

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

Japanese Americans in Orange County

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MITSUO NITTA

Interviewed

by

Rolf Janssen

on

August 12, 1976

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INTERVIEWEE: MITSUO NITTA

INTERVIEWER: Rolf Janssen

SUBJECT: Japanese Americans in Orange County

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J: This is an interview with Mr. Mitsuo Nitta by Rolf Janssen for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project, at his home at 9211 Loma Street, Villa Park, on August 12, 1976, at 7:00 p.m. Mr. Nitta's wife, Toki Nitta, is also present.

Mr. Nitta, could you tell me a little bit about your family and some of your personal background?

N: Both my parents came from Japan. My father from the prefecture of Yamaguchi-Ken in 1897. My mother came to America from Nagasaki. She came to Los Angeles in 1914 or 1915. My parents were married in 1915. My father migrated to the Los Angeles area from Alameda. He had landed first in Portland and went to Alameda at the turn of the century. He went to night school, working as a houseboy. During the summers he worked in the fields throughout the San Joaquin Valley. During the five or six years that he did this he passed through Southern California, and when he passed through the city of Santa Ana, he noticed the many church steeples there, and at that time stated that, if and when he were to marry, he would like to settle in Santa Ana. In 1907 he bought the original parcel of ground in Orange County, in Santa Ana, which was located on Fairview Street between Bristol and Sullivan. That was the original homeplace. In 1915 he married my mother. At that time he had a small restaurant in Los Angeles. They had a daughter who was born in 1916. Then they moved from Los Angeles, selling their restaurant, to the original fifteen acres which were bought in 1907 in Santa Ana. At that location the three Nitta sons were born and raised. From 1915 until the evacuation of 1942, we

lived a farm life. In 1918 my father planted the first acreage in asparagus, on the original fifteen acres. I think he was one of the first to plant specific crops. The farm name of Greenspear Farms started from that crop. We lived a very quiet life there at the ranch. We went through Diamond Grammar School, Lathrop Junior High School, and Santa Ana High School. My parents felt we should all have a college education. During the Depression years of the early 1930s we all pitched in and helped on the farm. My father always guided us toward agriculture because he felt that the three of us farming together would always do better than one by himself. It was with that in mind that he sent the three of us to agricultural colleges. My older two brothers went to Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo, and I, being the youngest, went to the University of California at Davis.

Just before World War II we started to put together a sort of family agricultural project. My oldest brother majored in agricultural mechanics, my second brother majored in poultry husbandry, and I in truck crops. By 1941 we had expanded from fifteen acres to one hundred thirty-five acres. The last parcel of sixty-five acres we acquired in the spring of 1941 in the community of El Modena, which is in East Orange. In 1940 we started a poultry project which was part of the overall family agricultural venture.

The war came in 1941, and everything was in a turmoil. I was drafted into the Army in February of 1942. Both my parents and my brothers were evacuated in 1942 to Poston, Arizona. The family arranged to have our acreage farmed by our old faithful Mexican farmhand. The bank was to take care of the administration of the ranch. The newly acquired ranch of sixty-five acres was leased out to a person by the name of Lawrence Kokx. During the period that we were absent Mr. Kokx farmed that parcel, while the original home piece was farmed by Mr. Salvador Quintana, who, by the way, is still with us--being with us for over fifty years. I served in the Army from 1942 until towards the end of 1946. I was in the service for over four-and-a-half years. This included one year of overseas duty also.

My parents and brother came back to Santa Ana to resettle the ranch in 1945. They were the first family to come back. I returned to the family in 1946, and decided in the fall of 1946 to join the family venture. We were all married at the time and it was not a simple decision to come to. I was married and had a child at that time. Things were not easy, but we all pitched in. I had been going to school all my life and had served in the armed forces right after graduating from Davis, so I really

didn't have the practical application of farming. I learned fast. From 1946, I guess, the next ten years were very difficult as far as work and management goes. We acquired, through the concerted effort of the family, more money and more property and in the late 1950s, when the start of the urban boom came into Orange County, we started to trade the property that we had accumulated. In other words, for one acre of our ground we would trade for three or four acres of less valuable ground.

