

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with YOSHIE MARY TASHIMA

Interviewed

By

Patricia Tashima

On February 15, 1974

OH 1360

This is an edited transcription of an interview conducted for the Center for Oral and Public History, sponsored by California State University, Fullerton. The reader should be aware that an oral history document portrays information as recalled by the interviewee. Because of the spontaneous nature of this kind of document, it may contain statements and impressions that are not factual. The Center for Oral and Public History encourages all researchers to listen to the recording while reading the oral history transcription, as some expressions, verbiage, and intent may be lost in the interpretation from audio to written source.

Researchers are welcome to utilize short excerpts from this transcription without obtaining permission as long as proper credit is given to the interviewee, the interviewer, and the Center for Oral and Public History. Permission for extensive use of the transcription and related materials, duplication, and/or reproduction can be obtained by contacting the Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, PO Box 6846, Fullerton CA 92834-6846. Email: [coph@fullerton.edu](mailto:coph@fullerton.edu).

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: YOSHIE MARY TASHIMA

INTERVIEWER: Patricia Tashima

DATE: February 15, 1974

LOCATION: Buena Park, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

PT: This is an interview with Yoshie Mary Tashima for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project by her daughter, Pat Tashima, on February 15, 1974. Mary will be speaking on the relocation of Japanese Americans during World War II. First of all, Mom, I'd like you to describe your way of life at the time of World War II, your age, and just basically what your life was like then.

MT: Well, my mother and father had a laundry and dry cleaning business for all the years that they were in the United States. My oldest brother was in college, the younger one was working with his father together in the business, and I was just a sophomore in high school. When the war broke out, it was a Sunday morning, and we were on our way home from church when we heard the news. Of course, we were very shocked, yet we were so young, we didn't fully comprehend what was going on.

PT: Do you remember the actual bombing of Pearl Harbor, when it happened?

MT: No, we got the news on the radio after it occurred. All we knew was that we heard—that the Japanese had just bombed Pearl Harbor. It was quite a surprise, but like I said, we were so young we really didn't know the true meaning. But then, as the time went on and we went back to school the following Monday, we really got the feeling then that it wasn't the same anymore. People were beginning to feel a little animosity toward us. They called a big assembly, and we felt very uncomfortable because we had nothing to do with what went on.

PT: Did you go to a mixed school with Caucasians?

MT: Oh, yes. I attended John H. Polytechnic High School in Los Angeles, which was one of the more prominent high schools of that area. It had a very large student body and was very well known. It was located in the heart of downtown Los Angeles, a very cosmopolitan area. It had a mixture of every race.

PT: In what ways did these people direct their animosities toward you?

MT: Well, the favorite saying in those days, you know, they would refer to us as Japs, and we felt that was very derogatory. I mean, it isn't a bit flattering, and for people whom we'd known for most of our lives to suddenly turn on us in that way was very, very uncomfortable and sad. It was really a helpless feeling.

PT: It was all verbal though, nothing was physically done?

MT: Oh, no. No harm was done; it was just their actions.

PT: Did the Pearl Harbor attack affect your personal attitudes about anything?

MT: No, I can't say that it did. We were too young to know any better. To our folks it meant much more because they'd been over here all their lives, raised a family and were quite successful in whatever business and whatever they were doing. Most of them were quite successful in getting on their feet, so to speak, and so to them it was a crushing blow to have this happen, to have it all wiped-out just like that.

PT: Can you briefly tell about your parents coming over and establishing a business and what they went through?

MT: My father came over as a youngster of seventeen. He came all alone from Japan because, in those days, the Japanese custom was that the oldest son took over everything and that left nothing for the others. So, he felt there was nothing there for him so he came to America with many others who did the same thing. He came over and worked at whatever he could, but finally, he ended up in the cleaning business, the hand laundry and cleaning business. Prior to that, he was working on the farms and doing this and that, you know, little things. Then, when he was pretty well settled in his business, he called for my mother. This was a picture thing, you know, in those days where they called their brides over through pictures and it more or less worked for them. Their relatives over there did all the investigating and what have you. She came over by boat. And she wasn't alone; there were a lot of other girls her age coming over to be married. When she got here, naturally, she got married, and they both ran the business. Then my brother was born, and a year later the second brother was born. A couple years later, my sister was born, but she died shortly after birth due to pneumonia or whooping cough. I can't remember which. And then me.

