

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with RONALD TANIMOTO

Interviewed

By

Jay Thompson

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: RONALD TANIMOTO

INTERVIEWER: Jay Thompson

DATE: December 10, 1992

LOCATION: Irvine, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

JT: This is an interview with Ron Tanimoto by Jay Thompson for the Japanese American Project for the Oral History Program at California State University at Fullerton. The interview is being held at the Fluor Daniel Corporation on December 10, 1992 at approximately 11:45 in the afternoon. Ron, can you tell me a little bit about your family and your childhood?

RT: (chuckles) In terms of?

JT: Can you tell me a little bit about your family, your mother and your father prior to, actually, your birth in 1940? During the thirties and earlier, also?

RT: Okay. My dad was born in Japan; my mother was born in Japan. My dad came here to the United States approximately in 1915. Worked for a few years and then went back; married my mother and then came back. And worked up in San Francisco for a while and then moved down into the Southern California area. Stared farming in Gardena, in Gardena, Compton, Dominguez area. My sister was born—the oldest—was born in 1923, I believe. I'm not exactly sure what point in time they started the farm. I know my dad, in order to earn money, worked as a bellhop at the Biltmore Hotel in Los Angeles for quite a while. I think this was prior to him marrying my mom. So, he must have build-up a substantial amount of money to be able to do farming when he came back. I'm not sure if he had the experience in farming, but from what I understand people in Hiroshima and that area there did do a lot of farming. And I'm not exactly sure what his parents did, but I'm pretty certain that they farmed.

JT: Can you tell me your mother, your father, and your sister's names?

RT: My father's name is Tsuneza; that's spelled, T-s-u-n-e-z-o. My mother's first name is Mine, M-i-n-e; her maiden name is Fukumoto, F-u-k-u-m-o-t-o. My sister's name is Tokiko, T-o-k-i-k-o.

JT: You were born in 1940 so a lot of the earlier experiences that your family went through you only know by what your family talked about, or what they remember and had told you about. Did they relate any experiences of the thirties and what the farm was like and what the area—what neighbors, friends they had?

RT: Basically, my experience from where I got most of my information was from my sister because she was the only one I could ask. I spoke Japanese when I was small, preschool. Although, as far as getting interested in what happened in the past as far as my family is concerned, I never expressed any interest or asked questions during my early age. My mother passed away when I was fifteen. My father—the relationship between my father and me—he was the head of the household. He was only talked to when, or spoken to when he spoke to you first. And, I guess, that was carried on from the way he grew up, because my mother would always intervene when there was any questions between—you know, in relation to my father. So, I really never got to have a close relationship with him.

He worked most of the time. This is after the war, because this is basically what I remember. He went to work before I got up and he came home very late while I was doing my homework or while I was sleeping. He ate by himself or with my mother at approximately nine o'clock in the evening. My mother would feed me first, around six o'clock, which would be considered normal hours. And I'd probably be in bed by the time he got home. So, I never really had a close relationship with my father until my mother passed away. It was just the two of us. Then I started asking him questions. He really didn't give me much information. (clears throat) His answers were more asking me why I wanted to know or why I needed to know. He didn't feel that I needed to know. He wouldn't answer me. So, I really turned to my sister. She did a lot of question answering for me. And this is, basically, what she remembered.

What she related to me during her childhood was that she thought we were pretty well off. What she could remember. When she—at the time she went to high school, or was going to high school, as far as being able to drive a car that was no problem because we had lots of cars, according to her. And she grew up—and she was in her teens during the mid-thirties and late thirties. And that's, basically, I think, what I can remember conversations with my sister has. She considered herself a spoiled brat, could do anything or could ask my father anything. Again, she did not have to go through my mother. She could do that directly and got anything from my father. Especially things that my mother said that she couldn't have, my father would do for her. She related to some experiences where my father would come from dinner, after farming, saw what we had for dinner, take the plate and flip it over and walk-off and not eat that night. My sister was very disturbed about that. To a point where—although my mother made all the meals—she would tell my dad she made that meal. For some reason, it was different. He had any inkling of doing those things, my sister would rush right up and tell him that she made the dinner. And he

would say, “Okay,” and he would eat the dinner. Kind of save my mother some embarrassment, I think. But, she was very close to my parents.

