit for laborers.

MR. TADAKI: Mostly what kind of people came?

MR. NOMURA: Usually farm people.

MR. TADAKI: But wasn't it tradition in Japan for the oldest son to inherit the land, so the second son left?

MR. NOMURA: In my family three are gone and one returned home early.

MR. TADAKI: The Issei never had parents, grandparents there to take care of?

MR. NOMURA: Well, they had someone back there to take care of them.

MR. TADAKI: When you first came to the Sacramento Valley, do you remember what the Valley was like? How long did it take to go from Sacramento to Los Angeles?

MR. NOMURA: Well, I had automobile so it take a full day. We had pretty good roads.

MR. TADAKI: Was Fresno the center for agriculture?

MR. NOMURA: In those days, Japanese markets were good in Los Angeles so everyone sent produce to LA wholesale houses.

MR. TADAKI: Do you remember going through Fresno?

MR. NOMURA: Oh, yeah. Not much change, grapes especially around Lodi. Fresno grew up after the war. Mass producing was in the northern valley until then, canneries there, too. Then after war, Fresno became number one, also Kings, Tulare. All the fruit, olives, everything. Most productive.

MR. TADAKI: Do you think irrigation was responsible?

MR. NOMURA: Oh, yes. That was the factor. It came after the war. Water was the main opening for farmers. Before that it was cotton and sugar beets. Most Japanese came after getting their experience in the north. People moved where they thought the farming or climate was good.

MR. TADAKI: How did the Japanese get along with the other minorities.

MR. NOMURA: Other minorities are jealous because Japanese too good at growing, sacrifice themselves. They get a lot of contracts with wholesale houses.

MR. TADAKI: Who owned the wholesale houses?

MR. NOMURA: Hakuajins (Caucasians). Issei hired Mexicans to do labor, earlier Philipinos. I used to hire Mexicans even in Sacramento picking potatoes, 1923 and after. They were good workers then. The ones coming from Mexico were better workers and more honest. Send money home every month. Even when I first came here I had a Mexican family that came from Texas.

MR. TADAKI: During the war what were your feelings toward Japan?

MR. NOMURA: Well, when we first went to the Assembly Center at Tanforan we had a heck of a time. Then we went to Topaz, had to organize the camp, set it up right. We were unhappy with conditions, food, but we obeyed rules of relocation. No use complaining.

MR. TADAKI: Were most of the people as cooperative as you?

MR. NOMURA: Most everyone cooperative. We had a few agitators who were finally shipped to Tule Lake and then back to Japan.

MR. TADAKI: How did they agitate?

MR. NOMURA: They didn't want us to obey regulations. They want us to speak against. I was one of the oldest. Mostly the Issei were for Japan. In your family you talk it over and you say you have a responsibility to this country, your duty, help your parents and stay in camp. I had my own way of thinking.

MR. TADAKI: So you put yourself through school?

MR. NOMURA: Study every night, went to night school at 16.

MR. TADAKI: Can your children speak Japanese?

MR. NOMURA: Not much. They can understand a little.

MR. TADAKI: I guess they didn't have the opportunity to use it. What was your feeling about how to bring up your children?

MR. NOMURA: My timing was poor for my children. When we came back from Chicago, everyone wanted a job, so they went right straight to work. Eventually they went back to school, just lately, so my kids had hard luck because of the war. I regret that.

MR. TADAKI: Did you have plans to have them fit into American life or

absorb Japanese culture?

MR. NOMURA: I want my kids to do what they think is best, not worry about Japanese or American traditions. Do the best you can. I went to school and learning about Meiji era. Meiji says be responsible for lifetime. I like the wording. Responsibility means you are grown up and take care of your parents, be nice to brothers and sisters, play your part in the community. Help out. I'd rather believe in that.

MR. TADAKI: Do they still believe that in Japan?

MR. NOMURA: Oh, yes. That's the start of education in Japan--Meiji. Some things we can't do because we are in this country like the responsibility for ancestors. But I am an American already and my family has my independence, and we all get along.

MR. TADAKI: Is that your philosophy, the Meiji Era and independence? That's what you taught your children.

MR. NOMURA: Something better than what you think you can do.

MR. TADAKI: And you think you are more American than Japanese?

MR. NOMURA: Yes. Especially in advanced ways. You have to change. Everything changes so you change, too, or get left behind. So I farm and have to learn irrigation, how to buy home, always ahead, planning ahead.

MR. TADAKI: You had the fight and spirit.

MR. NOMURA: I had a better life. It's the way you handle things. I had security by good planning.

MR. TADAKI: Well, Mr. Nomura, did you have anything you wanted to add to this interview?

MR. NOMURA: Well, things are changing so fast. This coming generations makes too much easy money. They have to think that over, how they should spend the money. That's my policy. How to spend the money wisely.

MR. TADAKI: Thank you so much.