

HARRY SAKAE WATANABE

This is a statement by Mr. Harry Sakae Watanabe who was born November 10, 1896 in Shimotsuma, Ibaraki-ken, Japan. Mr. Watanabe came to the United States as a yobiyose in April of 1915 and lived in Coalinga for 34 years and in Hanford for 30 years. This statement was written in the summer of 1980.

To begin with, I would like to note the fact that there have been very few criminal records among the Japanese in this country over the last 80 years (1900-1980). This is something Japanese-Americans can be proud of.

I have recorded the history of the first Japanese immigrants who came to live in Kings County. Around 1900 many Japanese immigrants came to the United States. Their purpose was to make money quickly and return to Japan. The most promising way to acquire a fortune was to go to Central California to pick grapes. Although the immigrants were told that Fresno was scorchingly hot, they came because they heard that wages exceeded \$5 a day. However, Hanford had a greater need for farm laborers than Fresno. In Hanford there was the Lucerne Vineyards, which was known as the largest vineyard in the world. Also, there were the MacRae Vineyards and Grangeville Vineyards, as well as others. Many grape pickers were needed. Mr. Fukushima from Fresno established a labor camp in Lucerne, and other smaller labor camps were established, which enabled 300 Japanese workers to come here. I will write a little about those camps. Blankets were laid in the barns or directly on the ground in the sheds as beds. The bathtub was a bucket filled with hot water.

Makeshift stoves were made of bricks with iron bars laid across the top. Firewood was burned underneath, and pots and pans were placed on top to cook rice and other dishes. I don't think people today would be able to imagine what it was like. It was before we could buy wood-burning stoves.

It was some time before barracks were finally built at the Lucerne camps. Mr. Yumikura built a big Japanese bathtub.

Although there was a wood stove, we didn't use it very much. Meals consisted of vegetables and meat (round steak) cooked together, pickles made of nappa or daikon, and sometimes we had fish. Of course, there was no gas or electricity like today. Kerosene lamps provided lighting at night.

As for Japanese food stores, Mr. Jitsuzo Omata came to Hanford in 1902 and started a grocery store at the intersection of 7th and Green in 1904. Two years later (1906) he built a new store to expand his business and continued to operate the grocery until the war broke out. He was also the first Japanese to get married in Hanford. In 1908 their first daughter Tsuneko was born. She was the first Nisei to be born in Hanford. After her Minoru, Jiro, and others were born. Mr. and Mrs. Omata were blessed with eight children.

At that time there was a need for living quarters. Mr. Kozuki started a boardinghouse on 7th Street next to the Omatas in 1906. Mr. Takeda and Mr. Obata later succeeded in its management.

In 1908 Dr. Murayama, a medical doctor from Japan, came and treated Japanese patients although he did not have a California license. Later

he graduated from an Eastern medical school and became a legitimate doctor. He resumed his practice in Fresno and returned to Japan around 1920.

Mr. Sakamoto came to the States in 1908. While working on farms, he studied English. He graduated from the Dental Department at the University of Colorado. While he was still attending school he visited Hanford and during summer vacations rented a room in the boardinghouse and did dental work for the Japanese in the community.

Next to the boardinghouse, there was a Japanese bathhouse operated by Mr. Mori. The men's and women's sections were not separated. On the north side of 7th Street there was Mr. Sagara's boardinghouse and Wada's Candy Store. The latter were parents of Mr. Yori Wada who is now a director at the YMCA in San Francisco. Next came Tokumoto's barbershop, a fish store, the Buddhist Church, and the Omata's residence. Seventh Street between Green and Brown was all Japanese establishments.

As for restaurants, there was the Star Restaurant and Hamanaka's Restaurant on 6th Street, and Saito's Restaurant on Irwin Street. All were opened around 1910. Kataoka's pool hall, a photo shop, and Tagawa's laundry opened about 1912.

On the opposite side of 7th Street, which was part of China town, Hayashibara opened a garage in 1920. The management was passed on to Mr. Mizote from Fresno in 1936. Mr. Yamamoto started the first nursery in Hanford. In the beginning, he grew a few varieties of fruits and grapes. Their store on 7th Street was open for business about three months during the winter. The demand from farms gradually increased and several years later, they were growing several hundred thousand young trees to accommodate the demand. The nursery became famous throughout Central California. Mr. Yamamoto was killed in an automobile accident and his brother and friend, Messrs. Takeda and Ichimura, succeeded the business. The nursery was relocated to East 7th Street where it now stands and continued until after the war broke out. After the war, Taro Takeda and George Takeda, sons of Mr. Takeda, started the nursery again, specializing in nursery stocks. They also started landscaping. The nursery has expanded and prospered. Today it is one of the largest nurseries in Central California.

