

GEORGE MASUMI SAKAI

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is August 4, 1980. I, Helen Hasegawa, am privileged to be in the home of Mr. and Mrs., George Sakai, 686 East Sierra Avenue, Fresno, California, 93710.

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

MR. SAKAI: My full name is George Masumi Sakai. I was born in Japan on October 13, 1897. I arrived in Seattle, Washington with my mother in November 1906, and my father came to meet us, as he was here five years prior to our arrival. We stayed with, who was later to become my father-in-law, Tsunezo Miyamoto in Emmaton. Emmaton is in the Delta area of Sacramento County near Rio Vista.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Mr. Sakai, in what Ken were you born? And what did your father do?

MR. SAKAI: I was born in Kumamoto-Ken, Higashi Samo No, where my father was a farmer. He grew rice and a few vegetables, I imagine.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you remember how old he was when he came to America? And what did he do in Sacramento?

MR. SAKAI: I imagine he must have been around 31 years old, since there's 22 years difference between us. And we lived in different places on farms as day laborer. My mother cooked sometimes.

After Sacramento, we went to Penryn and on down to Fresno to pick grapes. When we finished picking the grapes, we went back to Sacramento way. We followed the crops, just like the Mexicans do today. Many were doing the same thing, but we went as a family. Certain seasonal work was already known, so we followed the pattern. Places like Del Rey, 400 to 500 Japanese came to pick grapes during the season. Some stayed on for the pruning season.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were there other Japanese children at that time, or were you the only one?

MR. SAKAI: I went to seven different grammar schools, but most of the time I was the only Japanese in the American school. In Walnut Grove, though, we had an "Oriental" school, taught by one Caucasian teacher. There were Chinese and Japanese students only, no Caucasian students. It was a segregated public school. We had to go to that school, and we all walked.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were there that many Japanese families there?

MR. SAKAI: Quite a few.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were there any Americans living in that area?

MR. SAKAI: Yes. And their children attended all-white school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was really segregation. How old were you then?

MR. SAKAI: I really don't know, but I guess I must have been between 12

and 13. We settled in Del Rey in 1909 or 1910 until 1942, when we evacuated, and we came back in 1945.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In Del Rey, did your father start the grocery store?

MR. SAKAI: We had a boardinghouse and a store. My mother used to cook and board people--about 10 or 15 people, and at times as many as 25. My mother was a hard worker.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did your father decide to stay in Del Rey?

MR. SAKAI: Let's see, how did that happen? We were still migrating around. One year, Sherman Island, where Emmaton is located, was flooded. It rained so much that the levee broke, thereby flooding many islands. It takes about a year to pump it out and dry the land. Mr. Miyamoto had his business there but couldn't do anything, so we all came to Del Rey. One merchant by the name of Mr. Matsuo said something about having a boardinghouse in Del Rey. After he decided to go back to Sherman Island, he told my parents to stay and run the place.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you remember anything about conditions in Del Rey?

MR. SAKAI: I remember everything! One time Del Rey became very populated with Japanese. We had about four or five boardinghouses; we had three pool halls; two or three chop suey houses; we even had a bicycle shop; we had a "tofu ya" and "sakana ya." Mr. Sasahara came in 1922, I think, and started auto repair shop.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were all the businesses run by Japanese?

MR. SAKAI: Not all, but mostly. There weren't too many Japanese landowners. Mr. Matsuo was a tiny fellow, but aggressive, and he had a lot of people come to town and encouraged people to start businesses like that. He had a store himself.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then you went to grammar school in Del Rey. What was the name of the school?

MR. SAKAI: Prairie. In 1909. Mrs. Van Dam is the name of one teacher I remember. The other one I remember is Miss Robinson, she was nice to me in grammar school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: After grammar school, did you go on with your schooling?

MR. SAKAI: I went to Sanger High for two years, and I quit.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you were a student, did any of the students show any prejudice?

MR. SAKAI: None whatsoever! Del Rey people are very nice and friendly.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did you do after two years of high school? Of course, we must remember that at that time, formal education for many children stopped after grammar school.

MR. SAKAI: I delivered for the store--groceries--down to Sanger. I

went into Sanger, to Kirkman Hill, to Centerville, down Wahtoke Way, to Uchiyama's in the Riverbottom area was my last stop. One week we took orders, and the next week we delivered. I started to do this in 1917. I started before I was married in 1919. Then credit got so bad that we quit delivery service around 1934.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I had heard that people traveled by horse and buggy. Is this how you made your rounds?

