

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with WILBUR SATO

Interviewed

By

Tim Carpenter

On November 30, 1995

OH 2424

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CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
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NARRATOR: WILBUR SATO  
INTERVIEWER: Tim Carpenter  
DATE: November 30, 1995  
LOCATION: Los Angeles, California  
PROJECT: Japanese American

TC: This is an interview with Wilbur Soto at his home, here—what's your address, Wilbur?

WS: Los Angeles.

TC: In Los Angeles. Today is November thirtieth, and it is 10:55 a.m. And we are going to be beginning our interview. This is an interview for the Oral History Project at Cal State Fullerton. And, as we said, the interview is being conducted here, at Wilbur's son's home in Los Angeles. The date is November thirtieth, and it is 10:55 a.m. Wilbur, thank you again for—we're picking where we left off three years ago. If you remember in our last interview, we spent quite a lot of time talking about the camps, your experiences at camp, and the democratic clubs that formed following in the fifties. And today we are going to concentrate on that time period, again. So, to begin with, let's start with '45. Your memories of Manzanar, breaking up at Manzanar and getting back to life in Los Angeles, what do you remember?

WS: Well, we left camp in the summer of 1944, and we went to Des Moines, Iowa. We lived in a hostel there, for a while, and then we got an apartment.

TC: Which we are we talking about? Who's with you at this time?

WS: My mother and father. My brother was in Pella, Iowa, in a little college called Central College in Pella, Iowa.

TC: And what did you guys do in Iowa? What do you remember about Iowa in the summer '44?

- WS: Well, it was a beautiful place. We had green grass, as opposed to camp, it was all desert. Everything was green, the rivers and big clouds in the sky, and that type of thing.
- TC: And how were you at this time?
- WS: I'm about sixteen.
- TC: Sixteen. So, you began high school again in Iowa?
- WS: Yes. I started in tenth grade in September of '44.
- TC: And what was the Asian American population in Iowa back then?
- WS: Very small. Very small but the unique thing about Iowa was that there was a hostel of American Friends Service Committee Hospital where they received the evacuees from camp, and they were able to stay there and live there. They tried to find them apartments, furniture, and things like that. And jobs. So, families were able to settle there. There were a lot of students, and because it was a fairly large town, students came from all over Iowa, all these little small towns where they had colleges: University of Iowa, Iowa State, Drake University, Fairfield College; any number of little colleges. Plus, even from Chicago—Chicago was about three hundred miles away—and Missouri, which was south. People came from all over the area, and they would congregate on the weekends. They'd have a Sunday lunch—
- TC: So, a lot of activities?
- WS: Activities, yeah. And it was great, in that sense, because people were able to meet one another and support one another and encourage one another.
- TC: How many folks from Manzanar, from your camp, were relocated with you?
- WS: Not very many.
- TC: Not very many
- WS: I don't remember any. They were from different camps.
- TC: So, you had people coming in from Arkansas. From what other areas do you remember from the folks? What other camps were—
- WS: Poston, Arkansas, there was a guy there from Hawaii. His father was a leader in Hawaii. He was picked up and brought to the United States, and he ended up in Arkansas.
- TC: From Hawaii to Arkansas?

WS: The camp in Arkansas, and then he relocated from there to a business college in Des Moines. Then later, he went back to Hawaii.

TC: What a ride for him.

WS: Yeah.

TC: What do you remember about your sophomore high school year in Iowa?

WS: Well, it was different. It was exciting, and it was different. When I first got there, we had to register for class, and we all gathered in the auditorium. I was sitting there and a man came up to me and stuck his hand out as if to shake my hand and then he hit me in the stomach. I lost my breath and fell over. I guess he was just trying to be a hero or something.

TC: Another bully asserting himself.

WS: Yeah. This was a young black guy so that was sad in a way because this small black group at the school, they really kind of befriended me after that—or before that or whatever, during that time.

TC: They adopted you.

WS: In a way, but I was a stranger there so it took a while. So, I just went to class. That's about it.

TC: Do you remember, at that time, were you trying to block out the camps? How were you processing the camps as a sixteen-year-old? Were you bitter about the camp experience? Were you angry about it, or were you just trying to put it behind you and get on with your life?

WS: I was kind of in a cloud, just in a strange place, without any friends type of thing. Just trying to get along, trying to make my way.

TC: How were your mom and dad feeling?

WS: Well, they were trying to get along. They got jobs in factories.

TC: Both of them?

WS: Both of them. So, it was different for them.

TC: And how long did you remind in Iowa?

WS: We only stayed there for about a year.

TC: So, now you are roaming again?

WS: Yeah, we moved back to Los Angeles in the summer of '45.

TC: Okay. And back to Terminal Island?

WS: No, we came back to this area, Mendocino area.

TC: Where we are now?

WS: Where we are now. We bought a little house on Fourth Avenue and Twenty-Ninth Place.

TC: Is that considered the Crenshaw District that area or is that outside the Crenshaw District?

WS: It's Crenshaw. Before the war, there was a little Japanese community called the Sawtelle District, and that was located on Normandy and Jefferson. It's a little community there with shops and things like that. Before the war, I wasn't familiar with it but the blocks were—there were lines drawn on the streets where certain minority groups—if you were a minority, you couldn't move beyond a certain line. They were all over—

TC: Were they physical or were they artificial? They were physically drawn?

WS: No, they weren't physically drawn, but they were there.

TC: Like the Mason-Dixon lines.

WS: Racially restricted covenants.

TC: Right, like the Mason-Dixon lines.

WS: So, people couldn't move beyond certain lines. With the people coming back, and the Negro population growing from the war, there was a lot of population pressure to move west from—say, Normandy would be east of here.

TC: Right.

WS: So, it would be to move west.

TC: The influx was moving west.

WS: There was a big Jewish population in this Crenshaw area, Crenshaw and Adams, bakeries and churches and stuff like that. So, they gradually, over the years, got pushed out in a way.

TC: So, it was an effort by your parents to come back and also begin their life new in '45?

WS: Yes.

TC: And now you're changing schools again?

WS: Yup.

TC: Are you coming back, then, to your old friends when you came back?

WS: No.

TC: So, they had pretty much scattered as well?

WS: The thing is, when we lived in Terminal Island, we lived—did I ever talk to you about Terminal Island?

TC: Oh, yeah, at our last interview.

WS: There were two schools—Terminal Island was only a mile-and-a-half long, but a couple of blocks away from the school that I attended was another school, Fish Harbor—they called it Fish Harbor where this Japanese village was located. And those people went to that school, and it was, maybe, 99 percent Japanese. They mostly spoke Japanese, and so they were learning English in the school actually. A few blocks away, we had this other school. And in this other school was a number of Japanese families and white families and Mexican families and Filipino families—

[00:10:00]

TC: And that was the school you were in, correct?

WS: That's the one I went to. So, a number of people that I knew from that school were scattered. Some of them went to different camps because we were evacuated from Terminal Island in February of '42, and people went all over. There was a window of opportunity where people could move out of the state.

TC: The volunteer relocation?

WS: Right. So some people from Terminal Island ended up in Utah, went to Utah from my area.

TC: Like Sak's<sup>1</sup> family.