Mr. Tagawa's King's hand laundry is also of historical significance in Hanford. Around 1910 the Koda brothers from Coalinga came to help establish the store. The business has continued to date. At present the Tagawa's daughter Naomi is running the laundry and you can hear her singing while she irons.

In August of 1979 KMJ-TV from Fresno sent a crew to film a special program on the hand laundry which has remained unchanged for 70 years. The interview with Naomi was a meaningful one. The laundry is located next to the Buddhist Church on Green Street.

Celebrities from Hanford are Mr. Yoichi Miya, an executive director of Shiseido, Mr. Ben Maewaki, an officer of the United States Army in Japan, Mr. Shiro Omata, Mr. Wada, Mr. Kuroda, Mr. Bob Omata, and others who reside in the States.

In 1908 Mr. Hiwano opened Taiyo Shokai, which was a Japanese food store in Armona to serve the Japanese population. Later Mr. Hiwano moved to

Hanford and built a new store near the Buddhist Church. It was in operation after the war. Mr. Nobusada later bought the store in Armona.

Mr. Nishimine opened a boardinghouse next to Mr. Nobusada's store around 1908. After Mr. Nishimine moved to Lemoore, the management was in the hand of Mr. Yoshida. The Kumashiro brothers also opened a boardinghouse which was bought by Mr. Takahashi several years later. Mr. Takahashi became ill and eventually returned to Japan.

There were five Chinese gambling houses across from Japanese town in Armona, which turned this area into one of the places in California where lots of gambling took place. Many Japanese laborers gathered there and Armona became more prosperous than Hanford.

In 1920, after Chinatown burned down, Japanese town went downhill. After the war, Japanese town completely disappeared, and now there remains only Mr. Mitsuyoshi's residence. At its peak, there was a Japanese hall in Japanese town and a ceremony was held there on Tencho-setsu (emperor's birthday). Humorous Japanese amateur shows were also held at the hall. At one time there were enough Japanese in the area so that a Japanese baseball team called the Issei Seinen (Issei Youth) was organized. There was a Japanese laundry in Armona which opened around 1918.

In Corcoran, there was Chono's laundry and Mano's Grocery.

The Caucasian farmers in the area learned that the Japanese were honest and hard workers. So the Japanese workers found steady work and finally were able to settle down. Several dozen Japanese families decided to settle in Armona, Lemoore, and Hanford. The number of people who leased land increased from 1910 to 1915. They wanted to settle down and raise a family. Consequently, many young men started to send for picture brides.

Around 1920 the State of California passed a law prohibiting picture brides. However, by that time, there were many couples with children. The number of children per family averaged six or seven and ranged up to 9, 10, and even 12 with the larger families. There were some tragic cases, but at the time, the more children one had, the better they were. The Issei parents who had suffered from racial discrimination and persecution for a long time worked hard to raise their children as fine American citizens, and made every sacrifice necessary to achieve this goal. They were determined to educate their children to the same degree as the Caucasian children. Japanese schools started when the Nisei children started to attend public schools. Thanks to the sacrifices of the Issei, the Nisei now hold good positions in many fields.

In the home, Japanese was the only language that was spoken, so the children didn't understand English. So when they started to attend public schools, they encountered many difficulties. A mother would take her child to school, and upon returning home would find the child had run away from school and reached home before she did. There were episodes like this.

A Japanese school was built at the corner of 7th and White in Hanford. Classes were held for two hours following public school during weekdays and all day on Saturdays.

When World War II broke out with the attack on Pearl Harbor, the

Japanese-Americans in California were charged as spies and arrested. The documents of the Japanese Association were all burned, and there remains no written records. So I will state only what I can remember.

Around 1910 Mr. Yoshimasa (Zensei), Masuzawa initiated the organization and Messrs. Omata, Masai, Sagara, Kusamura, Takenaka of Hanford and from Armona Messrs. Nishimine, Hiwano, and Mayeda organized and held membership in the Japanese Association. After that Mr. Habara and others joined.

The Japanese Association was like the local branch of the Japanese Consulate. It dealt with trivial everyday matters. Once a year a conference of the Northern California Japanese Association League was held in San Francisco. The Kings County Japanese Association sent representatives to the meeting. At the conference, topics discussed included discrimination against Japanese, prohibition of picture brides, and other problems which occurred one after the other. It also dealt with bringing family members to the States (yobiyose), issuing passports, plus other such similar functions, and played quite an important role in the lives of the Japanese people. Messrs. Masuzawa and Habara were the representatives who were sent almost every year. Their appearance, complete with a morning coat and a hat, was famous at the time.

After World War II, there were many Japanese who didn't come back to Hanford. Consequently, the number of members decreased. The need for the Japanese Association declined as well. There were many Niseis now and they weren't particularly interested in the Japanese Association. Mr. Habara voluntarily became the president as well as the secretary, and so it continued for a while. After he moved to Cleveland, the association was discontinued. Mr. Habara was awarded the Kunrokuto Zuiho-sho by the Japanese government several years ago.

The first secretary for the Japanese Association was Mr. Fugihira, who later went back to Japan. He traveled around Armona and Lemoore by horse and buggy to collect the association fees. The charge for horse and buggy rental was a dollar and a half a day. There were no Japanese who owned a car at that time. The horse and buggy served as the main transportation source. Very few people even had a bicycle.

Around 1915 a huge celebration ceremony was held at the Courthouse in Hanford on the occasion of the Emperor's birthday. The mayor of Hanford gave a congratulatory speech which was interpreted by Mr. Sakamoto. The Japanese living in the United States took up a collection and with it donated a drinking fountain on the corner of Irwin and 8th Streets. The membership of the Japanese Association numbered more than 200 at that time.

When the discrimination movement against Japanese began around 1913, the Japanese Association rallied people in an attempt to stop it, but to no avail. Later, farmers with assistance from the Japanese government could continue leasing land as part of the Trade Agreement between Japan and the United States. But the Issei didn't have the right to own land any longer.

Those who purchased land before 1913 were: Kusamura and Konishi in Lemoore; Hase in Grangeville; and Hayakawa in Hanford. Those four were about all. Nishimine and Nishi co-owned some land in Lemoore.

The first Japanese to lease land in Kings County were Hoshino and Watanabe in 1905. They co-leased a 40-acre grape vineyard in Lemoore. Three years later Mayeda took over the vineyard and both Hoshino and Watanabe co-leased an apricot orchard from Mr. Cortner in Armona until around 1920. In March when the apricot blossoms were in full bloom, they held an annual flower appreciation party (hanami). Many farmers came from Lemoore and Hanford to spend a full day drinking and feasting. The partygoers enjoyed themselves to the utmost. There were very few Japanese women then. Most of the partygoers were energetic young men. There is a photo of Masao Kusamura when he was taken to this party by his parents by horse and buggy from Lemoore. The opportunity for picnics didn't exist like they do today.

The Buddhist Church

Since all of the Japanese immigrants were members of the Buddhist Church in 1905 Messrs. Jitsuzo Omata, Zensei Masuzawa, Shinjiro Hirata, and Shinzo Takenaka sponsored and organized a Young Buddhist Association. They rented a house at 314 7th Street to hold their meetings. That was the beginning.

As the number of members increased, there developed a need for a hall. In 1915 they decided to change the name to the Hanford Buddhist Church and to build a new hall. Kusamura, Jitsuzo Omata, Shinzo Takenaka, Akito Matsui, Yoshimasa Masuzawa and others formed a special committee to erect the hall. The new hall was designed and a building site was purchased with a donation for several thousand dollars.

Finally, a new Buddhist Hall was completed at 314 7th Street, and a dedication ceremony was held in 1916.

In 1929 a bigger site was obtained on Green Street, and the hall was moved to the new site. It remained there until a modern church was built there in 1968.

When people returned after the war, the hall served as a place to stay for those single persons who had nowhere to go. It was one of the significant roles the hall played.

The present hall was completed through donations coming from members Kusamura, Nishi, Shiroyama brothers, Miya brothers, Horie, Kishue, and others. A 75th year celebration service will be held this coming November 2nd, and preparations are currently under way.