PT: How did you first come to know about the relocation order?

MT: Well, it just went so swiftly. That night they rounded up several men that were active in the Japanese society, such as schools, any charitable organizations or anything that had to do with Japanese society. They had a record on them, and they were all gathered and shipped to some unknown place we didn't hear of until a couple months later. I think it was somewhere in New Mexico, Lordsburg, New Mexico, that they were taken to and stayed there for quite some time. They had to go through very

strict investigations to be seen that they were cleared of any wrongdoings, any spying, and, naturally, they were all so harmless. We knew it, but the government didn't. It was during wartime, and you can't really blame the government. I mean, they have to look after themselves, but here we were helpless. Shortly, after Pearl Harbor, the orders were just—so many people from this community had to gather at a certain church, and they were to get their orders, which we did. We had to be ready with only what we could carry, nothing sharp and no firearms or anything like that. Just clothes and whatever we could carry, but nothing excessive, you know, nothing extra. We were shipped to Santa Anita race track. They had converted that beautiful racetrack into a concentration camp with barbed wire and sentry towers at various locations. And we spent, I would say, six months there. That was what they called a reception center.

PT: And was this all the people from the Los Angeles area only?

MT: Yes, everybody in the Los Angeles area. No, I wouldn't say that. I think part of them went to Manzanar, California, which was a permanent relocation center by the way. Santa Anita was just a reception center where we all gathered, and then from there they dispatched us to different relocation centers. We went to the one in Granada, Colorado. It was all fixed-up. There were barracks. It was a regular dust bowl. Oh, it was terrible.

[00:10:09]

PT: Well, how did Santa Anita compare to Colorado, the living conditions?

MT: Well, Santa Anita, the wonderful part of it was that the weather was so beautiful all the time. The living conditions were horrible because they were just temporary barracks. You might as well not have had any walls at all because there were great big knotholes in the boards, and you could see your neighbors. And you could hear *everything*. It was just like living in one big room. But we did have boards in-between, so we covered them with whatever paper we could get a hold of, tarp or whatever.

PT: Now, were you in the horses stalls?

MT: We weren't, but many were. Many people were living in there. We weren't one of the families, but they did use all those stables. Everyone of those stables housed people where horses used to live. And I don't know if it was their imagination or what, but they used to say it smelled. Well, you can imagine.

PT: About how many people were at Santa Anita?

MT: Oh, Patty, I can't even give you a rough estimate. Of course, while we were there they had that huge grandstand where we had makeshift schools. We had qualified people to teach us, but it wasn't like going to school. Here we were sitting in a

grandstand and seeing the beautiful mountainside and all, but at the same time that wasn't the only thing happening. After being put there, we did defense work for the government making all these huge camouflage nets, and I'm telling you, they were huge. They were made out of green burlap, and they had to be strung from way on top of the grandstand roof. They had to be woven in and out, so we were contributing to the defense of our country, regardless.

PT: How did the relocation move disrupt your way of life, your family life, the business, your school life? What did you miss the most?

MT: Well, it was total, total disaster, if I might say so. We had to quit school, my folks had to give-up their business and leave it, and my brother had to drop-out of college. We lost all of our belongings, all of our memoirs, all of our annuals. Well, we lost everything. We did store our belongings in different churches, but they were ransacked during the war. A few kind people that did keep a few of our things for us, kept just incidental things, sewing machine and what have you, but the real, true things that we wanted to have when we came back were gone.

PT: Things from Japan?

MT: Things from Japan, things from throughout our school years and most of my mother's china and glass. She had beautiful china and glass. That was all gone.

PT: Can you remember any of the things you did take with you to Santa Anita since you were only allowed to take a few of the essential things?

MT: Just some clothing, and I think we took a sleeping bag because we weren't sure what kind of facilities we were going to run into. Those were the most important things: blankets, sweaters, and coats. We knew that we would be transferred to a colder area, so we took gloves and scarves.