We have really made our economic gains through land. In 1969 we traded and sold out most of the ground that we owned. At the present time we are merely farming one crop, strawberries, which is basically to keep ourselves occupied and together. We're too young to retire, and we feel we still enjoy the challenge that goes with farming. It was in 1970 that I lost my father; he was ninety years old and still healthy. My brothers and I all feel that Orange County is our home and we want to live here as long as possible. We have our families which are all grown now. We enjoy it here. We've seen the tremendous growth and we've enjoyed the economic gains that have come with this urban boom. This brings us up to where I live right now.

J: You mentioned your grade school. What was its name?

N: Diamond Grammar School.

J: It was located in Santa Ana?

N: Yes, it was in the southwest part of Santa Ana.

J: Was there also a separate junior high school?

N: Yes, we had two junior high schools in the city of Santa Ana. One was Willard, which took care of the students in the north part of town, and Lathrop, which I attended.

J: You also attended Santa Ana High School?

N: Yes.

J: Were you involved in athletics or student government in high school?

N: I was very active in sports, and made my varsity letter in all four major sports while I was there. Football, baseball, basketball and track--I made varsity letters in each of these, plus class B in three others. Sports was my main activity in high school.

J: They probably kept you busy.

- N: Yes, although I did make the academic honor roll. From Santa Ana High School I went to Davis.
- J: You mentioned that when your father first came he noticed the many church steeples. Were you, as a family, members of a church?
- N: Yes, my father was one of the oldest Methodists from Japan that lived in Orange County. He encouraged us to follow his religious belief, and we became members of the Santa Ana Methodist Church in 1925.
- J: Was your father a Methodist before he arrived here?
- N: I believe he became a Methodist in Los Angeles at the turn of the century.
- J: Were there any Japanese clubs or organizations before World War II?
- N: Yes, before World War II our social activity was very limited and it was usually through the Japanese American Citizens League [JACL] that we had dances and other social activity. My brothers and I did belong to the YMCA [Young Men's Christian Association], but getting into town in those days was not an easy job. There was no integration in those days, so the Nisei kept more or less to themselves. I did have an opportunity when I was in high school to have some social activity. I belonged to a social club at Santa Ana High School.
- J: What was the name of that club?
- N: It was the DeLos Club. It was strictly a social club.
- J: Was it integrated?
- N: Yes, a Mexican fellow belonged to it besides myself. I think there were four other Japanese American families within the whole Santa Ana School District then. We were sort of integrated, but for our social activity, like I said before, we still stayed within our own race.
- J: Was this something encouraged by your parents or the white majority?
- N: I think it was basically by the white majority, and I think our parents by and large encouraged us to stay within the Japanese American society.
- J: You mentioned there were dances sponsored by the JACL.
- N: Yes. I think they were held usually once or twice a year, and they were big deals.

J: Did they have a particular clubhouse?

N: They usually met in the Garden Grove area. It was mostly recordings, nothing live; there was nothing that big in Orange County.

J: Was the area basically rural at that time?

N: Oh yes, I would say that in the 1930s ninety percent of the Japanese families lived on the farm. They were scattered throughout the rural areas of the county--Huntington Beach, Garden Grove, Stanton, Buena Park, and a few in Santa Ana. Mostly they were farmers, either leasing or owning small parcels of ground; where they eked out a living.

J: Did your family just farm areas that they owned or did they lease some?

N: We leased some but eventually we were able to purchase parcels that we were leasing. My father bought the original fifteen, but then later we bought a thirty-five acre parcel, and then we were leasing another twenty which we eventually bought. It was accumulated over quite a long period of time.

J: Was it a normal procedure for Japanese Americans in Orange County to buy a little and then lease and eventually purchase, or was it mainly a leasing operation?

N: There were some like that, but by and large I think the majority of them leased property. In the early days most of the first generation lived on leased ground, probably because they came over here with the idea of making money and then going back to Japan to spend their later years. As the years progressed they changed their ideas--I think it was in the 1930s that people started buying acreage--and felt that because their children were Americans of Japanese ancestry that their home would be here. Right before World War II, I think there were quite a few farming families of Japanese ancestry that owned acreage here in Orange County.

J: Were there any restrictions on Japanese Americans as far as purchasing land?

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N: Yes, there was the Alien Land Law which came into effect in the early 1900s. I think it was 1910 or after that no persons of Japanese ancestry who weren't citizens could own ground here in California. My father acquired his original fifteen acres in 1907 before the Alien Land Law came into effect. We acquired the thirty-five acres in 1928-1929, and my father bought it with the idea that it

would be in our, his children's, names.

J: You being citizens it was okay.

N: That's right, of course after 1952 there was no problem.

J: What kinds of crops did you plant before the war?

N: We had about fifty acres of asparagus right at the beginning of World War II. We were farming seventy acres and the other acreage was planted in tomatoes, lettuce, pole beans, spinach, and lima beans; there were many, many different commodities, all in truck crops.

J: What type of farming methods did you use?

N: My father did most of the planting, so to speak. Our main crop, of course, was asparagus, and that is a perennial plant, so you can't plant anything else on that acreage. I do recall we had tomatoes every year; as a crop that would come in August-September, right after the asparagus season. We had pole beans, we had some citrus also, five acres of lemons, and eight acres of oranges in the 1930s. In the late 1930s the lemons went in. That's about all I recall prior to World War II.

J: Was citrus fruit a more profitable type of commodity?

N: No, I wouldn't say that it was as profitable as the asparagus. All during the Depression years my father always made money on asparagus. Right in the height or depth of the Depression we always lost on other crops; but asparagus was one crop on which he always managed to make money. He was an excellent asparagus farmer. I took advanced truck crops in asparagus research with the idea that I would continue, but that did not happen.

J: Did your farm have any type of mechanization? What type of labor did you have?

N: We had Mexican field hands; excellent workers. Asparagus was basically a hand-harvested crop, and it still is. We mechanized our shed where we belt-sorted. We had refrigeration to keep the crop marketable and fresh. By and large it was mostly hand labor. It was my oldest brother who started to convert our old horse and mule days into the tractor, and we got our first Ford tractor in the late 1920s. In the 1930s we got into the Caterpillar and the John Deere. Our mechanization did come out in the field as far as land preparation. We still had some horses and mules even after World War II.

J: Did these Mexican field hands work on a seasonal basis?

N: Yes, during the asparagus season it was a seven-day deal. They would come seven days a week. Starting from the end of February we would go until the 4th of July. Having other crops, following asparagus, we would have work from the end of February into October for about fifteen harvesting hands that were employed by my father. We followed up with beans and tomatoes, which still require a lot of hand labor.

J: So they had about eight months' employment.

N: Yes, but at the peak of harvest when we had other commodities that required a lot of hand labor, we would have as many as seventy or eighty out in the field, picking beans or harvesting tomatoes.

J: How and where did you get the credit to run your business? Did you deal with other Japanese Americans?

N: My father was an officer in one of the wholesale houses in Los Angeles. This is one of the reasons why he expanded his farming and put in other crops. Before World War II there were many first and second generation Japanese involved in the Los Angeles wholesale produce houses. My father was associated with two, one that went broke, Okuhiro Produce; and the other, Venice Celery Distributors, where we were sending our produce until the evacuation. That's one of the reasons we expanded beyond just asparagus.

J: Did white farmers in Orange County ever sell their products to these Japanese wholesalers?

N: I think they did, but then they were not closely associated with Japanese farmers. We more or less went our own way. We did talk to some Caucasian farmers, and were friendly and fairly close to some of our neighbors, but then they were in different crops--lima beans, dry limas, and citrus. We weren't in direct competition.

J: So that prevented any hostile feelings?

N: Yes, that's true. There was absolutely no hostile feelings where we grew up, all through school, even up at Davis.

J: You mentioned that the JACL sponsored dances once or twice a year, and that there were social activities in high school. Were there any types of non-group activities?

- N: In the late 1930s there was a group; we called ourselves the Orange County Japanese Americans. We were at times invited by other organizations to a social gathering. Organizations in Los Angeles would invite Orange County fellows to a social. We had an Orange County Japanese basketball and baseball team. I was a member of both teams. We participated with teams from Los Angeles and Long Beach--Japanese Americans, of course.
- J: Were these socials in Los Angeles also exclusively Japanese?
- N: Oh yes, mostly church affiliated. (To Mrs. Nitta) Wouldn't you say that?
- TN: Both the Christian and Buddhist Churches had their own groups.
- J: So most of your activities were fairly well-organized by some church group?
- N: Usually but not only church groups, it could be a Buddhist also.
- TN: Even the universities had their own fraternities and sororities for Japanese Americans.
- N: I used to go to a few dances in Los Angeles that were open to all the Japanese Americans throughout Southern California, and it was quite a gathering.
- J: How did you get up to Los Angeles? Did you have a car?
- N: In the late 1930s we were able to get there by family auto.
- J: What kind of news services did the people in Orange County have in the 1920s and 1930s? Was there a Japanese language newspaper?
- N: No, there was no local Japanese American newspaper like what the JACL has now in their Santana Winds, which carries local Japanese American activities. There was none of that because we were still a very small community, as far as Japanese Americans were concerned. There was really no need because we would personally see the various people throughout the county, socially and otherwise.
- J: How many Japanese American families would you say there were in Orange County in, say, 1935?
- N: I would venture to say around seventy-five families. I may be wrong, but it was a small number, probably less

than one hundred families.

J: Were you aware of what was going on in Asia and Europe in the late 1930s?

N: Oh yes. We knew that Japan was at war in China. We were aware of what they were doing because our parents would always talk about what was going on in Japan. They would get it through a [Los Angeles based] Japanese paper called the Rafu Shimpo. My parents used to get it. We were all old enough to know that there was trouble brewing in the Far East as well as in Europe. Many of the Orange County Nisei were subject to the draft. There were people I knew who were among the first draftees. This was in November of 1941, before Pearl Harbor. Some of the Nisei were in the service prior to World War II. I think the older Nisei were well aware of what was going on throughout the world.

J: Was there any kind of resentment about being drafted during peacetime?

N: No, I think by and large the Japanese Americans here in Orange County were more U.S.-oriented. They felt that this was their country, and there were never any doubts; I never had any doubts when I got my call that I would fight for this country. There was no second country for me. I think that this was the feeling generally throughout the Japanese American community here in Orange County. For those of us who were born and raised here in Orange county, this was our country.

J: Did your father and mother ever express any despair over how Japan had changed, since they had left so many years before?

N: I think they really didn't know how Japan had changed from a peace-loving country to a military state. There was never any doubt in my parents' minds whose country I was to defend. They told me when I went off to service that "this is your country and God be with you." They could not--though they wished to--become citizens at that time. They later became citizens in the 1950s, but it took an act of Congress to allow it.

J: Did your father know that he could never become a citizen when he came in 1889?

N: Oh yes. I'm sure he became aware of it after he arrived. Though he was a fine pioneer for this country. He did many things, from being a good participating noncitizen, to doing many fine things that were just great. We heard

so many people telling us little things after he passed away. I was aware that he was very community oriented. He served the Orange County community a great deal. All three of us are following in his footsteps, but I don't think we will ever accomplish what he did.

J: What activities was your father involved in before and after the war?

N: He was a church leader.

J: Was he a member of the Methodist Church of Santa Ana?

N: No, he was a member of the Centenary Methodist Church in Los Angeles, which is an all-Japanese Church. He was a Christian leader and he supported all Christian activities in churches throughout Southern California. I don't think there was a minister in the Western Hemisphere that he didn't know. He also supported the Community Chest and the YMCA. He was asked to do some interpreting for other Issei--or first generation Japanese--that were in court, and he did serve in this capacity at times, also.

J: I'm surprised with an expanding farm that he had the time.

N: He was on the go all the time.

J: After your family returned, was there any feeling of hostility from your white neighbors?