Mr. Kusamura was born in Lemoore and went to Japan when he was a young child. He graduated from a Buddhist school in Japan and upon returning to this area has served as an able leader of the church. He dedicates himself to the management of the church. At one time there were more than 200 members in the Hanford Buddhist Church. Although the present membership is only 25 families, they are extremely proud of their new facilities. The church has had 15 ministers throughout its history.

The Christian Church

Several very ardent Christians, Miss Moore, Mrs. Harlow, and Mrs. Gaston, started a free English night class for Japanese immigrants around 1908. The students were converted to Christianity because of

three ladies who were sincere in their religious beliefs. Tagawa, Fukuda, Wada, Hase, and Mizukami raised funds by participating in a choir at a Caucasian Christian church and by soliciting donations from Caucasian members. With these funds they built the Harlow Memorial Presbyterian Church next to the Buddhist Church on 7th Street. It was a two-story building, and Japanese youths rented rooms and went to school from there. At night they studied English at the church school.

Yamamura, Hifumi, Matsubara, Hattori, and Watanabe were some of the youths who lived there around 1915. They formed the Lincoln Club and lectures and discussion programs were held. It was very popular and many youths were attracted to these activities. Some of the first ministers were Reverends Miura, Narita, Toyotomi, Koga, Sato, and Ota. This group was active until the outbreak of World War II.

During the war, the church was set on fire and completely destroyed. Many of the Japanese Christians did not return to Hanford after the war. Some members settled in the East. Returning Isseis and Niseis purchased an old Caucasian church and held services every Sunday for a time. But due to lack of members, it became difficult to finance an independent church. The remaining Christian church, members joined the Caucasian Hanford Presbyterian Church.

Around 1920 Japanese children (both Buddhists and Christians) went to Sunday School at the Japanese Hall regardless of which religion the parents belonged to. They were several dozen in number, and most of them were from Buddhist families. Later the Buddhist Church started its own Sunday School.

After the war, there were many people who didn't come back to Hanford. Those who had established a base here came back here. Mr. Goro Omata opened a grocery store with other partners. The store had originally been a family store. After a few years it was sold to a Chinese grocer. Mr. Mizote built and operated a garage where the Christian church was previously located, and the garage is still in business today. Besides the garage, the other Japanese businesses in Hanford are the San Joaquin Nursery, Satoda Watch Store, Inaba's Time Shop, and the Ed's Tic Toc Shop. As for restaurants, Kusamura's is on 10th Avenue, and the Star Restaurant on 6th Street. Japanese town is not as busy as it used to be; there is not much left of it.

As for farming, most of the Niseis returned to succeed their parents and have been successful in expanding their operations. Mr. Mitsuo Shiroyama owns an apartment in Hanford in addition to a farm. The Miya brothers, Kay and Harry, own a several hundred acre orchard. Maki Hase, Yoshito Matsubara, Dick Kishiue, Hideo Horii, and the Shiroyama brothers in Laton are all big successful farmers. Others are Roy Fukuda's walnut orchard, Nishi's fruit orchard, and Fukano's walnut farm.

Nisei veterans who fought in World War II organized the VFW and the Nisei Liberty Post 5869 in 1949. Their first commander was George Nishi who had been awarded the Silver Star. Today it is one of the most famous Posts in Central California. The membership is 85. The organization contributes considerably to the community.

We Isseis were able to receive our citizenship thanks to the outstanding accomplishments of the Nisei during the war. We received many benefits because of the Nisei soldiers. After the war, Niseis had job

opportunities equal to the Caucasians. Twenty-seven years ago, Hisako Fukuda became a grammar school teacher and is still teaching. Many Niseis are working for schools today.

Though Coalinga is in Fresno County, it has had a close relationship with Hanford. Around 1898 oil was discovered there and Southern Pacific Railroad tracks were laid and many big oil companies started to sink wells which required lots of workers. At that time the wages for farm laborers were \$.75 to \$1 for an 11-hour day. Consequently many Japanese went from Hanford to Coalinga to work, since they were paid \$60 a month with room and board. Within several years the young Japanese men were able to save \$500 to \$600 with which to return to Hanford and lease land at various places. Among them were Mochizuki in Madera and Habara in Hanford. Their work in Coalinga consisted of cooking for hotels and oil companies, washing dishes, and house maintenance.