WS: From the Terminal side of the island, some people went to Utah and then other people joined their families in other parts of the state. So they ended up in different parts—

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<sup>1</sup> Sakae Ishirara, O.H. 2425, Center for Oral and Public History

TC: Spread out—

WS: Different areas, so some I never saw again. Some I was able to meet, but others I never ever seen since that time.

TC: What high school did you go to in '45?

WS: I came back and went to Dorsey High School, which is off of Jefferson.

TC: So, you were a junior?

WS: I was a junior.

TC: Did your brother remain in Iowa, or did he come back as well?

WS: My brother was in the Army, and I think he was in Japan. He went to—

TC: After the war?

WS: Iowa and then from there he got into this Army program where they help you with your college—

TC: See the world.

WS: Yeah, so he ended up in Japan and Korea.

TC: And where did your mother and father buy and move into when they came back to Los Angeles? Did they get a house or apartment?

WS: They bought a little house, a tiny little house on Fourth Avenue, Fourth Avenue and Twenty-Ninth Place.

TC: And what type of work did they begin?

WS: My father began to do gardening, and my mother got a job as a—Bullocks, doing monograms. Are you familiar with monograms?

TC: I think so.

WS: They used to put them on towels and clothing and so forth.

TC: So, she would stitch them by hand?

WS: Just those monograms. They made monograms of initials and flowers and all different kinds of things.



TC: And did she do that at home?

WS: No, she did that at Bullock's.

TC: At Bullock's. So, how are your mom and dad doing now? They're back in Los Angeles after camp experience. You're back in high school trying to get on with life. What do you remember about that time?

WS: Well, at that time, we didn't know anybody. A family moved next door to us, I guess, that previously lived in West L.A., and we started finding people that we knew from the past, from camp, some friends from camp, mostly my brothers class. They would come and hang out at my parent's house. And you know, they would look for activities. For instance, when people came out from camp, they would go down to the Shrine Auditorium somewhere. I think they had a skating rink down that way somewhere and people had skating parties. So, they find places to congregate, either a bowling alley or a skating rink.

TC: A place to come together.

WS: To find an old friend. They were looking for people that you knew from camp, I guess and from before camp.

TC: So, they're becoming successful in '45, '46, in meeting those people and reconnecting and putting their lives, somewhat, back together.

WS: Right.

TC: What do you remember about school? Were you a good student?

WS: Well, I was a fair student. I had a hard time with the sciences, (chuckles) I did well with the social sciences.

TC: Well, that explains why you became a lawyer.

WS: I liked American literature and English, American history, political science; that type of thing.

TC: Did you share with a lot of your high school mates your camp experience at this time or were you mostly blocking it or just not dealing with it? Where is the camp experience in your life?

WS: Well, I think it was just behind us. There were, maybe, four, five Japanese Americans at Dorsey High School.

TC: Out of the entire high school?

WS: Yeah. And so, this whole thing about—maybe it's just me. Maybe it's just the personality or whatever it is. Like in Iowa, I didn't know very many people. Maybe I had one friend there at school that I met, and we'd go to football games or whatever. Then I would go to the hostel. And when I came back here, well, I didn't know anybody in school. Here, I'm coming in the middle of a class type of thing, so I'm not with any particular class. I would meet a few people, but it's pretty much you're on your own, so then you go through school that way.

TC: Senior year, you're the class of '47.

WS: Forty-seven, yeah.

TC: In your last senior year, had you thought about college at this time and were you projecting what college you wanted to go to when you were at Dorsey? Did you want to go to UCLA or SC at that time? Do you remember thinking about college?

WS: I guess so. I think it was a natural thing that you were going to go to college. I just applied, and I was accepted.

TC: Let's talk about your senior year. What do you remember about graduation and your last year at Dorsey?

WS: Not much.

TC: Not much?

WS: No.

TC: No real lasting memories?

WS: I think I went to the graduation. That's about it.

TC: You talked about your love of American literature and history at this time. Were there any schoolteachers that were playing an impact on your life? Both Sak and Sue<sup>2</sup> talked about their high school teachers that, looking back now, they see that some of the seeds were planted their progressive leanings. Was any of that planted during your high school years, Wilbur, do you remember?

WS: Well, I think English literature and then political science—in the political science class, it was pretty much current affairs and so forth.

TC: And you had an interest in that.

WS: I wrote an essay on peace or something like that, as I recall, and I won a prize.

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<sup>2</sup> Sue Embrey, O.H. 1366, 2285, & 2426, Center for Oral and Public History.

TC: Wow.

WS: It wasn't first place, but it was a prize. (chuckles) I think \$25.

TC: That's a lot of money.

WS: Yeah.

TC: Where did that come from, writing about peace after all of your camp experiences and everything?

WS: I don't know, just—and then I took a speech class. And there was a young man that I met. I guess, he befriended me and we'd see each other every once in a while. And then, at UCLA, I'd run into him. And later on, we became really good friends. He came from a leftist family, active and stuff, and I didn't know that then.

TC: What was his name, do you remember?

WS: I think it was Zakon.

TC: It was Zakon?

WS: It was Robert Zakon, and he's a lawyer. He and I became lawyers.

TC: Is he Caucasian?

WS: Yes, he's Jewish. He lived in this Crenshaw area.

TC: So, you graduated from Dorsey; no really lasting memories. You wrote your peace essay, so there's some speculating progressive leanings inside of you. You found a friend who would later become a real political ally. You began your freshman year at UCLA. What was your major?

WS: My major was sociology.

TC: Sociology?

WS: Yeah.

TC: Did you like UCLA? What do you remember about UCLA?

WS: Well, the first year or so, it was a rush. You're so free, and there's no discipline at all. You'd go to these classes and so forth and big social scene. There were a lot of people. You meet a lot of Japanese Americans, a lot of Japanese Americans there. So, I began to meet a lot of people.

TC: It was a coming out time for you?

WS: In a way, yeah.

TC: In a sense.

WS: In a sense, yeah.

TC: Mom and Dad are still at the house? Dad is still gardening?

[00:20:00]

WS: Right.

TC: Did you live on campus, or were you still at home?

WS: No, I lived at home.

TC: Okay, so you're commuting?

WS: Yeah. There's a friend that kept popping into my life. In camp, he was my Sunday school teacher, and his brother was in the same class as my brother, in the class of '44. And this young man, he graduated just as he went to camp. His whole family was a very religious family. I just knew him through that Sunday school class.

TC: At Manzanar?

WS: At Manzanar. And at Manzanar, he was a counselor at the Children's Village. The Children's Village was the orphanage. He was a counselor, then he went to Chicago, and then he studied philosophy and art. Then he went to France, and he studied under \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible).

TC: Wow.

WS: Then he went back east, and he was trying to make a living. He ended up in the New York Yacht Club. They gave him part-time job, and he was a part-time librarian, part-time—what do you call those people that take care of museums? Curators?

TC: Curators.

WS: There was a museum there, you know, at the Yacht Club. This is a millionaires Yacht Club in New York City where they had their own building and their own clubhouse and all that.

TC: Their own world.

WS: And this young man, every time he would come into town, he would always look us up. I guess he felt I was his friend. He came and he would see me all the time. And over the years, we developed a really good friendship.

TC: And what's his name?

WS: His name was Sohei Hohri.<sup>3</sup>

TC: You stayed in touch with him through the fifties and sixties?

WS: All the way. I'm one of his good friends now.

TC: Today?

WS: I'm one of his good friends, yeah. He called me almost every week from New York City.

TC: Of all the camp internees, was he the one you stayed in touch with the most?

WS: Yes, I would say that he is the closest. And then, I have a friend that was in the next block in camp.

TC: That you stayed in touch with?

WS: He was a watchmaker, and his brother was an optometrist. In camp, whenever they needed people for specialized people, they imported them. They scattered the doctors, so no matter where they came from, they'd send them to different camps. So, each camp would have an optometrist, dentist, so forth. He was actually from San Francisco. He got uprooted, in a sense, from the people he knew and everything, and they stuck him in Manzanar. They used to hang out around our barrack. We had a little group of these two blocks. He was down in Little Tokyo, so whenever people would come, they would go down and see him. So, that became like a meeting place. Over the years, we just kept in touch all these years.

TC: That's amazing.

WS: So, he's another person, and I still talk to him. I call him up every once in a while.

TC: Now, your friend from New York, when you were a freshman at UCLA, he was already back east then?

WS: He was back east.

TC: Okay. Your freshman year at UCLA, did the Bruin Democrats or the Nisei Progressives enter into your life yet, as a freshman? Or when did that begin, your involvement?

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<sup>3</sup> Sohei Hohri, O.H. 3786, Center for Oral and Public History.

- WS: I don't think so because I started there in '47, September '47. It must have been at least a year later. I was just going to football games and meeting people—
- TC: You were just in the social scene? Just being a freshman, taking it all in.
- WS: Taking it all in. (chuckles)
- TC: So, your sophomore year, then, would be when you first saw the Niseis?
- WS: Probably. I think this guy Robert Zakon was trying to get me into different things.
- TC: So, he was dragging you along?
- WS: Probably. I haven't run into him, and he's probably getting me into things.
- TC: So, there's no driving force at this point in time. It's just mostly tagging along with Robert and checking this stuff out more than anything else at this time.
- WS: Yeah.
- TC: And how is school going? And are you attending to your classes as a sophomore?
- WS: Attending my classes, yeah. I don't remember when we started that *Nisei Bruin*. We started a little newspaper. I don't remember whether I was a sophomore or a junior, whatever, but we got a group of people together and started this *Nisei Bruin*.
- TC: So, *Nisei Bruin* would be not just political but social as well as political then? Ethnic identity?
- WS: Yeah, we copied the *Los Angeles Times*. We had a society, sports, all different kinds of columns that we tried to—
- TC: With an ethnic flavor to try to pull together the Japanese American community.
- WS: Yeah. We had a club, Nisei Bruin Club.
- TC: How big was the club?
- WS: It was pretty big.
- TC: Dozens? Hundreds?
- WS: Oh, it was dozens. I don't know if it was hundreds, but there were lots of people.
- TC: Forty, fifty, maybe?

WS: Had all these different classes because people were coming back from the service so the ages varied, too.

TC: So, your sophomore year is '48?

WS: Yeah, '48.

TC: Do you remember anything about the Harry Wallace campaign at that point in time?

WS: When was the election? Do you recall the election for—

TC: Well, Wallace ran in '48, so it would have been in November of '48. He would have been on the ballot.

WS: Truman ran that year, too?

TC: Right. It would have been Dewey and Truman and Wallace in '48.

WS: Oh. then I must have gotten involved a little bit around that time.

TC: So, you don't remember meeting Wallace? The meeting that Sak pulled together when Sue and Art<sup>4</sup> went and met with Henry Wallace? Were you part of that group at all? Do you remember?

WS: No, I'll tell you how I got involved with that. I was going to school, and I signed up for these extension classes at UCLA. Extension classes would be in the summertime, and they were down Eleventh and Hill or Tenth and Hill. There's a theater down there that had a big building, and they had classes in there. I signed up for sociology class—I think was 1A and 1B—and I signed up for English, American literature class. And I had these two wonderful teachers there. It turns out the sociology teacher, her husband was one of the leaders in the communist party in Southern California. I don't know whether he was a spy or FBI agent or whatever.

TC: Or a true believer.

WS: Or a true believer. But, she was a good teacher, and she would always—in both of those classes—this was completely different than UCLA because you rushed from class to class. But after those classes, we would hang out and have coffee, and the people in the class, we would sit around and have these poll sessions and everything. It was really wonderful. And you'd become friends with the teachers and the students.

TC: So, this is the beginning of your progressive—

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<sup>4</sup> Arthur Takei, O.H. 2423, Center for Oral and Public History.

WS: She started telling me, “Why don’t you go to—there’s a Nisei Progressives”—I never heard of the Nisei Progressives because we didn’t take the Japanese papers or anything. She’d give me a little piece of paper and say to run down there. They are having a meeting, so and so, so and so, and so and so.”

TC: So, that’s how it started. It was a teacher?

WS: So that’s how I got into—

TC: Do you remember her name?

WS: Yeah, her name was Jean Blair.

[00:30:00]

TC: Jean Blair. And do you remember her husband’s name?

WS: Robert Blair.

TC: Robert Blair. So, you got a little strip of paper and went to the meeting. What do you remember about the Nisei Progressive meeting?

WS: Well, not much. I was just a young kid there (chuckles) with these adults. I was impressed because these were really bright people, you know?

TC: Ethnic identity—I mean, these are Japanese Americans—

WS: Yeah, they’re real bright. They are artists, writers. They are articulate.

TC: Do you remember Art or Sak or Sue at that time?

WS: Not at that time.

TC: They were probably there.

WS: Probably Sak, he used to chair the meetings.

TC: So, now, this is ’48. Do you remember the rally with Wallace in Los Angeles, the photograph that Sue shared with us a couple years back?

WS: I don’t know if I went to that.

TC: At Garfield? Okay

WS: My memory is so bad.



TC: We're going to get it kick started here. (chuckles) Now '48 was the Wallace campaign. You were active in that. This is the beginning of the Nisei Progressives, your involvement in that. Forty-nine is your junior year at UCLA. Are you going to go straight through all four years at UCLA?

WS: I went all four years, but it's so hectic that I can't put all these things together—

TC: In a chronology—

WS: —in chronology because I started getting involved with the left wing—they usually have these front groups, different groups. They have different names. I don't know—what's the name. (chuckles) I don't even remember the names.

TC: They changed weekly.

WS: Yeah. So, I got into some group. The meetings are just constant. And then, not only meetings, but then you're asked to hand out leaflets at the bus stop, and you're asked to go to the factories on Alameda.

TC: Leaf the workers?

WS: Yeah. They used to have these auto factories and these electrical places where the UEW and the autoworkers, you know? I guess they couldn't distribute them so they asked the students. So, get up at two in the morning and distribute leaflets. (chuckles)

TC: Now were these flyers Communist Party propaganda? Or what kind of leaflets were you passing out? Do you remember?

WS: I don't know.

TC: But, off you went.

WS: Off I went.

TC: And graduated from UCLA in '50—

WS: Fifty-one.

TC: Fifty-one, with a degree in sociology.

WS: Sociology.

TC: So, now what? Nineteen fifty-one, you graduated from UCLA.

WS: Well, you know, when I was at UCLA, I left home, too. I was at UCLA, and I lived at the Robson Hall. It was a co-op—

TC: It's freshman year—

WS: I don't know if I moved there in junior year or senior—

TC: But, by the end, you had moved out?

WS: Yeah, I was living in the Robson Hall and active in campus and doing different things. When I was at UCLA, the students that I knew were the children of the screenwriters. This was the time when they were being hauled before the Un-American Activities Committee. We would meet at their homes, so we met a lot of kids that were associated with all these different screenwriters in the Valley and all over. Also, some of the people were some of the people that volunteered for the Abraham Lincoln Brigade over to Spain and fought in Spain.

TC: Fought fascism.

WS: Yeah. They let me babysit for these people who were the Abraham Lincoln Brigade and all that kinds of stuff. We did all this stuff and these movie people's homes. It was hectic. You heard about these black nightclubs on Western Avenue and Normandy. We'd go to those places like that. So my introduction to the black community, in a sense—

TC: Begin with the nightlife. Now, were you the exception within the Nisei at this point in time? Were you a minority within a minority? Were a lot of the Nisei running around doing a lot of this multicultural stuff?

WS: No.

TC: So, you're a minority within a minority?

WS: Yeah.

TC: Was Robert doing a lot of this stuff with you at this point in time? Is Robert still around?

WS: Robert Zakon?

TC: Yeah.

WS: Yeah, he's still around. But, you have certain responsibilities. In other words, I'm at UCLA, and I'm active in the Nisei Bruin Club, so forth, so that's what I do, in other words, as far as political activity, is to be within the Nisei Bruin Club and meet

- people and try and involved people and different things. You know, that type of thing. And try and promote progressive programs.
- TC: What did it mean to be a Nisei Progressive in 1951? If somebody asked you to define a Nisei Progressive, how would you define it?
- WS: In terms of that particular party or just in general?
- TC: In general or party, however you would define the ideas that you subscribed to the common person, if you were to define for them what it meant to be a Nisei Progressive?
- WS: It meant opening up because they had all these different ideas floating around. There are all these different kinds of people in there, but there were people who thought beyond themselves. They weren't interested in money. They were interested in issues, bettering society, and moving society forward. That type of thing.
- TC: Making it a better world.
- WS: Making it a better world. So, that was interesting and exciting.
- TC: What are some of the issues you remember in 1951 that were very passionate with the Nisei Progressives at these meetings that they were talking about?
- WS: Well, they were talking about peace. They were talking about the attack on the left wing. Those were hard things at that time. Then they tried to concentrate on local issues. The Nisei Progressive were trying to get involved in local things, local issues like Art was talking to you about: the housing in Little Tokyo or the citizenship bill came-up. What the JACL [Japanese American Citizens League] promoted was the citizenship bill, the McCarran Act, but it had all these things against left wing aliens and really harsh provisions, so they were trying to fight that battle. Therefore, they were for citizenship, but they were against this Walter McCarran Act [McCarran-Walter], so on. So they were trying to promote those issues in the community.
- TC: Do you remember the work of the committee for the foreign born at this time? Some of the work that was going on with the Issei over being deported?
- WS: No, because Sak was doing—he would report on those kinds of things at the meetings, but that was his kind of responsibility.
- TC: That was his issue.
- WS: That was his issue.
- TC: And Art was doing a lot with the police station at Little Tokyo and evacuating all the folks, so that was a big issue.

WS: Art was a writer on the *Crossroads*, so he was connected with that newspaper.

TC: Until they all got fired?

WS: Yeah, and all that.

TC: So, it was a very heavy time?

WS: Oh, a very heavy time because it was not only these big issues, but then how do you move this Japanese community? What do you do? What are the issues? And how do you get involved in these kinds of things? And, at the same time, you're supposed to be helping workers, working class. So, it was a heavy time, exciting. You spent your time at meetings and just—I don't know how I through school. I really don't because I was trying to work, gardening and so forth. And, in my last years, I got a full-time job in a factory in Gardena in a plastic factory. They were making radar domes and aims chairs and all kinds of different stuff.

TC: So, you were doing that at night?

WS: I was doing that at night.

[00:40:00]

TC: Then get up and go to school.

WS: Yeah—

TC: Then your organizing.

WS: I would try to go to meetings. (chuckles) So, it was kind of hectic time.

TC: When you graduated in '51, what were your plans then? Had you thought of going into law school at that time?

WS: No, we were going to go into working class.

TC: Into workers' revolution.

WS: And so this friend of mine and I, his name is Walter Gerash—he's an attorney at Denver now—he and I hit the road and went looking for jobs in factories. We went to this one place in East L.A. I got hired; he didn't. He went somewhere else, but we kept in touch and everything. So, I got this job at this factory making stoves and refrigerators, a spot welder. I don't know what we made, eighty-five cents an hour. (chuckles)

TC: There you are with your BA spot welding, pulling for the workers' revolution.

WS: Yeah, I became the shop steward.

TC: So, you were active in the union?

WS: I was active in the union and went to these union meetings. Maybe I'm paranoid, but all the time you always got this thing where your phone is tapped and all this kinds of stuff. See, when I was at Gardena, I was working over there, they came and got me at work and they marched me out of there—with my lunch box—and they just fired me.

TC: No reason, you're just out of here? "That's it welder. You're an agitator."

WS: Yeah.

TC: That left an impression, I'm sure.

WS: Yeah, it did because they didn't give me any reason. Of course, they were making radar domes, you know? Big deal.

TC: You're a security rick.

WS: Yeah or something. So, they just marched me out of there, I was fired. Today I would, probably, go fight for the job, but I didn't know any better. They just walked me out and I was gone, lost my job.

TC: So, how long were you in East Los Angeles as the spot welder?

WS: Five years.

TC: So, '51 to '56?

WS: Yeah.

TC: And did you stay active through all that time?

WS: Well, when I was at UCLA, we formed an organization called CENO, California Intercollegiate Nisei Organization, and that organization was statewide. We went to different parts of the state—

TC: To bring the various Nisei clubs together.

WS: So, we started having these statewide conventions and CENO wanted, within the L.A. area, to have activities.

TC: Was this mostly a political focus, or was it a social thing as well?

WS: It was a social and a little bit political because we participated in Nisei week. We put on a little play. We put up skits and helped with the Nisei week, get involved. One of the big things that we did, we organized a Black History Week celebration at L.A. City College. I got different people involved in that. One of the friends of mine that I got involved in helping in these things, I got him involved in a peace art show. He's an artist, Japanese American, and he had his painting in the art show and helped with this Black History week—this was in 1951 or '52, something like that. It turns out that one of our class friends from UCLA became an assistant attorney general, and he gave us a reference, this artist friend. So, this friend got a visit from the FBI with a quarter-inch dossier, and it was on him.

TC: Wow.

WS: And it was about that Negro History Week thing.

TC: That's amazing.

WS: They had all the names of all the people who participated and all that kinds of stuff, and I just found this out because I had not seen this guy for twenty, thirty years. Somehow he got a hold of me because the museum was having a civil rights show at the museum, and he said that if anybody should be in that show it should be me. So, he gave the museum my name, and they tried to contact me. And when I talked to them, they just wanted people that had anything to do with the marches in the South. (chuckles)

TC: You're ahead of that in '51. Did you ever see any of the freedom of information request documents on yourself, Wilbur?

WS: No.

TC: You never did?

WS: No. I've got an inkling to do it, but it's going to cost a lot of money.

TC: I think you can get some help through the ACLU. They could help you. It wouldn't cost you too much money. We should look into that for you, see if we can get some of those documents. Well, through '56, you continued working in East L.A. at the factory. The Nisei organizing continues.

WS: Yeah, and through that period, the union thing was interesting because people were getting murdered in the union. It was a really scary time for me. I'd go to these meetings; the head would send out for liquor, booze. He'd get these people all boozed up, and they're really stealing the money from the union.

TC: Ripping them off.

WS: Yeah, they had these health and welfare things starting-up. It was really scary. Guys were ending up dead in Las Vegas at the time. (chuckles) Anyway, it was scary. The international union took over the local, anyway.

[recording paused]

TC: Wilbur, it is now 11:40. We are still on November thirtieth, and we are continuing here in Los Angeles. Wilbur, we were just talking about the union and some of the activities with the union. You said the local you belonged to was—

WS: Sheet metal workers 170.

TC: And the international finally came in—

WS: Finally came in and took over the union. But, when I was there the union—I don't know what they did—they came in the back door of this plant. They came in and made a deal with the thing. I don't even remember the issues there, but I think over wages and security and so forth. But, I was agitating in the thing, and the company fired me.

TC: Fired again, Wilbur.

WS: Fired me again.

TC: From the radar domes to—

WS: What happened was all the people in the plant walked out.

TC: In solidarity.

WS: In solidarity. (chuckles) And so, these big wigs from the union came down, and then they had to negotiate and so forth.

TC: Did you get your job back?

WS: I got my job back.

TC: All right!

WS: Things improved and so forth. Wages increased, but the company finally moved out to Texas or someplace back east. Yeah, some non-union state.

TC: And what year did it end for you?

WS: I think '57.

TC: Fifty-seven. Okay, now during this time, isn't the West Jefferson Democratic Club getting organized?

WS: All these things are going on. I was active with CENO. I was active with—

TC: Which was a statewide effort to bring the Nisei groups together.

WS: I was active in the union, I was active in the JACL, and we were trying to organize these different campaigns. We were organizing for the different candidates and trying to have an American Japanese presence. So, we organized these committees. In those days, we had to go through phone books and look for Japanese names and then pick out the names and type them up on things and do our own mailers and things and raise our money and so on. We tried to get the JACL to become active with the political issues. I believe at that time there was a freedom of choice initiative, where they wanted to have the right to refuse people in a barber shop or in a restaurant—you know? The owners can choose who they wanted—

[00:50:47]

TC: Have a Constitutional right about who they can serve.

WS: Yeah, this is how they used these words. They turned them on their heads. The same type of thing that was going on—

TC: Legalized discrimination.

WS: After the war, a lot of lawsuits. There was a lot of activities for civil rights. The soldiers coming back, racial restriction covenants came. In '48 was the lawsuit, went up to the Supreme Court. And *Brown v. the Board of Education* in '52 or something like that. And these miscegenation cases, all these types of things were up in the air. And the alien land lawsuits were going on. They were trying to enforce the alien land law against Japanese that were coming back from the camps, you know, take away their land. So, we were trying to get the JACL to take an interest in these issues, in these political issues and things, fair employment practices and fair housing and so on. So, it was exciting to be involved in all those campaigns, and I was involved with the East Los Angeles JACL Chapter. I can't remember his name. Anyway, he was a chapter president, and I was the vice president. We were both young guys right out of college, and he went on to lead this fight for reparations, which is amazing. This fellow died.

TC: Did he make it thorough end of the eighties? Or when did he pass away?

WS: He made it through the eighties.

TC: Did he actually see the bill signed by Reagan?



WS: I don't recall. I don't know if he did or not.

TC: But, he kept the fight alive.

WS: He kept the fight—he became a teacher in Japanese American studies, which was great.

TC: Sure! We need more historians.

WS: He was going to go to law school but he didn't go or he didn't make it or something. I don't know what happened. Or he didn't pass or something.

TC: Do you have any recollection of the West Jefferson Democratic Club?

WS: Oh, lots of things. In all of these clubs, like the West Jefferson and these clubs at UCLA and the progressive party thing, there was so much tension and pressure because of the repression that was going. The FBI things, all those kinds of stuff—I mean, Sak was called up before the Un-American Activities Committee. So, all these and the pressure—Cold War, it's cold war stuff, and so there is really heated debate all the time on issues. I mean, there's serious, serious debate.

TC: Did you meet Art through the West Jefferson Democratic Club?

WS: No, I met Art through the Progressive Party.

TC: Through the IPP.

WS: IPP, yeah.

TC: So, that was in '52.

WS: Issei Progressives. Yeah, '48, '49.

TC: Okay, do you remember the campaign with Hallinan in '52? Did you work on that campaign?

WS: On what campaign?

TC: In '52, when the IPP ran their candidate for president.

WS: Maybe a little bit but I was still in school kind of active in student stuff. You got so much time, and you're active things and you do—

TC: Spread out.

WS: Yeah, you do what you can.

TC: When you finished up with the labor activity in '57, where do we go next?

WS: Well, when I was going to work and everything, we formed this civil rights committee for the JACL and we formed a committee for the district council. And I had on this committee a number of people of people who were just great people. Gosh, the names just deserted me. (chuckles) Mary Ann Takagi was on my committee. We'd meet at her house. And we'd also have all these different attorneys. David Yokoseki and Frank Chuman would come down and George Maruya, and we'd meet at the house. One summer we were there, Paul Takagi said he was going to go to law school. He said, "Why don't you go to law school? Come along, go to law school with me." It must have been about '56 or so. And I said, "Okay, fine."

TC: Off to law school—

WS: Off to law school. We registered for night school at Loyola, and he didn't make it. He got sick for some reason, and he didn't make it. He became a professor at the University of California, Berkley, in sociology and criminal law or something, criminal studies or something like that.

TC: But, you hung in there. You stayed with the law?

WS: I stayed in there. One year I went to UCLA at night, still working at the factory, and then I decided to go full-time. I didn't know what the prospects were here in California. You know, they were having all these things were you couldn't become a lawyer if you were—they were hauling these people before these committees, senate committees, state committees and naming names and saying you're unfit to become a lawyer, doctor, or whatever it is. I didn't know what to do. So, this friend of mine that we were going around looking for jobs, he went to Denver law school. He was at the University of Denver Law School, and my brother happen to be teaching at the University of Colorado.

TC: So, all signs were pointing to Colorado—

WS: Yeah. I ended up that year, I guess the summer of '57 or something like that—or '58—

TC: So, you just uprooted yourself from Los Angeles with all this activity going on and said—

WS: Yeah, sold my house.

TC: Had you married yet?

WS: Yeah, I had two kids.

TC: Well, let's back-up a little bit! When did you get married?

WS: I got married in 1951.

TC: So, right out of—

WS: Yeah, right out of school.

TC: Where did you meet your wife?

WS: I met here in Des Moines, briefly, but I knew her sister better. Her sister was a little older, she and I used to write to one another. She came out a couple times, went on a few dates and—

TC: But, you ended up with her sister.

WS: She told me to take care of her sister.

TC: And what was her name? Your wife's name?

WS: Rosie. Their family relocated to Iowa. They were doing farming in a little town called Johnson, Iowa, near Des Moines.

TC: Is that near Ames?