MR. SAKAI: No. Father had bought a Ford from J.P. Phelan in Fresno in 1915. We made a box at the back end and delivered out of it. I remember he paid \$515 and I had to crank it to get it started. Since Henry Ford had made a commitment in the newspaper that if he sold a million Fords he would give a rebate, we got a check for \$50. The price of the car sounds cheap today, but wages were 15 cents to 20 cents an hour; 10 cents for a quart of milk and 10 cents for a loaf of bread.

MRS. HASEGAWA: During this period you got married. How did you meet your wife?

MR. SAKAI: My wife's name was Grace. I guess my mother got her, kind of like a "baishakunin." My mother used to go to San Francisco quite often, and I guess she got us together. I had heard that Grace didn't want to come to the country because of many inconveniences; such as plumbing, et cetera, We were married by Reverend Fukushima on February 1, 1919 at the Japanese Congregational Church in Fresno.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where did Grace live before she came to Del Rey?

MR. SAKAI: She was born in Honolulu, Hawaii. She lived in San Francisco and Sacramento and went to Japanese School in a Buddhist Church in Sacramento. In 1914, I think, they moved back to San Francisco and had a boardinghouse expecting a lot of Japanese people to come to the 1915 Panama Canal Exposition.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then you had children; how many do you have?

MR. SAKAI: We had five children, all born in Del Rey. As they grew older the boys helped me in the store, and the girls helped their mother. Grace died in 1975 after a long illness. In 1926 I took over the business from my dad, and by then we didn't have the boardinghouse You know, my father had bought the property through another man and had built the store himself in 1912. He was quite a capable man! It was a two-story frame building and was lighted by kerosene lamps which were suspended from the ceiling. The boardinghouse had no electricity either until 1913.

In 1919 a new store made of bricks was built by contractors, and I did the electrical wiring myself. The original store was later condemned and demolished. The new store, of course, still stands. After I took over the business, my parents retired, took life easy, and went to Japan in 1938. They returned to Fresno in 1953 and lived together with us until they passed away.

MRS. HASEGAWA: As a child growing up, you said you hadn't experienced any prejudices. What about after you had taken over the store? What kind of relationship was there between you and your community?

MR. SAKAI: Well, it was the same thing. No one was hostile to us. By then, we knew each other, almost all the people in Del Rey.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are your children doing now?

MR. SAKAI: John, retired on disability, and his wife Marcie are now living in Las Vegas, Nevada. Bob and his wife Toshi operate the Payless Market in Fresno. Alice Yoshioka is helping at Payless Market. June, married to Masso Kurata, died in 1965 in an automobile accident. And Janice, married to a Caucasian, is a housewife now living in Washington.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many grandchildren do you have?

MR. SAKAI: I have 10 grandchildren and two great grandchildren!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your grandchildren marry Japanese?

MR. SAKAI: No. Three that are married are married to Caucasians.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When Pearl Harbor came, you were still in Del Rey. Your store was open that afternoon. What reaction did you have?

MR. SAKAI: Next door, my sister-in-law's husband Henry, a tall guy, he's from Hawaii, he repeatedly said, "Japan bombed Pearl Harbor!" I didn't know what he meant, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was. We were excited.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Eventually you had to close your store.

MR. SAKAI: We closed our store 1st of August 1942. Nobody paid their debts. The Americans, who used to trade with me, whom we thought were pretty good friends, stopped coming. When they passed the front of the store they didn't say "hello," they just walked on, looking sideways. I lost practically everything.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did you do with the store and all the contents?

MR. SAKAI: I was already picked up by the FBI in February 1942 and sent to Santa Fe, New Mexico. John, who had his university education abruptly terminated by declaration of war and had come home from Berkeley, stayed at the store and sold some of the goods and paid all our suppliers.

MRS. HASEGAWA: John paid the bills, but the customers did not pay you. How could you manage that?

MR. SAKAI: We had the stock in the store, so we had to sacrifice that. We didn't owe too much.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why were you in New Mexico?

MR. SAKAI: In the Fresno Bee, it said all Japanese with flashlights and any kind of arms have to turn them into the sheriff. And I didn't do it, so I got called on that. Somebody must have reported it. They took all the shotgun shells and picked me up. They were for sale, they weren't my personal property. They took me to Fresno jail at once. From Fresno, they took me to San Francisco's Immigration Department, a big place. There was a Chinese cook. We ate one piece of toast, one small egg, and coffee for breakfast. That's all! We stayed there about two

weeks. Then we boarded a train in Oakland, all shades down, until 10 o'clock at night and went to Los Angeles; from Los Angeles to Santa Fe, New Mexico.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You didn't have any chance to pick up clothes or anything when the FBI came after you, so what did you do?

MR. SAKAI: After I went to Santa Fe, I wrote to my wife and she sent clothing and other necessary articles.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was a big camp? They had many there? How long did you stay there?

MR. SAKAI: There must have been 200 or 300 there, I guess, all Japanese as enemy aliens. I was there five months. They eventually had an investigation, and they questioned me why I had everything. And I had bought some Japanese Tokyo Electric bonds floated by Chase Manhattan Bank of New York, for purpose of making money, what else! So, after the investigation, they said I could go home.

MRS. HASEGAWA: People in various parts of California were, by now, being evacuated. What did you do with the store?

MR. SAKAI: I came back to Del Rey just before the completion of the evacuation of the so-called Zone 2 in August 1942. We were hoping to come back, so we boarded up the windows and asked a hakujin (Caucasian) to take care of it for us, a Mr. Loyal Crosby.

MRS. HASEGAWA: And which camp did you enter?

MR. SAKAI: The whole family went to Gila, Arizona in 1942. Later the internees were given opportunities to relocate. I think we could have gone east but not west, of course, so I applied to go to Minnesota to look over the place. The government paid the rail fare. I went there in 1943. The whole family was applying for permit to go there. I went first and bought a duplex in Minneapolis, Minnesota and got a job. John had volunteered for 442nd from camp, so he was already in the Army. Bob went to St. Thomas College, Alice went to the University of Minnesota, June enrolled in high school, and Janice went to grammar school. While here some Lutherans befriended us, and I think Grace joined their church.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of work did you do in Minnesota?

MR. SAKAI: We--a friend Min Omata and I--farmed in Mankato. We raised cucumbers and things like that; squash, corn, and sugar beets. We can't farm in winter, so I joined my family in Minneapolis and got a job in a candy factory.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When the end of the war came, what did you do?

MR. SAKAI: November 1945, we drove back to California, back to Del Rey. We unboarded the windows and reopened the store! It had not been broken into and nothing had been taken. We had a home in the back of the store, across the alley, which we had rented out. And everything was all right.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you first came back to Del Rey, how was the reception from your former friends and customers?

MR. SAKAI: Well, it wasn't too good. Some came in to say we liked you to come back here. Some said they wanted to trade with us, but were afraid people would talk. There were some Mexican people, and they gave us quite a bit of business.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I heard you later opened several stores in Fresno.

MR. SAKAI: That was after 1950. I had four markets at one time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Would you like to tell us about it? Why did you open so many?

MR. SAKAI: Well, because I had two boys and two sons-in-law; I wanted each of them to have a store, but it didn't work out. The expenses were getting too heavy, because a new store takes time to open and to draw customers. So I concentrated on one store finally.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Someone told me that you had a franchise to sell GE appliances; that you were the first Japanese to have one.

MR. SAKAI: No. Someone else had it before me. But I was the first Japanese to have a franchise for selling Wedgewood Ranges. I had a hard time to get that. The first place I applied refused me. In fact, there was no response. But the San Francisco warehouse granted it. I did real well. One time a customer came in to my Del Rey store to buy a stove. He looked over my stock then said, "Wait while I go in to see what they have in Fresno." He came back and told me I had a greater selection than Fisher-Glassford, which was one of the largest appliance stores in Fresno at the time!

MRS. HASEGAWA: We used to hear about your big business ventures just about this time. Were there others?

MR. SAKAI: Oh, I built the Tropicana Lodge. I had a hard time financing that. The local bank refused to loan me the total amount I needed. Do you know who helped me finally? The Sumitomo Bank of Japan in San Francisco. So I got it started in 1960 and finished in September 1961. Oh, there were a few other ventures, too.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Can you tell us how you started the store in Fresno?

MR. SAKAI: When I came from Del Rey to Fresno in 1950, I had to pay \$400 rent. That was quite a bit of rent for me. I had paid no rent in Del Rey since we had owned the property there you remember. So I said to my sons John and Bob, "If I can't make a go of it in Fresno, you boys will have to help pay the bills." They said, "Sure, Dad, we'll help and pay." That was my encouragement for coming to Fresno. I was very happy with my boys.

We opened the store in August of 1950. I commuted from Del Rey for two years. Then I bought a house on Holly Avenue, west of Fresno Street, close to the store. John ran the Del Rey store for 10 years, and then we leased it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What else would you like to tell us about yourself? Do you have some Japanese customs that you still continue?

MR. SAKAI: Well, I am very proud that I'm a Japanese. For one thing, we

all pitch in and help the people. Japanese as a whole try to be honest. And Japan made such a big recovery after the war. I don't know how they did it, but it's fantastic.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you been to Japan?

MR. SAKAI: I have been there three times. In 1963 Grace and I went for the first time and enjoyed the trip very much. Second time we enjoyed it, but the more you go the less you enjoy it. The third time, my son John and I went to the 1970 Osaka Expo, and I didn't like it. It was a big place and when you got tired there were no benches to rest. You had to walk a lot and there were lots of noise in cafeterias and restaurants. I wanted to see old-fashioned Japan, such as Kabaku and puppet shows. But, no, it was all modern things at the Expo.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did you enjoy most on your 1963 visit? What impressed you the most at that time?

MR. SAKAI: What impressed me the most? I still remember when we were leaving Japan in 1905 and went to Yokohama, the street car caught my interest. I can still hear its, clang, clang! But this time I got there, there were lots of new buildings and new hotels. There's one thing that impressed me very much, though. I got up early one morning and there were all these women sweeping the street gutter with bamboo brooms. I thought that's why the Japanese people never go on welfare, they are willing to work. I went to Kyoto. Kyoto was a very nice city. There's the Nishi Hongwanji Temple and inside the temple there were seven huge pillars, three feet in diameter and probably 12 to 14 feet high and was told they were made out of Hinoki (cypress) trees. They didn't bomb Kyoto, the old Japan is still there.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you go to Kumamoto, your birthplace?

MR. SAKAI: Yes, to my old homestead and stayed there a couple of nights. When I left there as a child, there was a creek that I thought was big, but when I went back it was small, and I could easily jump over it now. The roads are still narrow. They have electric lights which they didn't have when I was there. I enjoyed, too, seeing my old grammar school and getting reacquainted with my old grammar school friends. I also enjoyed seeing and visiting my maternal uncle who was 80 years old. Before I left, he walked two miles to come to see me!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did every home have a television by 1963?

MR. SAKAI: Yes, I think they did. Japan used to have lots of ricksha and it's becoming all automobiles and trucks. I remember the ricksha, my mother and I traveled in them while we were in town. There's few bicycles and there's lots of buses now, passenger buses. There's lots of women drivers, and they're good drivers, too. There's lots of school buses, 10 or 20 of them at the temple, and they squeeze them in so close together in the parking area.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What amazed me was the way the Japanese people encouraged the school children to visit all their famous places. You know they are school children, because each group is in uniform.

MR. SAKAI: Yes. They do this all year. All the kids, even the 8 year

olds, have cameras already.

MRS. HASEGAWA: No wonder the people take pride in their country's history. They see all the famous palaces, shrines, temples, parks. Well, you've been here a long time, have you noticed any changes in the attitudes toward and treatment of Japanese people?

MR. SAKAI: Today? There's lots of changes. Right after the war I needed a part for my Ford truck. and I went to Ford garage in town. And I, waited at the counter 10 or 15 minutes; they bypassed me. So I said, "When are you going to wait on me?" He said, "What do you want? We don't have it." I said, "You didn't even go back in the stockroom to look." "We don't have it." That's the only incident I remember that happened around 1945 to 1950, anyway, before I moved to Fresno. On the whole "hakujins" are very nice. When I bought groceries from United Grocers and applied for credit, Mr. Harvey Sorenson said to me, "I know what you boys went through, take all you want." No question asked.

There was segregation in movie theatres. I used to be very fond of movies, so even from Del Rey, after closing the store, I would drive to Fresno to see a movie at Wilson Theatre. I go in there, they would say, "This way please." Yes, it was segregated. The hakujins were seated in the center section, and I would be with the Chinese and Mexicans on the side section. That was before the war and segregation continued until about 1950.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you remember some of the real estate regulations concerning selling or renting to the Orientals?

MR. SAKAI: Yes, I heard something like that, but it never happened to me. When I bought the house on Holly Avenue, we had no problems with the neighbors.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That's in West Fresno, isn't it? Now, the Nisei are scattered all over Fresno. Even at your store on the West Side, I can see that you serve many ethnic groups of people. What economic changes have you observed in conducting your own business? You've been in business for a long time.

MR. SAKAI: Well, I think the main thing in retail business is advertising. If you don't advertise, you don't have any trade. Bob advertises in Fresno Bee and broadcasts on Mexican radio station. Advertising is the backbone of any business, especially for the new merchants. We get most of the business from the West Side. We didn't have to advertise in Del Rey.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Socially, do you think there has been any change?

MR. SAKAI: I don't think there has been much change.

MRS. HASEGAWA: All in all, the trend has, been toward acceptance of the Japanese in almost every area of life, hasn't it? Have you been involved in any political, social, or religious organizations?

MR. SAKAI: Not really involved, but I became an American citizen after World War II. Right now we belong to Kumamoto Kenjinkai; it's more or less a social group for those with any connection with Kumamoto-Ken.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you do any judo, sumo, or kendo?

MR. SAKAI: No! I tried the kendo before the war, and I had a kendo set. Pearl Harbor came, and they gave us a scare that the FBI were picking up people. I had kendo mask and everything, so I dumped that in the toilet—the outdoor toilet.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have your children learn any of these Japanese things?

MR. SAKAI: No. John might have tried kendo, but I don't remember.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Alice was very good in drawing, in art, wasn't she?

MR. SAKAI: No, it was June who went to New York and went to Parson's Designing School. She got a good write-up one time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What about Japanese customs? We all think the giving of Kodan at the time of funerals is a very good practice, and how you believe in this custom. What do you think of "baishakunin"?

MR. SAKAI: I think "baishakunin" (go-between arranged marriage) isn't too bad. I don't know the statistics, but I think the "baishakunin" marriages are pretty stable and other marriages are broken up.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you think the young people today don't have the "gaman" (patience)?

MR. SAKAI: That may be right.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you belong to a church? I have heard that Reverend and Mrs. D.G.M. Bach had been missionaries in Kumamoto Japan were very kind to the Japanese and helped them get resettled in this area. They no longer live here.

MR. SAKAI: I think religion is good to certain extent.

MRS. HASEGAWA: By the way, Mr. Araki told me that Del Rey was noted for its beautiful girls, and that young men rode their bikes at the end of their work day from Fresno and Bowles all the way to see all these beautiful women!

MR. SAKAI: There was only one woman. She was just like a covergirl on Japanese magazines. She was really very beautiful woman. Some people even came from San Francisco purposely to see her!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Would you say that the town of Del Rey was started and developed by the Japanese?

MR. SAKAI: Man by the name of Mr. Matsuo made a pretty good sized Japanese settlement. During the summer, Japanese farmers from Sanger, Parlier, Fowler, Reedley, and Selma all used to come to Del Rey to recruit Japanese laborers. There were maybe, as I said earlier, 400 to 500 people available for work.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was quite a community! It hasn't grown very much since, though, has it?

MR. SAKAI: No, not since the 1922 fire which burned biggest part of the Japanese business houses, and the Japanese town never did revive. There was the hakujin town beside that. There was a bank, grocery store, drugstore, garage, and a doctor, too. Chinese used to have the gambling house, and they would only come during the busy season. The chop suey place was run by Japanese. Del Rey has the finest vineyards and orchards. Another reason Del Rey didn't grow is because Santa Fe Railroad and Del Rey Ranch had some kind of misunderstanding so they didn't sell their lots that were already subdivided for construction of houses.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I recall being in a huge Japanese hall many years ago.

MR. SAKAI: My dad built it! He had a lot of anti-feelings. He had somebody design it, and he took the work of contracting it. Things were very reasonable in those days, so the whole thing cost around \$2500 for lumber and labor. It's still there. It was used as a Japanese language school. Grace was the first teacher, on a temporary basis, until a regular instructor was found. Of course, the hall was used for community gatherings. And it was also used for Fresno Japanese Congregational Church Sunday School on Sunday, and Buddhist services every other Sunday. There are no more meetings held there.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there anything else about the Japanese or about yourself you'd like to tell? What kind of advice would you give to the Sansei and the Yonsei, you as a successful businessman?

MR. SAKAI: Not successful. I worked for it!! I didn't have too much up here (pointing to head), so I had to work hard. I think we should teach our children to be honest, and we should always meet our obligations.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you manage?

MR. SAKAI: We didn't. We quit. We didn't have to pay rent because we owned the building, and we didn't hire anybody. The family worked together. The only expense we had were lights, water bills, and et cetera. So we were able to survive in 1917 to 1934, for about 20 years.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You stress honesty. You had finished two years of high school. Do you think education is important?

MR. SAKAI: Yes, I think it's very important. So I encouraged my children to have higher education. John and Bob both graduated Fresno State College.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I'm sure you've learned a lot from practical experience, more than anyone could ever learn from books!

MR. SAKAI: Another thing I like to say to the future generation, the young people today should think. Just reading the book isn't any good, but read the book and think. And another thing, you've got to analyze why man said this or why it was this way.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Seventy years in America! There were every so many interesting experience you recalled for us in this interview. You do have a fantastic memory, especially for one going on 83 years! How do you do it?

MR. SAKAI: I go to the market to help every morning until noon and also help occasionally at night until we close. I think this keeps me active and healthy.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you very much, Mr. Sakai!