[recording paused]

PT: This is side two with Mary Tashima and her account of the Japanese Americans during World War II. Did you remember anything else in particular that you had to take with you?

MT: Oh, Patty, I have to tell you the funniest story. It's a humorous note because I think every shoe store in Los Angeles sold out of boots. Word got around that we were going to the desert, and everybody should take boots. And I'm telling you, we all bought boots. And we were going to be cowboys. (laughs) But, they did come in handy because it was very sandy and dusty.

PT: Since you were so young when the move came, what were your personal reactions to the life at Santa Anita and to uprooting yourself and moving on?

MT: Oh, I don't know. We were so young, like I said, and to us it was just we had to do it, and we did it. We were so young we just did whatever we were told to. Naturally, as we grew older, even after being relocated to Amache, Colorado, or Granada, why, we began to wonder what we were to do in the future. Our high school education was a must, and they did have a school there.

PT: Do you remember any kind of problems, like facility problems at Santa Anita?

MT: Oh, not really. The bathrooms were one of them. I mean, it got to be kind of a hassle when you had to wait in line to use the bathroom, but that was soon remedied. People got into the habit of not rushing all at one time, but there for a while it was terrible. And, of course, eating was another problem. Having to line-up at a great, big mess hall with tin cans for sups and tin pans for plates, we weren't used to this kind of daily occurrence.

PT: When did you move to Amache?

MT: Well, as I said, we stayed in Santa Anita for six months, probably until the end of the year. We got to Colorado in about October or November, right in the dustiest season. I'm telling you, dust that you couldn't even see the next barrack, that's how dusty it was. It was a regular dust bowl. There weren't any trees, or shrubs, or greenery. Just barracks out in the middle of the desert and a great, big wire fence around there so we wouldn't escape. But, who would want to escape? It was very desolate.

PT: Was life any different at Amache than at Santa Anita?

[00:19:33]

MT: Well, it was more of a settled feeling because we knew that we weren't going to be moved anymore from there, that we would be there for a while. So, they did have schools. We went to school every day. And whoever wanted to work went to work in the mess halls as cooks or at the hospitals as nurses' aides. They had regular doctors in our group serving as doctors that didn't get paid any more than we did. We had a regular hospital staff, a barbershop, beauty shop, a canteen where they sold a few things, a fire department, and a police department. It was just a little city within itself, and we had to run it ourselves. We had our own personnel, and our salary was tremendous! For what I did, I worked as a nurse's aide, and I think it was something like \$8 a month. Then if you were anything above that, like chief cook or something, you got \$16 a month. I think the doctors and the office personnel, or any skilled worker earned \$32. I'm not sure. I can't remember really. Oh, boy, we thought that was something. (laughs) But, like I said, we all did our jobs, whatever we had to fulfill, we did. We got along quite well. We finally landscaped that desert into something beautiful. It's just remarkable what people can do to a nothing place. We planted trees, flowers, and a lawn. Our barracks were nothing but a big room, and so my brothers got scrap lumber and made all the beautiful furniture. We had Montgomery Ward catalogs and Sears catalogs that we could mail order from, and so

my mother ordered drapery material, and we made it quite comfortable. We kept the grounds watered so when the wind did blow—of course, on the windiest days there was nothing that could help us. Then, when the winters came, it was so cold, and those boots really came in handy because I'm telling you, the snow was really deep. It really was very cold.

PT: Did you ever get to leave the camp?

MT: Yes, after we were there for a while and everybody was on good behavior, they said that we could apply for passes to the nearest town, which was something like sixteen miles away. It was a little town called Granada, and all it had was a little drugstore. Fortunately, one of the men was from San Pedro and had been a fisherman before the war, he opened up a fish market there, so whenever we went in, why, we would buy fish or whatever foods we wanted. And without sounding too mercenary or anything, the local druggist that had that little drugstore—which was nothing until we got there—we turned himself into a millionaire because he did all that business. All that business came in, and he became very affluent. And then there was also a larger town, Lamar, Colorado, which was a good-sized town. They had movie theaters and restaurants. That was quite a bit further out, thirty or forty miles. We had to take a bus to go there, but they would give us passes if we applied in time. We'd go and take in a show or do whatever little shopping we had with what little money we earned. We kind of looked forward to that.

PT: How did the people in the town act toward you?

MT: They didn't treat us any differently. They didn't roll-out the red carpet, but neither did they show any signs of hatefulness. It was a regular farm town, and most of the people around there were farmers. After going in and mingling with them, they kind of got to like us and looked forward to our coming in and spending whatever we had. And it's like anything else, when you get to know people, it's different—the feeling.

PT: Did you keep in contact with any of your friends in Los Angeles?

MT: In Los Angeles? Yes, we did. One Negro woman and her family were very wonderful people. We always wrote to them, and then they'd write us back. And then, there was a lawyer and his family that took care of some of our things. They always wrote us and told us what was going on. But, as for the others, there wasn't too much communication. Everybody was so busy, anyway, during wartime. They were busy working, defense plants, and just from what we read and heard, we would imagine they were working very hard. Defense plants were going day and night. And like everyone else, they were out to make the money.

PT: What was the feeling of most of the Japanese within the camp? Were there any dissenters or people that wanted to get out?

MT: Well, there were a few that wanted to go back to Japan. There was a little bit of trouble and a little bit of friction, but it didn't materialized into anything drastic. It soon blew over. Those that did want to go back had a choice, and they were sent to Tule Lake, California. Everybody that wanted to go back to Japan and still felt that their loyalty was there had the opportunity to go to Tule Lake, and there was a number of them. But, for the most part, the older generation, your grandmother and grandfather, their generation—I can't begin to tell you without feeling a little sad because their spirits never waned. (begins to cry) And after being in the camp a long time and their sons were drafted, they still had that sense of loyalty. They felt that they should send their children off with a good feeling, even if they were going to war.

PT: Did both your brothers serve in the Army or just one?

MT: Well, they both were drafted, but the younger one was very active.

PT: So, the stay in the relocation camps wasn't really that long for every Japanese?

MT: No. A lot of them were able to leave. Like my brothers left quite early. The older one was still interested in going to college, so he went to Nebraska. He went to the University of Nebraska School of Medicine and worked there. And the younger one was always so ambitious (laughs) that he had to go out and work and make some of that money. He went to Denver and finally to Omaha and worked for General Motors.

PT: This is really interesting, but we're running out of tape so I have to continue on the next one. [recording paused] This is side three with Mary Tashima. Okay, mom we were talking about your younger brother and when he left the camp.

[00:29:50]

MT: He was so anxious to leave. The moment he got there he was already in the office applying for departure to work on a sugar beet farm, and that he did. Many of the boys did that. They went out to work in different sugar beet farms in Colorado. Incidentally, my father also contracted work nearby. When he came home, he'd bring little gifts for us. This went on until one morning when he did come back. He felt very ill in the morning and passed on that night. So, it wasn't too far after we got to Amache that he passed away. But my mother and I stayed there. We stayed until the camp was ready to close and went to Omaha, Nebraska, where my oldest brother was and rented a room from one of the doctors at the university.

PT: By this time your older brother had continued with his schooling—

MT: Part-time and working, too, but at the same time he was learning.

PT: And your younger brother was in the service?

MT: No, he was in Chicago.

PT: Oh, I see. Now, didn't the men have to agree to some kind of oath before they left?

MT: Oh, yes. All the boys did. They had to sign a statement saying that they would serve their country if asked. And naturally, the majority of them did. But like I said, those who didn't want to had the opportunity to go Tule Lake where they stayed and eventually they repatriated to Japan.

PT: Okay, so Mom, in your family, only you and your mother stayed for the whole camp duration?

MT: Yes.

PT: And that was how many years?

MT: Gosh, Patty, I can't remember. Two years at least, maybe three; I can't remember.

PT: Did you have a feeling of being safer within the camp rather than back in L.A.?

MT: No, I had no such feeling. I felt no differently. It's just that we were pushed together in one big unit and had to live there, and we made the best of it.

PT: Were most of the people anxious to leave the camp?

MT: Oh, yes. You know, our only home was California. This is where we all were situated, and my goodness, we longed to come back here. We knew no other place.

PT: But, there was a law prohibiting you from returning to California?