JT: You mentioned in an earlier conversation that we had that many times your dad presented his time during the Second World War, his internment, in that, more less—excuse me for the pronunciation, *shikata ga nai*?

RT: Right. *Shika, shi* (chuckles) *shikata ga nai*. Basically, that means it happened, there’s nothing you can do about it. You don’t worry about it, it’s something in the pass. Forget about it, it’s done.

JT: Because we’re talking about your dad. The experience your dad had, can you relate as you understand what happened to your father we had also in a previous conversation. A little bit of a discussion why you thought that he had been interned.

[00:09:38]

RT: As far as I knew at that particular time, from what my sister told me that he had gone to prison. He was arrested directly after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. She felt that he had ties with the Black Dragon Society. He was also in martial arts. He was a kendo. He practiced—I don’t know if he taught—he practiced kendo, which is the Japanese fencing. But, my sister kind of thought that it was the fact that he had friends in the Black Dragon Society. She raised a story to me that the reason that I was named what I was, my father asked this person to give me my Japanese name. She asked my sister—or he asked my sister that I should have an American name, also, and that’s actually my first name. And my Japanese name was my middle name, and the word for my actual middle name means dragon. It’s a combination of what this person named me, and I think 1940 was the year of the dragon. So, I don’t know how the two got together, but my sister—this is what my sister related to me. He asked this person for my Japanese name.

JT: Your middle name is?

RT: Tatsuo.

JT: Your father, as we discussed, was interned, what, at Lordsburg as you understood?

RT: Yes. I guess he went directly to Lordsburg as far as I know, or from what I’ve heard.

JT: Did your sister ever say that they visited him at any time while he was being held in jail?

RT: Now, that I don’t recall.

JT: What was the first remembrance that you have of camp? Because I understand your family went to Jerome, Arkansas. Do you remember parts of Jerome, any of those?

RT: I remember nothing of Jerome. I remember Crystal City. I remember—I could just about visualize the duplex house we shared with another family. I can vaguely remember the layout of the camp. We were against one of the fence lines, in the first house, in a row of duplexes. I remember sticking my finger in an empty light socket; experiencing shock. (chuckles) I remember little things like how ice formed on a ditch right in front of our house. I can remember looking out beyond the fence line and recall all the sage bush and flat land, and that's basically it. I remember the snakes.

JT: What kind of snakes?

RT: Rattlesnakes. At that time, I didn't realize there were different types of snakes, but I remember the noise of the rattlesnake and somebody telling me that's a rattlesnake. (chuckles)

JT: I have right here, I've got *My Six Years of Internment* by Reverend [Yoshiaki] Fukuda. And on page eighty-three, there's a drawing of the Crystal City camp itself. It was done for the 1988 Crystal City Reunion Association and all the sections are marked in here; D section, T section, and so forth. If you would like to take a look and see if anything really brings back memories to you, of the camp itself, different things.

RT: Oh, okay. We were close to the Japanese school. I imagine we were in this row here of homes, because it's a longer fence. I remember we had to walk across an open area and a guard tower to get to school, and the size of the building is where it says Japanese School. It's fairly big. And I remember like during rest period time, we would all have to lay on the floor. Either pretend to be taking a nap or actually taking a nap. And I remember that.

JT: I was pointing to the south of the Japanese school, there was a west T section. I was pointing to that area—excuse me, that area over in there.

RT: I remember we were corner house or the first house.

JT: The Japanese school itself, you went, what, kindergarten?

RT: Yeah, kindergarten. That's about as far as I got, I think.

JT: And then did they basically teach you your Japanese there?

RT: Yes, I would guess that I had gone earlier, also, not so much learning Japanese characters but speaking. And I remember learning English there, too, also.

JT: So, you learned both then?

