

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with ARTHUR TAKEI

Interviewed

By

Tim Carpenter

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NARRATOR:       ARTHUR TAKEI  
INTERVIEWER:     Tim Carpenter  
DATE:             November 22, 1995  
LOCATION:          Los Angeles, California  
PROJECT:          Japanese American

TC:     This is an interview with Art Takei by Tim Carpenter for the Cal State Fullerton Oral History Project. This interview is being conducted at the offices at the United Food Commercial Workers here in Downtown Los Angeles on November 22 and we're beginning at 11:05 a.m. Art, once again, thank you. I want to lead-off this morning and talk a little bit about your family relationships, how they might have affected you and your political development growing up. What kind of impact did your family have in shaping you politically, if they did?

AT:     Well, when I was six years old that's when my father passed away, so most of the burden fell on my mother. She was a very educated person. She taught school, so consequently, she was very, very interested in making sure that we get our proper education. And also she emphasized she didn't want us to—I have one brother who has also passed away. But, she, for example, insisted that we tried to maintain our knowledge of Japanese language and Japanese culture, so around when I was about nine years old, she sent myself and my brother to Japan. We stayed there four years obtaining school primarily, and thank God we were able to come back before the war broke out, World War II.

TC:     What year would that have been when you were nine when you were went over?

AT:     Nineteen thirty-two.

TC:     Nineteen thirty-two. So, you returned then in '30—

AT:     Yeah, I think it was—I returned in '36.

TC:     Thirty-six.

AT: Yeah. And that has helped to enlighten myself about what I am and have a little bit more in interest in Japanese culture as a result. She insisted, even after we got back, that we attend a Japanese language school in L.A.

TC: Was that the school in Little Tokyo?

AT: This one was in the city of Compton.

TC: In Compton?

AT: Yeah, when most of it was still farmland. They used to have Saturday classes, and that's what I attended. And that's helped me to learn the language. I had a heck of a time retaining the knowledge because you got to converse in order to retain it. But, you know, that essentially was the most important thing in her life. Also, we lived in what we now call Boyle Heights in L.A. That's a little bit before you get to East L.A. As a result, we were brought up in a really diversified community where it's—today, it's predominately Latino, but then it was just everyone.

TC: Very multi-cultural?

AT: Oh, yes. And the way I ran around in school, both junior high and high school, I went around with different people. And the question of having any adverse effect on me has a result of being a minority, none of that really came into play until World War II.

TC: Before we get to World War II, two quick questions. Your father and mother's names?

AT: Okay, my father name is Naokichi.

TC: Can you spell that for me, please?

AT: N-a-o-k-i-c-h-i and the same last name as myself. My mother's name was Seki, S-e-k-i and same last name.

TC: And then your brother.

AT: His American name was William, and he had a middle name which was Japanese. And, as a result of the incarceration, there was a real rude awakening in the sense that, for the first time, I was faced with the situation where my race, my identity, my ethnicity came into play and made me think.

TC: Would you say prior to December 7, 1941, you really didn't have any slings and arrows, racial epithets or anything like that?

- AT: Oh, no, because, where we lived, that never came into play, and I was brought up in that environment. I was conscious of who I was, but I never had to face the harsh reality of being a Japanese.
- TC: Sure. Now, your family is certainly the exception. Was there a lot of Japanese American living out in the Boyle Heights area where you were?
- AT: Yes.
- TC: So, there was a concentrated population?
- AT: Yes. Let me get a cup of coffee.
- TC: Sure. [recording paused] Before we get into December seventh, a little bit about Boyle Heights. You said there was a larger Japanese American community there. How big was the population out there?
- AT: All I know is that a lot of the people in Boyle Heights and a community called City Terrace had a sizeable Japanese population. And the reason for that is that many of them work down in Little Tokyo and it was fairly close by to catch—
- TC: Was the Red Line running?
- AT: Streetcar.
- TC: Streetcar.
- AT: And that was one of the reasons why many of them located in Boyle Heights and City Terrace.
- TC: Did your mother remain there in Boyle Heights when you were in Japan? And when you returned from Japan you returned back to Boyle Heights?
- AT: Yes. She ran a bookstore and a stationary store in Little Tokyo, so she was one of the ones that was commuting by streetcar.
- TC: It sounds that you were probably reading as you were growing up, then, if your mom was running a bookstore.
- AT: Yeah. We had access to all kinds of books and literature. Although, that wasn't my forte; I just glanced at it and that was it.
- TC: And how would you describe your mom politically? Being an Issei, she wasn't voting.

AT: She was rather conservative, I think—that was due to her up keeping—but she never asked my brother or myself to define our political inclination based on what she may have thought.

TC: So, she was very open?

AT: Yeah, she left us alone with that.

TC: In school, did you go to public school in grade school and high school?

AT: Yes.

TC: And did you also—Sue Embrey<sup>1</sup> explained that she would also spend an hour after school in Japanese school doing language and so forth. Did you also do that as well?

AT: No, I went to the Saturday class, which was an all-day session. On the other hand, Sue—there were classes right after the public school let out. Depending upon where you lived, there were a number of Japanese schools in the L.A., downtown area to which a lot of the people went to.

TC: What grade would you have been in 1941?

AT: Forty-one, I was starting high school. I was a little bit behind because of my trip to Japan.

[00:10:00]

TC: So, you were a freshman in '41?

AT: Yeah.

TC: And what do you remember about December seventh as a freshman in high school?

AT: Well, very worried because number one, it happened on a Sunday that Pearl Harbor was bombed, so you're listening to all these radio broadcast.

TC: So, you were home listening to the radio when you first heard?

AT: Yes. My mother was concerned about what was going to happen. But we finally decided that we were going to go to school, which of itself, because of our upbringing in that neighborhood, Boyle Heights, there was a little bit of taunting but not much. So, I was able to go to school and continue on until we were evacuated.

TC: So, what do you remember stands out from December to February when the orders came? Struggling trying to stay in school?

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<sup>1</sup> Sue Embrey, O.H. 1366, 2285, & 2426, Center for Oral and Public History.

- AT: Yeah. My mother, all of us, like hitting a panic button. She, among other things, had the job of trying to get rid of her business and then making arrangements who is going to take care of the house while we were gone.
- TC: Did you own your home? You weren't renting?
- AT: She was purchasing a house at that time. Consequently, we tried to help her as much as we can, but like in my case, I didn't have any business background or anything like that. So, when it came to trying to dispose of her business, she really took a licking. She was lucky to salvage value out of—
- TC: So, she got a little money?
- AT: Yeah, by actually auctioning and selling some of the merchandise and so forth. She took a beating in terms of actual value of the business.
- TC: And your home, were you able to sell it?
- AT: No, we, fortunately had an Anglo lady, a widow, that lived right next door, and she had agreed to take of it. Well, I guess we didn't know how long we were going to be gone. She lived until the end of the war, and she took care of it until we came back.
- TC: So, your mom was able to move back into her home?
- AT: Yeah, eventually because there was a tenant who was renting the home. We just didn't want to arbitrarily boot them out, so we had to wait a little while.
- TC: That was worth that wait to get your own house back.
- AT: Yeah.
- TC: Well, you were really the exception. I mean, most of your friends and family must have lost everything. I mean, you guys were lucky in that sense that you were able to come back to your home.
- AT: Yeah, we were lucky. Like I said, some people hit the panic button, and maybe did things out of just—
- TC: A little too sudden?
- AT: Yeah. But, she took a beating on the business. On the home we were lucky because of this lady next door with whom we were very close before the war. She had no hesitation about agreeing to take care of our home.
- TC: When your mother and you and your brother got the news, to go to the evacuation center, did you go to Santa Anita?

AT: Yes, we went to Santa Anita.

TC: And what do you remember of that day when it was clear that you were going to have to leave Los Angeles?

AT: Well, the saddest thing is that you're saying goodbye to all the people you knew. In my case, I have a lot of schoolmates that I had to let them know what is happening. We really didn't know what was going to happen with the war and everything, so we couldn't even say, "I'll see you. I'll be back," or anything like that. We just left it, sort of, hanging loose and so forth. My brother went back to the job he had in Buffalo, New York as an aeronautical engineer, so he actually was not with us at the camp.

TC: Just you and your mother?

AT: Yeah.

TC: What do you remember about the day you arrived at Santa Anita?

AT: I looked at it and couldn't believe they were trying to put us into, uh—

TC: The horse stables.

AT: —second rate military barracks. Some of the other people who were not as fortunate as we were, they got put into the stable area at Santa Anita. No matter how much you scrubbed the walls in the stall, you couldn't get [rid of] the stench of the horse manure and so forth, but we were in a newly built second-rate military barrack, and that's where we were.

TC: How long were you there before you were assigned a concentration camp?

AT: Three-and-a-half years. Wait, what?

TC: How long were you at Santa Anita before you were sent out to the camp itself?

AT: Oh, the permanent camp, which was in a place called Rohwer, Arkansas. And we went in April, and I think we were sent to Arkansas—I know it was winter so it's got to be probably January or February.

TC: So, you were in Santa Anita for a while before you got out to camp?

AT: Yeah.

TC: Looking back, how did you end up in Arkansas? Because it seems that most of the Los Angeles internees ended up in Manzanar.

AT: I think geographic location, where your residency was, so that most of us that were in East L.A. were sent to Santa Anita and from there some of them went to Manzanar, some of them to went Heart Mountain, Wyoming, but most of us wound up in Arkansas.

TC: What do you remember about that train trip, leaving Los Angeles going out to Arkansas?

AT: Pissed, you know. Like I said, there was a rude awakening for me being incarcerated, and I started to give it a lot of thought. Why and what the hell am I going to be doing?

TC: Would it be fair to say that fear was giving way to anger? As you said, you said you were pissed off.

AT: I was more pissed off and not knowing what the hell is down the road.

TC: That unknown.

AT: Yeah. So, yeah, there may have been anger, just being ticked-off at the whole thing.

TC: Do you think, looking back, Art, it would be safe to say it was the beginning of your progressive tradition?

AT: Yes.

TC: The seeds were being planted, now, during this process?

AT: I began to not only read, think, and talk to people, but I was beginning to, if you want to call it, rebel against the so-called institution. Not necessarily the government itself, but whoever put us in these camps. I was ticked off, pissed off about it.

[00:20:02]

TC: Thinking back to that time, was any of the anger directed at the Issei, the first generation, for not fighting their relocation effort more?

AT: No.

TC: So, it was always directed at the U.S. government?

AT: Yeah, and the reason for that, my mother's friends were primarily same type of businessman in Little Tokyo and a lot of them got caught-up in the initial round at the outset of the war. Some of them really—well, it just happened to be what you are. One of the businessman that was two doors away from our store, he was a radio repair man.

- TC: Obviously, shorthand radio operator sending signals back?
- AT: Yeah. It was the kind of thing that they assumed. So, those were the kinds of friends that were close to our family, and our relatives were also businessmen.
- TC: Sue Embrey said she remembered very early on at this time to, the initial round-up, some of the schoolteachers getting rounded up, one who she later found-out was a member of the communist party. Do you remember any of the schoolteachers, at that point in time, in the initial roundup that were getting—or was it most of the business people that you remember?
- AT: Most of it was business people.
- TC: We are in Arkansas now and we are at the camp, can you explain a little bit to me kind of the political and social traditions that began developing within the camp? Did they reflect the community, as you knew it? Or were new things happening within the camp politically and socially?
- AT: Actually, when I went to Arkansas, I was continuing with my, so-called, high school education. I met a lot of the same age group that were going to the high school.
- TC: Were any of your friends from Boyle Heights there?
- AT: Yeah, some were but most of them were new or people that I didn't know.
- TC: And where were those folks coming from? Do you remember? Geographically?
- AT: They came from all over Southern California.
- TC: So, it was eclectic. It was pretty much a cross section—
- AT: Yeah.
- TC: Okay.
- AT: Yeah, and, as a result, since you have to fight boredom in camp because of all the restrictions, you could play sports, sports teams and so forth. But most of the time you just got together with your peers, and we started discussing different things and asking different questions.
- TC: So, you began study groups amongst yourselves? Exploring what is going on.
- AT: It's not a study group. It's just a discussion group. You know? After we came back from the mess—we ate dinner and so forth. Especially in the summertime, because there's a lot of sunlight, we would go somewhere, a remote area of the camp, and we just sat around, talked and asked questions.

TC: So, this was the seeds of what would eventually become your progressive tradition. You're laying the groundwork work at this time. Would that be fair to say?

AT: Yeah, I would say so because, like I said, to me it was a rude awakening. Aside from beginning to question the actions of the government, I really wanted to know what can I do to fight back?

TC: And how did that manifest itself? How did you begin to fight back within the camp?

AT: In the camp? Well, for example, toward 1943, I think, that's when they decided to give all of the internees a loyalty oath test. Basically, it was two simple questions. And what our groups, the high school group decided to do was—the two basic questions was, Do you pledge loyalty to the United States? And, Would you defend if the United States is invaded? And so forth. We decided among ourselves we are going to answer yes and yes, and we will qualify each of those answers with a dissertation of our feelings. And so, what the Army decided was any yes answer followed by a qualified answer was a negative answer.

TC: It was a negative as far as they were concerned?

AT: Yeah. So, you had two types of groups answering the question. One is the famous no-no boys. They answered both questions, no-no.

TC: And off they went.

AT: They wound up in a camp in Tule Lake, California. They were the ones that they—a lot of them got deported, as a result, and so forth. The yes-yes answers that we gave with the qualifying answer, even if we were so-called no-no boys—the thing is that there were so many of them in our camp that answered the question that way that the Army threw up their hands. We had to go through interviews with the Army, why we gave a qualified answer and so forth. And since a lot of our thinking was somewhat similar, they began they began to understand that it was really a protest—

TC: There was a pattern developing.

AT: Yeah. So, they finally gave in, and they didn't complete the interview, those yes-yes qualified answers.

TC: Now, were you feeling isolated in Arkansas? Were you getting wind through the grapevine what was going on at Tule Lake? Did you know of the opposition at the other camps at that time?

AT: Yeah. There weren't too many restrictions on so-called listening to the radio or reading certain newspapers and so forth. You could always pick up certain things because there were tidbits of news and so forth.

TC: So, you knew you weren't alone. There was a resistance developing within the camp that was linking up across—

AT: Yeah.

TC: In addition to the loyalty act of '43 at Manzanar, it was the riot that really helped shape some folks there, their political leanings. What other examples can we point to at this camp, after the loyalty act in '43? How did you continue to manifest your opposition to the internment and to the imprisonment at that time?

AT: I left the camp shortly thereafter. I was able to use the excuse, "I'm going to join my brother in Buffalo, New York," because I just wanted to get the hell out of that camp. So, I missed some of that, the closing part of the camp and so forth.

TC: So, you got out in '43 or early '44? When did you finally get out?

AT: I would say in '44. They were a lot of things that we did then that you could consider a form of protest. For example, there were a group of young people who were eligible for the draft, who did not volunteer, who found a way to get themselves disqualified from the draft. One was drinking a lot of soy sauce. It shot up your blood pressure. So, what happened was the first group that did that and went to be examined were turned down, were rejected. The Army finally caught-on, so what they did was, they would hold all of the recruits overnight—

[00:30:33]

TC: So, they couldn't get their soy sauce. (chuckles)

AT: Well, they had drank soy sauce before they left the camp, and the so-called shooting up of the he blood pressure probably lasted less than twenty-four hours. So, if you were kept overnight, the blood pressure went back down.

TC: What did you think of the 442nd at that time?

AT: Again, I think it was a contradiction. You have to admire them. You have to say, "Hey, good for you guys." And yet, some of us were not that overly enthusiastic about volunteering for the service and so forth. So, the so-called protest, in their own way, manifested itself in different ways. Like I said, some people had no hesitancy. They wanted to prove themselves so they volunteered. Some of them were not objectionable to being drafted, and so they went into the service and so forth. I would say quite a few just were just not enthusiastic about that portion of the war, but I don't think there was any big movement to oppose anything openly or start a riot like they did in Manzanar and Tule Lake. But, you know, toward the end, like I said, I was not in camp.

TC: As you were leaving the camp in '44, the contacts you made in Arkansas, would you come back in touch with some of those folks later?

AT: Yeah. A number of them were either in the same high school or met a lot of them in school, and a lot of them had relocated back to L.A.

TC: So, they also made their way back to Boyle Heights or that area so you ran into them. So '44, you're in Buffalo. You've now gone from Boyle Heights to Arkansas, and now you're in Buffalo.

AT: Yeah, and lived with my brother and I went to work in a bakery plant. You had to stay there a certain period to establish the fact that you weren't just giving the excuse that you wanted to join your brother to get away from the governmental restrictions and so forth.

TC: So, late '44, early '45 now is the time we're talking about?

AT: Yeah.

TC: And how long did you remain in Buffalo?

AT: I think about eight months. I think the limit or the restriction was I had to stay with my brother for six months. So, after that time was up, I told my brother I want to go travel. I wanted to see New York. And that's where I started to meet a lot of the, if you want to call it progressive and communists and people that really began to give me some of the answers that I was seeking at that time.

TC: Was this the summer of '45, Art?

AT: Yeah.

TC: So, you were in New York during the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Do you remember the bombings?

AT: Yes, yes. And that was another thing that I questioned why they had to bomb Japan and not Germany or Italy, even though they got out of the war a little bit earlier.

TC: Not just once but twice.

AT: Yeah. So, in New York, I stayed there about a year or so, and I met a lot of people. And again, there was a lot of discussions that we conducted way into midnight and so forth. And I was still working, trying to make a little bit of money and so forth.

TC: Who are some of these folks in New York that we would know today, some of the folks that you had been hanging out with? You said Communist Party or Resisters League, what kinds of folks were you?

AT: I think there was a few—I remember there was a politician by the name of Mark Antonio.

TC: Mark Antonio?

AT: Yeah. I think that's his name. He was a real progressive maverick and accused of being communist so forth. So, around his campaign, I met certain people that were involved in the campaign. I met a lot of students from NYC, and some of the people I just lost track because they're still either back there—I think very few of them came out this way.

TC: Was a lot of the discussion at this time anti-war or racial equality? What are some of the issues—

AT: That's when it became—like for example, politics was foremost on our mind. And that's when the third party question—

TC: Began percolating?

AT: Yeah. And in '48, I came back to a California.

TC: So, we are done in New York then. From New York back then to California in '48.

AT: Yeah, what I did was I took some time off and went up to New Hampshire in the spring of—it had to be in the spring of '46. If you know anything about Maine or New Hampshire—

TC: It's cold. (chuckles)

AT: It's cold, and they got these hostels where the students—

TC: Youth hostels?

AT: Yeah, in the spring, before the summer season you have to really open or get them ready and clean them up and paint and so forth, so I did that. I hitchhiked and spent, I guess, about three months doing that, primarily, in New Hampshire, a little bit in Maine. And then, I decided I still wanted to see parts of the United States that I had not seen. So, I decided to go to Chicago—there was some friends of mine that had relocated there—and spent some time there. And then, I came back to California in late '48.

TC: Back with your mom? Did you move back in with your mom at that time?

AT: Yeah, since we had this big house in East L.A., I went back there and lived. By that time, she had begun to raise certain questions about my activity or my going to this group or this meeting or whatever it is, and I explained to her that the reason why

I'm doing it: I just wanted to learn as much as I can. And in '48, if you'll remember, Henry Wallace became the third party candidate.

[00:40:01]

TC: How did you find out about the meeting in Los Angeles on the Henry Wallace campaign?

AT: Well, in '48, I also decided to go to UCLA. I went there, and that's where I met more people, both—I'm trying to remember some of the names of the organization. But, you know, I guess I was interested in so many answers. For example, I was involved in even the YMCA because the YMCA, interesting enough, had a fairly position of opposing wars and so forth. They gave me more opportunity to become active in that institution so that, I think, in '49, '50, they had the national convention, and I was elected as a delegate and sent to the convention that was held in the campus of Notre Dame.

TC: Wow, so you got real active?

AT: Yeah. But, I came back—but then my focus was, by then, turning more toward politics.

TC: And so, was your major political science, then, in '48 at UCLA?

AT: Well, there were a number of organizations which I looked into. And ah, I think, what came out of the Henry Wallace campaign is what interested me the most and that's when I started to get active and started to meet people like Sak [Sakae] Ishihara.<sup>2</sup> I think it came a little bit later-on.

TC: Were you concentrating on your academics at that time or were you concentrating on the community?

AT: No, I was a bad student. (chuckles) I finally just couldn't hack going through college for four years or six years, and that's in '52 after the second attempt of the third party movement, where the Progressive Party was formed and Vincent Hallinan was, I think, the presidential nominee. By that time, I was committed toward the left progressive—

TC: School wasn't in the plans. Politics was in the plans!

AT: So, for example, I was asked to make a speech at the Progressive Party's convention—

TC: The convention in '52?

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<sup>2</sup> Sakae Ishihara, O.H. 2425, Center for Oral and Public History.

- AT: Yeah—on my attitude of the question of bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. I don't think my thinking was crystal clear, but I just got up there and harangued the delegates.
- TC: It must have been pretty raw?
- AT: Yeah, I was personally opposed to it. And as a Japanese American, I don't think the government should have taken down Japan alone and so forth.
- TC: This is from '48 to '52—that's a significant four years.
- AT: Four years.
- TC: In '48, how would you define a progressive? In 1948, what did it mean to be a progressive to Art at that time?
- AT: Well, it will be someone who is basically opposed to the governmental institution as they function at that time. Also, more to opposing any wars. Racism, as such, I think was a peripheral issue. It wasn't the basic issue that motivated myself for the progressives that I had been working with. And some of them were communists, frankly, I wasn't to that extreme end.
- TC: What attracted you specifically to Wallace? What were the issues in '48 for you, as a young person who had the camp experience, now you've come through the bombing, and you're in New York, you've learned about third party movements, now why Wallace for you?
- AC: Well, I think the one of things in back of our minds, at that time, there was a tendency for many Japanese, including myself, to blame the Democratic Party for incarcerating us because—
- TC: Because Roosevelt was president.
- AC: Yeah, Roosevelt was the president, and he was the one that signed the order. So, there was a tendency to be anti-Democratic.
- TC: But, it's ironic that Wallace would be his vice president.
- AC: Yeah. But you know, he had come out openly and stated why and so forth. And, if you remember, Truman came into the picture. I think many of didn't have any appreciation of Truman—
- TC: Here's the man who dropped the bomb twice on you.

- AC: Yeah. So, that, I would say, was probably the most compelling turning point on why we supported a so-called third party, which was an opposition to the Democratic Party and the Republican Party.
- TC: Would it fair to say it was more of an anti-Democratic Party *and* Republican Party— [recording paused] We are continuing our interview with Art here at the United Food and Commercial Workers on November twenty-second, and it is now five minutes till twelve. Art, we were talking of the election of '48, and the question was, your personal participation with Wallace was more of an anti-Democratic *and* Republican Party vote than a pro-Wallace vote. Was that fair to say?
- AT: I would say so. Wallace was just a name or another politician who used to be a Democrat. I think I was sort of caught up in all of the people that was supporting Wallace who tended to be the same as myself: anti-war, for peace, and some of the issues that I think I was interested in at that time. So, that, I think, was some of the background motivation.
- TC: So, you really had no illusions of winning at this point in time? It was to make the protest statement and let people know there was an alternative, and it wasn't going to be the status quo?
- AT: I tried, but you have to give it the best shot because you want to at least have a good showing and so forth.
- TC: It was a serious effort?
- AT: Yeah, I thought we tried to give a serious effort, along those lines.
- TC: Now, your politics at this point in time, your mom is beginning to question a little bit of your involvement, the degree of your involvement and some of the groups you're involved with. How did you compare with other Asian Americans, Nisei and Kibei, of your generation? Were they also very active in the Wallace campaign?
- AT: I think they were very conspicuous by their either absence or silence. Even some of the people that agreed with me just did not want to come out openly, and so forth. Again, in the process of organizing the so-called Nisei Progressive Organization, it was obvious that we didn't have the real broad rank and file support of the community.
- TC: Where were most of the Japanese Americans at that point in time? Were they apolitical? Were they Republican?
- AT: Apolitical, I think the businessmen tended to be Republican. I think a lot of them did that for the same reason that some of us were blaming the Democrats, so some of the business people as a protest against that became Republicans.

[00:50:00]

TC: And when the Issei finally got the right to vote in the fifties, was there any real involvement from the Issei voting in the fifties?

AT: No. There was activity. Both the Republicans and the Democrats and the Nisei Progressives did try to stimulate interest in our community. The Republicans had a mortician that was head of the Japanese American Republican Club, and they made more noise than, if you want to call it, Democrats. I think the Nisei Progressives, we were also able to stir-up some shit by making certain noise and so forth.

TC: Now, from '48 to '52, after the Wallace campaign, you then remained active in what would become the Progressive Party, which is the remnants of the Wallace campaign?

AT: Yeah, it was called Independent Progressive Party [IPP] in California. It was qualified by a ballot measure.

TC: And the IPP, you became an organizer then, in '49 or '50 with them?

AT: I'm going to say probably after the '52 campaign I went to work for them.

TC: So, let's talk then about '48 to '52 before you became the organizer of the IPP. You became very active within the third party movement following the Wallace campaign.

AT: Right.

TC: And at this point in time, did the Nisei Progressives, then, form as a group? As the Nisei Progressives?

AT: That's kind of hazy. You could probably get more specific information from either Sakae [Ishihara] or Wilbur [Sato]<sup>3</sup> about when we formed.

TC: But, it's post '48?

AT: Yeah. I'm just trying to remember whether we formed during the Wallace campaign. For example, I think one of the photographs that Wilbur has, there was a big rally at the Gilmore Stadium, and we marched in to and so forth, which was kind of a highlight—

TC: So, you actually met with Wallace? There's another photo that shows you guys.

AT: Yeah.

TC: Were you part of that meeting?

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<sup>3</sup> Wilbur Sato, O.H. 2423, Center for Oral and Public History.

AT: Yes.

TC: So, you and Sak and Sue were all there that day?

AT: Right. But, the chronology is a little bit hazy, so you'll have to reconstruct that.

TC: Sure. We talked about what it meant to be progressive for you in New York when you were in your formative years. Now what does it mean to be a Nisei Progressive? Now we have some ethnic identity going on. What does it mean when we say Nisei Progressive?

AT: I think, basically, it was, again, anti-institution and anti-government, and what we were trying to do is encourage as many Niseis to come forward and start getting active in politics because, by that time, some of us were beginning to conclude how important politics and elections and campaigns are to the welfare of a particular community. For example, if you have ever been to Downtown L.A., right across the street from city hall is the police headquarters, on First and Los Angeles Street. That whole area used to be part of Little Tokyo. And what happened was there was effort by the politicians to displace all the businesses and all the residences in that whole block and build this police headquarters.

TC: And they picked on you guys because you wanted to organize and were vocal would you say?

AT: Well, to the extent of which I had any kind of interest is one of my favorite restaurants was there. (chuckles)

TC: You had some self-interest as well!

AT: Yeah! What we did was, Nisei Progressives, for example, decided to oppose the building of the police station. And one of the things that shook-up, if you want to call it, our community maybe, to some extent, our institution for the city hall was we prepared a handbill which we forwarded in the form of an eviction notice and inside we put the reasons why we were doing this and mentioned the Nisei Progressives. We distributed to all of the tenants in that whole—

TC: Radius.

AT: Yeah. It was about three-block area. And that really shook-up because we got more phone calls, people asking, "What is this? What is this eviction notice?"

TC: Great organizing tool.

AT: Yeah, and that, sort of, told us that we got to take up these issues no matter how minor it is because it does attack our community. Another thing that happened—again, I think it's in '48 because it was after I came back—an all-English Japanese

- American newspaper was started called *Crossroads*. And it is now defunct, but some of us so-called, progressives were instrumental in forming that core of the newspaper staff. We started publishing it—in fact, I'm back tracking now, but I think it was formed in '47.
- TC: Was this principally a community newspaper, or did it have a political edge as well?
- AT: That's what we thought we would do, except the publisher, the guy that put in the most money, was a Nisei, but he turned out to be more conservative than expected because we started carrying stories about Wallace, the third party, and the upcoming election in '48. And, apparently, he got some flak from some of the Republicans and the businessman, and he finally retreated to a point where he fired just about the whole staff.
- TC: They just pulled the plug on it?
- AT: Yeah, because the editor—he's passed away—and the art editor, who was a very talented Nisei cartoonist—I was like the associate editor, there was a sports editor, I think all of us were fired with the exception of the sports editor who remained there for a while.
- TC: Do you remember the name of this publisher?
- AT: Bob Uno, U-n-o, is his last name.
- TC: In the paper that was '49, did you make it through '49?
- AT: Yeah, he continued publishing the *Crossroads*, I think, for several years after the '48 campaign, but it became harder and harder to maintain. Finally, I think he sold the paper to someone else, but, by that time, they had no readership, so they just went defunct.
- TC: The year of Rampart, or the Downtown Police Division, what year was that, Art? Was this the early fifties when you organized the tenants and so forth during the police station?
- AT: It was post-'48 shortly after the formation of Nisei Progressives.
- TC: This is the coming out party in '49, was this organizing drive downtown organizing for the Nisei Progressives?
- AT: Yeah, and we attracted a lot of interest. Not to the extent that they would start coming to our meetings, except, a couple of them did. But, what we tried to do I think had an impact on some of the so-called up-and-coming political leaders. As a result, we had some influence so we maintained contacts to try to influence those

people to more our point of view. And even today, we're still trying to do the same thing.

[01:00:21]

TC: So, the struggle continues?

AT: Oh, yeah.

TC: Why, after the Wallace campaign—for instance, I think Wallace got 1 or 2 percent of the vote. Why not, at that time, fall back into the Democratic Party and hold the Democratic Party accountable since the party, at that time, had a progressive vision? Shortly after that Adlai Stevenson would be running for president, who I would think would be somebody you might want to support. Can you comment a little bit on that? Why not?

AT: I would say that by that time we were determined more to try to prove certain people wrong or try to strengthen our position or our image in the community, a little bit of stubbornness. However, after the '52 campaign, we made a conscious decision to go back into the Democratic Party—

TC: So, the last hurrah will be '52 as far as third party for you?

AT: Yeah, because after that we finally formed an organization called West Jefferson Democratic Club, and we began to really challenge some of the Democratic Party's policies. The reason why we had to choose that name—

TC: I was going to say you're dropping your Nisei identity now.

AT: Yeah, they would not let us use so-called Japanese American Democratic Club, which would have been the logical name.

TC: The party itself said you can't call yourselves—

AT: No, you can't use any ethnicity in the identification of the club. You have to be geographic or you could I guess dedicate it to a past hero and so forth.

TC: And today we have the Pacific Islanders Caucus and the Asian American Caucus and the Black Caucus.

AT: I think the Democratic Party has recognized certain weaknesses that they had. But, the West Jefferson Club came into being. We functioned until well past the Kennedy campaign in 1960.

TC: How did you end up with the Jefferson name?

- AT: Well, because Wilbur practiced—let me try to think. Some of the people, ah, there was a concentration of the new Japanese American community, up-and-coming Nisei, and so forth. So, we used to meet in that area because there were more of our supporters there.
- TC: So, you said Jefferson Democratic Club. It's not the Jefferson in the historic sense. It's the Jefferson in the geographic sense?
- AT: Yeah, around the Crenshaw area.
- TC: Gotcha. Now you're into the Democratic Party, and you said the club stayed fairly active during the Kennedy Campaign?
- AT: Yes.
- TC: Now, how active were you when you say active? Were the numbers continuing to grow or was it a vocal minority that became active? Were you successful in bringing more Japanese Americans—
- AT: I think, to a certain extent, we did attract more people. I think the most important thing is because we were now part of the so-called institution, we were able to do certain things that we thought were important. For example, in the late 1950s, we started to push for more representation in government, that is of Japanese American and so forth. At that time, we didn't think in terms of Asian Pacific Islander, total population, so forth, because, at that time, we were the biggest community. Those other communities were just trickling. They really didn't start going until the 1980s and so forth. So, after we helped on the Pat Brown campaign—
- TC: For governor?
- AT: Yeah. We helped defeat the right to work law that was on a ballot in 1958 and so forth. And I think after that, one of the things using a little bit of the influence or contacts we made with Pat Brown's campaign, we decided to send a delegation to the state capitol. The meeting was held at the governor's mansion. I don't know if you've ever seen the old mansion—
- TC: Where Jerry Brown grew up?
- AT: Yeah.
- TC: And this was principally Asians or Japanese Americans?
- AT: Yeah. And the interesting part of it was the delegation—I think there was about eight of us that went up there at our own expense—included Norman Mineta who was just coming up in San Jose area at that time. There was also a jurus by the name of Stephen Tamura who is actually from Orange County. And what we did was having

a discussion with Pat Brown, we said, “Hey, Pat, you’re going to be able to appoint certain people because you’re the winner.” And we recommended as jurus by the name of Tamura, and said, “Please consider him for appointment,” and so forth. So, we indicted that people like Norman Mineta did have interest in seeking public office and make sure that you support someone like Mineta. Actually, the theory of having more representation was accepted by Pat Brown. Shorty thereafter that meeting, he did appoint Tamura as superior court judge. I think later on he was elevated to a certain court, a very outstanding jurus, but unfortunately passed away. Norman Mineta ultimately ran for Congress and got elected and so forth. So, that was, if you want to call it, the highlight of the West Jefferson Democratic Club. And then, we went into the 1980 campaign, and there what we were trying to do was to garner support for Kennedy.

TC: Nineteen sixty? You said 1980.

AT: Okay, 1960. Sorry, 1960. We had a reception—

TC: You had another meeting with Kennedy like you did with Wallace?

AT: Yeah, there was two meetings: one with Kennedy, one was with Teddy. He ran the campaign on the West Coast at that time. We had a reception at West Jefferson Marriott, neither of them could come out, but they sent some somebody like Barry. Barry, um—not Barry. Fitzgerald? Um—

TC: One of those Irish guys?

AT: Yeah. So anyway, we had the fundraising, and—

TC: With the convention in Los Angeles, were any of you elected to be delegates to the national convention?

AT: No, that was the other thing we were pissed off—

TC: A little taken aback.

AT: We also learned that there is a process, and you got to get involved in the process.

TC: Well, in two short years, you now had a meeting with the governor, you got some appointees, you are now learning the dynamics of Democratic politics.

[01:10:00]

AT: Yeah. Unfortunately, I guess, we are getting old. (chuckles) I guess the enthusiasm was petering out. The West Jefferson Democratic Club really kind of petered out in the sixties. It’s unfortunate because there were certain things that we did that I think

- taught us some good lessons. We made an effort, also, to push for a Congressional candidate in midtown L.A.
- TC: Roybal?
- AT: That's when Roybal got elected. But that district was also looked upon by us as we could possibly elect a Japanese American. Unfortunately, the candidate that we pushed didn't have the balls to continue with the hard campaigning. You know? The rough and tumble of campaigning.
- TC: Didn't have the fire in the belly.
- AT: No, so we were left without a candidate.
- TC: Who was that candidate, Art?
- AT: His name is an attorney by the name of Frank Chuman, C-h-u-m-a-n. Wilbur knows him well.
- TC: Sounds like you are extremely disappointed in him by the end of the campaign.
- AT: Yeah, we were really ticked-off because he was the national president of the Japanese American Citizens League, so he had that credential. He had the credential in the bar community.
- TC: What kind of tension did that create within the Nisei Progressive that you had at JACLER running? Did that create some friction?
- AT: Well, we were pissed off at him because he would not follow our recommendation that he run. We would raise money for him, and do everything. He just did not have the basic instinct for politics.
- TC: I was just curious if any of the animosity from the camp days spilled over to the Congressional campaign in that you had at JACLER running? Did that really manifest itself in that campaign? Or did those wounds, for the most part, heal?
- AT: I don't recall anything along those lines.
- TC: So, it was mostly disappointment in him personally no having—
- AT: Yeah, he also came out of the camp, and I don't know, if because of that, or whatever is his upbringing, ah, that made him hesitate to plunge in.
- TC: What about the racial and the ethnic tension of the Japanese American candidate and the Hispanic candidate running?