MT: That's right. They hadn't lifted that yet. The clearance was not lifted yet for us to come back here, so until then, everybody relocated to other cities out East, just everywhere, which was good in a way. It made everybody disperse, you know. They weren't congregated in one little area anymore. We were everywhere from New York to the South, to the Midwest, and up North. We were just everywhere.

PT: You joined your brother in Omaha?

MT: Yes.

PT: What was life like for you after leaving the camp?

MT: Well, like I said, we stayed in this doctor's home. We rented a room from him, and I found work. My mother, of course, was too—we wouldn't think of letting her go to work anyway. She'd seen enough hardship. So, between my oldest brother, Sharky, and I, we worked, and we stayed in Omaha until the ban was lifted. And, when it was

my mother couldn't wait to come back so this is where we headed. California here we come! We came back to Los Angeles, and my mother wasn't down yet. The minute we got back the first thing she did was look for a business. By this time, the younger brother was overseas in the thick of it, so the oldest brother was still home. And, of course, between the three of us, we looked for a business, found a location, and we started a business. We did very well until my brother was drafted. Then my mother and I had to carry on the business before the war, so we knew people in the wholesale line that took very good care of us. They knew it was just two women trying to run a business and they were very helpful. Then when my younger brother, Jim, came home, he took over. I went to school then, beauty school.

PT: What about your other brother?

MT: My other brother was in the Army.

PT: Then he came back and went to UCLA?

MT: Yes.

PT: Had L.A. changed at all to you during the time you were gone?

MT: Oh, yes. It wasn't the same because everybody we knew was gone. The friends we had were our Oriental friends our Japanese friends. But, we got along fine.

PT: There were no prejudice?

MT: Well, in this particular location where my mother opened her cleaning business, there was a funny feeling, but she wasn't afraid of anybody. She was quite a businesswoman. There was no prejudice against us, but when my brother left, we had to hire a presser because we couldn't do the pressing and when we did—the wholesale house would send us a presser, and he happened to be of another color. It was *he* that was being, you know, and boy, my mother fought like a soldier for him, too. She didn't think that was right at all. I mean, he was there working for her, doing a good job, and she wasn't going to have any friction from her neighbors. And they both ran a business on each side of her. We got along quite well when she got her point across. They left us alone after that. We did beautifully; the business went beautifully.

PT: As you look back, do you feel that you were treated unfairly by these relocation orders?

[00:39:24]

MT: I hate to look back. When you do, you only think of the not too happy side of things. It's not good to look back. I don't think any of us do. You've never heard your mother or father talk about how we were treated or mistreated, and you *never* heard

the older generation, not a peep out of them, which is a great tribute. It's those people that were mistreated, not us, really. You never heard a word from your grandparents or any of the older generation, never a thing said about war or relocation. They just came back and started digging. I mean, what was past, was past. They were going to start a whole new life, and that's what they did.

PT: I suppose there were some good experiences that you remember?

MT: Oh, yes, it wasn't all bad. There were a lot of happy moments, dances, movies, and games. We had regular league games, baseball, and there was wrestling. The men had their Japanese Go tournaments. That's like checkers I would say. There were black and white pebbles that they had to line up a certain way. And they would spend hours—I mean, it was really quite an intellectual game. And they prided themselves—my dad used to sit for hours. Well, like I said, a lot of it was enjoyable. A lot of them met their husbands in camp and boyfriends and a lot of good came out of it.

PT: Do you still keep in contact with some of your camp friends?

MT: Oh, yes.

PT: Where are they situated now?

MT: Chicago, Cleveland, Ohio, all over.

PT: Do you think the experience had any effect on you, good, bad, or indifferent? Did you learn anything from it?

MT: I don't know if I learned anything. I was in the learning stages then, anyway, since I was so young. If anything, you learn to be very tolerant. You had to be very courageous, too, because when you're cooped-up in a camp for so long, and then you're suddenly released, you don't know really what to expect from the outside. Well, maybe you could say it was a slight inferiority complex that you felt. You knew that people were really looking at you because they hadn't seen an Oriental in that part of the country. But it was all in our own minds, and once we went to work and got to know everybody, it was wonderful. There was no feeling of—

PT: Bitterness?