RT: Yes.

JT: Did your mom ever take you to the store?

RT: I don't recall.

JT: You mentioned that you lived in a duplex. Who were your neighbors?

RT: The surname of the family was Oyama, I believe. From what I can remember, they were from Peru; they were interned from Peru.

JT: Was there a lot of little kids to play with in camp?

RT: I don't remember that so much, but I do know the one boy that shared the duplex. He actually had three names. We called him Robert, but his actual name was Roberto. He also had a Japanese middle name, which I can't remember. But I remember he was different because he had three names and we only had two. (chuckles)

JT: Crystal City itself had a swimming pool and an orchard. It also had other kinds of activities—mainly sport-type activities for older kids in there. Do you remember anything about those types of things, going to see anything? Going over to the orchard?

RT: I do remember the swimming pool. From what my sister tells me, it was an old cesspool that they cleaned out, and I remember it was circular. There was a fence in the middle of it, in the center of the pool where the lifeguard sat. I remember my dad swimming breaststroke with me on his back, taking me out to the middle so I can hang-on the rail. And he would take me back along the edge of the pool and warn me not to stand or get near where water _____ (inaudible) was, because it was mostly built-up with elegy and slim. And other kids, I believe, had drowned there.

JT: And there had been two, as I understand, two girls that somehow had drowned within the pool itself, which leads me to, was the pool deep? Could you stand in it?

RT: I'm sure it was deep. If I recall—I'm not sure when—when the community actually cleaned the pool. Being little, I'm not exactly sure how deep, but I'm sure it was—they drained the pool and then they went down and cleaned the bottom of the pool.

JT: Concrete or—

RT: Concrete, yeah. It looked, to me, very deep. More deeper than a normal pool, I'd say.

JT: Is there anything else? Did you ever have to go to the hospital? Get shots?

RT: Yeah—I don't remember, my sister was telling me that they had either a whooping cough epidemic or an alert where they had the kids get shots. And an episode where my mother actually cut in line so I could get my shot before the kids, for some reason.

I never asked why, but, my sister thought it was kind of amusing that she was able to do that without arousing much, you know, hatred or whatever you want to call it.

[00:20:15]

JT: Indignation?

RT: Yeah, from the other people around.

JT: There had been from two periods, that I understand, in Crystal City itself that one—I think both were related to large influxes of Peruvian Japanese that—I'm not sure if it was whooping cough. But, there was, I think, tuberculosis and possibly measles was another one. Whooping cough could go along with both of those.

RT: Um-hm.

JT: They had to segregated large number of the people, incoming people, because they were afraid of the contamination to the rest of the population. And, obviously, tuberculosis for Japanese is very—I guess, it's very traumatic and emotional sort of thing. So, they take it very seriously with those types of diseases. Your sister went to high school while she was in Crystal City?

RT: No, she had already finished high school—no, she was in her senior year of high school when we went to camp. I believe she would have graduated in that year of '42; in June of '42. I don't recall if she went to school—or to high school, but I know she received her diploma from Gardena High School where she attended.

JT: Did she say what she did while she was in camp itself?

RT: The only thing that she mentioned was going to a school in Minnesota. I'm not exactly sure what kind of school. I just don't remember right now. I was thinking it was some kind of language school.

JT: That brings me—I think you mentioned—did she join the military?

RT: No, that's where she met her first—or her, uh—

JT: Her husband?

JT: Her first husband and I guess they got married in '45. But, I believe she did go to Minnesota, and I just can't remember exactly for what reason she was there in school.

JT: As I recall, we brought out a copy of *Crystal City Times*. It had a wedding announcement, and it happened to be your sister's and her husband's.

RT: Right.

JT: You remember anything about the wedding?

RT: I remember the church. I remember we put the post _____ (inaudible) for the wedding. It was—at that particular church, I also remember going to services there. My sister was a Christian, she's a Baptist. But, that was previous to going to camp she was a Christian. My folks are Buddhist, and I was raised as a Buddhist. But, I'm Christian now. I do remember pictures—she took pictures after the wedding in front of the fountain. I don't remember too much about the wedding itself. That's about it.