WS: I don't know. She ended up in Ames at the college there. The University of Iowa or Iowa State?

TC: There's so many, I get them confused. I think Johnson is near Ames because I spent a lot of time in Ames in '88 for the Jessie Jackson campaign. I was out there for Reverend Jackson.

WS: Oh! She ended up at Ames, went there for a year.

TC: We had a great rally at the university. Back to '51, you got married right out of college. We didn't even cover any of this. During all this organizing and all this heavy time we are talking about, you working around the clock, working as a union steward, you're married, and raising two children at the same time.

WS: Yeah, my first kid was born in '55, my second one was born in '57.

TC: And their names?

WS: First one was Naomi Whitney, and the second one was Emerson Ko.

TC: Emerson was born in '57—

TC: Emerson was born in '57, but that year you decided to move to Denver. So, you have an infant with you?

WS: Infant, yeah.

TC: So, on a lark, sort of—not a lot of planning—it looks like you decided—

WS: My life was like that.

TC: Serendipitously, you're off to Denver—

WS: Off to Denver, right.

TC: In '57.

WS: My insurance guy that sold me the policy of life insurance said he knew a lot of people in Denver and he'd help me get settled, so on and so forth. So I went over there, and I called this guy and they just—(laughs)—kind of what are you doing here?

TC: Wilbur who?

WS: Yeah! (chuckles) Anyway, ended up in public housing track in Denver.

TC: So, that was Section 8 housing back then?

WS: I don't know what that was.

TC: But, you and your family are now in Denver.

WS: Yeah.

TC: What do you remember about leaving all this activity and all this organizing you were doing in Los Angeles? Did you miss it being in Denver, or were you excited about starting your new life in law?

WS: Well, law is very interesting. It's like history. You go back and you read all these old cases and go back to Old England, all this kinds of stuff. It's really fascinating stuff. I had this friend Walter Gerash there, and he used to take me around to the different courthouses all over and little towns in Iowa every once in a while when he had a case or something.

TC: So, you're really excited. This is a new chapter in your life?

WS: Yeah, and I had to work. I had to find a job.

TC: Where did you work? Back at the factory or—

- WS: No, the schools were very helpful. They got me a job as a janitor, and I was working at night as a janitor cleaning up these buildings. And then, after a while, geez, I ran out of money. I only had \$3,000 from selling my house. And ran-out of money so they gave me half scholarship and a half loan, they gave me a job at a library, and they found me a job at a law firm in the afternoon.
- TC: They really took care of you.
- WS: So, I worked from the school—go to school in the morning and worked in the afternoon; just law school filing things, walking around delivering things, picking-up stuff for them, and at night I worked at the library.
- TC: How big was the Japanese American population in Denver at this time?
- WS: It was not very big, but they had a community there. I was going to JACL meetings and meeting some of the people there.
- TC: So, you were able to plug in a little bit.
- WS: Just a little, just a little.
- TC: But never to the degree that you were active in Los Angeles?
- WS: No, no. I just got to know a few people, and that was it.
- TC: Law school, then, three years or four years?
- WS: It's a three year thing, but I had one year here at night—
- TC: From Loyola.
- WS: Yeah, wasn't a full thing but had a number of classes. So, when I went there, I was a mixed person. In other words, I was taking classes from different freshman, sophomore, whatever, because I wasn't in one particular class.
- TC: Filling it all in.
- WS: Yeah. It was good, in a way, because you meet different, in different classes. Because in Denver—here, they flunked out a lot of people. But, in Denver, they did the same so they would flunk out over half of the class in the first year. So, when you meet people from different classes, it's nicer. And then, that way, the older students, we would all study together. We'd had these poll sessions, and we'd talk over cases, you know? Different things. We really helped one another. Whereas your total freshman—the freshman are so disparate. I mean, they'd cut your throat—
- TC: Survival of the fittest.

WS: Survival of the fittest. (laughs) It was at Loyola, people cheating—

TC: So, it was much more community?

WS: It was much more fun. I enjoyed the—first time I was ever in a fraternity. I joined a fraternity and worked full-time, and I don't know.

TC: So, you graduated from law school in '59, '60?

WS: Yeah, '59.

TC: And practiced law in Denver? Is that where you began your—

WS: No, no. I came back here.

TC: So, got your degree, and then decided, I'm going back to Los Angeles.

WS: Came back to Los Angeles.

TC: Uprooted your family again.

WS: Yeah.

TC: What did your wife think of that?

WS: Well, she went along.

TC: She helped pack.

WS: Yeah. Dirt poor, I tell you, dirt poor. We didn't have any clothes, didn't have anything.

TC: But, you just decided I want to get back to Los Angeles because that's where my base is, my family? Why not stay in Denver?

WS: I don't know. I didn't have anything. (laughs) When we were there, my folks came to visit. I think my mother came, and, you know, I ran out of money. They cashed in the insurance policy they had on me, and they gave me the money. And I really got sick. I was working so hard, I had got down to 110 pounds or something like that because walking in the snow with the wrong clothes and all that kind of stuff, and I really got sick. So, I took a bus back. I don't know why I took the bus, but they paid my way, came back, and recuperated a little bit. They cashed in my insurance policy; I went back to Denver.

TC: When you came back to Los Angeles with your family, where did you move back to? Back here to this side of town?

WS: Yeah, I think I moved in here.

TC: This house here?

WS: Yeah. Because I had to study for the Bar, and you have to study all summer. It's like a full-time study thing, so you go every day to study.

TC: What about having to go to law school in Denver and having to pass the Bar in California? Were there different things you had to study or was it pretty universal?

WS: No, it might have been a little bit different, but then they had that Bar study program, all your prep courses.

TC: So, you were ready. How did you do your first time?

WS: I passed.

TC: Congratulations. That's a pretty tough task.

WS: I passed, but it was all study for the whole summer.

TC: I can imagine.

WS: Everyday I'd take a bus and go down to the law library down there.

TC: So, you're a lawyer? In 1960, you're an attorney in California. And where do you hang your shingle? Where do you start your practice?

WS: In Gardena.

TC: Gardena. And what kind of law did you practice?

WS: General.

TC: Just Japanese American community, word of mouth, reaching out, working with the community?

WS: No, I got a job at a firm that I guess they thought they thought there's a lot of Japanese Americans, they ought to have a Japanese American there. (chuckles) No, I didn't help them that much! I'm not very good at—

TC: You didn't bring that many clients in?

WS: No. (laughs) I got a job there in Gardena.

- TC: So, you must have been excited. You've finally got a paycheck coming in now. You passed the Bar. Did your political activity resume, when you came back to Los Angeles, to the fervor that was going on before you left or was it slowed down a little bit?
- WS: Well, I had to study, and, after I became a lawyer, I was active in the democratic thing. That when we had the Kennedy—when the Kennedy—
- TC: Nineteen-sixty would have been Kennedy in Los Angeles.
- WS: Kennedy in Los Angeles, and so we had this club—
- TC: The West Jefferson Democratic Club?
- WS: West Jefferson. I tried to get active in Gardena, so I joined a club there.
- TC: Did you see Sak again, when you came back?
- WS: Yeah.
- TC: Because he's in Gardena. Wasn't he active—
- WS: No, he wasn't there. I saw them through this club, the West Jefferson. We'd meet over here this way.
- TC: When do you remember meeting Sue?
- WS: Sue, I met her at the Independent Progressives, Nisei Progressives. She used to sing, folk singer. I met her there, and her husband, Gar, who's an artist. And then after that, I didn't see her until the eighties.
- [01:10:00]
- TC: Really? So, from the early sixties, not again until the eighties?
- WS: I didn't see her in the sixties, from the forties—when the Nisei Progressives broke up in '52 or whatever it is, I didn't see her again until the eighties.
- TC: Wow, so from the last run of IPP would be '52, that would have been the last time you saw her until '80 during the Manzanar Pilgrimage. Is that what—
- WS: I take that back. I didn't see her at all, except, one year there was a big anti-Vietnam march, you know? Get out of Vietnam. And this friend of mine, Harold Itatani, who is a watchmaker, his wife's—he called me—and his wife was going to become a psychologist. She's going to go for her master's in psychology. She didn't graduate college, but after kids grew up, she went to college. And then, she was going to USC



- and was going to get a psychology degree, and I thought about that, too, because they had a program where they had attorney could use their experience and some of their units and apply that toward credit. Anyway, from them I heard she was going to be in that march, so I thought I would go down and walk with her. So, when I went down to the march— it was down by Echo Park, that way.
- TC: Would this be '71?
- WS: Somewhere in MacArthur Park, and Sue was there. That's the only time I saw her. Other than that, I had not seen her.
- TC: Tell me a little bit about Art. Was '52 the last time you saw him?
- WS: No because Art, I saw him when—we were organized now. I don't when we formed that West Jefferson Democratic Club.
- TC: That was in the fifties?
- WS: Yeah.
- TC: It would have been IPP in '52, and I believe the chronology of the West Jefferson Democratic Club was '53, '54 it was starting to get formed.
- WS: So then, I saw Art all the way through the Democratic Club.
- TC: Okay.
- WS: Because Art was active—
- TC: He did the Roybal campaign.
- WS: Oh, he was really the leader in the Democratic Club.
- TC: And what about Sak?
- WS: Sack came to this Democratic Club, too.
- TC: So, you saw him through all that time as well.
- WS: Yeah.
- TC: And Sue you'll lose touch with, and then, when you're back in Los Angeles doing your law work, you said you were active in the Kennedy campaign.
- WS: Yeah, all these different campaigns, we were doing something. I don't know what we were doing.

TC: And then, you did the anti-war march in '70. So what about from '65 to '70, were you active in Eugene McCarthy Campaign or Bobby Kennedy's Campaign? Do you remember those campaigns in Los Angeles, what the club was doing then?

WS: Vaguely, vaguely. I mean, it's just such a rush. I ran for county committee one of those years, and I became—

TC: Democratic Central Committee?

WS: Yeah, I got elected to that, so I was meeting with people in the Gardena area as county central committee member.

TC: How many Nisei Progressives or Nisei Democrats ran for central committee? Were you the only one?

WS: Yeah.

TC: You were it?

WS: Yeah.

TC: What do you remember about those meetings?

WS: Oh, nothing. You get involved and you know money influences, (chuckles) you get down to the nitty-gritty politicians, you know?

TC: Did you ever run to be a delegate to the National Convention?

WS: No.

TC: Had you thought about that? Would you have liked to have done that?

WS: No, I don't think so. I went to a lot of CDC.

TC: California Democratic Council.

WS: I used to love going to meetings.

TC: So, you were active in the CDC as well.

WS: CDC, yeah; Sacramento, all over the place, San Francisco—

TC: That was Alan Cranston.

WS: Yeah, Alan Cranston.

- TC: So, you remain, throughout the sixties, very active in the Democratic Party and doing your organizing?
- WS: Yeah.
- TC: What about the seventies?
- WS: There is one person who was really active in the Democratic Party, her name was Marge Shino and she was on a state committee.
- TC: Marge Shino.
- WS: Her and I were very good friends.
- TC: Shino.
- WS: Shino. Oh, she died—she was very active. And after she died, her husband said she has a lot of photographs of the Democratic Party stuff. Because when we were active in the Democratic Party, we put on a big campaign for Pat Brown when he was running for governor. I guess he ran against Nixon?
- TC: Reagan—well, Nixon, he beat Nixon. He beat Nixon, he beat Nixon and then he lost to Reagan.
- WS: He lost to Reagan?
- TC: Right. That's when Nixon gave that press conference; "You won't have Dick Nixon to kick around anymore." Pat Brown beat him in '62, I believe.
- WS: At that time, the big issue was fair housing, for us, and we put on a big dinner for Pat Brown.
- TC: Now, which we? Nisei Democrats?
- WS: Nisei Democrats, but what we did was we involved people from other communities. We got the Chinese community, the Filipino community, Korean community—
- TC: It's a multi-ethnic night.
- WS: For the first time because all the other time they were enemies. And for the first time, we got all these people involved.
- TC: And it was pretty much just you and Marge that put this together.
- WS: Me and Marge, Toshi Yoshida, Katz Kunitsugu, a lot of people. These women were really good organizers, good workers. (laughs)

TC: So, this probably would have been '62, then?

WS: Yeah, '62.

TC: When Brown went against Nixon, I believe that was '62.

WS: It was a huge dinner. We had over four hundred people, and all these—you know people are interested in getting jobs, things like that.

TC: Do you have any of the pictures that her husband talked about?

WS: She has them. I don't have them.

TC: Who has them? Marge passed away.

WS: Marge passed away, her husband passed away, and the son has them.

TC: So, the son has them, so we could find them at some point.

WS: I think so.

TC: We'll have to track those down, Wilbur. So, that was a big deal in 1962, I mean, you really organized this big dinner. And this was when you were in the Central Committee?

WS: I don't know if I was in the Central Committee. I don't remember.

TC: But, it was around that time?

WS: Yeah.

TC: Throughout the sixties, it sounds like you stayed involved. When did you—

WS: They had these different presidential campaigns and stuff.

TC: When did your involvement start to wane down? When was your last big—early seventies or did you stay active through the seventies?

WS: I stayed active in the seventies, and around '75 or so, I bought a liquor store. Then my time was really severely limited.

TC: You come from practicing law to running a liquor store.

WS: Well, what happened was I had three partners, and we bought a liquor store in Wilmington. My one partner gave up his job and ran the store in the daytime. Then it was my job to stay there at night. This was like a seven day a week type of thing.

- (chuckles) So then, about '75, I was out of it because we got the liquor store. And then after we sold that liquor store, we bought another liquor store in L.A.—
- TC: And you bought a restaurant at some point, too—
- WS: And then we bought the restaurant, so from '75 on, yeah, to about '80 something, '89.
- TC: If we can in our time here, reflect a little bit. In '75, when you went into the liquor, looking back on progressive involvement, were you proud of it? Any regrets?
- WS: No, I don't have any regrets. [There was] a lot of activity. I think all of that counts.
- TC: You think you made a difference?
- WS: I think all of the things that you do makes a difference. It counts. And the people that you meet, and you look back on their lives and what kind of people they are and what they've done, so forth. And people that you've influenced and that were friends. And not just yourself, just all the people that are around you and the things that you've done. I look back at it with a lot of pleasure.
- [01:20:06]
- TC: If you were to explain the progressive movement to a young person today, who were the voices that you listened to that made an influence in your progressive development growing up? Who were the people you listened to?
- WS: What do you mean?
- TC: As far as the progressive politicians at the time, Henry Wallace or Pat Brown, who were the politicians in the progressive movement who had an impact on you that you remember going to these meetings and hearing all of these debates and discussions, who made an impact on you?
- WS: Well, I don't know. After a while, you get a little bit, skeptical about politicians. So, when you say politicians, I don't know whether I can say, "Gee, you really influence me." Like who's this guy who is on TV all the time? Bill Moyers you know? He comes up with all these different nice programs that you say, "Gee, well, he's a real influence, a real teacher." And teachers are like that. People that you meet are teachers, that you think you know are sincere. I remember the movement having meetings with Paul Robeson, sitting by him and listening to him talk. How intense and sincere and all that. So, people like that, teachers, people like Paul Robeson or politicians, too, but—
- TC: Sounds like the schoolteachers in your extension course had an impact on you, too.
- WS: Oh, yeah.

