

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with KINICHI KIMBO YOSHITOMI

Interviewed

By

Marilyn Jones

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NARRATOR: KINICHI KIMBO YOSHITOMI

INTERVIEWER: Marilyn Jones

DATE: October 10, 1978

LOCATION: Anaheim, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

MJ: This is an interview with Kinichi Yoshitomi with Marilyn Jones for the California State University, Fullerton Oral History Japanese American Project on October 10, 1978 at 7:30 p.m. in Anaheim, California. Kim, will you tell me what you can, what know about your father and mother and your early life?

KY: Oh, yes. Well, first of all, my name is Kinichi Kimbo Yoshitomi, but, at present, they all know me by Kin because of the fact that the names are too long. Getting back to this very beginning, I was born in Oakland, California, on December 9, 1916. My mother came from Osaka, and father came from Fukuoka. My mother was a picture bride because my dad had been here earlier, and, in the course of growing up, he was able to acquire four retail stores and became a very wealthy man. In going through the elementary schools in Oakland at that time, it was compulsory for all of us to attend a Japanese school. We started right after we got done with the American schools, which was for one hour, and we were paid, I think, an equivalent of \$2 a month. But typically, as an American boy, I did go to school, but I never went inside the classroom. So, the result of it was when we got the report card, my mother would hit the ceiling and would want to know why my attendance record showed zero. Well, I had told her that I was playing outside cowboys and Indians. But, nonetheless, since they both spoke Japanese at home, we managed to speak and converse in Japanese, and, of course, much of their thoughts were culturally from Japan. And there was a conflict in this as we were growing up because, as I mentioned before, we were more interested in cowboys and Indians.

Then, when the crash came, my mother decided to leave my dad, and we moved to Sacramento in the dead of night. And I thought that was a very exciting experience riding on the back of a pick-up truck and moving to a strange place. We went to a school there called Lincoln Junior High School, which was just built, and we were the first class to graduate. We also managed to go to the M Street Bridge where the *Delta King* and *Delta Queen* were docked. We'd take off our clothes and jump into the water—Sacramento River—and hail the passengers to throw us nickels

and dimes, typically, Tom Sawyer style. Then my mother felt that we should go back to the Bay region, so she and my two sisters and brother left, but I wanted to stay in Sacramento because I had acquired quite a few friends. I obtained a job as a houseboy. I tried to do that for a period of six months, but I found it was too difficult. And although my friends wanted me to stay—they kept me there for two months extra—I felt that I was imposition, so I left and went to San Francisco.

There again, going to a strange city was very difficult, but I managed to play sports, and, at the same time, got a job delivering ladies hat with two lovely ladies who ran a very exclusive millinery shop. I would hop on the cable cars and deliver these hats to the better part of town. Then I had quit school for two years in hopes that I could get my dad and my mother together, but it didn't work out. So, I decided to at least get a high school diploma, and after going to eight different high schools in all parts of northern California, ended up in San Francisco and went to the High School of Commerce, which is no longer in existence because it's the school district office. I managed to graduate in 1935, obtained a position with Iwata Company as a salesman in one of their gift shops. Then I left there after a year to go to Reno, and I was going out with a young lady then in hopes of getting married. And that did not work out because I got awfully sick due to the extreme weather. I came back, and I obtained a job with Ottawa Matsuoka Company, which is a very exclusive silk firm. We had the silk bolts in storage, and we would custom make anything that the customers wanted. And, of course, these were people from Hollywood, Beverly Hills, and the Metropolitan Opera people, as well as the people from the Big Band, which I liked very much, of course.

And on December 7, 1941, I had gotten up late and went over to the Japanese YMCA, which was located about half a block from where I lived on Buchanan Street. When I walked in, my friend said, "Hey, Pearl Harbor was bombed." And I said, "You gotta be kidding." I couldn't believe it. Of course, Hawaii was a very distant place anyway. And as we stayed there, some of the other fellas came running into the gym to say that, "Say, Kim, the FBI is pulling all of these fellas' dads out of the houses." "Well, let's run up there and see." So, we did. And as far as we could see up and down Post Street, we could see that they were pulling in the fathers of all the different families, and later we found out that they were associated with the Japanese Association, which was like a business fraternity. Then, all of a sudden, we saw posters being posted on the telephone poles stating that we must remain in our homes after eight o'clock, which was going to be a curfew. All the windows were blacked out. We had access to the telephone, but that was the extent of it. I remember some of my friends going to Chinatown just prior to curfew and staying in Chinatown because they felt that the average person couldn't tell them apart. They stayed in the bowling alleys and—well, they just stayed out all night.

MJ: Right.

KY: On December the eighth, when we went back to our jobs in Chinatown, we found that the doors were sealed and locked by the United States government stating that it had to remain closed. We were in a bit of a panic because our Christmas trade was quite heavy and much of the orders had to go out, but there was nothing that we could do

about it. And I do believe that was the first and only time I applied for unemployment and got one check. And then, there were notices posted that newly married couples were to be shipped out to Poston, California. Now, that did bring up a little bit of a problem because we didn't want to be separated not knowing what was in store for us. And we were given approximately three weeks to get ready to go into camp, at which time, they stated that the only thing that we could carry was what we could carry on our back, and so many of us went and bought duffle bags and just stuffed that to the top. We had these Greyhound buses come by the Japanese YMCA, and we went in the bus. And, when I got into Tanforan, they told me that I was going to be assigned to being a reception committee to show the people in what section of the camp they were supposed to live in. Prior to Pearl Harbor, I was the basketball commissioner for the Japanese American Athletic Union, so they felt that with my experience I should be put in charge of the recreational department, which I consented to do. Some of our families were sleeping in the horse stalls and, of course, it wasn't a very pleasant place to be because although it was whitewashed, you could still see some of the horse's hair around the building. The thing that really upset us was the fact that we were told to line up and get our lunches and dinners under the grandstand. The type of food that they were offering us was completely different from what we were used to, such as tripe and heart, and we had never seen it much less how to eat it. So we protested, and they finally gave us rice and things like baloney and whatever we were accustomed to eating.

[00:09:42]

At that time, Mr. Thompson from the University of Berkley asked me if I would volunteer to stay with a skeleton crew of two hundred because the rumor was that all the Italian people of San Francisco were supposed to come into camp, which I doubted very much because, at that time, the mayor of San Francisco was Italian. Then they told us that all the people of German extraction were going to come in, which they never did. Then, finally, they said that all the Japanese in Hawaii were supposed to come over, and they wanted us to be ready and set-up a program for them. We stayed there approximately two or three months, and they didn't come. By that time, the camp was deserted, and they gave us a choice of going to any camp that we wanted as long as it wasn't in California. Naturally, we wanted to rejoin our family, so we ended up in Topaz, Utah. At that time, I think we had about roughly eight thousand people, which was from the Bay region: Alameda, Oakland, Berkley, San Jose, Haywood, and San Lorenzo. And it was the middle of a desert, and on bad days, when it rained, you would sink into that sand all the way up to your knees, practically.

At that time, they asked me to set-up a program, so I borrowed a tractor from the agriculture department and made thirty-two baseball diamonds. We divided the camp into sections, broke-up the girl's team, the men's team, industrial league, and some of the better class triple-A team. We even made a nine-hole golf course out of sand tampering that down with motor oil, and we started basketball leagues. And after getting permission from the war relocation authorities, they said, Kim, we'll give you a pass, which will enable you to go in and out of camp, which I did, and we

made arrangements so that we could play basketball with the Salt Lake group because we were out of the California zone. We sent our teams up there, and we played in various tournaments. Also, at the same time, we also organized a program for entertainment, at which time Goro Suzuki, was our featured singer. He is better known as Jack Soo today who is on that program with Hal Linden. It was surprising that some of the boys from the University of California who were in camp with us—they were much older than we were—they founded a group called Don Cossack. We had a very interesting interpretation of all the popular songs, and we would insert our own words lambasting the war relocation authorities and whoever were in charge, but they took it good naturedly. As I understand it's in the Congressional records at the moment.

Well, a couple years later a team of Army personal came in, led by Lee Tracy the movie star, and they had asked us to volunteer for the United States Army. At that time the boys felt that, well, if we aren't going to fight for United States, at least we should be able to go home. But, of course, some of the hotheads felt that this was asking too much. Here we are behind barbwire fences, and they say fight for the United States? But some of the older heads prevailed and said, "Well, they only way to show your loyalty is to volunteer," and consequently, the very famous 442nd was formed with the hundreds from Hawaii. I believe that was December—just before the Christmas holiday I was asked to put on a Christmas pageant. I fell sick, and I couldn't make it. However, the other people carried on; they had a big pageant for Christmas. I think it was 1943. Then they asked me if I would volunteer, but just having come out of the hospital, "Well, I can't because I can barely walk." And then, orders came through that those of us that wanted to leave camp can go east, but we had to work for a war effort company. And I volunteered because at that time the top official, like myself, was making \$19 a month, with \$2.50 in script from, I believe, Montgomery Ward or Sears for our clothing. Of course, some of the—well, like sugar and beef we never got, and we found out later that they were black marking these items by the authorities. I told my wife at that time that I would go first with two other fellas to Cleveland, Ohio. When we got there the War Relocation Authority told us we didn't want you to be too conspicuous so you must not travel in big groups in twos at five to fifteen minute intervals. So, when we left our place, to go out to eat, well, we thought this is strange because we were born and raised here, and I didn't think the Caucasian people could tell us apart anyways. But, we did.

Oh, a lot of funny incidences, too, when we got to this place called Acumen in Euclid, Ohio, to make plastic parts for the Navy, the rumor had started that we were a bunch of saboteurs. They looked at us like we were a bunch of freaks, and I said, "Well, this is funny." But then, when I was operating this machine, I remember Mr. Russell the foreman came over and was very friendly. This was a fellow next to me, but he wouldn't say a word. Then at lunchtime, he turned around and said to me, "Hey, fellow, you speak better English than I do." "Well," I said, "I was born and raised here. I can't speak Japanese, but I can speak English." He said, "That's great. Come over and have some beer with me." I said, "Fine." I couldn't understand him because he was a Norwegian.