JT: Did you have a celebration after the wedding back at camp or a party of some sort?

RT: I remember them eating cake but I don't remember a celebration. I'm sure there was one. (chuckles)

JT: Do you remember celebrations, any type? Christmas, different holidays in camp?

RT: No, I don't.

JT: How about pets and animals inside the camp? Do you remember anybody having any kind of animal or pet?

RT: I don't recall. I know we had a pet previously going to camp. I'm not sure if we had to leave him or it was previous to our leaving that we didn't have any pets.

JT: What pet do you remember?

RT: I remember a dog. My sister used to tell me that it wasn't a dog, it was my brother because I used to eat his food and he used to eat scraps. I used to feed him my food, and he used to let me go into his bowl and take his food. She said we were kind of inseparable.

JT: So, it could have been in Jerome, earlier?

RT: Oh, this was before the war, in Gardena.

JT: Okay.

RT: But, I don't recall pets in camp. I'm sure there were, but I don't think we had any.

JT: Did your father ever mention anything about Lordsburg? Did you ever ask him anything?

RT: No, the only thing that I know he did was that he learned meat cutting, because I've seen some pictures of him with a group of people that he supervised as meat cutters.

JT: So, he could have work at one of the camps as a meat cutter in charge of others?

RT: Yeah, but I'm not sure what he did in Crystal City, if he worked at that or not.

JT: Did your mom ever talk about Crystal City?

RT: Really, she never did.

JT: Do you remember leaving Crystal City?

RT: I remember the leaving the post, yeah, going through the main gate.

JT: And then, your family relocated back into the Los Angeles area?

RT: Yes.

JT: And do you remember where you came back to?

RT: We came back to some relatives of ours that lived in Artesia. They had been in Artesia before and I believe they were able to keep their property. And we shared a big house with their family until they moved to the city itself. The family that we shared the house with bought a market and a hotel, and he worked in a store with my dad. Another one of his brother—not my dad's but the other person's brother—worked the store. His wife ran the hotel, and we stayed in the house in Artesia.

JT: The hotel and the store, they were what, within downtown L.A.?

RT: Right in downtown L.A.

JT: Little Tokyo?

RT: No, it was a little further south near the L.A. Produce Market.

JT: And what were the names?

RT: Their name was Yamada, Y-a-m-a-d-a. The older brother still lived in Artesia at that particular time, and we lived in the second house, which the younger brother moved to L.A. lived in.

JT: So, your father did farming, then, again?

RT: No, he worked at the market as a butcher, so he ran the meat and the fish concession.

JT: And you went to school in Artesia?

RT: I started first grade in Artesia and went through to the fifth grade.

JT: Tell the humorous story about looking around, and you and somebody else were the only Asian faces in class.

RT: Yeah, in this particular class, there was another Japanese girl and she and I were the only Asian, let alone Japanese. We were the only Asians in the class, and I remember feeling that we were different than the other kids. I do remember—I believe it was in the first grade—getting into a scuffle with another person. I think it was over the term Jap. And something my sister was telling me that I shouldn't let anybody call me a Jap because Jap is a derogatory term.

JT: Do you remember anything else about school? The area itself? You went as a first grader so that was 1940—

RT: Six.

[00:30:00]

JT: Do you remember more and more families moving into Artesia? Japanese families?

RT: From what I can remember, there were very few. Very few Japanese families or even Asian families at that time, it was predominately white. I think it was that particular time that—because I only spoke English and only spoke Japanese at home—that I don't have any pronounced accent. Like some of my friends that had lived in communities where there were other Japanese people. It seems that some of those people I know, if you would hear them talk, that you would detect an accent other than—or a dialect, I would say, other than what would be termed American or white.

JT: Did your sister or family ever talk about when they were in Crystal City, or afterwards, the possibility of them repatriated to Japan?

RT: I don't recall any conversations like that. She did mention the fact that my dad did not want to go back to Japan to live because his home was here.