Around 1906 three Koda brothers came to Coalinga and bought a hand laundry business from a Chinese man. They saved enough to buy another laundry and moved to Palo Alto in 1910. Keizaburo Koda later returned and started rice farming in Colusa. During the Great Depression following World War I, he began a tuna cannery along with other Japanese in San Pedro. Later, around 1920, he started farming several thousand acres of rice in Dos Palos with a Caucasian. He became so successful that he was called the Rice King of California. His younger brother Sakae came back to Coalinga to start a laundry in 1925. He settled in Baltimore after the war.

At one time Coalinga had a Japanese Association. The president was Keizaburo Koda, the vice-president was Hideo Mochizuki, and the secretary was Habara. There were more than 60 members at that time.

The Japanese people left Coalinga one after the other, and only I remained after the war. I ran a nursery until 1962 and retired at the age of 65. I moved to Hanford and live here today. I began the nursery in 1928, although a newspaper article about my business printed 1933 as the year the nursery was established. At present my third son Mitsuo Watanabe operates a drugstore. I enclosed a newspaper article for reference to my accomplishments in Coalinga.

Portions of an article written by Lula Grigsby, Librarian, about Harry Watanabe, taken from the Coalinga Record:

Harry Watanabe is the father of Herb Watanabe, of the Service Pharmacy; Yas a jeweler at Petty's Jewelry; and Nobuo a third-grade teacher. Time was when Harry Watanabe was a person in his own right, and just about the best known man in Coalinga. This was after he started the Coalinga Nursery in 1933, and contact with him, through landscaping and floriculture, was practically a way of life-- for 30 years or more.

It's hard to realize now, after so long a time, just how important Harry Watanabe was to the town and its people.

In the days when he started his nursery, on what became Hawthorne Street, civic minded people were working hard to beautify the town....It seems everyone was working under harder conditions, with everything against them; the soil, the climate, and most of all, the water. Not everything would grow here, and what would

grow was found through trial and error.

Then came Harry Watanabe, who seemed to have a natural instinct for gardening, and devoted his time to trying things out. In no time at all, Harry became the local oracle on gardening. Almost everybody sought his advice for planting the right thing. He was also interested in what everybody was planting, and willing to help out.

A lot of the big jobs were entrusted to him. The parks and the grounds of the public buildings got their start through him. He did the hospital grounds, helped with the grounds of the grammar schools, and of the college with Ross Phillips. He worked for years with the late Herb Hull in the city park. In fact, Harry Watanabe's work is all around us.

He helped, too, with civic things which might be said to be outside the line of duty. For instance, he and his wife took great interest in the Woman's Club Chrysanthemum Fete, and helped immeasurably with the success of the annual affair.

There was a sad interlude during World War II. During that time the bewildered, good citizen Watanabes--whose son Yasuo (Yas) was with the United States Army in Berlin and son Nobuo was serving as interpreter in Japan--were relocated." (Mitsuo--that's Herb-- was still in high school.)

After various "relocations," the Watanabes wound up in Maryland, where Harry served as sort of a handyman to a doctor.

They were gone three years. They came back to Coalinga in October 1946 to try to pick up the pieces of their lives and straighten out the title to their property.

The nursery work soon became too much for one man to handle; and, presently, Nobuo and his wife Lily were giving all their time to the nursery. That went on for about 12 years, but Nobuo wanted to teach school and in 1961 the nursery was just shut down.

That was the year after Mr. and Mrs. Watanabe made a visit to their homeland. It was in the spring of 1960 that they took a trip to Japan, where both had been born. Mrs. Watanabe, who had been Yoshino Izuka before her marriage to Harry, still has a 90-year old mother living in Japan.

In 1963 the Watanabes left Coalinga for Hanford. Harry wanted to retire in a place that had good water, for the easier cultivation of his flowers. And, besides, Mitsuo and his family were living there then, and there were many friends in Hanford.

It was at the house of long-time friends--the Takedas--that the golden wedding anniversary of the Watanabe's was celebrated in 1972 with family, relatives, and many other friends in attendance.

Harry is an old-timer. He first came to Coalinga 1915, a very young man, and the reason he came was because he had a sister living here, a Mrs. Onizawa who was running a hand laundry. She died not long after in the great flu epidemic.

It is interesting to note that the young son she left visited in Coalinga last June. He is now an executive of a large insurance company in Japan.

Harry, when he first came to Coalinga, did all kinds of jobs to make a living. He worked for Ayers Drug Store for a time, and it is said he even made beds at the old Sullivan Hotel (or Petrolia). At any rate, he managed 'til he found his true vocation; which was gardening and landscaping.