MJ: (laughs)

KY: And he had a terrible accent! But, we worked that out very nicely. Of course, we were accepted by the community, and they gave all the boys from California an opportunity to show what they could do, especially, with college degrees. There were quite a few fellas that ended up as presidents of steel firms and their own independent businesses. I, for one, had been interested in sports, and when I was offered the opportunity to turn golf professional, I accepted. But, at that time, I was thirty years old, and I thought that I was too old to play competitively. But Gordon Elms felt that I should try teaching because he felt that I had a lot of patience, so I said, "Sure, I'll try it."

I stayed there for about ten years, and then I had an offer to go to New York to do some work there, which I did. But my wife took awfully sick. She was in a coma for ten days, and I decided to come back. I came back to Cleveland to pay-off all the medical bills and debts. Then I got word from my friends in California that I should come back to California so I did. I came down to Los Angeles and they said, Well, look around. Try Orange County. And not having been in Southern California for a long time, I said, "Where's Orange County?" "Well, take the Santa Ana Freeway and go out to Orange County and get off on Buena Park," which I did. I spent approximately five months looking for property, and at that time Disney was not opened. Then I found this property on Lincoln. It was an orange grove, and we paid a fellow to clear that out.

MJ: And it was in Anaheim?

KY: That was in Anaheim. And I sat there the first day, which was a Saturday from nine in the morning to nine at night, sold one bucket of balls for a dollar. I said, "Boy, what have I done here?" The second day was two people, and I thought, Well, if it doubles up every day, I will be doing all right." But on Monday I drew a blank; nobody came. Disney had open just about three weeks after that, and then the whole place just started to boom. Then I was asked to teach golf for the city of Anaheim, and I did for the recreational department. Then when the high school condemned our property for Savanna High School, why, naturally, we had to sell it to them. But we also had a swimming pool, which we had built for Sammy Lee. We had leased it to the Anaheim school district for eight years, and then finally we sold it. In-between then, I opened up a Hawaiian gift shop, did that for about nine years. In the meantime, I went after a real estate license. I'm still teaching golf on weekends, mainly to people from Japan who can't speak English. And I'm still doing real estate right at the present time for Yum-Yum Donuts and for various Japanese firms, and \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) Management in Garden Grove. I'm just speaking at random now because Mrs. Jones asked me to put some thoughts on tape, and if there's anything that you would like to ask me, well, I would be glad to answer it.

MJ: Okay, Kim, I think that you covered an awful lot of your life in a pretty short time. That's a pretty full life, so I think we ought to get more information about some of it.

KY: Certainly.

MJ: You mentioned that your mother was a picture bride.

KY: Um-hm.

MJ: Do you know how that was arranged?

KY: Well, I think that was the custom in those days because the men came first, and naturally, there was a shortage of woman. Why, they had sent pictures, and they select from the pictures.

MJ: And did they talk much about it to you?

KY: No, because they have what is called a *baishakunin*, which is a go-between, and they trace down the family tree, sort of speak, to see if there is any hereditary diseases or what not, which I can appreciate today because I think it's a good thing.

[00:20:09]

MJ: Um-hm.

KY: I marvel at some of these people because not knowing the language and just speaking Japanese only, how they managed even to get into business. It's very comical—this friend of mine, his dad when he first came here, he worked as a houseboy, and the only word that he knew was goddamn right. So, every time the man asked him something, "Goddamn right," and he got by with it.

MJ: (laughs)

KY: It's just remarkable, but, of course, the basic instinct of the Japanese parents were the kids had to excel in school. Coming back with Cs and Ds and Fs, it was a disgrace. So, they did study pretty hard, but, of course, when we had to go to two schools at one time, it made for a very long day.

MJ: Did you feel that the pressure or competition to make good grades had an effect on you particular?

KY: Not me because by nature I'm a pretty easygoing fellow, but I do know some friends of mine that really got ill because the pressure was so great. They sacrificed, as parents, to see that their children got a college degree. And I think they have done very well, but this one fellow was asked to be a straight-A student. And I know that he got mentally ill. But, like in all walks of life, there are smart people and dumb people.

MJ: Did your parents try awfully hard to teach you the traditional customs of Japan?



KY: Yeah, that was rather confusing, Marilyn, because when they would try to give me some of the Japanese culture—well, of course I could see the beauty of it, the simplicity of it. What they call *shibui*, I appreciated that much, but when I started working for the Japanese firm in Chinatown, at that time I was making \$10 a week. And the fellow told me, “If you were in Japan, you would be making forty yen a week.” “Well,” I said, “I’m not in Japan. I’m here.” And I thought that was rather ridiculous. But, I think then to being raised in American custom, I thought that a lot of the Japanese custom was rather hypocritical because the state of my mind was the fact that New Years is a big event for most Japanese people because it is a three day holiday. Well, I remember watching my mother cook one night, and she did this for about a week. She was cooking up a storm. And then, she displayed on the table a—on December first when people came by—it was the custom. You would go from neighborhood to neighborhood and see your friends. And she would display her culinary skill, and the first thing she would say was, “Welcome, I don’t have much to offer you. The taste is very poor. It’s so humble.” You know? Well, I thought, This is ridiculous because you knock yourself out. You should be proud of what you’ve done. And say, “Look, here’s some food. Try it, you know? It’s great. Take all you want.” But there again, being humble was the way to go.

MJ: Was that perhaps just your mother’s custom, or was it your father’s also?

KY: I think it was that generation, the first generation, because they came right from Japan, so, of course—well, that’s why I said we were in-between two worlds.