JT: Both your folks, in 1952, they take on U.S. citizenship?

RT: Yes, they did.

JT: Do you remember anything about that?

RT: I remember my mother having a real tough time in school learning the citizenship classes. Probably because she didn't have a very good command of the English language. My dad being in contact with a lot more people, I believe, did. Other than spelling, he seemed to do very well in the class. But I know I helped my mother because she did have a hard time.

JT: Did you ever, during this period, ever see a change in the community? Being a minority within the community, itself?

RT: Until I was nine years old, we moved to Los Angeles, so that my dad could be closer to his work. There, most of my friends were Japanese American.

JT: So, you moved into a Japanese community, approximately?

RT: It was a fairly good size, yeah. Or the people that we were in contact with were Japanese American.

JT: And what area was that?

RT: This was down near the area around the Produce Market in downtown Los Angeles.

JT: South Central?

RT: Yeah, it's around Ninth or Tenth Street and San Pedro Street.

JT: Does the term evergreen mean anything to you?

RT: I know there's a Baptist Church in Evergreen. And I also know that there's also a cemetery. In fact, that's where my folks, their ashes are buried there in Evergreen.

JT: Both parents?

RT: My dad died in Japan, but they had his ashes sent over from Japan and were buried at Evergreen.

JT: Is that a request that he had? Something that was prior when your mother died?

RT: Yeah, when my mother died, he had the gravestone made. And he actually had his name put on it, also, with the birth dates and the date of death left blank.

JT: It was put in later?

RT: Yeah.

JT: Can you tell me a little bit about Evergreen itself?

RT: The cemetery—it was a fairly old cemetery. I don't know what the history of the cemetery is. At the time of my mother's death, as far as Japanese or Japanese American being _____ (inaudible) There it would say it would still be a minority. But I do know a section of the cemetery is set-aside for Japanese American servicemen that died during the war. There is a small tomb of—I believe, it's a memorial to some of the Japanese American that were not identified and there is a little memorial to

- them there, also. And then there is ribbon of headstones throughout the cemetery of Japanese American. And the last time I went back was this past New Year's Day. And I was surprised that there was more—considerably amount of—Japanese buried there.
- JT: The cemetery, itself, I understand, is not within a Japanese neighborhood.
- RT: It was fairly good size neighborhood prior to the war, and I would say, for approximately, twenty years after the war. But, more and more the area is changing composition. Most of the Japanese American and the Asians are moving out. Although, I believe there's a trend, now, of recent Chinese immigrant who have come from Vietnam or China that are living in that area, possible growing. But, the area is predominately Hispanic.
- JT: During your teenage years, did you see any kind of activity? The JACL [Japanese Citizens American Citizens League] within the community?
- RT: The JACL has been a big supporter of rights as far as the Japanese American community is concerned. There's an incident I remember with my dad when there was JACL had fought in Congress, lobbying to try to get some returns back to the people. And my father, through my mother, had filed a claim where it had an assessment made prior to leaving our home. And the money that he got back was about ten cents on the dollar of the amount they thought he was worth at that particular time. I remember the incident of JACL person coming to our house and asking for donations. And I remember my dad very angrily yelling at the gentleman, telling him to leave. That the amount of money that he received back in the claim was an insult and for them to ask for that money—a portion of that money—he couldn't tolerate that. At that particular time, I think he told the gentleman that he didn't want to be associated with the JACL any longer. I believe I asked my dad about the incident; he didn't want to talk about.
- JT: Did the gentleman that came and talked, was he Nisei or Issei, do you know?
- RT: I don't believe he was Nisei. I believe he was Issei.
- JT: Is there anything else you would like to add that you could remember?
- RT: Um, not off hand.
- JT: Usually what happens is once the microphone is turned off, all kinds of things remember. But, I'd like to thank you for the history project, for allowing yourself to be interviewed, and those memories that you shared, I believe will give students and historical researchers a better insight into understanding this period in time. Thank you.
- RT: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW