

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with AUSTIN CHRISTENSEN

Interviewed

By

William Docking

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CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: AUSTIN CHRISTENSEN  
INTERVIEWER: William Docking  
DATE: November 29, 1997  
LOCATION: Fullerton, California, and Layton, Utah  
PROJECT: Japanese American

WD: Greetings. This is Bill Docking, and I'm conducting a telephone interview today with Austin Christensen to record his recollections of his experiences at Tule Lake Internment Center for Japanese Americans during World War II. It's 2:00 p.m. Pacific Standard Time, Saturday, November 29, 1997. I'm in Fullerton, California, and Austin is in Layton, Utah. Thank you, Austin, for cooperating with me on this. Why don't we start by having you tell us a little bit about your upbringing in the Gila Valley in Arizona?

AC: Okay. I was born in Gila Valley, Arizona, which is the southeastern part of the state along the Gila River, the beginnings of the Gila River. It's a community of fairly close-knit towns, three miles or so apart. I was born in a little town called Central. It's quite warm in that part of the state most time of the year. Occasionally, there's frost in the fall, a little ice and that sort of thing. It's a very mild climate. The Gila River, at least in past years, has given quite a lot of irrigational water for use on the farms. The principal crop when I was there was cotton; I think they still raise quite a lot of cotton. But, I believe the farming has changed because the depletion of the soil with the repeated crops for cotton many, many years. And they have gone to irrigation from wells and that's also—pull the water cable down enough so they started to get failing water—and that's also a problem for them. That valley nestles close to Grand Mountains, which are very nice mountains, quite high. Snow in the wintertime and then the summertime more degrees cooler than in the valley.

WD: You were in the Gila Valley with your family. Your mother, and father, and your siblings. How many brothers and sisters do you have all together?

AC: I have one brother and three sisters.

WD: I see. And you were, basically, farmers there in the Gila Valley with your dad?

AC: Actually, my father was a cattleman-slash-cowpuncher. Then in the time I was born in 1929, we of course went into the Great Depression that year. So, he kind of left the cattle business and was selected by his friends and countrymen, sort of speak, to be a relief administrator. And so, during the Depression years, he did work for the federal government in the distribution and labor—providing labor and that sort of thing for providing people labor for the projects that were undertaken by the government.

WD: I see.

AC: He did work for the federal government all that time. After the relief administration position ended, he went into the Soil Conservation Service. Work for that for many years until 1941, then he was looking for another employment within the federal government. But, about that time December of '41, '42 the war started with Japan, and the openings for people that worked on the war relocation centers—which were the Japanese internment camps—came about.

WD: I see. What about your education? I know you were still young when you arrived in Tule Lake. Tell us about your education.

AC: Let's see, in 1942 when we went to California, as I recall, I must have been about the sixth grade when we got there to California, to Tule Lake. Until that time, I had been in grade school in Central Arizona school system, and later in the Thatcher, Arizona, school system.

WD: You went to school in Tule Lake, I know. But, after Tule Lake, did you return to college, university?

AC: In Tule Lake, I finished out my grade school years through the eighth grade and started into the ninth grade in the Tule Lake high school. Then I moved with my family to Eagle Point, Oregon, which is in Southern Oregon along the Rogue River and spent my sophomore year in Eagle Point. And because of a change of employment, my father went back to Tule Lake and spent my junior year there. And then, because my father was moving around a little bit, I moved back to Eagle Point where my brother had settle-down in the family ranch or farm and spent my senior year in high school; graduating in 1947. That fall I ended in Oregon State University in Corvallis, Oregon, and graduated from Corvallis a number of years later with a degree agricultural engineering.

WD: I see. Did you raise a family of your own?

AC: I have raised a family of six, three boys and three girls. And the family, which we are very proud of, they've done exceptionally well. Both their marriages, and their education and their employment, things of that nature.

WD: I bet those many children kept you and your wife with your hands full, didn't it?