AT: What happened was some of the liberal Democrats was pushing another candidate—I'm trying to remember, Norman—the last name escapes me. He was being pushed by some of the westside Liberals, and they also, later-on, in this Congressional campaign pushed a professor by the name of William Fitzgerald. He was teaching, I believe, in Loyola. Because we couldn't come-up with our candidate, we decided to support Ed Roybal. I think that we did it in such a way that we were on the side of pushing for Latino representation and so forth. That created a split because of the activists became one of the top campaign—I don't want to say manager, but she was active in the West Jefferson Democratic Club, but at the same time she was supporting William Fitzgerald. Most of us supported Ed Roybal, and that was the first time there was a split. And that probably led to the demise of eventually West Jefferson Democratic Club.

TC: The club itself?

AT: Yeah, because there was that split.

TC: Now, during all this time, through the fifties and sixties, with all of your party organizing going on, you became really active within the labor movement as well. Or did that come more in the sixties?

AT: No, that came in the late 1950s, where I think I mentioned before, in '54, I decided to get a regular job.

TC: Get a real job?

AT: Yeah.

TC: I bet your mom was happy. (laughs)

AT: Yeah, she was. And ah, I was able to help pay for some of the upkeep at the house and the mortgage and so forth. I went to work in a supermarket in 1954.

TC: So, your stint as the field organizer with the IPP is '52 to '54?

AT: Yeah, I would say early fifties to '54, but I stayed active or stayed in touch with them. In 1957 or '56, the head of the local here—

TC: United Food and Commercial Workers?

AT: Yes. It was called a Retail Clerks Union at that time. The numbers are the same \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible). We had a discussion in which I, and a couple of others, raised the question that with the large percentage of Japanese membership in the union, why isn't there a Japanese American in the executive board?

TC: Why isn't it reflected—

AT: So, that's when we opened up that discussion. And by that time, I used a little bit of my journalistic background by helping to generate certain stories for the union within both the membership and the community. For example, one issue that I picked up on was pension that came into being in 1957. Well, 1956, 1957. And the first Japanese American who was able to retire, we played that up because the head of the union at that time, by the name of Joe DeSilva, did certain things that I think was beneficial to Japanese American membership. One was he made sure that the time that we spent in camp would not constitute a break in service as far as pension—

TC: For your pension, adding up the years for your pension?

AT: Yeah. So consequently, this man that in 1956 or '57 that I wrote a story about, actually picked-up I don't know how many years—several years before World War II because he was already working at Grand Central Market, so, consequently, he was able to retire with, at that time, a fairly decent pension.

[01:20:16]

TC: Now, when you met with the labor leaders here in 1957, did you meet them through your political work as well?

AT: Yeah, I've always maintained contact with people like Sakae and Wilbur, Sue and these people that you just don't lose friendship unless something drastic happens. In 1957, I was appointed or elected to the executive board—

TC: So, you started in '54 at the grocery store and worked your way up the union that way. It wasn't necessarily your political ties. It was the grunt work of working your way through the union.

AT: Yeah, but, basically, because my political background, I think I had an appreciation—and this is where Sak comes in—he also has a very good understanding of the working class. Even though we both had criticism of the so-called official labor union movement, nevertheless, we both understood the beneficial effect it may have on the workers and so forth.

TC: So, from '54 to '57 and then in '57, coming on the executive committee, you were the first Japanese American to be elected on that—

AT: Yeah. And then, shortly thereafter, I think around '58 or '59 Joe DeSilva asked me whether I wanted to become a member of his staff as a business representative, his starting point as a staff person. One of the things I had to consider at that time, I was already in my thirties, and one of the things I had to consider was the pension plan that had been negotiated, how it may affect me. One of the things that was questionable at the time is I had built a certain number of years as credit. At that time, the best thing in the pension plan was predicated on ten years of full-time service and so forth. At that time, I think I had about—1954, let's say '58 or '59—I

had about five years, and I still had another five years to go. And so I told Joe DeSilva, "I want to wait until I qualify for the pension and have my vesting and then consider going on the staff." And so that was agreeable to him. Later on in the 1960s, the trustees of the pension plan, as well as the union, had agreed that if a union member goes to work for the union, that the employers would continue to contribute on the pension plan and so forth. By doing that, I would qualify—

TC: To make it.

AT: Yeah, even though I didn't have ten years in. But, what it really meant was the number of years I put in at that time will be frozen, but the decision of the trustees unfroze that pension plan as long as the contributions were coming in, as long as I qualify. So that ever since I went to work for the union in 1966, I became a business representative and an organizer and just continued on from there on.

TC: So, you've been with the union, now, consistently since '66 until today.

AT: No, I retired in 1990. So, I had from 1954 to 1990 in the so-called industry pension plan. Plus, the staff people contribute 5 percent of their paycheck to the international union pension plan, which I also qualified for.

TC: But, as far as your involvement with the union, it continues today. You were actually paid through the nineties, but you've remained active with the union up until today.

AT: There's an organization called the Asian American Labor Alliance, which is part of AFL-CIO. It's a national organization made-up of primarily of Asian Pacific Islanders union members throughout the country, and for the first time we had an advocacy group within the labor movement, which I thought was very important. We also at the recent convention of the AFL-CIO, elected our first API representative to the executive council.

TC: Pretty exciting.

AT: It's one step at a time. We are not totally satisfied, but those things, the way they've been operating, you're lucky to have what you have.

TC: It's been a long struggle. You can point to some real victories.

AT: Yeah.

TC: What do you think of Sweeny's election?

AT: I think it is going to work out well. I think—

TC: You think labor is going to get back to its roots now a little bit more?

AT: Yeah. I think what's going to happen is—and this is our hope—is that he will live up to his commitment to do certain things. One is, naturally, the so-called diversifying the AFL-CIO so it does represent the people of color.

TC: How big is the population now? How many Asian Americans are active within the labor movement in the United States?

AT: It's changing. For example, when I came to work in the union, the predominate group used to be the Japanese American. Now it's becoming more diversified in terms of all API workers. For example, the Korean population is increasing because of the sheer size of its community. What we are trying to do is encourage as many APIs to take an interest in so-called union related jobs and so forth. There's certain professions or certain work force that already has opened up its door to an API membership, and we have involved those kinds of union members into this new organization that's been created.

TC: Now, there's hundreds? Tens of thousands? Hundreds of thousand? How many pacific islanders are active? Or on mailing list or members.

AT: Well, in L.A. County, we have a membership approaching three hundred. There's a chapter in Orange County, and there's a chapter in San Diego. So, if you want to call it—the total membership, I understand it's about three thousand nationally, and I would say there is probably close to four hundred in the three chapters in Southern California.

[01:30:00]

TC: Pretty encouraging.

AT: And what we do is, our emphasis is on organizing so that if a union is involved, and a union organizing campaign of any kind where they have pockets of API population of workforce, we get involved, *if asked*. Sometimes they're the swing votes in a close election because there's organizing campaign and there's what they call certification campaign. And the API workforce, sometimes, plays a pivotal role.

TC: Three hundred votes makes a difference.

AT: Yeah. So, that's what this APALA is being doing, but we were only formed in 1992. Although, in this area, we have established and organization called APLE, Asian Pacific Labor Alliance, the acronym being APLE, and that was created in 1987, which paved the way for the formation of this national organization in 1992. At the time we formed, it was just an organization in L.A. County.

TC: Then you branched out.

AT: Yeah.

TC: Well, we've talked about what it was to be progressive in 1948 in New York. Then we talked about what it meant to be a Nisei Progressive in the fifties. Now, what does it mean to be a progressive in 1995?

AT: I think my concept will be that what we have to do is develop and encourage more APIs to take an active interest in politics, election campaigns, either by becoming active, in this particular case, the Democratic Party, but also taking an interest in becoming candidates because I think we're slightly behind in terms of election to public offices. I think that's one of the things we are trying to encourage right now.

TC: What would be some of the issues you'd run on? How would you distinguish yourself from other candidates when your API start running as progressives? What are some of the issues be that separate them from the rest of the folks?

AT: I would say through the traditional type of candidates and campaign that goes on. I think an API candidate has to identify himself, not only as an API, but also to emphasize the need for diversity within the political system, and I think the political thrust, it has to depend on the type of a district that person is going to—

[recording paused]

TC: Just continuing now, we are wrapping up. Art, we asked you the question of what it is to be a progressive today and what do we need to do, and you began by saying that we need to be running Asian Americans for political office. And we were talking about the issues that will separate those folks from other folks, and that's where our tape ran out.

AT: Okay. I really think that an API candidate has to be cognizant of the importance of diversity. And diversity also includes also having to coalesce with non-minority communities as well or political forces because there's very few districts where the population is such that it's going to be conducive for an API candidate. So, if you look at Norman Mineta, for example, he ran in the Silicon Valley, San Jose area, and the Asian population there was only like about 6 percent. And so, using them as an example, a politician has to be not just an API candidate, but it's got to be someone who is knowledgeable about the game of politics, and is going to be able to coalesce with the rest of the district or the community.

TC: You've been with the progressive movement for some time, are you optimistic or pessimistic now in 1995?

AT: I would say that I'm a little bit on the optimistic side, but I think that depends on what some of us really do. In other words, just sitting back—like in my case, I retired from the union in 1990, and what I am doing now is what I was not able to do when I was working full-time for the union and that is to keep in touch with my own community or do some of the things that I think are important to the progressive ideals that I think we hold.

TC: What are those ideas?

AT: Well, like I said, I will like to see some of the laws that is being pushed now by some of the arch conservatives be defeated, like Proposition 187 or the attack on the immigrant population that is taking place.

TC: The court ruling must be encouraging then, for Prop 187.

AT: Oh, yeah, definitely. But that, apparently, is not going to stop the conservatives from continuing on with their campaign. So, right now, we are trying to protect what we have or defeat some of the repressive legislations, and I think we have to continue to do that. But again, I think it's encouraging to note that the people that API is registering down at the naturalization ceremony at the convention center are registering predominately Democratic. And in talking to some of them—because we were able to keep some of their addresses and names and so forth—we are trying to educate them on the next step. You're registered now, how do you vote? That's the hard part now of trying to re-build the so-called coalition in the community and so forth. They're some hard, hard issues that are prevalent, and we are going to continue to do what we can. I think the basic thrust of APALA is helping the unions to organize more members because we feel that, ultimately, that is the solution to the means of our community for the API population.

[01:40:00]

TC: Who are the voices of the progressive movement today, Art? What people come to mind when you say the progressive movement? Who are the people that articulate the vision in the progressive movement that you remember growing up?

AT: That's a hard question because I can't think of anyone. I don't know if that's because the ones that are in the extreme left wing of the progressive movement—I'm talking about the communists and so forth—I don't see them.

TC: They are not relevant.

AT: No, they're not functioning, or they're not active. Yeah, and they're not relevant, or they not have any influence, let's put it that way. So some of the things that I've talked about or we're advocating right now sounds real conservative when we talk in terms of *progressives* and so forth, but that's the reality of what you're dealing with. That's why when we say the most important thing is helping the unions to organize, I think I've come to accept that as the thing that I should do in my twilight years and whatever I can do to bring in more union members could possibly lead to a better life.

TC: If you could recommend a book or two to somebody that would want to understand the progressive movement or the vision that you have, what would you recommend?

AT: A book? Uh—

TC: Anything come to mind?

AT: Nothing that fits its \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible).

TC: What about in your formative years growing up as a progressive and your readings that you've done, what books had an impact on you?

AT: I think I'd probably gone through most of the books that people talked about, from books written by outright communist and others that you want to call progressives or left wingers or so forth. But I can't think of anything that really is relevant to today's—the politics are so much more complicated, and that's why I think about the—even your boss, Tom Hayden, he's got hell of a track record. But then again, how do you get other people or the community to listen to him or to accept his leadership?

TC: Absolutely.

AT: That's, I think, sometimes a problem. You know?

TC: Sure.

AT: Because he's painted a certain way and a lot of people just fall into the trap. [recording paused] \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) what is being said about Tom.

TC: They see him in 1968, '69, and not in 1995. People get stuck in time.

AT: Yep, yep.

TC: Art, thank you. Is there anything that you wanted to add, anything that you wanted to close on?

AT: I admire your tenacity in following through on this lousy subject!

TC: We're not done yet. (laughs) Thank you.

AT: Okay.

TC: I'm going to get you to sign this.

AT: Oh, okay.

TC: Sign away your pension and everything!

END OF INTERVIEW