TC: Did Paul Robeson ever have a concert? Do you ever remember hearing him sing?

WS: Well, he sang at some of our meetings; he would sing a few songs.

TC: That must be some great memories.

WS: Yeah, it's great.

TC: What about some books, Wilbur? You write a lot, went to school, and you were a real curious guy. What are some books, growing up, that had an influence on you? Some of the stuff you read.

WS: Well, I read Theodore Dreiser and who's the guy that was active in the thirties in California and ran for governor?

TC: Upton Sinclair.

WS: Upton Sinclair, I read a lot of his novels, and *War and Peace*.

TC: Tolstoy.

WS: And when I got into the movement, I started reading a lot of Russian—

TC: Dostoyevsky.

WS: Dostoyevsky. Who's the guy who wrote *Mother*? Anyway, a lot of these Russian novelist.

TC: Had an influence.

WS: Yeah.

TC: Who are the progressive voices today? Is there anybody today?

WS: You know, I'm kind of out of it. I just kind of, up in the sky somewhere, (chuckles) looking down and coming down and helping people once in a while do things. I go to the Democratic Club meetings in Gardena. I'm helping Art with his APALA, Asian Pacific American Legal—I mean the Labor Alliance—

TC: Labor Alliance.

WS: From that he assigned me to help the new Otani Workers Support Committee.

TC: So, it sounds that you are still keeping your annual—

WS: Yeah. I go there and janitors, when they have their demonstrations—

TC: Janitors for Justice.

WS: Janitors for Justice. And this latest thing over the Thai workers that were enslaved, so they're helping with that. So, I've been taking a lot of photographs, and I bought a flash attachment for my camera, an additional flash attachment. So, Art had me take some pictures for the party that they had, and I've taken pictures for the demonstrations when the hotel workers marched to different places—

TC: To document all that stuff.

WS: So, I've been taking photographs, and I've been trying to take photographs of Manzanar. So, I've been active to a certain extent. I'm trying to help out the best I can. I don't want to be a leader. I mean, this is for young people. I want to help them.

TC: Are you encouraged? Do you see young people coming up today?

WS: Oh, yeah, very much so. I go to NCRN meetings.

TC: Which is?

WS: National Coalition for Redress and Reparations. They're kind of like the new civil rights groups. They are trying to do the job the JACL supposedly does.

TC: Should have done.

WS: Yeah or should have done. (chuckles)

TC: How many folks are attending that meeting?

WS: Oh, a lot of people.

TC: Really?

WS: Yeah.

TC: And a good age spread? Young people, old people?

WS: Yeah, right. I'm really encouraged. I go to these meetings of the APALA, and you see all these young Asian labor leaders. I mean, these are young people. They're really gung-ho. And then, the people that are active at UCLA—

TC: All the Prop 187 activity, the hunger strikes—

WS: Yeah. And then, a friend of mine, William Hohri, who is Sohei's brother—remember that I talked about?

TC: Sure.

WS: William Hohri is the fellow that led the fight for the lawsuit against the government for redress and reparations.

TC: Took it all the way.

WS: Took it all the way. Well, he now lives nearby me in Torrance; he lives in Alameda. He calls me all the time. He's a really disciplined person. He gets up early in the morning to write. He does a lot of writing. He writes for the *Rafu Shimpō*, and he does a lot of things. He supports the draft resisters, the programs that they have, and he writes plays. He wrote a play not too long ago, and he got a bunch of people together and we put on a number of, uh—what would you call them?

TC: Did you have a reading of it?

SW: Yeah, reading. We put on about five readings in different places. And for that play, he recruited the resisters and these young people to have parts. Miyahara, who now works for Loyola Marymount, he writes for the *Rafu Shimpō*, the fishing column. But he was active—was he active in your school? One of the schools, he was one of the deans or something, and he got active with the students. And he got too close to the students and they fired him.

TC: That will teach him!

SW: So, the Japanese community mounted a campaign for him, and he filed a lawsuit and all of that. I don't know what happen, but I think he got some measure of satisfaction.

TC: Well, you said you were above the clouds, but it sounds to me that you were coming down quite a bit, Wilbur. Sounds like you are still doing quite a bit.

SW: Well, I'm just helping where I can, to do what I can.

TC: Is there anything we didn't talk about today, you'd want to talk about on the tape? Anything that you would want to share?

SW: Well, I've been helping Sue and the Manzanar committee, in a way. I go there every year.

TC: Well, she sounds like you got the property, now, and that you're battling with Secretary of Interior Babbitt right now. You've made a lot of progress up there.

SW: Well, not enough. There's a lot of interest, so every time I go up there, I walk around the camp and I meet people. It's just amazing; I just hear all these stories that they have to tell. People that come, they maybe friends of somebody that was in camp. I



- met a young man who, in the 1960s, said he wrote a paper about the camps, and the teacher gave him an F. (chuckles) They took him out of class and everything. He was telling me things I didn't know about the rocks in the garden and so forth, so I get a big kick going up there and just walking around. I'm trying to take some decent pictures of certain various places that I think might be artistic or interesting; the rocks or the gardens.
- TC: Sure.
- SW: So, I'll be going up this weekend.
- TC: Back up again, camera loaded up with the flash, ready to go.
- SW: Yes, right.
- TC: All right. Well, I want to thank you, again. It's hard to believe we already raced through our first hour. I will be in touch, needless to say. I very much want to pursue Marge's son, see if we can find some of that documentation the Pat Brown '62 dinner. I think that would be—
- SW: There is this gal named Momoko Murakami, and she was in the Democratic club. She is like a pack rat, you know? She saves everything from what I hear—I've never asked her personally. I see her all the time because she's interested in photography and taking pictures of flowers, so she and I go out to the arboretum and take pictures of flowers and so on.
- TC: Do you think maybe next time on a photo shoot, if you can ask her if we can get together? Get some of the stuff that she saved.
- SW: Sure.
- TC: That would be great. I'd really appreciate that. I also want to give you some material on—I'm working for State Senator Tom Hayden now, and we are passing around a lot of literature.
- SW: I just saw him the other day.
- TC: Were you at the meeting Art was at?
- SW: It was the \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) meeting, right.
- TC: Patty Chen, right. Art was telling me about that. I want to give you some literature. Maybe next time you go to a meeting you can share with some folks about that as well. All right, well, I think that's a wrap, Wilbur. Thank you again.

END OF INTERVIEW