AC: Yes, it certainly did. Of course, during those years I graduated from Oregon State with a commission in the Corps of Engineers for the U.S. Army. Entering on active duty with the U.S. Army in 1953—in the fall of 1953—and I elected to stay on with the Army until 1957. So, all of my children were born while I was on active duty, and we started-out raising those children in Germany with two boys. One in Germany and then coming back to the United States—well, let's see. I think I misspoke. We came back to the United States in 1957. I spent a short period of time in Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, where my third child was born. And then we moved to—I took a job with Caterpillar Tractor Company in Peoria, Illinois, in 1957, staying in Peoria until 1962. And three more of the children were born in Illinois. Number six was born in Fort Belvoir, Virginia. Then I had gone back on active duty in 1962.

WD: So, you were in and out of the service. Was that one of your primary parts of your career, being in the military?

AC: Yes, it was and has been.

WD: I see.

AC: I'm a retired lieutenant colonel for the U.S. Army.

WD: Very good, very good. (clears throat) Let's start moving toward Tule Lake. I've been looking over these interviews, and I've been trying to pin-down—or get a handle-on—what it was that moved your family from the Gila Valley in Arizona to the somewhat desolate flatlands in and around Tule Lake. What do you know about that, Austin?

AC: As I said before, what had happen there, work was winding down. The Soil Conservation Service with the war footing that the United States was on, federal employment started to change. So, my father was looking for a transfer to continue his career as a federal employee and the job at Tule Lake came up. He interviewed for that job, made an application for the job, and was selected. And so, we moved from Arizona onto Northern California a few months before the family—I think, it's my recollection. We were still in school, so mom stayed in Arizona with us kids until she can take care of selling of any properties that they had and to let the kids finish school, and then we moved on up there to Northern California.

WD: So, it was a practical matter?

AC: That's correct.

WD: I see. (clears throat) Do you remember much about your arrival to Tule Lake? I know that you traveled from Arizona to Tule Lake with, I believe, your mom and two of your sisters?

[00:10:17]

AC: Yes, we did. My older sister Alpharetta [Matthews]<sup>1</sup> and my younger sister was Elva [Wallace].<sup>2</sup> We traveled with mom, and we had very big police dog. I remember we took them along with us. Actually, I think it was black in color. So, we took the dog with us—children, mom, and dog. So, we loaded-up in Arizona and took that long trip up to Tule Lake. I remember that trip as being somewhat long but it was a pleasant trip. We were able to stop and do a lot of things and see a lot of things. Tule Lake, for a thirteen-year-old boy, didn't seem to be that big of a deal. We moved into Tule Lake, as I recall, we had—family quarters that were built for us, and they were sort of pleasant. They weren't exquisite or anything like that. With no central heat, they were heated by oil fern \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible). And I remember the camp itself being row after row of tarpaper. What we call tarpaper shacks because that's what they were. They were military style of barracks. One story, as I recall, and there might have been some two-story. No plumbing in the buildings themselves. The plumbing for laundry, and sanitary purposes, and that sort of thing was provided by—in each block, this tarpaper and it was huge. And it was built for twenty thousand people. And so, the running water like that was in a smaller building for employee blocks, with no facilities inside each one of the buildings. The tarpaper buildings were tinfoil, and they were just bare, no partitions in the center of them. It was quite cold in that area, and we didn't know that at the time, as I recall. We arrived there sometime in the summer after school was out. So, it got pretty cold for the folks; they didn't even have the oil space heaters. They had coal fire space heaters inside those structures. I'm sure their teeth shattered a number of times during the wintertime that they live there.

WD: What were you expecting to find in Tule Lake? Or did you have any expectations of what to expect when you arrived at Tule Lake? Have you discussed these kinds of things with your family at all? And what was in your mind?

AC: I'm going to have to say that my mind was open and blank because I don't remember any discussion at all with my mother. Dad had already preceded us. I'm sure he had already written back to her and told her a little bit about the camp and its surroundings and that sort of thing. He hadn't, and she hadn't, passed anything along, that I recall, about what the camp was like.

WD: Were you surprised about what you saw when you arrived at Tule Lake?

AC: Not really.

WD: Not really?

AC: Not really.

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<sup>1</sup> Alpharetta Matthews, O.H. 2656, Center for Oral and Public History.