MT: No, none whatsoever. In fact, they kind of really cherished our friendship once they got to know us.

PT: You were put into these camps, I would say, during the prime, so to speak, of your high school years. Do you feel anything lacking because you were relocated during these particular times?

MT: Well, if we missed anything, I wouldn't have known it. We missed proms and things like that, but we had our dances and we had fun.

PT: Life for you really didn't change that much? It was the same life but in a different place.

MT: Yes, because we were still growing.

[recording paused]

PT: This is the final segment with Mary Tashima. Okay, Mom, life didn't really change for you. It was really your parents who were affected, right?

MT: Yes. We were young and growing and had to learn regardless of where we were, whether it was wartime or whatever, but it really had no effect on us that way. To the older people, well, they came over here and experienced so much discrimination. Talk about discrimination, they went through all that when they first came over. They worked hard and strove and struggled, raised their family and made a fairly good living from a successful business, and along comes the war and they're wiped-out completely again, discriminated against and thrown into a camp. Then have children are taken and out into the Army, many of them lost their sons, and yet throughout all their lives, they never uttered a word of bitterness. And, to me, that's a great tribute. If anyone should be respected, it would be the Issei generation because they encouraged their children to be good, loyal citizens and always praise America, regardless.

PT: They weren't torn between America or Japan then?

MT: Oh, well, if they were, we'd never know it. They'd never show it, and they wanted us to be true to our country, America. That's why I want to relay to you, as the next generation, to be very proud and to be a good citizen and remember what your grandparents went through to make it as comfortable now. And I want to instill that into you, and I think it should be. I'm sure you understand what I mean. (laughs)

PT: (laughs) Do you think the overall experience has strengthened the Japanese race?

MT: I think it made a better, much better people out of them. They learned to get out of their little cliques and mingle with others so that others would know what they were like. When you don't know anybody, it's very hard to judge. And that's what had happened. We isolated ourselves into this little clique and, naturally, any time that happens, it isn't the friendliest atmosphere. But, once we were assimilated—

PT: Yeah. How do you feel now after what you've been through and how the white population of America really don't know what you went through? They don't know about this experience and how's it's been explained in history.

MT: The only reason they don't know is because we were so isolated along the coast there. And there was no big publicity. If there was, it was just along the coast. And I don't know—possibly, if they knew of our experiences, they might be a little more broad in their outlook and think twice if they had any ill feelings. I don't know, it's hard to say. There are so many people that didn't know about the Japanese relocation and evacuation. But, those who did know were very sympathetic.

[00:50:28]

PT: All in all, do you think it was a kind of panicky thing for the government to do?

MT: Oh, I'm sure it was. They thought the first thing we'd do was destroy America because we were Japanese. And we were discriminated against. There was no question that, before the war, nothing was open. No doors were opened up for us. We couldn't go into any office and work. Whatever work we did was within our own group or our own business. And as we got educated and became skilled—and let me tell you, there were many intelligent people among us—then they kind of stood up and listened to us. They thought, Well, they're not so dumb after all.

PT: Is there anything out of the whole experience that you remember most, that stands out in your mind?

MT: That I remember most? Like what?

PT: Any kind of experience about your dad or—

MT: Oh, I don't know. When I look back now, on the whole, it really wasn't that bad to me or to the younger people, your mother and father. The older people, like I said before, it affected them quite a bit because, after all, they lost a lot. But, to us, we were so young and carefree, and when you're young and carefree, wherever you go, you make the most of it. So, as I look back now, I don't have hard feelings. Why should I? If anyone were to have hard feelings, it would be the Issei generation, and like I said, they never uttered a word, they never talked down America, and you never heard them complain. It was really one of the proudest things I could say about them: they never complained, never. In fact, if anything, it made them work a little harder when they came back. It gave them that second life, so to speak. Even with my father gone, my mother just came back and started right in again. That pioneer feeling just never left them, so it shouldn't leave you children.

PT: (laughs) Is there anything you'd like to add?

MT: No, just pay tribute to them, the Issei.

PT: This concludes our interview with Mary Tashima.

END OF INTERVIEW