MJ: Um-hm.

KY: But, if you were to put me on the spot here, I would say I’m more Americanized than I’m Japanese because I’ve never been there.

MJ: You seem that way to me.

KY: I think so.

MJ: When your mother left your father, wasn’t that an unusual kind of thing for a Japanese woman?

KY: Yeah, I think it was very—well, at that time, it was disgraceful because they didn’t believe in divorces and separation. But, she felt that she worked so hard to get the family in that position of wealth, and for him to gamble on the stock market, well, I guess we’re not the exception because so many people did, but at least it was an experience. And I know my mother never did manual labor until then, but she worked for Del Monte cannery there slicing up tomatoes. She would come home late at night with her hands all cut up. And, being young at that time, I could appreciate what she was doing, but, at the same time, I was too young to really appreciate what she was going through. But, I know one thing I remember is eating stew for one week because in those Depression days you’re lucky to eat. I swore that I’ll never

touch stew again, but I love it. (chuckles) It's good. But, coming into California, again, after all that absence in going to San Francisco to visit the family—I've got two sisters and a brother there, and we get together and the old customs prevail where you do have lots of food, lots of friends, lots to drink. It makes for a nice time.

MJ: Yeah. That's why you enjoy going to San Francisco.

KY: I do, very much so. Very nostalgic how everything has changed. Now, we are considered the old folks. Hard to believe!

MJ: Was there a very large Japanese American group in Sacramento? Or how did your mother happen to choose Sacramento?

KY: I don't know. Funny thing, I never questioned her about that because I thought, Well, as a child we were taught to obey our parents. You didn't talk back, that was a no-no. And, of course, being a youngster, the excitement was meeting new friends, playing baseball, and whatever. Then I joined the Boy Scouts there and went through the whole routine.

MJ: Talk about your sports and all the different kinds that you were into.

KY: Well, basically, anything in sport was fascinating because I applied for track. Then, of course, in San Francisco, we had the Mikado basketball team, and prior to that we belonged to the Japanese YMCA team, both of the teams that were undefeated for eight years. And that was the thing to do.

MJ: Were you on that team?

KY: I was a manager, yes.

MJ: You were a manager.

KY: Yeah, so the Mikados was a conglomerate of some of the better players decided into the AAU competition. And although, we were very small, why, we did play pretty well. And I remember getting a letter from the coach of USC stating that they were going to go to Japan, and they wanted some local competition before they went. So, we formed an All Star team up in the Bay region and played them. But boy, when our top man was only five foot eight, and he had to follow a six foot five, it was no contest. But, it was a valuable experience. I played football in high school. And, of course, we get accustomed to eating, so you had to work! So, working and having sports on weekends.

MJ: When did you start playing golf?

KY: Well, actually, I was caddying for some people in San Francisco when I was a high school student. Mainly, some of the older girls—I figured, well, why not go out, wide-open spaces, get treated. I thought it was a silly game at first, you know?

MJ: Most people do. (laughs)

KY: Yeah, right. But then, actually, we started to play in Pebble Beach in Sacramento it was more fun. And I thought, Well, this is a good sport, but I didn't realize until I got into camp, and then also into Cleveland, Ohio, that I would have this opportunity. It's been very good, meet nice people.

MJ: You been meeting—you said you teach a lot of Japanese people.

KY: Um-hm.

MJ: Are they people you meet that go out to the golf course or driving range?

KY: Actually, having had the drive range before, I was able to draw these people, and they would come from Los Angeles because they heard there was a Japanese speaking fellow there. And I had a friend with the Sanwa Bank in San Francisco whom I grew up with, and, as a matter of interest here—this is very, very interesting because he knew this young fellow. He was the pinball king of San Francisco, to the point where he was making a good living playing pinball machine. And some of the places would bar him from playing, or else tell him that he could have half of the earnings. Today, he's working for the Sanwa Bank. He's a controller handling five, two hundred million dollar money.

MJ: There is a future.

KY: There is a future. There is. (chuckles) But nonetheless, he told me that quite a few fellas coming to San Francisco wanted golf clubs, so we are shipping all these golf equipment to Japan or selling to them, the ones going back to Japan. And, of course, the golf companies were surprised that a driving range in Anaheim was selling any more equipment than the country clubs locally. But golf has taken off quite well in Japan; it's a status symbol. Like I said, it's all word by mouth. And, fortunately, I have some apt students, and they pass the word around. So, it's a very good sport.

[00:30:25]

MJ: You play that till you can't play anymore.

KY: Well, I play, but due to the fact that my wife suffered a stroke, I just can't get away too often. I enjoy being outside and watching the improvements of my students. While I was in Cleveland, I was asked by Gordon Elms. He's from the famous Elms family that built about half a dozen golf courses in Cleveland. They are Scotchmen; their father came from Scotland in the old school. And Gordon had asked me one

- day, he said, “You know, I’ve got some boys coming out of Crile Hospital from World War II that were either amputees or blind people—soldiers, so it’s quite a challenge. And it is quite interesting to teach these people what these deficiencies, and how well they adapted. So, this is what I tell my students that when you have two good legs, two good eyes, and two good arms there is no reason why you can’t hit that golf ball. But there again, like I tell them, the six inches between the ears, that’s the toughest. (chuckles)
- MJ: (laughs) I thought it was the distance you hit the ball.
- KY: The main thing is consistency. But, it has helped me with my real estate business.
- MJ: Let’s go back for a few minutes. You mentioned that when you were notified that you were going to have to go to the relocation center that the young, married newlywed people were going to Poston, but you didn’t say anything about when you were married and—
- KY: Oh, yes. My sister got married before I did, so naturally, the parting was very tearful. We went down to Los Angeles from San Francisco, and eventually found out that she ended up in Heart Mountain, which was in Wyoming.
- MJ: Oh, my goodness.
- KY: So, it was quite a few years before we got together. But fortunately, we would write letters. I got married just before camp. Well, all of us did. I was in the Mikado group, and we thought that, Well, if you have a girlfriend, we’d better get married because we didn’t know what was in store for us.
- MJ: And you’ve been going with her?
- KY: Not, very long, no, no. We got drunk. (chuckles)
- MJ: That’s a good way to get married. (chuckles)
- KY: Yes.
- MJ: You went to Tanforan as a sort of assembly center?
- KY: Yes, right. And, of course, it was interesting to see some of the wealthier Japanese families come and—fur coats, orchid corsage. I told her, “You’re crazy,” I said, “You’re in jail.” He wanted to know if somebody could carry the baggage to his barrack. They had erected all these barracks at the center of the racetrack, and he also wanted to know if there was a telegraph office where he could send off wires. I said, “Mr., you’re in jail. ne of that is going to happen.” But there again, I think the most popular people in the camp were the boys that were working in the commissary because they had access to the food. And, if you knew the right person, why, you can

get yourself a nice piece of meat or sugar, whatever was handy. But it was very interesting to see too, the contrast between people from the country and the city. We had quite a rivalry there. Oftentimes, it was pretty bad. Especially, since you're confined to one area day in and day out.

MJ: Yeah. What kinds of activities did you have? *You* had your sports.

KY: Yeah, mainly we formed a group—we had volunteers, we age groups for girls either in sports or like in handicraft, sewing or whatever. And just to show you an example of what people can do, when someone suggested a hobby show, naturally, we didn't have any materials—well, except for the trees around the camp. There was a Model-T Ford in the corner of this racetrack, and these people had gone and stripped that thing clean. There wasn't a thing standing, not even a bolt. And they had torn this apart, came back with flower vases, ashtrays, objects of arts. So, it goes to show you that if worse comes to worse, and you had to trust your brains and talent you come up with something.

MJ: Did they have a theater or dramatics?

KY: Well, we had a few of those.

MJ: At Tanforan?

KY: Yeah, Tanforan and Topaz. Yeah, we used to have a talent show every week.

MJ: Tell me more about Topaz and after Topaz. You were in Tanforan how long?

KY: Well, I think we were there from May until about August or September.

MJ: Wasn't that quite a long time for being kept in the assembly center?

KY: Well, like I said, we were asked to be left behind to accept the new arrivals.

MJ: Did your wife go on ahead?

KY: No, she stayed. We had one of the barracks in the middle of the racetrack, so naturally when everybody had left, there was hardly anyone in the place. So, like a night, she wanted to go to the bathroom, I would have to walk with her because all these empty barracks were \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) back and forth. No lights. It was kind of spooky.

MJ: Yeah.

KY: Eventually, we all said let's all move together towards the stall, so we ended up towards the grandstand, and then we just decided to just wait there.

MJ: How did you travel from Tanforan to Topaz?

KY: They put us on the train.

MJ: Train.

KY: Yes. It was an old coach—some of the other people that were not too well, we decided, well, they couldn't sit-up all night, so I don't know where they got the part. They brought down the overhead bunks and slept up there. And the guards were pretty lenient; they were stationed at each door. We were told to keep our blinds closed, but we would peek out to see where we were going. But, when I got to Topaz, they had assigned me to Block 41, which was on the extreme corner and found out that we didn't even have a roof. It wasn't completed then.

MJ: For heaven sake.

KY: And it was windy, dusty, cold.

MJ: And that was in August?

KY: I think it was September.

MJ: September.

KY: Yeah, right. Then, eventually, we got into this program, winter sports, so that kids could buy skates. So, we made a pond, froze the pond.

MJ: It's cold there then.

KY: Very cold, yes. And, for many people, it was the first time they had ever seen snow. Well, naturally, they weren't used to this cold, and it took a while to get used to.

MJ: Did they have enough clothes?

KY: Yeah, we bought quite a bit from, like I said, from the Sears catalogs. And, ah, some of the more ambitious fellas that went out to work in the sugar beet field, they had to get permission, and they had to stay out a week at a time. And, of course, they had to pay for their own food and lodging.

MJ: What was Topaz near? What town?

KY: Well, south of Provo.

MJ: Oh.

KY: Yeah, that's the biggest city around there, but we were right on the outskirts of Delta, Utah. And they had a mill there, so quite a few people went to work there for something like seventy cents an hour. And then, another bad feature there, too, was the fact since we didn't have any furniture—say you had a family of six, you were assigned six cots, one bare room. So, what we did was bang nails in the walls and hang a line and throw blankets over to give us the privacy. I remember the first night I was there the next room was just separated by thin plywood, so in the middle of the night, I thought, Boy, somebody is in the bed with me because the snoring is so loud. It just so happened that he had his head against my head. And you could hear families fighting because, you know, the walls were so thin.

MJ: Must have been interesting for a newly married couple.

KY: Oh, yeah, they were fighting, too. (chuckles) They were so embarrassed because we told them we knew everything that was happening.

MJ: (laughs) You didn't have to tell. Everybody knew.

KY: Right. Well, there's all kinds of rumors flying around camp, too. Of course we had people that were born here but educated in Japan, and it was quite a difference because although—

MJ: It must have been hard on them.

KY: Yeah, rather difficult. And since they couldn't speak English, why, they handled most of the mess halls. And boy, when I used to umpire these games between mess halls, they used to want to throw me in the lake there because they're so hot headed.

[00:40:10]

MJ: Who was the most hot headed?

KY: The boys in the mess hall; one mess hall against the other. And, of course, we had quite a few talents that surprised me because, naturally, when you live in a bay region, you know some people. When it came down to being in one place at the same, and when you send calls out for a talent show, we discovered quite a few people that really had hidden talents. We had one fellow that did a take-off on Carmen Miranda, and he was fascinated—it was. And then, we had another girl name Elsie—I think her name was—she sang *Cow Cow Boogie* and brought the house down. Then we formed a band; we had about a fourteen piece band. And Tom Tsuge, at that time, was the music major, so he conducted the band. We had the sounds like Tommy Dorsey, all the rest of the boys. I believe they are in Cincinnati right now leading a symphonic orchestra. So, they've done well. Then, of course, we had some really good ball players, too, but, of course, during wartime, we were restricted. And the contest for hot and heavy between blocks, between mess halls, between commissaries. And the pay scale at that time for unskilled workers was \$8 a

- month, I think. Then it went to \$12 for the mess hall people, and \$16 for the administration. And then the so-called top professionals, like us, were getting \$19. But you know what, Marilyn? It surprises me that I was able to save money because I couldn't spend it.
- MJ: I was going to ask you, did you save any?
- KY: I did.
- MJ: Even though you had to buy out of the catalogs and everything?
- KY: Yeah, because I would be working twelve to fourteen hours a day.
- MJ: Oh. You get paid by the hour. No—
- KY: No, by the month.
- MJ: So, if you were working twelve or fourteen hours a day—
- KY: Didn't make anything.
- MJ: But, you couldn't spend your money then.
- KY: Yeah, no. And then, I noticed, too, for those of us who smoked, that all we could find in the commissary was Rollies because the fellas was clipping all the coupons, and we had no choice.
- MJ: You didn't get the coupons?
- KY: No, no. So, there was a lot of that shenanigans going on.
- MJ: Did you go out to Delta or to Provo at all?
- KY: I did to make the arrangements for a concert or entertainment for the local high school. And that was my first contact with the Mormons and found them very delightful. Especially when they took us into their homes and fed us fresh fruit in the middle of January. I couldn't believe—even a watermelon they had buried in the ground fourteen feet deep in January. It was real good. And of course, they make their own things, so we were eating their homemade breads, whipped cream; delightful. And some of the more enterprising fellas were sneaking liquor under the seat of the car—(chuckles)—and taking it back to camp—
- MJ: Where did they get it in Mormon country?
- KY: Well, at some of the liquor places. Yeah, they did all right.



[recording paused]

MJ: Why don't you tell me a little bit more about your contacts with the Mormons, Kim.

KY: Well, there philosophy in life was fascinating. Especially, when they were so understanding of our plight, that we were victims of circumstances, and they thought we were very much American like them. But there again, because of our faces, we were stereotyped as being enemy aliens or whatever. So, another thing, too, on the same vein, a lot of the Issei—that's the first generation—actually, that was the first leisure time that we ever had when we ever had. And we were told that a lot of this was instrumental in having them pass away because they were so used to working hard. They had their own culture group within camp doing their little things, whether it be flowers arrangements or knitting or hobby. Some of these ladies acquired a talent to carve birds out of soft wood, and when camp was dismantled, why, they went on and did this as a business. So, it's quite interesting.

But like I said, these Mormon people were very instrumental in encouraging us to just keep up the good work. They encouraged us to keep our spirits up, and they gave us a lot of help. Whenever we went into town to do some shopping, why, there was no animosity. Then, too, a lot of this is due to economics. Folks brought a lot of business, and then it helped them with their sugar beet farms and milling. And it was just a matter of timing, I guess.

MJ: Did they invite you to their churches or to their church meetings?

KY: No, we had our own churches at camp for each denomination, whether it be Methodist or Buddhist or whatever. Sunday was observed in the morning; then in the afternoon it was all recreation.

MJ: Did many Caucasians visit the camp or were there any employed at the camp?

KY: Well, there were quite a few in the administration. These were the key people sent by the United States government, and we worked under them. So, the policy was dictated from wherever, San Francisco or Washington.

MJ: Have you compared your experiences at Topaz with those of others in Poston or—

KY: Yeah, it was pretty much the same because the circumstance was the same. However, like in Manzanar, they had the largest group because Los Angeles, before the war, had the biggest population of Japanese. And, well, it still is. In Southern California, we have the biggest congregation of Japanese at the moment. But, I think climatically, too, it made a lot of difference because where these people went. Like in Arkansas it was very humid, and they weren't used to that.

MJ: I bet.

KY: And they had, I believe, a lot of discontent, and I think the weather has a lot to do with that. So, those of us like in Utah and Wyoming, why, when it's cold, you just don't go out.

MJ: Um-hm. You stay in where it's warm.

KY: Right.

MJ: Something interesting has occurred to me. Did the woman, particularly, have more difficulty adjusting? You mentioned, particularly, the Issei women who developed some of their hobbies or the skills that they then carried on afterwards. Was it harder on the women, do you think or the men or either?

KY: I think it was about the same.

MJ: Was it?

KY: Yeah.

MJ: Because the men had always worked hard too.

KY: Yeah, well, they were doing a lot of manual work. And a lot of them were working on the butcher shop or what not. And some were postmen, delivering mail. One thing though, I remember when I had this appendicitis attack, why, there was no such thing as an ambulance and no telephone, so we had to relay to the block managers, say that we needed help, and they had come in an old sedan. And they asked me to get out of bed, I said, "I can't even get out of bed." So, they said, "We have to carry you on the mattress." They put me on a mattress and in the car. And the hospital was just a barrack. It was not what you call sanitized. But some of the boys at work—in fact, all the doctors there were Japanese. They were friends of mine who had just graduated from Stanford or Cal or whatever, and they told me, Kim, you got appendicitis. "Well, do whatever you have to do. I can't stand this pain." And, of course, we didn't have all the modern equipment, so then I got stich abness. I was stuck in there for another month.

MJ: That was during the Christmas pageant?

KY: Yeah, right.

MJ: When you were supposed to be conducting the Christmas pageant?

KY: And that's when my buddy said, "Well, Kim, if you get an operation, I'm going to get one, too." He said, "I don't need it, but I may need it someday. If it's going to be free, might as well get it done." So, he had it done, too.

MJ: He got his appendix out? (laughs)

KY: Yeah. Because he said, “In the outside, it’s going to cost you \$1,000 dollars.”  
“Well,” I said, “you’re nuts.” He got it done. And I remember Jack Soo had worn a  
doctors uniform with his mask, and he said he watched the whole operation. (laughs)

MJ: Was he sort of a comedian or was he—

KY: He was a good nature fellow.

[00:50:00]

MJ: Did you know him in San Francisco?

KY: Yeah, we grew-up together. Our families knew each other. Then of course, there  
was a fellow named Kim [Kimeo] Obata, whose father was Chiura Obata—he was a  
professor of art at the University of California, Berkley, very talented fellow. He  
ended up with Coca Cola in St. Louis in the advertising department, so they’ve done  
well.

MJ: Well, when you went to Cleveland was your wife with you there?

KY: Not, at first. We went there first—let’s see. Three of us volunteered to go, so I left  
camp with a hundred dollars to go to Cleveland. And they had promised us a job.

MJ: How about housing?

KY: Well, they had a place at Western Reserve, and it was strictly for the Japanese  
American boys. They had a house—I think it was a fraternity house. And we tried to  
buy a car. Some of the boys were very talented mechanics, so they were able to spot  
cards and fix it. However, much of our travelling then was by street cars or by  
walking. And we used to go to movies, watch the big bands, Perry Como, Frank  
Sinatra, and all the rest of them. Then later, once we got settled, my wife did come  
out, but the only place we could stay was in a private home. So, she worked as a  
cook and a housemaid, which permitted me to go out and go to work. They didn’t  
object to that. And it was my first experience with a Jewish family, an Orthodox  
family. Mr. and Mrs. \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible). They were delightful people. And on days  
we used to wear the skullcap, tried to eat the gefilte fish. I nearly died. (laughs) But  
it was a good experience.

MJ: (laughs) You’ve been exposed to quite a few cultures.

KY: But it was nice, yeah. But there, again, we couldn’t stand the humidity in Cleveland.  
It took quite a while to get used to that. And, of course, gas was rationed at that time,  
so a lot of boys would buy black market coupons. Well, I did too because there was  
no way to get around.

MJ: Um-hm.

KY: And then, on Sundays, we would end up at a Chinese restaurant in Chinatown in Cleveland so we could have our oriental food since there were no Japanese places. Then one day, a friend of mine came to visit and said, "Hey Kim, I understand Ohio is a ceramic state." And he said, "I would like to have some of these rice bowls made because we don't have any rice bowls anywhere." And I said, "Well, I have to go to a certain part of Ohio." So, I drove down there, and I told this lady that was manufacturing piggy banks for the Woolworth stores that my name was George Lee because feelings were running so high then. And I had a sample of this very fine bone China rice bowl—and, "Well," she said, "We can't make it that thin." And I said, "Well, I can appreciate that. Do the best you can and send me a sample." So, she sent me a sample, which I sent to Denver, Colorado, and this fellow, Wesley Oyama, started this Japan foods. Substituting the kind of food that we were normally getting from Japan, but he was manufacturing this in Denver, Colorado. He accepted it and said, "Well, have them make all you can get." So, we did at the rate of six thousand a week, and we were having them shipped to San Francisco directly for export to Hawaii. And then, the government stepped in and said that shipping was critical, only war material could be shipped, so that killed us. At the same time, he asked me to open up a Japanese grocery store, and since we had a population of roughly twenty-five hundred, I told him, "Well, why not?" So, I got two of my buddies to chip in, and we rented a store.

MJ: Where was that?

KY: In Cleveland.

MJ: In Cleveland.

KY: Yes, which is known as a Hough area right now. Hough area is a very bad place. At that time it was rather respectable; ah, a lot of immigrants there. And we were selling rice by the ton and all the Japanese food. And we were travelling all the way to Chicago to pick up the bean cakes. No one knew how to make bean cakes. Then we flourished and went into raw fish, and it did very well until the people started migrating back to California. So, the business fell down. I still have a sister-in-law in Palmer, Ohio, quite a few friends in San Francisco still there.

MJ: Oh, the sister-in-law.

KY: It's my wife's sister. And they've done very well. I don't think they have any plans of coming back because their roots are there now. The kids are all married. I would say that two out of three marriages are inter-marriages, and they're all settled.

MJ: Very good. You told me once that you were in Grand Junction, Colorado.

KY: Yes, well, that's another—

MJ: Where did that come in?

KY: Well, this friend of mine from Los Angeles was raising bean sprouts in New York.

MJ: Um-hm.

KY: He said, “Hey, come out and help me out.” So, I went there, and stayed with them for approximately two months and learned the techniques of raising bean sprouts. Then he said he had a contract to raise bean sprouts for a cannery. So, this fellow named Gerald Kamamatsu, myself, and Ikinoma, we hopped on this car and drove from New York to Chicago. En route, well, we hit an icy road, spun around about six times and hit an Army convoy. And finally, manage to make it to Chicago by Christmas, and then we got another car and drove to Grand Junction, Colorado. And then, in wintertime, the cannery closed down because [there was] nothing to can, and they thought bean sprouts would do it. So, we got all local farmers to help us. It was so funny because, well, like us, we were considered city slickers. We had heard there was a small Japanese colony there, so on Saturday night, we wore our suit, tie, and hat, got in the car, went to this place called Four Corners. And I could never forget this because we drove—and there was a four corner because there was a gasoline station. There’s nobody there, but apparently that’s where they all met at one time or another. And all the movies were Westerns; the music in the restaurants were terrible Westerns. Honestly! But here, again, the government said we couldn’t use any more cans for bean sprouts.

MJ: Had you already got into production?

KY: Yes, we did, for about three months, and we thought we were going to cleanup. I decided to have the wife come and join me, so a friend of mine was coming out to California, so he drove my Ford Roadster all the way from Cleveland to Denver where I met them. And I drove that into California. The car was so old. There was no floorboard, we had put plywood there, and it was cold. I didn’t think I’d make it to California, but we did. The first filling station we came to, why, there was a black attendant. And he said, “Hey, you want to sell your car?” I said, “How much would you pay for it?” I paid \$495 three years ago. He said, “I’ll give you \$695.” I said, “Sold!” Because I did not dare drive it back to Cleveland, so we took a train back. So, we stayed in San Francisco for about a month, but there was nothing going on because I think there’s still a lot of discrimination.

MJ: When would that have been about?

KY: This was in 1945 or ’44. I said, “No, that’s enough.” But, I do remember that we had going to Fort Snelling for my friend’s wedding, and we were staying at the Palmer House in Chicago. We had gone to a theater and came back, and we saw all this—well, all the telephone books been torn-up for confetti. And we got into our room, and unfortunately, had left the window open and the whole floor was covered with confetti. And we discovered that was V-J Day. And I thought, Boy, if this is the end of the war, I’m not going back to that factory. So, I told my wife, “We’re supposed to go back tomorrow, let’s stay a few more days,” which we did. When I finally got

back to Cleveland, I called the factory, and I said, "I quit!" (laughs) I was waiting for this. But, at that time, we still had our grocery store going.

MJ: Oh, yeah.

KY: And then, of course, I was starting my apprenticeship as a gold professional. So, I kept pretty busy.

MJ: You had lot of things going. So, then how soon did you go back to California after the war?

[01:00:00]

KY: Well, friends of mine had written to me from Los Angeles saying that I should come back to California. The opportunities were there. So, in 1955, I loaded up my car with a lot of extra golf clubs and sewing machine, what have you. And we stopped in Little Rock, Arkansas, to see Doctor Hara, who was a fellow we grew-up with, and he was the professor of surgery for Arkansas University. We stayed overnight and one day ahead of a storm every day, and we finally made it into California. And we stayed with our friends, Iwosakis, in Los Angeles for about five months, and he became one of my partners. Then I ended up in Anaheim. So, I think it was the nicest thing that ever happened to me, the nicest people here.

MJ: And you've been here now, how many years?

KY: Well, since '55.

MJ: Nineteen fifty-five.

KY: Right.

MJ: Well, you're practically—you're a pre-Disneyland native.

KY: By one month.

MJ: By one month.

KY: Yeah, because we bought the property in May and they opened up, I think, in June or July.

MJ: Why don't we stop for tonight, Kim. I know there's a lot of other things that would be interesting to talk to me about.

KY: Be very happy to.

MJ: We'll get together again.

YOSHITOMI

O.H. 1645.1

KY: Be very delighted.

MJ: Okay.

END OF INTERVIEW