N: I did not feel any because I was in military service, and I didn't come back until after the middle of 1946. My oldest brother came back with my parents from Poston. He did relate some incidents where there was hostile feeling, and I think it was mostly verbal and nothing more. He was supported by the Sheriff of Orange County and also by R. C. Hoyles who was the owner of the Santa Ana Register and was very much in support of the Japanese people returning to Orange County. Though there were some who were vocal, nothing really became of it. Of course, there is not that feeling anymore.

J: Did you ever feel that white Americans were feeling guilty about the evacuation?

N: Yes, I think the general feeling was that there had been a great injustice done to Japanese Americans. I think the manner in which the Japanese population moved out of their homes and went into relocation centers with as little commotion as possible, proved to the people that they are the kind of people we look to now. I think, overall, that the record of the Japanese American created a great feeling of

warmth for our people. I know that opportunities that we never had have come to our children because of what was created in World War II. This is what makes America so strong--they forgive and forget. I don't think we'll ever go through anything like we did in the early 1940s.

In 1941, I was the first Japanese American to ever have been elected a college football captain. One week prior to Pearl Harbor, the awards banquet was held and I was given The Jerry Norris award. When I heard that Pearl Harbor was being attacked, my first reaction was that I wanted to enlist, along with half of my teammates. It turned out that they all became active in the Marine Corps as naval aviators. I tried to follow in their footsteps, but because of my ancestry I couldn't. There was quite a contingent of Japanese Americans at Davis at that time. The people on campus went out of their way to be nice to us. I might have been responsible for part of that feeling because I had participated in football and felt as much a part of the school as any Anglo on campus. It was a period in my life when there was no doubt who I was going to support--but what was going to happen to my parents? It was quite an experience for us to go through, days that I'll never forget.

- J: No, I can imagine. When war was declared, then, you were up at Davis.
- N: Yes, I was finishing my last semester.
- J: How soon did you return to Orange County? Did you receive the immediate impact of the local people here?
- N: Well, I think I did. My father came up after me. December 8 was supposed to be the start of final exams up at Davis. I was to have graduated around the middle of December, the 15th or 16th. My father did come up after me, and he related to me what was going on, who had been picked up among the first generation Japanese here in the community. The FBI had knocked on the doors of people whom we knew. These were just small instances really, people that I think were more the Buddhist-oriented families.
- J: Did the evacuation start right away?
- N: No, I went into the service in February of 1942. I did get communication through letters from my wife and my parents as to what was going on. They received notice in April, and in May they were assembled at assembly centers, and from there, as I take it, they were put into relocation centers. I don't know how many relocation camps there were. Most of the Orange County people went to

Poston, Arizona. I did visit my parents once while I was in the service, and this was when I was married in November of 1943. I was married by a Presbyterian college president in The Graham Tyler Chapel at Park College. I think there were twenty-five or twenty-eight people attending.

J: It was located where?

N: In Parkville, Missouri.

J: Were your parents able to attend?

N: Oh no, neither my brothers nor my parents nor her parents were allowed to attend. She did have a sister working in Kansas City who was able to attend. She was the only relative on either side that attended.

J: You mentioned you served one year overseas.

N: Yes, in Italy.

J: What unit were you in?

N: I was in the 442nd. I joined them soon after the war was over in the Mediterranean; the war in Japan was still going on. I was commissioned in January of 1945, as a second lieutenant in the infantry out of Fort Benning. At that time I was sent to OCS [Officers Candidate School] out of the 1st Battalion of the 442nd that was stationed in Camp Shelby, Mississippi. I think the Army realized that the Nisei was a pretty good soldier, and they needed Nisei officers, so they opened up OCS in 1944, but up until then it was closed. I had my first run-in with discrimination in the Army. Soon after I finished my basic training in April of 1942 I was selected as one of four out of this company of two hundred to attend OCS. The lieutenant who was my platoon leader came to me practically in tears when he found out that I could not attend OCS because the colonel had stated there would be no "Japs" going to OCS out of his regiment. It just made me fight that much harder to get into OCS--and I made it!

J: Did you see active duty with the 442nd?

N: It was not under combat conditions, but I was with the 442nd first at Camp Shelby, and then after getting my commission I went through one basic training of recruits at Fort McClellan, Alabama. I was shipped overseas with two hundred and fifty replacements, along with six officers. I came back with the outfit, and I got in on all the gravy.

J: You left the service in 1946. Did you serve in occupation duty in Europe after the war?

N: Yes, I think my biggest job was in the northern part of Italy. I, the only officer along with twenty-seven enlisted men, moved a full German railroad regiment, equipment and POW's back into Germany from Bolzano, Italy. We moved in truck and train convoys, without a stolen parcel or piece of equipment and with minimal trouble getting from Bolzano to Munich. It was quite a job. I was given a letter of commendation for that. It was a two-month job.

J: What was your reaction when you returned home in 1946?

N: It was a very difficult decision for me to come back. I thought possibly I might go back to school and get my Masters. I did go up to Davis at that time and I talked with the dean and to some of my professors. Because housing and everything was so difficult, I came back very discouraged. After thinking it over for several months, I decided to make a try at the family enterprise. My father always encouraged us to stick together, and I think I made the right decision. It was a very difficult period for my wife, who is city-born and bred, to make the adjustment to country living--and it was real country living in those days, in 1946-1947. It was a very difficult period in our lives, coming out of the service with a wife and child; it was a very difficult adjustment. We all came out of it, much for the better, I believe, though my wife may not agree with me.

J: You were lucky in the sense that you came back in 1946 and not right after the war.

N: I came out of the service at the end of July 1946. I was on terminal leave for three months, so I took most of that three months to make my decision as to what I wanted to do. It was prior to then that the verbal abuse and the transition period in which most of the Japanese American families returned to Orange County, took place. I was not completely aware of what had happened, but I was told by my brother what had taken place. In the case of the Nitta family the transition was very minimal.

J: Could that be because your father had been active in community affairs?

N: We were all involved in the community. My father had a very good reputation.

J: So that did help?

N: You bet.

J: Your farm was run by your Mexican American manager and the bank handled the administration. Was this typical of other Japanese families in Orange County?

N: I don't know if it was typical, but this is how my father did it, and he was very business oriented . . . No, I wouldn't say it was typical of all Japanese families. There was much lost, I would say--a lot of vandalism and a lot of abuse to the homes and property belonging to Japanese families throughout Orange County.

J: Was there ever any local policy of grabbing Japanese land while they were in Poston?

N: No, I think the majority of the Japanese families had it arranged to have their property farmed by someone--leased out or businesses taken over on an interim basis, say--during World War II.

J: So there was always that hope that the internment was only a temporary situation.

N: That's right. There was always that hope, and I know that the majority of the Japanese families felt they would eventually come back to Orange County. I think ninety-five percent did return after World War II.

J: I wonder if that's American optimism or if it's the immigrant spirit of determination.

N: Our roots were pretty deep here in Orange County. I think the Japanese families here were pretty well adjusted in the community. The Nisei were well-accepted in school, the majority were good students. They never caused any trouble, they were just the quiet Americans, never rabble-rousers. I think this typifies more the Nisei in small communities throughout the western part of the United States. This was more typical of the older Nisei. I never heard of a Nisei going to jail.

J: Was credit just as easy to get after the war as before?

N: We continued doing business although some business firms required C.O.D., cash on delivery. Some firms were very hesitant to deal with the Japanese farmers. I'll never forget the one person we were dealing with, from California Spray Chemicals. Because of the deep feeling this manager had for my father, he would sneak out at night with some hard-to-get items and pass them on to my father. I'll never forget that person.

J: Was he Japanese?

N: No, he was a Caucasian who was head of California Spray Chemical in Anaheim. This is one of the small things that was done to welcome back, so to speak, the Japanese families. I'm sure there were many other instances where Caucasians were happy to be dealing with the Japanese American.

J: Are you currently a member of the JACL?

N: Not an active member. The Nitta family has been quite active in years past. I've held offices in the JACL, I've been a member of the Thousand Club, along with my brothers, for many, many years. When the JACL first originated in Orange County, my father was one of the advisors. He encouraged the Nisei to form an Orange County JACL. Presently, I am not a very active member, though I do belong to the Thousand Club. I support it financially.

J: Can you explain what the Thousand Club is?

N: Instead of contributing five or six dollars for a local membership, we can donate forty dollars a year to the national organization, and belong to the Thousand Club.

J: What offices have you held in the JACL?

N: My brother was past president, I've been vice-president, as well as holding other offices.

J: In the Orange County chapter?

N: That's right. I have two brothers, and the oldest one was more active than my brother and I. I'm the youngest by two years. We're only a year apart.

J: Is this the only ethnic organization you belong to?

N: I do not belong to any other ethnic organization outside of the JACL, and basically it is financial support that I give. I have not taken an active part in it for quite a few years. In the late 1940s and early 1950s I felt there was a definite need, and the JACL took a strong role in fighting to end the inequities against Japanese Americans at that time.

J: What activities were the JACL involved in then?

N: The national JACL was instrumental in fighting the escheat cases, the Alien Land Law, and getting citizenship for the Issei--our fathers and mothers. They did tremendous good

before, during, and after World War II. I'll never forget the JACL. I think there is a definite need for a national JACL, though the local role is a little less important now than before World War II. The Japanese Americans are pretty well integrated within Orange County. Our kids were included in all social activities. My children were members of social sororities and fraternities. I couldn't join a fraternity before World War II, it was sort of a "no-no." It is in the third generation that the social inequities are being rectified; they are becoming just "another American" with all the fringe benefits. I stress the role of the JACL prior to World War II because basically that was our social activity. The JACL is needed for other reasons.

J: What was the local JACL involved in right after the war?

N: Raising money to carry on the escheat cases. The government was trying to take away the property of Japanese Americans. The JACL fought this issue all the way up to the U.S. Supreme Court. The State of California was trying to take away our property.

J: They were trying to do this after the war also?

N: This was during and after World War II. We fought it through the courts, and through the combined efforts of the national and local JACL, we were able to come out on top. Those were trying days.

J: Do you believe that there is a need for a national organization to protect Japanese rights?

N: You never know, there are problems that can always crop up among ethnics. I'm not saying we're going to fight the battle for the browns or the blacks or other yellows. The JACL has protected the Japanese Americans well in the past. I feel there is more opportunity today for the Japanese American here in America than ever before. I think the Caucasian people will bend over backwards at times for a person of Japanese ancestry. It was a different ball game before World War II. A national JACL is needed but it doesn't need to be as active as it was in the past.

J: Why do you think that Caucasians will bend over backwards for Japanese Americans?

N: I feel that it reflects on the Nisei. We're a small minority, our parents taught us diligence: "Try to do the best you can in school or whatever you do." The Nisei, where he was given the opportunity to teach, or go into medicine, or dentistry, did above the average. The

larger corporations that hire specialized people, such as engineers, find that Japanese Americans are by and large a conscientious group, and so they get their money's worth. I hope this continues.

I'm a member of a service club, I'm a Rotarian, and have been for fifteen years. I've been active in Orange ever since I moved here in 1946. I have many Caucasian friends and they have made these comments about Japanese American employees.

J: You are a member of which Rotary Club?

N: Orange Rotary Club, City of Orange.

J: Because of past performance of the Nisei, the Sansei are also viewed as good employees.

N: Yes, the Sansei may not like this, but the Nisei has set a good example. The Sansei are carrying it on beautifully, too. They have many opportunities which we never had. They have inherited some of our traits also.

J: What is the JACL of Orange County involved in today?

N: I could not say, I have not been very active. I have been a little disturbed or perturbed by the new group that is active in JACL, and consequently I have not stayed up with local chapters. There is a local chapter but I don't know how active it is. For the last two years I have not even attended the installation, which were the first ones I'd missed since 1946. Things have changed a little.

J: Well, a person's interests change.

N: That's right, there are very few of us natives, the original Orange Countians. We're such a minority. I talked with one person who attended the installation of the last Orange County JACL and he said there were very few of the old-timers there at the dinner. Things have changed.

J: What role should Japanese Americans be playing in Orange County government?

N: I would encourage Japanese Americans to get involved in community and county government if that is what they would like to do. I served on the 1974-1975 Grand Jury of Orange County representing an ethnic minority. It was a real education in county government. I'll never forget that one year I served on that grand jury. There are many ways in which to serve mankind, and it doesn't have

to be in government. I believe there are more and more Japanese Americans who are getting involved in city, county, and state government. Personally, I'm not that politically oriented.

J: Do you feel that there is a Japanese American community, either geographically or culturally, here in Orange County?

N: Not geographically. There are Japanese Americans in every community in Orange County, and by and large they are well-integrated within the community. There is a cultural center and I think it revolves around the Buddhist Temple on Dale Street in Anaheim. They have Japanese-oriented events like the obon, flower arrangement, and bonsai shows, and the Japanese dance; these bring out the Japanese culture. A sort of festival takes place once a year. It is well-attended by Japanese as well as Caucasian people. That's about all I can say about things being Japanese in the county. When I first moved to Orange, there were only three families of Japanese ancestry. I made a survey within the city about four or five years ago and there were over one hundred and twenty families. You never saw a concentration, they were well-scattered and integrated. They never cling to each other, and the children as well as the parents were a part of the community. Things have changed for the better.

J: What are you and your family presently engaged in?

N: In what respect?

J: You mentioned before that you were semi-retired.

N: I'm not retired. We're still farming fifty acres of strawberries, and that keeps us busy enough. We can get enough time for vacations. I'm going to Europe next month. My brother is going to Japan. The other one has been to Europe. We have investments together in Ventura County and Arizona. Our families have all been college educated. I have the youngest child and she is twenty years old, starting her third year in the School of Architecture at Berkeley. My oldest daughter has a Masters degree in teaching and is teaching at Cerra Villa Junior High School in Orange. I have a son who has an MBA [Masters of Business Administration], a graduate of USC. He's working for an import-export firm. My second daughter is a practicing dental hygienist, a graduate of Marquette University. That's the extent of my children. Three of them are independent of us now, though they do come here quite often. My wife is finding the transition of seeing the family leave and trying to find something constructive to do in her life difficult. I think it is a period which

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confronts many dedicated mothers. Did I answer your question?

J: Oh yes. Could you tell me where your fifty acres of strawberries are located?

N: We're leasing ground from Santa Fe Land Company. This will be our last year on that property because it is going to be developed for commercial use. We've been approached by the Irvine Company to lease ground and in 1977 we're going to lease and move our strawberry operation to Irvine, for three years. We're increasing our acreage from fifty to seventy-nine acres. Our job will be a little bit heavier, but with the three of us a single crop is not that difficult. We used to raise as many as sixteen or seventeen different crop commodities. We used to operate two sheds, double cropping about three hundred and fifty acres maximum, and that really kept us going. Now we've sold or traded out most of our acreage, and we're down to one commodity, strawberries, on leased property, just to keep ourselves actively engaged in farming.

J: In Professor Harry Kitano's study Japanese Americans: Evolution of a Subculture, he has one small paragraph that talks about chicken sexing. This arouses my curiosity. By any chance, Mr. Nitta, do you know why some Japanese Americans possess this particular talent?

N: Chick-sexing originated in Japan. The first people who were involved in the profession of chick-sexing here learned in Japan. One of the original chick-sexers is teaching chick-sexing and his name is S. John Nitta of Lansdale, Pennsylvania--no relative of mine. I heard of his name prior to World War II. It was during, and right after, World War II that many Japanese Americans were involved in chick-sexing. I knew some of the original old-timers that went back to Japan to learn it. One fellow by the name of Ty Saiki from Central California was one of the originals.

J: Thank you. Do you see an optimistic future for the Japanese American?

N: I think the present-day Japanese American is enjoying opportunities never before enjoyed by the Japanese American. They can go into any field of their choice and, by and large, be wholeheartedly accepted. My wife's sister, an excellent teacher, was the first Japanese American to break into the Los Angeles school system in 1945. And look how many Japanese American teachers there are today.

J: On behalf of the Japanese American Oral History Project at California State University, Fullerton, thank you very much, Mr. Nitta, for a most interesting and informative interview.

END OF INTERVIEW