<sup>2</sup> Elva Wallace, O.H. 2654, Center for Oral and Public History.

WD: Were your family's quarters—you were part of what I call the staff of Tule Lake?

AC: Right.

WD: Your family was part of the staff.

AC: Yeah.

WD: Were your quarters separate from the quarters from the internees?

AC: Yes, there was the main part of the camp where all the Japanese were housed was in one section, and it went for acre after acre. And then, there was a huge firebreak—actually, a separation between the military complex and civilian complex where the headquarters buildings were. And there was a hospital built there and then the family quarters off in one area.

WD: How was the internee area separated from what you call the civilian—which is the staff area? When you say civilian area, are you referring to the staff area?

AC: That's correct.

WD: How was the internee area separated from the staff and the military area?

AC: Very huge open space.

WD: Just a huge open space?

AC: Yeah, I don't recall even that there was a fence there. There may have been, but I don't recall it. There was a fence around the camp, I know, but I don't believe there was a fence between and the Japanese.

WD: There was some turmoil, as you know—and we'll talk about that a little bit later—in Tule Lake. Starting in August of 1943, and I think they may have built a fence sometime after that.

AC: Could be.

WD: But, we'll talk about it in a few minutes. Going back to your quarters—and I'm not sure if I asked this or not, I don't think I did—were the civilian quarters similar or same as the quarters for the internees?

AC: They were built, basically, on a—let's say a military floor plan, sort of speak, but they were much nicer, much more partitioned. They had a number of rooms: bedrooms, kitchens, living room. And as I remember, there was only concrete slabs. Let's see, the Japanese buildings were not on a concrete slab. I believe the civilian staff were on a concrete slab. They didn't have much insulation, as I recall, but they

- did have a wood siding on them. They weren't just tart like they were for the Japanese.
- WD: I see. So, the quarters that you stayed in—you, your family, and other staff member at Tule Lake—were somewhat better than the quarters for the internees.
- AC: Yes, they were.
- WD: What were your impressions of Tule Lake when you arrived there? Any particular thing that you remember thinking or that stands out in your mind in the first days, weeks of your arrival there?
- AC: There are things that you see when you arrive. The large number of Japanese. I don't recall that I ever met a Japanese before I got there. And there wasn't that much contact between us and the Japanese. There were recreational areas within the camp provided for the civilian staff. I remember learning how to play pool at Tule Lake, so that was fairly interesting to me.
- WD: That was with the military personnel that you played pool?
- AC: Military had their own; they had what they call day center. We had our day center also, but it was separate from the military.
- WD: So, these are just your pals and friends that you made there?
- AC: Yeah.
- WD: Other members of the staff?
- AC: Other children.
- WD: Other children, members of the staff.
- AC: I remember outside the camp there was a fairly large hill that the Japanese used to use quite a bit and go and up and down the—that was one of the areas that was within their camp and they were free to roam that area. I remember that they found, throughout the areas, seashells, and they collected those seashells and made all kinds of beautiful things from them. I remember that later in the year, thousands upon thousands of waterfowl coming into the area. That was one of the other things that was interesting. We were able to hunt the waterfowl. Ammunition was in short supply but wherever we can get a hold of it—
- We started school in the fall. That was somewhat of a shock because the school children that came from the camp, from Tule Lake, were not too well treated by the local civilians. And one of the reasons for that, I guess, well, they had some expectations by the local farmers that when the Japanese were brought in there—they would be brought in there primarily get to be used, basically, as slave labor. And the

decision was made early by the federal officials that would not occur; the Japanese would not be provided to the local farmers unless they paid the prevailing wage, which they refused to do. Therefore, the Japanese did not go out for outside employment, and they stayed within their own compound. They had a huge area that was set aside for them to raise their own foodstuff and to provide some activity for them. They had other areas set aside for raising farm animals. I remember they raised quite a number of pigs. I don't remember much about cattle or dairy. I don't know exactly what they did in that regard. But, Tule Lake had a lot of things to be interested in. With Southern Oregon—Cama Falls—some forty-some miles away. We, occasionally, went to Cama Falls; it was a pretty nice trip.

[00:20:47]

WD: For shopping and entertainment purposes?

AC: Basically, it was to purchase clothing and things of that nature.

WD: Was there a commissary at the camp that you could go to?

AC: I don't recall a commissary being available to the civilian staff. There may have been, but I don't recall it. Most of our shopping, as I recall, was done either in Tule Lake or on the occasion that we got to Cama Falls.

WD: And when you say Tule Lake, in that regard, you are referring to the small town of Tule Lake?

AC: Right, Tule Lake.

WD: You already mentioned that you learned to play pool at Tule Lake camp. What other kinds of recreational activities were you and your friends involved in?

AC: I remember a number of basketball standards set-up outside, which weren't use in the wintertime—but basketball standards, a lot of volleyball courts. I don't recall any tennis courts there. There may have been, but either I didn't participate, or wasn't interested in them, or recall them. The recreational facilities provided, as I stated, the civilian staff.

WD: What was provided for the internees, do you recall?

AC: I don't think there was anything provided for them. There may have been. I know there was some activity. I know that the Japanese were very proud of maintaining their physical being, because I recall most of that was done by whatever they could device on their own with their exercises. They did have a number of [exercises], so I'm sure there must have been volleyball nets or something provided for them.

WD: So, as far as you know, whatever activities they were involved in they devised for themselves and were permitted to do and carryout those activities?

AC: To my recollection.

WD: What else do you remember about the social life for the internees? You mentioned that they collected and made things with seashells and that sort of thing. What else do you remember about their social life, the way they occupied their time, because they obviously didn't have a lot to do?

AC: Well, they tried to keep them as busy as they possibly could on the farm, doing the farm things. The other activities was the small mountain that I talked about—actually, it was a hill two or three hundred feet high, very close to the camp. But, they could walk, and they did a great deal of that, walking around. Under the employment, I know that we used that hill. In the wintertime, I know the Japanese were not using it at that time to snowboard. Whatever device we could to \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible). We had fun doing that. But, the Japanese were pretty much left in their own devices. I think it was a real challenge for them because they didn't have much in the way of social activities.

WD: You didn't socialize that much with the Japanese, then?

AC: There was no socialization at all between the civilians and the Japanese.

WD: Was that something that just occurred kind of naturally? Or was that something that was imposed upon you?

AC: I believe that was imposed. I think that was a strictly a non-fraternization type of deal. No contact between civilians and so called detainees. Even the military \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) and the Japanese—whatever you did, the hospital or they provided some staff. I believe there was some mess halls around civilian, and another mess hall in the military side. But, the mess hall in the military side, my recollection is, no Japanese were employed in those. But, there was some Japanese employees assisting in the clerical division, things of that nature, and then the administration of the camp. We came in some contact with Japanese. I was late in the period that they permitted some of the Japanese women to work for full wage for the civilians as employees. Usually, they were housemaids and things of that nature.

WD: You said that happened later on?

AC: Uh, yes. We didn't have it at first, toward the end of the period of time there.

WD: What was your father's relationship with the internees? I know that he was involved in some type of work crews. Can you tell us a little bit about that?

AC: Yes, my father, being the type of individual he was and the disposition that he was, even though he had a son that was overseas fighting the Japanese from Japan, always

said the Japanese that were there. His position was he was an exception foreman to take care of maintenance and roads, things of that nature. He is what most of us would call a civil type of work, and the Japanese equipment operators worked for him off of the bulldozers. I remember there was a big flood during some period of time when we were there. And I remember going out with my father when they took big dragline pieces of equipment and put them on each mats of wood mats so they wouldn't sink into the lake out in that area. You had a lot of water from digging canals and things of that nature, to protect it from the flooding and to also reclaim some land to be used for farming, but he had exceptionally good relationships. In fact, I know it was good, long-lasting relationships that he developed with the Japanese that worked for him. He maintained those relationships after the camp was closed, and they lasted for many years. He was respected by the Japanese because he was a fair man, and he treated them with respect and common decency.

WD: So, he had daily contact with the internees?

AC: Yes, he did.

WD: Do you remember any of his comments or reflections regarding them at the time?

AC: My dad was very impressed with the Japanese, with their skills, with their dedication, and everything else. He had no problems whatsoever with the Japanese people and didn't take advantage of the situations that they had been thrust into. He certainly expressed, I think, a number of times that they were mistreated. They should not have been there. He did as much as he could to make their stay there a pleasant one. They reciprocated so his relationship—in fact, I think one story, conversation going on one time—I'm not sure whom the other party was. But, there was another civilian who had found out through a Japanese internee he had some weapons still at his home that he was trying sell, and this man was just about to close the deal with this internee and take advantage of the situation. My dad overheard that he step right in there, made a fair offer to the man. In fact, one of those weapons that he bought was a .12 gauge shotgun that is still owned by a member of my family.

WD: So, there were some civilians, some staff members, there that did take advantage of the Japanese even after they had been interned in Tule Lake?

[00:30:06]

AC: Yes, they were.

WD: That's one kind of taking advantage of people. Was there any brutality or cruelty, specifically, that you remember on the part of the staff toward the internees?

AC: No particular incident stands out in my mind. I'm sure that \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible), not within my earshot because it was very rare for me to be involved as a young teenager in any of the dealing between the civilian staff and Japanese internees. I certainly had

the feeling most of the time that the majority of the civilian staff, first of all, didn't want to be there. And two, because the Japanese were such an enemy—it came from Japan we were fighting, our troops fighting over in Southeast Asia that there was a lot of animosity between the civilian staff and the Japanese.

WD: There was at times, then?

AC: I had that feeling I still have that feeling that there was.

WD: Well, Pearl Harbor was a difficult situation for the United States and the Japanese Americans that were here, as we all know. Another thing that I try to pin-down, to some extent, is whether or not there was any kind of institutionalized or governmental harassment or brutality that was imposed officially, or semi-officially, upon the Japanese. What do you know about that?

AC: I don't recall any program of that nature. I know that many of the GIs, the Army guard troops made it as miserable as they possibly could for the Japanese to get to the gate and things of that nature. So, they harassed them quite a bit. A lot of catcalls to the young women, Japanese internees, things of that nature. But, I do recall one incident, which we will talk about later on—

WD: Let's talk about it now.

AC: Okay, it was probably a year or two into the internment that the older generation of Japanese—that had closer ties to the Japan still, we call them the shave heads—invited a large group of the younger Japanese to protest and storm the headquarters building of the camp. And so, when they started up toward the headquarters, my recollection is the military set-up a machine gun \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) to the light poll, which was just outside the headquarter building. And as the troops were sitting there—and, of course, you get nervous, all the Japanese coming toward them, one troop kind of lost his cool and pulls the trigger of the machine gun.

My recollection is that only one Japanese was killed at that time. It did break-up the demonstration. The Japanese were forced back to their part of the camp. And then, the military did have a number of tanks. There must have been ten or twelve tanks they had onsite. They rolled those tanks out and took them into the large firebreaks that I mentioned before—the civilian area, between the military areas and the Japanese area. They lined those tanks up in a big long line across that \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) with the guns pointing toward the Japanese. It just scared the Japanese. They were terribly frightened, expecting, I'm sure, artillery pieces on those tanks that those guns would be fired up upon them at any time. The word that I heard later on by my father that it really scared them. They will never do that to us again, we will be good. That's the only incident I remember having in the camp.

WD: Repeat for me, once again, what the start of this was? You said that somebody invited someone else to—

AC: The older Japanese, internees, who had incited the younger Japanese to protest whatever they wanted to protest. I don't remember, but they did. They got a large number of them, and they marched toward the headquarters compound. But, I don't know when it was over.

WD: But, that was the result.

AC: But certainly, many things that the Japanese could complain about. As I said, living conditions were very, very austere, and there was no privacy at all in those buildings. You had families—of course, they put up blankets and scrounged up whatever they possibly could, packing tape, to try to get themselves privacy in each one of those barrack buildings. I went into those buildings after the Japanese had been removed, and it was just an eye-opener to me to know how terrible those conditions were for those people living in those buildings with no privacy whatsoever.

WD: Tell us what you remember about that. This was after most of the internees had apparently been—

AC: Released and returned to their homes. The camp was sitting vacant for a number of years—well, probably a year. And the military—actually, I guess the civilian side of what had happened, just as the Japanese were returned to their homes, all of the federal land became available, and it was made available to the returning G.I.s, given so many acres. And I don't recall, probably sixty acres, it might have been more than that—for farms. Also given with that this buildings. But, prior to that happening, there were contracts left, and my father got some of those contracts to remove those laundry, shower, sanitation facilities from the camp. They were not given away. And, as I said, the buildings were left empty and being an inquisitive young man that I was, I went down into the buildings. Of course, no locks on the doors. So, we were able to go through those buildings and observe what the conditions were.

WD: And they were?

AC: Very austere.

WD: Very austere?

AC: Yes.

WD: Did the Japanese leave much behind?

AC: Well, they brought nothing to speak of to leave, and there wasn't much that they could leave behind. So, no, they didn't leave much behind.

WD: I see. What other tensions were you aware of in the camp?

AC: I don't remember anything in the camp. As I said, there was a problem between the civilian members and part of the military members in the camp and the local population in the surrounding farms because of the community.

WD: Did that exist the whole time you were there? Or did that finally get settled and smoothed out to some extent?

AC: It ultimately kind of just went away because, after a period of time, when they became better acquainted with us, we became better acquainted with them. Another thing that never changes was our transportation between the camp and the City of Tule Lake and the school system in Tule Lake. There was no school for us in the Tule Lake reservation, so we had to be transported into the school system within the Tule Lake community. And I'm sure that put, somewhat, of a strain on the community. But, our transportation consisted of flatbed truck, which was used for the mail runs between the camp and the city and, of course, the rest of the United States. We had to ride on the back of that mail truck. And it was cold. It was fiercely cold in the wintertime and the wind was whistling around that canvas, so we in there with our teeth shattering both directions going to school and going back from school. And we had one driver that didn't like us at all.

WD: A military truck driver?

AC: Private, anytime anybody would stand up, she'd slam on the breaks and throw us all to the front of the vehicle.

[00:40:01]

WD: She would?

AC: Yeah, she would.

WD: It was a woman.

AC: Because she didn't like us, I guess. She didn't like the responsibility or whatever.

WD: A sure way of handling children.

AC: I guess.

WD: Ah, did you ever feel unsafe in Tule Lake at any time?

AC: No, I never felt threatened at all in Tule Lake.

WD: Even during some of the trouble and some of the demonstrations and strikes?

AC: Even during the trouble.

WD: Why do suppose that was?

AC: I think the major reason was that the example of my father. He was able to communicate with us that the Japanese—of course, they had no arms. I'm sure they'd been able to build it to make a few things from what they found around the area from \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) and used up latex of that nature. If they had the desire to do so—federal penitentiary. They could come up with some type of a weapon. I think the example and calm approach that I felt in my home, I never felt any threat feeling toward the Japanese; any fear at all.

WD: You think your home was typical of the staff there at Tule Lake? Of the other homes?

AC: Basically, it was. At least the people that I was friendly with. I'm sure there were some people that were scared to death. Probably some of the women that were scared for quite a period of time in the camp. It did not occur, as I said, and none of the other homes of the children that I was friendly with.

WD: In June of 1944 there was a Japanese male, one of the leaders of the Japanese community there was murdered by Japanese. Do you recall that?

AC: That does not ring any bells whatsoever. I don't recall any discussion on that.

WD: Well then, I won't ask you any questions about it.

AC: Okay.

WD: Would you categorize Tule Lake as always being in constant turmoil?

AC: I would not.

WD: You would not. Were there periods of turmoil?

AC: I'm sure there were, but, again, I feel that the periods of turmoil we were isolated from those as children. And it seemed to be kept under control by the military and the leadership of the camp staff.

WD: I get the impression that you lived a normal life of a young man there and were not impacted in any negative ways by this experience. Is that correct?

AC: That's correct. The only way that I felt that I was impacted was because of the rationing system and the incapability to get much gasoline. My parents nor I could participate in school activities, evening school activities, so were isolated that way and had very little opportunity to do anything. A little later on, when we went back over there, I played football for the high school, participated in the athletics and that sort of thing. But, dances—we had dances in camp. Of course, a number of young

kids were a pretty small group, as far as I was concerned, so there wasn't much opportunity to meet other young ladies.

WD: And you weren't socializing with the internees so that cut down most of the population of that camp, didn't it?

AC: That's correct. No socialization as far as I know of. I knew there was not until they permitted the maids to start working for the civilian members of the camp. And then, there was additional fraternization, I'm sure, at that time.

WD: Did you ever come to your father on any of his assignments, work assignments?

AC: I did a number of times. My dad was very good at trying to train me and give me any kind of opportunity he could to learn skills. So, when it was necessary for him to go out and to move equipment around, if he could, he would permit me to work that equipment. And if he couldn't, the Japanese would offer him the equipment, and I would accompany him and went with him. It wasn't any different for me in that period of time. When activity was going on, when work was going with the Japanese, there were a number of things that could have happened.

I remember there was a big plume, which is a wooden structure that is boxed shape, open top—it carries water across depressions—and that had washed down. My father was called upon to provide work crews, his Japanese work crew to assist the local population in putting that back together and get the water flowing again for irrigation. That was kind of an exciting time, an interesting time. There was no animosity at all between the civilians and the local population and the Japanese at that point.

WD: You mean the local population of Tule Lake and those areas?

AC: Yes.

WD: So, you did have a chance to have some contact with the internees through your father?

AC: I did, yes.

WD: And your impression of the Japanese was the same as his? Basically, that they were hard working, industrious people?

AC: That's correct. I really admire them because for what they did and what they had and uprooting that had come about and the sacrifices they were willing to make to provide the troops for the European theater and things of that nature. \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) our American system.

WD: Did you feel that way then?

AC: I think that toward the end of my stay in Tule Lake, which was about 1942—with that one break there—1944. Toward the end of my stay there, as I grew older, and was able to grasp things. I started to feel, yes, this is a terrible injustice upon American people that should have never happen. I still feel very strongly in that way.

WD: Well, we're getting near the end of the interview and one of the things that I wanted to cover was some of the attitudes, thoughts that you have now regarding—as I said, not only your experience, but, uh—let me break the question down into two parts. Give us a run-down, again, on your experience, how you felt then and now about the correctness of the action that was taken against the Japanese. And then, I'll give you the second half of the question when you're done with that.

AC: Okay. As I said, I went there as a very young man—kind of naïve from a small community in Southeastern Arizona—to the internment camp. There were so many Japanese there who were, in my opinion now—as I said developed over the years that I was there—a terrible injustice to a group of American people. I knew that, yeah, there was some—in fact, again, this was \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) by the conversations had by my father that some and very few of the Japanese were really anti-American and would assist the Japanese from the mainland in doing anything against the United States. But, I feel now, as I developed over a period of time that I was there, this attitude that I just think that our government was entirely wrong in uprooting those people from their homes and sending them to those camps.

WD: And your attitude toward that hasn't changed over the years.

AC: No, that has not changed at all. In fact, I have a brother that fought there and was wounded by the Japanese. In fact, I'll tell you a little bit about his experience when we have a moment.

WD: Go ahead and tell us now.

AC: They were actually mistreated not only by being thrown into a camp with no ability to bring belongings with them, to speak of, minimal time to prepare to leave their homes, to make any arrangements to take care of their businesses, their farms and that sort of thing. Not only did they have to live under those conditions in the camp, they went back to their farms, and that's when another terrible injustice was being perpetuated by those who had taken over those facilities. So, the Japanese, when they left the camp, they went back to totally run-down, in most cases, farms and businesses and those types of things that had been abuse by the people that had been taken over them for years. And I don't think any compensation was ever made. In many cases, no compensation was made during the time the Japanese were of the farms and businesses. So, along with what they were going through in the camp, terrible conditions there, they were losing their inheritance at home.

[00:51:03]

WD: Yes, yes.

AC: What I started to mention was when my brother came back, he had been moved on to the Philippines and sent home for recuperation and was ultimately discharged from the service. He came back and stayed with the family. Well, he had a terrible hate for anybody that had the eyes of a Japanese. But, the best thing that ever happened to him, and the best way for him to recuperate from his wartime experience was the exposure he had to the Nisei, which are the American Japanese of the internees. His association with them through my father was very quickly able to work on the hatred he held for the Japanese. He had a great respect for them himself because of the experience he had with the good people he met there in the Tule Lake Internment Camp.

WD: So, your brother who had fought the Japanese in the Pacific for nearly four years, came back to Tule Lake?

AC: Yes, he did.

WD: And then, shared that experience with the rest of his family of seeing the internees held there in the camp? And you said that that was a cure for him?

AC: A cure for him, that's correct.

WD: That very interesting. The second part of the question that I started a moment ago is, what do you think are the implications for a culture like ours. A democratic, a liberty based culture in light of this somewhat unjustified imprisonment of so many American citizens and their families? How do you think that can be applied to our culture? What do you think pertains our institution and our form of government?

AC: It's terribly scary to know that decisions can be made affecting American citizens just because of their skin color or their ancestry who heap upon them all these terrible injustices and continue to let it perpetuate itself. I think we had a precedent set with the American Indians and perhaps some of our *great leaders*—and I put great leaders in quotes because that's the way I look at them—who made those decisions about the Japanese. Probably considered we got away doing it to the Indians, we could get away doing it to the Japanese. And somewhat they did it a little bit to the Germans—but not that much—Germans who were not American citizens but had been loyal to the country and remained loyal most of the war. So, I think it's a terrible black clout that's over us and is possible for our politicians to make those bad decisions. \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) for the right of the individual—I guess a politician—to never let it happen again.

WD: Yes, Austin. Is there anything else that I haven't covered that you would like to discuss now that we are at the end of this interview?

AC: No, not that I can recall. As I said, it didn't have that great impact upon me, basically, because of my father and the type of person he was and the relationship he was able to develop with the Japanese and the \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) from them and the fact that there were activities throughout the period of time to include the hunting of the waterfowl there—as I stated, the sky would be black with waterfowl moving in that area. It was somewhat of a pleasant upbringing for a young man.

WD: Do you think that the experience as a whole—and this is kind of a leading question, which is not supposed to be good questions for interviewers to ask, but I'll ask it anyway. Do you think that, on a whole, that the experience heightened your sense of justice or injustice as you went through your life and made you aware of that particular aspect of life?

AC: My opinion is very strongly that it did heighten—made me more aware that they were a number of injustices that could be perpetuated by many people in the United States and that the injustices were permitted to happen. Not only were they permitted to happen or caused to happen, that sort of thing, they were never adequately compensated by those who were responsible for doing it. Basically, it goes back to the American people, and I know for years the Supreme Court refused to even hear any cases about the Japanese claims against the federal government. I think they're totally wrong in doing so. I think the Supreme Court should have addressed this, but the implications are extremely great about them hearing it. As I stated before, not only did the American Japanese lose his freedom in those internment camps, he lost his resources that were being depleted by so-called loyal Americans who were abusing that they had been given conservatory over basically what it should have been, and that was not enforced by the federal government, or by the local or state government, to adequately compensated Japanese for there loses in those areas.

WD: One more question. Given the difficult dilemma that was posed by the Japanese Americans after Pearl Harbor—and this is a very difficult question. What do you suppose the country could have done differently to deal with that dilemma that we all faced?

AC: I think the country could have done what they always do, and should have done—I shouldn't say what they always do—(laughs) What they *didn't* in that particular case. They should [have done] the same thing we do now: send people from the FBI and other agency to monitor what's going on among the population and to root out those that are guilty and to let the non-guilty do what they are supposed to do as loyal Americans.

WD: Well, Austin, I think we are at the end of this interview. Thank you very much for your interesting comments, and this concludes the interview with Austin Christensen. Thank you.

AC: You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW