

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with KUNI ISHII

Interviewed

By

Andrea Bass

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NARRATOR: KUNI ISHII
INTERVIEWER: Andrea Bass
DATE: May 25, 1994
LOCATION: Santa Ana, California
PROJECT: Japanese American

AB: This is an interview with Kuni Ishii by Andrea Bass for the Japanese American Project of the Oral History Program at California State University, Fullerton. The date is May 25, 1994. The time is approximately 8:45 a.m. The interview is being conducted in the interviewee's home in Santa Ana, California. Okay, Kuni, we are going to begin our discussion today, talking about your parents. I was just wondering what their reasons were for coming to the United States, and where did they live when they got here?

KI: Well, my parents—my father came when he was very young in age. I think he was on a merchant ship with his brother or something, so he was very young. I really can't remember what he used to do before he got married to my mother. But, he went back to Japan when he was about forty—he was a bachelor until then—and he met my mother. It was one of those fixed—

AB: Was it arranged?

KI: An arranged marriage and my mother was very young. She was about eighteen, I think. But anyway, the only reason she wanted to come to America was to get away from the cold weather in Japan. She always said that because she used to get frostbite on her hand and feet. So, even if my father was so old, she was willing to come to America. And, after she came to San Francisco, they stayed until the evacuation. She had five children, and I'm one of the oldest. I have two sisters and two brothers. My father was a cook for a lady that had a business school in San Francisco. So, she had a chauffeur, and my father was the cook.

AB: In her home?

KI: In her home in the Presidio area in San Francisco. And then, war broke out.

AB: But, what did your mother do beforehand? Did she work?

KI: My mother couldn't work because she had five children. But, in those early days, in the 19—oh, I would say, 1920s—after 1920s, these ladies who came from Japan didn't know any better. They didn't know what the life was in America. They couldn't speak the language. They didn't know anything.

AB: Was your father fluent in English?

KI: No, he wasn't. But, he attended cooking school, so he knew something about cooking, and he was able to read the cookbook. When you converse with your boss and whatnot, well, you talk English, so you eventually learn. I think that's the only way these Issei people learned how to talk English.

AB: So, when your parents came over here, they were already married? They were married in Japan?

KI: They married in Japan because they had to have the document to come into America through the embassy. So, they came here.

AB: Why did your father come? Because your mother came because she wanted—

KI: Well, my father wanted to get away from the old village because there was nothing for him to do, and I think since he was forty when he was married—you know, when he came he was sixteen. He came quite early, so he was ready seek out a world, I think.

AB: Would you say he came for economic reasons? He thought that he would make more money in America?

KI: Well, I don't know about making money, but for economic reasons, maybe and to learn things, probably. Because the village that he was born and raised was in the inner—what do they call it? Inner—in Japan there's a mainland—

AB: Oh, the mainland?

KI: The mainland of the island.

AB: Honisha or Honishu?

KI: It's between Honshu and the island Shikoku, inland or whatever, in a little village.

AB: Were his parents farmers?

KI: No, they were, uh—I can't even remember that. (laughs)

AB: That's okay.

KI: I don't think I ever asked my mother what they used to do. I don't have any—

AB: Oh, that's okay. Don't worry about it. They were married in Japan; then they came here. And did they have their first child in America?

KI: Yes, I'm their first child.

AB: Oh, you were the first. I thought you said you were one—

KI: Well, five of us were born in San Francisco.

AB: Okay, five of you were born in San Francisco.

KI: Well, I can't say that I was born in San Francisco, but they lived in San Francisco for that, you know?

AB: Um-hm.

KI: They went to visit their friend who came to America on the same boat when they were married and she was expecting me. And, in the old age, the wooden _____ (inaudible), she mis-stepped, and I came. (laughs) I was born in this friend's house in Watsonville, but I lived in San Francisco. (laughs)

AB: Oh, how funny. That's a neat story. (laughs)

KI: I started out with a very unusual—(laughs)

AB: Started out with a bang.

KI: Yeah. But anyway, this couple, his mother and his father was living in America already. So, they went—I think the son was born in Japan. And, after he graduated school, he met with this woman and then came out here to San Francisco.

AB: And these were your parent's friends?

KI: Yes, uh-huh.

AB: Okay.

KI: The very first friend my mother had met on the boat—because they come from different parts of Japan—they were living in Watsonville near apple fields. My mother said she never wanted to eat apples because she smelled that before she was expecting me. So, I think it was in the apple orchard that they were working.

AB: But, your mother didn't work, basically, while she was raising five children?

KI: Not until she took us to Japan when I was nine years old. I became ten on the way to Japan. But, you know, like I said, I left here about 1938—let's see. No, I would have been ten years old. I was born in 1919 so that—

AB: So, you would have been—1929—

KI: Nineteen twenty-nine we went to Japan. She took five of us children and went to Japan, so she could leave us with her mother and her father who raised eight children. I think my mother asked her to look after us while she came back and worked and helped my father. They both worked and make ways, and then, she was going to go back to Japan. That's what all these Issei ladies had in their dreams because, when they came to America, they thought, you know, it was such a beautiful place, and they had big ideas maybe. But, you know, when you're young, you don't know how big the place is. You only know your surroundings. And with five children, you can't go anyplace.

AB: So, she had enough money to—

KI: Well, yes. My father was working so they saved something.

[00:10:06]

AB: So, they saved something up to transport the children back to Japan so that—

KI: She went with us.

AB: So then, she could come back here and work to save up more money?

KI: Uh-huh. Economically, it would be ahead that way. Then, while we were there, we finished the schoolings. I came back in 1937, after finishing high school.

AB: But, you were fluent in English already from being here for ten years?

KI: Well, not quite fluent. When I was going to grade school, I had the fundamentals.

AB: Did you go to a Japanese grade school here?

KI: Well, we used to go to Japanese school on the weekend, I think. That I can't remember either, but they do have Japanese school over here, too, and they go on weekends. I can't remember whether I was just going to weekends? We were right in the city, so we could go every day if we wanted to. I can't remember that part.

AB: But, you did go to—

KI: I did go to the Japanese school.

AB: And then, the regular school that you went to, was that predominately Japanese also?

KI: Oh, no, no, it was a public school.

AB: Okay. Were your first ten years of being here, were you in what you would consider a Japanese community? Or were—

KI: We were living in the Japanese—

AB: Part of town?

KI: Japanese Town, yes, because of the convenience of the stores. And just like any other people who immigrate, they always come to their own kinfolk—not kinfolk but—

AB: But of the same ethnicity.

KI: Yes.

AB: So then, your father worked at a white woman's home, and your mother didn't work while—

KI: Oh, no—

AB: —while she was raising—

KI: After she came back, after leaving us in Japan, she came back and started working domestic jobs. And she learned how to cook from my father. So, she became—

AB: Did she work for another woman in the same neighborhood who employed your father?

KI: Well, around that area they were all affluent people because they were the only— well, in the big town, the ones who could afford to pay chauffeurs and cooks are all affluent people. Since she was a spinster, well, you know, she—I can't say she was a spinster when I was little because she was still young then, but all her life, she never did much.

AB: Okay.

KI: I could say that. She did own a business school—secretary of school.

AB: Okay, so that's how she made her money.

- KI: When I look back, I can say, “Gee, people in America they were really ahead,” because I think she was from an English background.
- AB: Because normally, then you wouldn’t think of a woman who was unmarried, wouldn’t have that amount of money on her own, unless from an inheritance or something of the sort.
- KI: I don’t know how she started. I never did find out. But, I think she had a son, maybe younger than I was, and, uh—
- AB: The one who was not married?
- KI: No, not the son—I mean, a nephew.
- AB: Okay.
- KI: Nephew. And the nephew took over the business before she died. I don’t know whether he is still alive and continuing. I used to go to San Francisco every year when my parents were there, and my mother lived there until about ten years ago. She died seven years ago in L.A. because I had to look after her. I had to put her in a nursing home in L.A. But anyway, it’s been seven years since she’s gone. Before that, she came here. So, ten years ago, she was here with me. Until then, I used to go there to San Francisco to visit my mother three or four times a year.
- AB: So, she stayed up there. When you and the other children went back to Japan, did you want to go back to America? Did you miss your life here? Or was it that you missed your parents?
- KI: Well, being the oldest, I really didn’t miss the life, but I was in touch with my mother all the time because we would exchange letters every time. And, when you’re going to grade school—it’s not like nowadays, talking about music and this and that—as long as you have a school life and somebody to care for you—my mother had a sister and a brother still living with my grandmother, so they were very helpful to us.
- AB: So, you were enjoying yourselves in Japan, but you missed your parents in America?
- KI: Oh, yes. We didn’t know what our parent’s love was, actually, because I was so involved with the schoolwork. In Japan, when you start school, you’re really involved in schoolwork every day. Well, in the old days. Now it’s different.
- AB: I know. I agree.
- KI: We used to have homework all the time. Even summer, every day we’d have to study in the summer.
- AB: So, you graduated from high school in Japan, then?

KI: Yes, I did.

AB: Then—

KI: Came back—

AB: You came back to America, and what was your life like then?

KI: After I came back, my mother felt like I should learn English because that's the first thing she missed when she was young.

AB: She was fluent in English at this point?

KI: Not fluent—

AB: Not fluent—(laughs) I keep saying fluent but—

KI: When you don't go to school, you don't really actually learn.

AB: She could speak it and understand it.

KI: She could speak it because of the conversations, and she could catch on to certain words.

AB: So, your brothers and sister, when they came back, they were still in high school?

KI: They were still over there, and one by one they were supposed to come back.

AB: Okay. So, you were the first one to come back. And in what year was that?

KI: That was '37.

AB: Thirty seven, okay. And then, did you work when you came back here?

KI: Well, I worked with this lady who—in fact, I came back with her because she had a brother in China as a missionary. He was married, and they were in China so she went to visit him. And, on the way home from China to the U.S.—I met her before in Japan. In those days, we didn't fly so we took the ship. She was on board already. She was sort of looking after me on the ship, and we came back.

AB: And then, did you work—

KI: And I worked at her home as a schoolgirl. I guess you don't know what a schoolgirl is. (laughs)

AB: I was just going to ask you that!

KI: Even now, you have girls going to school, attending school, and you live there. You fix the breakfast and you go to school, come home—and there's a cook already, so you don't have to do their dinner, but you help wash the dishes.

AB: So, it wasn't really beneficial to her. It was more beneficial to the schoolgirl?

KI: Well, for me it was because that's the only way to learn conversation English, if you live in a home.

AB: Was that the reason for—

KI: Yes. And then, my parents thought that since she knew me ever since I was a little girl—and she kept up the correspondence, too, while I was in Japan.

AB: Okay, so this woman you met in America, the first time when you were here?

KI: No.

AB: You met her on a boat?

KI: My father used to work for her.

AB: Oh, this—

KI: The spinster.

AB: I'm sorry. I didn't know it was the same woman.

KI: Mrs. Smith—Miss Smith, Juliet Smith, actually. Anyway, she was a lady that my father used to work for many years before I went to Japan. So, she knew me ever since before I left for Japan.

AB: And then, when you came back, she said you could be a school—

KI: Live there and help her out.

AB: And the reason for this was so that you could learn English better?

KI: Yes, because instead of going to college—because I didn't think I was fit to go to college for conversation either. And I didn't know enough English, so I started from a nearby junior high school.

[00:20:15]

AB: Um-hm.

- KI: But, I got through fast, and then I transferred to a commercial high school in San Francisco. They had a high school of commerce. Mostly they teach you about business, so I attended that high school and finished.
- AB: And that was already after you had received your high school degree in Japan. This was to further your education in the English language?
- KI: Yeah, to learn English more or less.
- AB: So, you were living at Miss Smith's home when your father was working as a cook for her?
- KI: Yes.
- AB: And was she paying you any money or did you—
- KI: Maybe she did—yes, I think she paid me a minimum because I was getting—what do you call it?
- AB: Education.
- KI: Board and room.
- AB: Oh, okay, room and board, and you were also getting knowledge of the English language.
- KI: Plus, she was more like a friend than a—
- AB: She sounds like a very nice woman.
- KI: She was because that's why my folks trusted her. Otherwise, I don't think in the old days—they wouldn't let a young girl just go into a family. Besides, she was a single woman.
- AB: For your friends, were most of your friends Japanese at this point?
- KI: Well, I knew—let's see, like a couple of family's children about my age that we used to go to school. Especially, one family, even until this day—their mother just passed on at ninety-four—we kept in touch. They're still in San Francisco.
- AB: But, your friends that you would do recreational activities with, they were, basically, Japanese?
- KI: Oh, yes.

AB: See, that's what I was wondering. Or being in Miss Smith's home, I thought maybe you might be around—

KI: At that time, I did not have that much recreation opportunities because, in the old days, they didn't have girl gym or whatever for the young people. But, I started going to the church, to Buddhist church, and there I met many people that were in the same circumstances I was. We would exchange the situation we're in after school, although we didn't go to the same school.

AB: It would be another friend that you can talk with about similar situations?

KI: Yes.

AB: At this point, how would you classify your relationship with your parents? Was it one that you had a lot of freedom? Or was it that, at this point, being a young lady, that you were still under your parent's—

KI: Oh, yes. Well, in Japan, it's customary situation—you weren't free. A lady wasn't free until you were married.

AB: So, anything that you wanted to do was to be approved by your parents.

KI: That's right. And they had to know who your friends were, so most of my friends were my parent's friend's children or either the relatives, mostly.

AB: Would you say that you agreed with—was there anything that you really wanted to do at this age that your father said, “No, no, Kuni, you can't do that.”

KI: No. The only thing that I had to do was to learn what I can, so my main hope was to learn anything that I can use even after I was married.

AB: What were your plans at this part? Did you want to go back to Japan after you got an education or did you think that you wanted to stay?

KI: No, after I came back here—well, you know, I had no desire going back because I think I was just dying to come back, more or less, to be with my parents. And then, knowing that all my family was going to join me after, I didn't have anything to—

AB: Were your brothers and sisters—did they come back from Japan at this point?

KI: Yes, my brother next to me did, and then the war broke out.

AB: So, it was just the two of you here when the war broke out?

KI: The three had to stay back and finish school.

AB: Was your brother that was younger than you, was he living with your parents and going to school?

KI: After he came back?

AB: Uh-huh.

KI: He was in a situation like me. He got the same part-time job and went to school.

AB: But, he lived in your parents' home?

KI: Yes, uh-huh.

AB: Cause you didn't live in your parents' home. You lived with Miss Smith. Were your houses far apart?

KI: Oh, yes. Uh-huh. I had to take streetcars.

AB: About?

KI: About upper town to—Japanese Town is closer to downtown. It was about at least twenty minutes.

AB: But, you saw your father every day because he was at work?

KI: Oh, yes—at that time my father had changed his job.

AB: Oh, so when you were with Miss Smith, he changed jobs?

KI: Before that.

AB: Oh, before that? And where was he working?

KI: He was still a cook, but at a different home.

AB: Was there a reason why he left Miss Smith?

KI: Well, I think, uh—I don't know what it was. Maybe the situation changed.

AB: But apparently, it was in good terms if she took you in?

KI: Oh, yes. Uh-huh.

AB: So, your father was a cook in someone else's home. And then, your mother was a domestic in another person's home all in a general area, though, of affluence?

KI: Oh, yes.

AB: So, you saw your parents on a regular basis?

KI: At least twice a week, day off, and weekends. Well, weekends I'd come home, so I would stay with them.

AB: Did you find it a different setting being in Miss Smith's house, and then on the weekends going to your parent's house? Did you feel more freedom in Miss Smith's home?

KI: Well, no, because, at Miss Smith's home, the only thing I had to do is study and just look after whatever it is I have to do for her to have me around, to please her in whatever she asked me to do. But, she had had other help.

AB: And then, on the weekends, what was your role with your parents?

KI: I would come back, and then we would have a family get-together. I would attend church, meet my friends there. I was involved with the Buddhist girls.

AB: It seems that you had a happy childhood and growing up—

KI: In general. Among the five, I think I had the most because the rest were—

AB: Separated from your parents.

KI: Separated.

AB: Because a lot of other stories that I've read about, it seems that a lot of the Japanese American children had to, not only go to school, but they were working a lot. And there wasn't really the sense of freedom or leisure time, and it seems that you were exempted from that. You got to go to school, but you also got to enjoy your leisure time on the weekends.

KI: Yes, that's what it was.

AB: Was your situation different and unique from your friends? Did they have to work a lot?

KI: Well, the girlfriends that I had, we all were in the same situation. Because we had gone to school in Japan—well, nowadays, you can when you you're an adult, maybe when you finish high school—but, in those days, the only persons in our generation who was able to go to college were the ones that the parents could afford to send you. There was nothing like that. Nowadays, we can work and go to school.

AB: Like myself. (laughs)

KI: Yes, uh-huh. You don't know how fortunate you are, and people that don't take this opportunity—I adopted two boys, and the only thing I regret is that my two boys just didn't like school.

AB: Some people are like that. They are. Cause if everyone was liked—

KI: The only reason I adopted them was to get a better life for them, you know? But, if they wanted to go their own way, well, I can't help it.

AB: Um-hm. Would you say, then, that your lifestyle was economically better than other Japanese that you knew or—

[00:30:10]

KI: No. I could say that now because I hear stories of people who were brought up, even younger than I, who were brought up among seven or eight children in the family in the farm. They said they hardly wore shoes every day and all that. And I look back at my life, and I say, "My, some people really had it rough." They might have a good family life, living together with other family, but economically, as I look back, I think I was more like a princess. (laughs)

AB: As you say, you really never went without. You always had clothes.

KI: Oh, yes.

AB: You always had a roof over your head.

KI: People you call Kibei went back to Japan and came back.

AB: So, you didn't find later on after talking to people how good your situation was growing up compared to some other people. What sort of community did your family live in? And did your father play any special roles in that community? Or your mother or yourself?

KI: No, they didn't have any responsibility or volunteering because they weren't able to put the time into it. The only reason why she had to separate with the family was the one reason to work—

AB: It seems that was a good decision, and it worked out well.

KI: Well, it did until the war broke out.

AB: Until then, exactly. Okay, we'll begin our discussion about pre-war and right before the war and pre-evacuation. What were the immediate circumstances surrounding your life just prior to the war breaking out?

- KI: Well, immediate circumstances were that I was—after I finished high school, my mother was talking to this Japanese schoolteacher. I used to attend this Japanese school when I was young, and the teacher was telling her that I should go to college. But, since I was the oldest and she can't afford to send me to college, she ended up trying to tell me, since she didn't have the opportunity to do whatever she wanted when she was young—and she got married early—she wanted to send me to a tailoring school. There were many girls from out of town who used to come to San Francisco. When their season wasn't busy in their farms, these girls, they would come into town and attend summer school, six months or one year. So, I attended the sewing school.
- AB: Was this something that you wanted to do?
- KI: Well, as a girl in Japan, before they get married, all the women go to sewing school to learn how to make kimonos and tea ceremonies and flower classes.
- AB: Do you need a drink of water?
- KI: I have one. You know, I was more than glad to learn whatever I could to prepare myself for marriage.
- AB: I was going to say, going to sewing school was to prepare you for marriage. It wasn't, then, to work in that field and to make—okay, okay.
- KI: Since I found out that they were hiring Japanese girls to work in exclusive designing stores, dress stores, shops, I thought maybe I have a chance to learn a few more things. But, anyway, this is after the war. After we went out from camp and went to Chicago, why it came very handy.
- AB: Oh, good.
- KI: Because I started out learning to do alterations and tailoring some.
- AB: So, it paid off for you?
- KI: Yes.
- AB: So, you were going to this sewing school when you found out the war broke out? Is that what you were doing at the time?
- KI: Well, no, I had finished already. I was working for a private lady who sewed at home.
- AB: Oh, okay, so helping her out.

KI: I think she was from Europe the way she was talking. She was taking custom clothes, you know, children clothes, adult clothes.

AB: And you were living at your parents at this time?

KI: Yes.

AB: So, you were living with your parents at home, going to work during the day for this woman, and helping her with sewing. And then, your mother and your father, both at this time, your mother was a domestic and your father was a cook?

KI: Yes.

AB: And it was just you and your brother at home?

KI: Yes.

AB: So, you were just working—

KI: Right in Japanese Town in San Francisco.

AB: Okay, okay. Is that when you found out about the war breaking out?

KI: Yes.

AB: And what was your immediate reaction to that?

KI: Well, when you're young, you just don't get excited or anything. You just take what the orders were because this was an order.

AB: Before the president enacted the executive order for all Japanese Americans to go into internment camps, did you think that something was going to happen? Or were you guys—

KI: No, I don't think I had any inkling about that. But, when we heard that they had dropped a bomb on Hawaii, we said, "Oh, no. Well, how long is this going to last?" That was the main thing that I was concerned because our family was still separated.

AB: Oh, let me ask you one other question. Did your father own property at this time, prior to the war?

KI: No.

AB: Okay. So, you guys were renting?

KI: If he did—even if he did—I would be able to go to college. That's about the only difference. My friends had the opportunity.

AB: Okay. So, what did your family do when they first found out they were going to be moved and evacuated?

KI: Well, they just followed the orders, I guess. Because I can't remember what the reaction was, but people panicked, I'm sure, in the Japanese Town, Because I think there were a lot of things that happened. When you look back, you just don't know—I don't know, maybe the reactions were that I wasn't that, uh—

AB: Were you scared?

KI: No, I wasn't scared.

AB: Upset?

KI: Well, I was trying not to be excited, I guess. I just took it as it came. And, well, we had this Japanese American Citizens League, and they were trying to help all the Japanese people.

AB: Were there any men in the community you lived that were removed by American authorities cause—

KI: I think they were, but you know, I wasn't too knowledgeable about who was really taken because the upper-class people, the business people—we're in a different category so we didn't know anything that was going on. But, in the farm country, as I talk to my husband after I was married, his father was taken because he helped with the Japanese school and things like that, very simple things.

AB: Exactly, exactly. So, no one in your community, that you can remember, any community leaders or anything like that that were taken?

KI: I can't remember who was taken? No, I can't remember anybody.

AB: And you weren't afraid that something might happen to your father, that he might be taken or anything like that?

KI: Oh, no, nothing like that. Domestic people weren't involved, I don't think.

AB: What were your parent's reactions to this whole situation or to the evacuation?

KI: My parents—the only worry that they had was that they weren't able to send the money for communication with the family.

[00:40:10]

AB: Okay.

KI: The money happened because they had their savings in a Japanese bank—well, they had it in a Bank of America, too, but, you know, to send the money to Japan, it's easier to have it in a Japanese bank.

AB: Did anything happen to their money?

KI: I think it had to be confiscated. Not confiscated—

AB: They just put a hold on it.

KI: They couldn't send anything. Everybody's belongings had to be stopped for a while.

AB: Okay. And how many days did you guys have to prepare for the evacuation?

KI: That I can't remember. We must have had a few months to prepare.

AB: No—well, I don't know in your case, but a couple other people, it was soon thereafter. What was happening to a lot of people was that if they owned—not if they owned property, but, if they owned like cars, furniture and stuff, they were having to sell it like in a weeks' time. So, they were really losing money on it because a lot of people knew the situation in which they were in and that they were going to be evacuated so that they would, basically, take anything for it. Do you remember having to sell?

KI: We didn't own any cars. We just had a few [pieces of] furniture.

AB: Do you remember having to sell that?

KI: I don't—maybe they did because I can't remember. But, I remember packing up my own things, mainly.

AB: Did you get to take most of your things?

KI: Oh, yes, uh-huh.

AB: Because I was told that you could only take what you could carry, so if you had more than that, you couldn't take it with you.

KI: That's right, uh-huh.

AB: I have different stories of people who would drive their own cars to camp and sell it there to whomever was waiting there to buy a car for a good price.

- KI: Farming life and city life is different. City life, transportation was mostly in streetcars.
- AB: Okay. So, the four of you—it was your father and your mother, yourself and your brother. You went to—
- KI: We went to self-evacuation in Florin, outside of Sacramento.
- AB: I'm sorry, what's the name of it again?
- KI: Florin.
- AB: Oh, Florin.
- KI: F-l-o-r-i-n.
- AB: Okay.
- KI: And that's strawberry country. And the reason why we evacuated was that I had a girlfriend—my mother's friend had two daughters who were in the same situation as I was. The older sister was married just before the war, and the younger sister was still single. But, it was their mother's second marriage, so even after they were married, my mother's friend was still working in San Francisco, and the father—her husband—was hired for strawberry. So, on the weekend, she would come back, and he would come out to San Francisco once in a while.
- AB: So, was this just a relocation center up there?
- KI: No, we made a self-evacuation to their place, and from there, we went to assembly center _____ (inaudible).
- AB: Okay, were you with a lot of friends and other families that you knew then?
- KI: No, this was the only girlfriend. Well, I knew another girl. She attended the same sewing school that I did, so every time she was in San Francisco, I would see her. She's living in Montebello, right now. She is a very close friend, like a sister.
- AB: That's neat. How long were you in the assembly center?
- KI: I never figured that one out. We went in 1942. It says, May 19, 1942, and I went out of the camp, let's see, in March of 1944.
- AB: But, you weren't in Jerome yet?
- KI: We were in Jerome, and Jerome was the closest camp to Washington, D.C., I understand. So, I heard that we had a very good situation, that we were taken care

because the personnel would come down to see how everything is going. That's what I heard. And then, of course, the climate and everything else was different. Well, you could read in those books. I was reading it when I took it out a couple days ago. It wasn't really that bad because the—

AB: What was the dwellings or housing arrangements when you first got there?

KI: Well, starting from relocation or the assembly center?

AB: Let's do Jerome.

KI: Well, Jerome was all lined-up like barracks, like Army barracks, and we had a mess hall, showers.

AB: Did your family have their own private section?

KI: Yes, uh-huh. Each barracks, I think, were about four families, divided. The single persons had single barracks, separate.

AB: So, you were there for a couple of years? It was from '42—

KI: From assembly center to relocation—because assembly center, we were there five months.

AB: Oh, okay. Were you with any other people that you knew in Jerome, or did you just make friends when you got there?

KI: Fortunately, when we were in Jerome, we moved in with the people we got to know at the assembly center. So, I knew a few people that we got to work together _____ (inaudible).

AB: What exactly were the roles that your parents played in Jerome? Did they work? What were their responsibilities there? Your father, did he cook?

KI: I think they were just waiting to see when they were going to start releasing, you know, for people to go out and seek their own lives from the camp. Relocation after staying in the camp for a couple years—

AB: No, in camp! Did your parents work while they were in camp?

KI: Oh, in camp? No, they didn't work at all.

AB: What did they do for income then?

KI: Well, the government gave us clothing and food. And then, I can't remember whether they gave out spending money. But anyway—

- AB: Your father didn't work as a cook while in camp?
- KI: No, no, he didn't. I think they were enjoying the rest period. (laughs)
- AB: Oh, because your father was a little bit older?
- KI: Yes.
- AB: About how old was he when he went into camp?
- KI: I think he must have been about—let's see fifty—
- AB: Do you know when he was born?
- KI: When I was born, it was 1919. He was about forty.
- AB: He was about forty then?
- KI: Yes.
- AB: So, he was about sixty-something then? Early sixties. And then, he took it as, more or less, a rest period?
- KI: He was waiting to go outside.
- AB: He just kept waiting to get released?
- KI: Yes, uh-huh.
- AB: Did your mother work when she was in camp?
- KI: No.
- AB: She didn't work either.
- KI: I think she went to learn English. (laughs)
- AB: Oh, she took advantage of the opportunities.
- KI: The opportunity to do whatever she wants.
- AB: Did you or your brother work when you were in camp?
- KI: Uh-huh.
- AB: What did you do?

KI: I worked in the hospital.

AB: Oh, in the hospital?

KI: Um-hm. That's what I started out at the assembly center. So, I worked in the hospital, and then later on, I worked at the welfare department doing some operation and sewing—

[00:50:03]

AB: Was this while in camp or after?

KI: In camp. They had tailors who were willing to work for \$19 and had some workers on hand. People who were ready to go out and seek more work, when they needed clothes, they asked the tailor to make it.

AT: So, at this point, your brother was working also?

KI: No, he was working for something else. I can't remember.

AT: But, the two of you were working while in camp and your parents weren't?

KI: Yes.

AB: Did this give you any sort of economic advantage over your parents or did you willingly share your income?

KI: You know, I can't remember that part too well. They must have had some type of income.

AB: Or did they have their money that they had just saved up?

KI: Maybe that's what it was because in camp, actually, they gave you just enough clothing to get by. I can't even remember what they gave out. But according to that, it says they gave out clothing, so they must have gave out underwear, socks, or whatever that we can use.

AB: We visited Manzanar, and in the beginning, some of the people who were interned where allowed to go into the towns and make purchases.

KI: We did, mostly, mail order.

AB: Oh, mail order?

KI: That's the first time I ever heard about mail orders. In the city, you don't know about anything like that. So, we used to do Sears mail order.

- AB: And how was your relationship with your parents when you were in camp? Was it still the same?
- KI: I think that we enjoyed everything because we didn't have any responsibility; we just did whatever we wanted, more or less, whatever the facility provided.
- AB: Was there a lot of recreation going on at that time? Because some of them had baseball—
- KI: Very minimum. I can't remember seeing any movies, but we had some speakers some from the YMCA and _____ (inaudible).
- AB: This may sound absurd, but would you consider it a happy time where you were going about your life in a leisurely manner and your parents had a time to rest?
- KI: Well, that's what they said. Maybe it was enough for them to rest because all these Issei people came to America and just worked. When the children were just about through high school, they would become help, really a help to their family. And then, they had to go to camp, so I think they deserved the good rest. They did what they wanted to do that they missed because most of the ladies, they got married young. For us, I think we had a very carefree life, but, of course, we didn't know which way to look.
- AB: So, you and your brother were working. Did you enjoy working in camp?
- KI: Well, I guess when we were there, we enjoyed what we can do. That's what I would have to say because there was no choice.
- AB: Uh-huh. Would you say that your experience in camp was a little more beneficial for your parents because they had the chance to rest, but it inhibited your plans?
- KI: I think for the younger people it did because many people must have looked forward to just continuing whatever they wanted to do and then seek out their careers.
- AB: Who was in charge or given responsibilities while in camp? From your observation, was it people your age or the Nisei generation or was it people of your parents age?
- KI: The people of my parents age because they had more experience in whatever they did. Like I was reading in the book over there, and most of the people who were able to find a _____ (inaudible) jobs and provide them the things that they knew, would come from the people who had the knowledge of it.
- AB: But, some of the things that I've read—and every situation is different, of course, and this is only applicable to some of the people—but some of the information that I read is that some of the American authorities gave power and responsibilities to the

- younger Nisei because they spoke better English, they were more Americanized, and the American authorities trusted them more. Did you see any of that in camp?
- KI: Well, like I said, I come from a different community so I can't say. People from Fresno Assembly Center were, more or less, business people who had businesses in Fresno city or farming people that had farms in that area. So, most of the people I was involved with are in the Fresno Assembly Center book. We could see what they did, but the younger generation who had schooling, a few—like pharmacists, people working for schoolteachers, and things like that—they were very aggressive.
- AB: The younger ones?
- KI: Yes, the Nisei. They did what they knew. They contributed to whatever they knew? Yeah.
- AB: Would you say that in camp—from your recollection—that more of the Nisei worked?
- KI: There was a period where many Isseis were free with the children, so they were starting to enjoy their life, too. So, especially in camp, they didn't have to look after the children. You would just go to the mess hall, and they were fed. So, they did what they wanted, the Issei people, I think. The Nisei, they were limited, but they did what they can.
- AB: Were the Nisei—or let's just use you specifically, were you still under the authority and responsibility of your father at this time?
- KI: I would say yes.
- AB: You would say yes?
- KI: I would say yes because, even if I wanted to leave camp with my girlfriend—who lives in Montreal—she left first because she had a brother living in Wyoming, and he never went into camp. So, she had the chance to leave early to see what she can find, but I had to stay behind. And then, my father went out first, since he could communicate with the Caucasian people. He wasn't afraid to leave. _____ (inaudible).
- AB: Where did he go to look for work?
- KI: He went—see, the thing is, they would have some Help Wanted situations that they can seek out. And he went out close to Illinois—I think it was someplace out of Illinois. Bourbon? He went to this home to cook. So, that was his first step. And, after he got settled there, and, when he had time to go into the city to look for a place to call the family, he called us.

AB: Was the war over at this point or were you just free—

KI: It wasn't quite over yet.

AB: You were just free to go because—

KI: Before leaving the camp, my father left from Jerome, but, in the meantime, I think things were slowing down before the war was ending. They wanted to close Jerome so we had to move into the Rohwer Center. So, my mother and I, at that time—my brother had left with friends, I think, so he was living, I think, in Chicago, too.

AB: Was that against your parent's wishes that he go with his friends?

KI: I don't think so because we can't all go look for work at the same time. So, one by one we sort of depended on each other.

[01:00:10]

AB: So, your father was in the Illinois area, and your brother went with his friends someplace else.

KI: Yes.

AB: Did you really sense being controlled when you were in Jerome? It sounds it was kind of a rather liberal environment that if you wanted—

KI: As far as going out to shop outside the camp.

AB: You could or could not?

KI: No.

AB: You could not? Okay.

KI: Like you said, you heard somebody going shopping—I think certain people were working for the co-op stores because we did have the co-op stores in camp, so they were going out to purchase—

AB: Supplies and stuff, okay.

KI: In a way, we were controlled, yes, but we had to make the most of it. Whenever you get near that fence, you get shot, _____ (inaudible), so we never—

AB: You didn't observe any—like there was a riot in Manzanar. Did you observe anything like that at Jerome?

KI: They had the four corner lights.

AB: But, was there any rioting or—

KI: Rioting? I can't recall that.

AB: It sounds like it was somewhat of a peaceful—

KI: Certain camps must have had because they had these people who were against us, the no- no people, they called it. Some camps, they did have it.

AB: Was your camp predominately Issei or Nisei?

KI: Oh, I think it was about the same all over.

AB: Well, because—

KI: If I can recall, I was thinking we had the Jerome reunion, here, not too long ago but I wasn't able to go. They had two reunions. But, the only reunion I went to was when the Florin people, who were self-evacuated, those people came over here close to Knott's Berry Farm?

AB: Um-hm.

KI: We had a reunion there.

AB: That must have been nice.

KI: But, they're all farm people.

AB: All farm people, okay.

KI: But, there were some professional people.

AB: Okay. Because what I was thinking is that, you know, if you're—[recording paused] Oh, I know what I was going to say. Going into your camp in Jerome, if the Issei were there and most of their children were of adult age, did a lot of their adult age children not go to camp?

KI: No, everybody living on the coast had to go to camp.

AB: Because, you know, how if they had a self-evacuation, where if you relocated yourself—

KI: Still we were in the area around it—we had to evacuate from there. Even people in Oregon and Washington, they had to evacuate, too.

AB: Okay, so you had a couple of years in camp. Your father left. He went to Illinois. Did you and your mother follow him and go there?

KI: Yes.

AB: So, you two went there, and he was working as a cook at this time?

KI: Yes. After we were all together, he changed his job in the city.

AB: Okay. And what did he did then?

KI: He was still working for domestic.

AB: And was your mother working at this time?

KI: After we went out, we found jobs for ourselves.

AB: And that's when you said your sewing experience paid off?

KI: Yeah.

AB: And were you making a lot more money at this point?

KI: Oh, no, because you have to start from the bottom. (laughs) Whatever you do, you have to start from the bottom.

AB: But, it was still more money than what you were making in camp?

KI: Oh, naturally. You said that we were making \$19, but that was only the professionals, like schoolteachers or doctors or, well, people with degrees that went to college. People who didn't, well, they'd get paid \$16, and I see the least was \$12. So I don't know whether I was paid \$16 or \$12. (laughs) I can't even remember that. (laughs)

AB: Did you spend most of it or did you save it?

KI: I don't think we had anything to save.

AB: Did your parents have any money when they left camp, or did they use up all their savings? Were things hard?

KI: They couldn't spend all of what they saved because the food and board was provided, so whatever they had saved, they couldn't spend too much, unless you mailed ordered. So, whatever clothes we took in—

- AB: So, they still had some money when they left? So, when the three of you were in Illinois, you were working, your mother was working, and your father was working, and you were doing your sewing, at this time, right?
- KI: Yes.
- AB: Where did you go from there?
- KI: Well, I didn't stay too long in Chicago because the war ended. And he came back—I met my husband before he went overseas.
- AB: Where did you meet him?
- KI: In camp.
- AB: You met your husband in camp?
- KI: When he came to visit.
- AB: Oh, he came to visit. He came to visit whom? I'm sorry.
- KI: Me.
- AB: Oh, so you knew each other beforehand?
- KI: The thing was I met his sergeant friend before that. He came to visit with someone with I grew up with in San Francisco, and the fellow was going to see his folks in Rohwer.
- AB: Uh-huh.
- KI: And this fellow was going to see his folks in Rohwer, too. But the family that I knew—that I grew-up with, he wanted to stop in and see us—this was in Texas. He was living in Texas. So, these two fellows came and dropped in and saw us.
- AB: So, this was your husband, Charlie's, sergeant and you didn't know him, but you knew the other boy that he was with?
- KI: Two fellows and this one fellow was going to be sent overseas, not the one that I grew-up with. The sergeant was. So, when they were in Mississippi, before shipping out, you know, going across to Europe, the closest camp girls (chuckles)—USO, they called it. Well, the camp had corralled some single girls to entertain the boys. The boys would split the bus bill, (laughs) bus fare to bring the girls for night of social. So, one night—well, there were several trips. I went one night—
- AB: Did they have to twist your arm to go? (laughs)

KI: Well, I really didn't want to go, but there were so many people that went out to the city already. Students who wanted to finish their education, so whoever was left, (laughs) I think the bunch of girls—so they were recruiting. I'm kind of on the bashful side, I guess. Girls that I knew were going, so I went. Here I saw this sergeant that I met before, and he was right under my husband in the same headquarters. So, he introduced me to my husband, and ever since then he wanted to correspond with me. (laughs)

AB: Was it love at first sight?

KI: I guess. I didn't want to marry a soldier. (laughs) I never wanted to marry a soldier and a doctor, I always told myself. Here I am. I ended up with a soldier.

AB: For him, it was love at first sight, for you it was, "Go to med school and then call me," right?

KI: No, I was being patriotic, I think. Because I couldn't break his heart, so I had to keep his hope up. (laughs) So, after I went to Chicago, I kept up the correspondence.

AB: And how long did you guys correspond?

KI: Until he came home. His family was back in California. [They were] already over here in Santa Ana with farming. He stopped at _____ (inaudible) camp just to see me. (laughs)

[01:10:21]

AB: Oh!

KI: Anyway, he wanted to get engaged, so we got engaged. Then he wanted to get married right then. I said, "Oh, no. No way." (laughs)

AB: What did your parents say?

KI: They knew because they met him.

AB: Did they want you to get married? Or did they say, "Kuni, whatever you want, that's fine with us."

KI: That's right.

AB: They said—

KI: Well, they trusted me, I guess. (laughs) Well, before he went overseas, he came once to meet me in camp. That's what it was. A little short—I think that was the time that he couldn't go anyplace else. I kind of think he did—oh, yes, he did come to our camp because—oh, no—

AB: He was in Texas, and he came—

KI: Texas. That's the time he couldn't go see his family in Arizona.

AB: Okay.

KI: There was a time that even GIs couldn't go in there. So, he said, well, he was going to New York to see his friend, one of the fellows from right here in Santa Ana who went to Cal Tech. He was working in New York already. They had to show where they were going, so he showed the person that he got the pass.

AB: But, he didn't go to New York?

KI: Well, he did.

AB: Oh.

KI: He went all over, wherever he could. But, he did drop into town to see me.

AB: I was going to say he might have said he was going to New York, but he took a detour to Jerome.

KI: He won't stay in our camp because there's no place to stay.

AB: Oh, I know. Just to see you. That's so cute. (laughs)

KI: So yeah, that's the story, that's how our correspondence was. (laughs)

AB: We were just talking about you Charlie [Ishii]¹.

KI: (laughs)

CI: My ear must have been hurting.

AB: Oh, it was good. (laughs) We were just talking about when the two of you met—

CI: The great state of Mississippi.

KI: You were in Texas.

AB: No, Texas when she was bused down to one of the functions—

CI: Well, they came from Arkansas to Camp Shelby—

¹ Charlie Ishii, O.H. 1757, Center for Oral and Public History.

AB: Uh-huh.

CI: —from USO

AB: Um-hm.

KI: But, you came to stay in our camp, too.

CI: Yeah, after that.

KI: Oh, that was from Mississippi then.

CI: Yeah.

AB: And you were supposed to be in New York. (laughs)

CI: See, my, supply sergeant went to Arkansas _____ (inaudible).

KI: The sergeant that I was telling you about. _____ (inaudible).

AB: And she told me how he invited her down to one of the dances—

KI: No, the USO.

AB: *The USO* invited her down to the dances, and she saw the sergeant and then he was under you.

CI: My supply sergeant met her before in camp, and he introduced me.

KI: But, I didn't know he was going to be there.

CI: No?

KI: No. (laughs)

CI: Because they gave us so many tickets, and then I didn't give one to my supply sergeant. He came bitching to me. I said, "Hey, what the heck do you think I'm a first sergeant for? Let's go. I got two tickets."

KI: But, he ended up as a best man because he settled in Chicago, too.

AB: Oh, so you did get married in Chicago?

KI: Well, yes, he had to come back home. He had to come back home after we were engaged, and then he had to come back before his crop started because his family used to raise crops, asparagus crop.

AB: Uh-huh.

KI: So, we had to get married in January, the worst part in January.

AB: Oh.

CI: But, it didn't snow.

AB: Oh, it didn't?

KI: *It did*, remember?

CI: No.

KI: It was a nice day, but it did snow before that.

CI: Before that, but not on the wedding time.

AB: Her mother left Japan because she wanted to avoid the frost, and she wound up in Chicago. (laughs)

CI: But, the coldest place I've been to Europe—I've been to the United States coast to coast, from south and north end. You know what's the coldest place?

AB: For me it was Chicago.

CI: No, the coldest place is Texas.

AB: Oh, really?

KI: The panhandle—

CI: The panhandle of Texas. I don't care how much clothes you wear, it goes right through you.

AB: Oh, wow.

CI: Our honeymoon was in '42, '43.

AB: Um-hm.

CI: I tell you, I've been through all that snow in Europe. Nothing like this.

AB: Wow, for me it was Chicago.

KI: The wind is terrible.

- AB: Oh, it was horrible. Horrible, yes. (laughs) Okay, now we're going to talk about you some more Charlie. (laughs)
- CI: Good-bye.
- AB: Bye-bye, Charlie. So, he wanted to get married right away, but you didn't want to get married right away, correct?
- KI: At least, I was looking forward to a June wedding like any of the young girls, but he said—you know? He calls it a crop day.
- CI: I heard that. You know why she didn't?
- AB: Why?
- CI: Because she didn't want to be a widow.
- AB: No, (laughs) she wanted to wait for warmer weather.
- CI: I was going overseas, see? She didn't want to be a widow, that's all.
- AB: Oh, he left right away?
- KI: Oh, he left right away, sure.
- AB: Aw.
- CI: Now you get the point?
- AB: (laughs) Bye, Charlie.
- KI: My point was over the air mail.
- AB: So, it was okay by your parents—or whose decision was it? You said they left it up to you to go be married? That was no problem with them?
- KI: No, because we weren't living apart. If I were away from my parents, they wouldn't know anything going on, but, when they came back, why, we stayed over a couple of days, and we came back to California. Then we set the date to get married in January, so they could start working with their crops in February.
- AB: Did your mother stay in Chicago?
- KI: Oh, yeah. They stayed a couple of years after. And then, finally, they came back to California.

AB: Did they settle near you and Charlie—

KI: San Francisco.

AB: Oh, they settled in San Francisco? You know what is very unique about your situation is that—like I said, very unique and very advantageous for yourself—is that there wasn't a lot control in your family. Your parents raised you in a very good manner. And sure they had the final say, but they really trusted your judgment.

KI: Well, most of the girls in our age, well, they were already _____ (inaudible) because they had the Japanese culture background. And most of the girls were either—some of these girls I met, they were fixed marriage arrangement, or they didn't really have courting dates, like nowadays, like six months or whatever.

AB: Six years.

KI: Or however many years. Yes, uh-huh.

AB: Some of them can't get the men to marry them. (laughs)

KI: In those days, well, they set the date, and that was it. The parents agreed to each other. It's more like arrangement, more or less. Still, you had your freedom to choose who you like.

AB: But yours wasn't. You mean arranged in a sense that your parents would say, "You cannot marry someone of this type."

KI: My girlfriend would meet somebody—well, parents of both sides would meet together, and then, if they didn't agree, they could always say, I don't think it will be arranged.

AB: Did you see any of your fellow Nisei girlfriends who sort of backed away from that arrangement and said, "No, this is who I want to marry?" This is what I want to do.

KI: Well, the only time I knew was—well, I had arrangements, too, in San Francisco when I was still—this is before the war. But, one of my girlfriends who was married—these two sisters that we evacuated, self-evacuation, with, the oldest sister's husband's friend introduced us. He was a salesman so he used to go around from San Francisco, to California, to Stockton. I don't think he came as far as L.A. Anyway, he was a salesman for a Japanese firm—imports / exports—he used to meet different people. They were looking for girls for their sons and this and that. He asked me to meet this fellow. I said, "Well, why not?" (chuckles) It's an open invitation.

AB: But, you could say no if you wanted to?

[01:20:02]

KI: That's right.

AB: Did you know any girls whose parents said, "This is who you're going to marry" and the girl said, "No, I'm not."

KI: Not among my girlfriends.

AB: Not among your girlfriends?

KI: No. Because my friends used to go around with my Buddhist friends. We were all in a bunch wherever we went to _____ (inaudible) and whatnot. They married somebody that they liked.

AB: Would you say that your friends were in a liberal family situation, like yourself, where their parents weren't very controlling over them? Or they were when they were younger and then, as they got older and more—

KI: Well, at least they were past twenty-one. I think they knew how they controlled their children when they were young. And after they were out of school and working on their own—after they met the other side, why, I'm sure they had their children have their own home.

AB: Do you think that a lot of the freedoms came because of economic freedoms because you were able to work?

KI: Because of being Americanized, I think.

AB: Um-hm.

KI: They were open-minded, a little bit, although, they still had control. They still looked into the background of the family before they chose their mate, before the war that was. And, after the war, it was something different because everybody met somebody from different places, but they were always sure to ask somebody who used to live there or heard of them—

AB: To know something about them.

KI: Because when he came to our camp, we went in the mess hall, and he met this family—the two sisters. We were lined up in the mess hall so we could get our food, and he was surprised because they used to farm right in the same area. (laughs)

AB: Oh, really? Oh, how funny. That's neat.

KI: They made a self-evacuation near Fresno, too. That's why they were evacuated to the assembly center and then to Jerome. And here he came to Jerome and saw these two

sisters, the younger sister and the older sister who was married already before the war.

AB: But, he wasn't interested in her. He was interested in Kuni. (laughs)

KI: So, this younger sister, she became a widow marrying this, what do you call it? _____ (inaudible) who lost his leg in the Army overseas.

AB: Oh, they amputated his leg?

KI Amputated. Anyway, well, she knew him before they were living out this way. But anyway, since she was single, she told me at the mess hall, "Well, you don't have to worry about him. He's a nice fellow. You know that?" (laughs) And then, all of a sudden, her sister—she was quite older than I was. She's in the eighties, now. But anyway, she told me because—even from Fresno Assembly Center, my parents used to live in the same block that we used to live.

AB: Um-hm.

KI: Because every block they had different people come. Usually, it's comprised of the same people from the same community. This family—the married couple who had two children already, She was from our block. She went into the assembly center early so she had a choice.

AB: So, that's how you found out a little bit about Charlie?

KI: Yes, it's a small world—

AB: It is.

KI: —when you really think about those things.

AB: Just from your observation, how many children were in Charlie's family?

KI: There was an older brother and two sisters.

AB: Older brother and two sisters. And they all worked doing farming?

KI: The oldest brother was married already, before the war, just before the war.

AB: Did he go into camp?

KI: Oh, yes.

AB: They all did except your husband, Charlie?

KI: They were taken to Arizona, and then they went to Colorado, they made an early leave. What do you call it? Early leave, and the whole family went, parents, the brother. They all went to Colorado, and they found a place to live. I think eventually—I don't know whether they leased or bought their place—anyway, they went into chicken farming, raised chickens.

AB: Your parents, when they left, they went back into the San Francisco area, and you came down to Southern California to live with Charlie, right?

KI: Um-hm.

AB: Did you still have much communication with your parents after camp and during this time?

KI: Oh, yes.

AB: A lot of communications still?

KI: Then, you know, I could make long distance, but I hesitated because—in Japanese culture, once you get married, you married out. And, in those days, you didn't have the capacity—we built a small garage house to live away from the brother because right after the war, everything was so combined. So, we lived in the brother's yard where they had the property back in Fountain Valley. After that, we built a home in another piece they were on. When we first got married, we had to all share a lot of things, bathrooms. (laughs)

AB: Yes, a lot of people did that at the beginning of their marriage.

KI: So, I was able to communicate with the telephone with my folks. Yes, uh-huh.

AB: But, you felt a little guilty inside because I'm married now, I shouldn't be—but you had such a good relationship with you parents. You probably—

KI: And I was writing letters, and what not about the situation, because I had never experienced any farm.

AB: Were you sad in the beginning when you got married and moved away?

KI: Well, my husband told me before I was married, "Our farming is different from other small farmers." Because they said woman don't actually have to go out to the field to work like strawberry growers. I knew what strawberry growers were. _____ (inaudible).

AB: Because those are the people that I was thinking of where everybody was working, the children didn't have much freedom, the parents needed them to work, and then the parents were the ones—or, you know, the father was the head of the economic unit.

- The children didn't have their own separate money, but you, all along, were making your own money. You had sort of a semi-independence economically.
- KI: Yes.
- AB: However, responsibly and how you acted—
- KI: Until I left.
- AB: —you were still under your father's thumb, sort of speak. But, not in a controlling manner, just in a respectful, I know what's best—
- KI: That's right.
- AB: That's neat. When did—or did your—was it another brother and two sisters that were in Japan come over?
- KI: Oh, right after the war.
- AB: Right afterwards they came over?
- KI: After the war they were able to come.
- AB: Did they go to Chicago—
- KI: Well, relocation authorities were able to release them because they started out releasing people who were stranded out there, the children and the students, you know, who were separated from their families?
- AB: Okay, so they came back and lived with your parents in Illinois and then moved to San Francisco?
- KI: Uh-huh. And then—well, my other brother, he was in the service. He was taken to Japan in the service because he had—
- AB: Oh.
- KI: So, he had the clearance.
- AB: I was going to say, did they let him over here because of that?
- KI: Yeah, because the parents were here. He was born here in San Francisco.
- AB: Oh, that's right. Did he have dual-citizenship?

KI: Well, you see, in order to go to Japanese school, in Japan, you have to have a citizenship to say that you reside there and whatnot. So, my parents had to put a lean into it. It's not like a public school in America. Not everybody could attend. You have to say where you belong and all that.

[01:30:08]

AB: I didn't go to public school out here. I went to private school all the way through. But, I know the public ones were, if you are of the age, you go and that's it.

KI: Because, even when you start going to high school, you have to pay tuition, too.

AB: Oh, really?

KI: Oh, yes. We did. I don't know about the city type school, but we had different—well, over here, too, you had the city—well, not the high school, but in Japan they did have that type. They didn't have co-eds. It was all girls' high school or boys' high school.

AB: When the other children came here, how was their relationship with your parents being away from them for so long?

KI: I think they were glad because they had gone through so much hardship in Japan. Especially, my two younger sisters—well, one was married. I think, in a way, my aunt, sort of, forced my other sister to get married to this fellow because he was the only child in the family. Well, in Japan, you listen to the peers. You know? Well, if everything looked fine, My parents would say, "Well, okay." So, I don't think she had much to say when she was married.

AB: Did she come over here, then, with her husband?

KI: Oh, yes. And, she came with two children.

AB: Okay.

KI: But, she was able to come.

AB: Okay, but your parents said, "If your aunt and uncle think that this gentleman is okay to marry, then we'll go ahead and give you the okay?"

KI: Yes, that's right.

AB: But, she really didn't want to do it, you don't think?

KI: Well, I think that maybe she wanted to; otherwise, she wouldn't have gotten married.

AB: She could have said, no?

KI: She could have stayed in Japan if she wanted to—[stayed]single—and married somebody else. But in Japan, until recently, there was no love—I mean, unless you get married on your own. Those days, in the early days after the war, still, the peers had the responsibility. Especially, when my sister had my folks over there under _____ (inaudible). They had the responsibility.

AB: And then, your brother came over here. Did he live with your parents?

KI: Yes. And then, he found work. He used to do to night school; I was here already. I think my mother felt very strong about learning English first because she was very young, but she didn't know any better, so she just tried to make up for it, whatever she missed. Even to my sister—my sister came when my parents were still in—my youngest sister, we were about nine years different—she was still about three years old when she went to Japan.

AB: Oh, yeah.

KI: She went to high school in Chicago.

AB: Okay. And your parents stayed up in San Francisco the whole time?

KI: Except for the time they were in camp and Chicago.

AB: And Chicago, that's right. And then, when you brought your mother down here to live in L.A., into Los Angeles?

KI: Well, my mother, yes—well, when they first came back to California, they stayed here for a few—I don't know whether a couple months or so. But, the situation in the city from L.A. and San Francisco is so different—

AB: It still is nowadays.

KI: Transportation is the main thing. They couldn't very well get to work easy like they did in San Francisco. San Francisco, you know, is very easy. Well, they lived there all their lives. So, they moved from end to end; they didn't get lost.

AB: And economically, they were okay after the war?

KI: Oh, yes, yes—[recording paused]

AB: Go ahead, I'm sorry.

KI: People in San Francisco, they were experienced in the pre-war days, you know, people who worked, they were genuine people that knew their business. But after the

- war, a lot of people said they knew how to do domestic cooks and whatnot, when they really didn't know how to cook fancy food and whatnot. Of course, maybe the people after the war lived different, too, not like before the war.
- AB: I was going to say, how did your community in San Francisco change? Do you know, from what your parents told you? Did they go back to where they lived before?
- KI: Well, when they first went back, they just had a room in Japanese Town. They rented a room in Japanese Town, a hotel or someplace. And then, on a day off, on a weekend, my father and my mother would get together. My sister got married in Chicago, and so she didn't come back to San Francisco.
- AB: Did your parents ever tell you what the community life was like and how it changed?
- KI: I'm sure every place was the same; wherever you went, different people were living where you used to live. Everything was so dilapidated, you know, when you came back. Especially, when my parents came—before they came back, we went to San Francisco to take a trip, and I went to see my girlfriend. Going to San Francisco, going to Monterey, Carmel, and you know, drive. We didn't have any family, so we did things leisurely. Things were so dirty. And I'm sure just like when the farmers—when my in-laws came back, with the brother, wife—
- AB: They had land to come back to though, right?
- KI: Yes. Well, they had forty acres to start out with.
- AB: Oh, wow.
- KI: Forty acres and the twenty acres with the two boys names.
- AB: Because they were Nisei and the parents couldn't technically own the land?
- KI: Well, the parents couldn't own the land so when the children were of age, they could only put it in their names. But, the house was only on one land, on the twenty acre land, so we built our house with his own hands and a carpenter, on a forty acre piece. (laughs)
- AB: Oh, wow. He didn't make you do any of the work, did he?
- KI: Oh, I wouldn't do anything. (laughs)
- AB: Tell me if this is personal, but did you take the relationship with your parents of you having a lot of freedom and being able to do what you wanted, and not being under someone's control, did you take that over into your marriage and say, "Oh, I'm not helping. I don't need to do this." You know what I mean?

KI: Well, that's the funny part because his parents—I mean, my father-in-law was very—

AB: Domineering?

KI: Very domineering, and he comes from a part of Japan—I don't know. I would say from a Samurai era, although he was raised as a farmer's son. But, he was the oldest of the eight children, so he had a lot of responsibilities. So, when he came out to America, my husband's father had all that responsibility on his head. So, in back of his mind, he had nothing but work and make money and send it to his parents. I think that's the difference from my parents because I never heard my parents saying that. Because, of course, my father didn't have no parents; he lost them when he was young. And he lost his only brother, his youngest brother, when his younger brother was nineteen. He was on a merchant ship, too, in San Diego, and he died right there. He's buried in a cemetery in San Diego.

AB: Oh.

KI: So, it's been so long ago, so I never had any background to hear something like that. But, when I came to this family, why, when the season came, my mother-in-law was out there working. We had asparagus. The men would go out with workers and bring the asparagus back into the shed or the barn.

AB: Did you work?

KI: Well, when we got busy, yes. We had to pitch in, but we didn't get paid because just the head of the family are getting paid. And we had to make our living from the monthly payment they gave, and the rest they made, what do you call it? A foundation to buy more land, to buy equipment.

AB: Oh, okay. So, his parents gave you and Charlie an allowance every month—

KI: Well, the three of them did. The three of them were doing the same.

[01:40:37]

AB: Oh, okay—

KI: They all got their allowances.

AB: Okay. And you were used to doing work and getting paid your own money.

KI: That's right.

AB: Did that bother you at all?

- KI: Well, it did, yes, because I didn't have any spending money. And it was so funny because I was starting to put down all this expense in this little diary. But, you know, so many years passed by. We didn't have any family—I says, “Here we spend nothing but food and clothes. Just about what your spending.” (laughs) I says, “Why should I put all this amount down?” So, I stopped putting down after so many years. But, after farming got better and better—
- AB: I'm sorry, did you say you stopped working after—because you said, “Why am I working?”
- KI: No, we were working, but there was a time when they didn't pay us. I forgot when they started paying us, but they did give us spending money. They started because I think we started—my sister-in-law—we started complaining.
- AB: Complaining? I was going to say. Well, because you were used to the freedoms that you had with your parents and then also being in camp. Economically, you were used to having your own money. And now you were working, you were like, I need a little bit of my own money—
- KI: That's right. Farming is a little different, I think. It's not like living in the city. Because most of the food comes from your backyard, grow a vegetable garden, and whatnot.
- AB: But still, it was that sense of—
- KI: Sense of having a little spending money. Uh-huh, yes. So, I forgot how long I had to go without it. For eight years, we didn't have any children. And then, I said, “Well, being a farmer's wife and not having a family is kind of sad,” because I was so used to having children all around me. My cousins in Japan—and I was about the oldest. I had another girl cousin, my mother's oldest sister's daughter. She got ill, and she died at nineteen years. We were the same age. So, after Shibi was gone, I was about the oldest among the cousins. Because my mother was the third in the family and her—the oldest sister, the next brother—he didn't get married until my mother got married.
- AB: Okay.
- KI: So, I was kind of lost. Well, anyway—
- AB: And then you adopted—
- KI: No, I couldn't be without any children, so I says to my husband, “You know—” This was in the fifties—and I says after years, “You know, I hear as a Japanese family we can adopt.” So, I went and tried to adopt. You don't think it's really going to turn out. I sent in to Children's Home Society, made the application, and within three months, I got an okay. (laughs) They had a baby for me. (laughs)

AB: Oh, how fun.

KI: We went clear up to Berkley to see him.

AB: Hm, what's his name?

KI: James.

AB: James. And then, you had another one?

KI: Yeah, Roger.

AB: Were they brothers?

KI: No.

AB: Oh, okay.

KI: Roger. We picked him up from L.A.

AB: In, L.A., how fun. And you told me you had a boring life. You said your life was simple. Is that what you tried to tell me, Kuni?

KI: Well, it is. (laughs) It's different, but, you know, everything is so—it's not like people, farmer's daughter going into the camp, just going out from the camp, and going out with the family.

AB: But, in all honesty, Kuni, you seem like you had a very, very happy life. Very content; not all this glamour and things like that. But just very, just, very—

KI: Well, very satisfying—

AB: And very happy within yourself.

KI: Although I did hate to marry a farmer, I didn't do bad at all compared to the other families I see. There's always the better ones and the bad ones. (laughs)

AB: Well, you're a very attractive woman, no wonder—

KI: I don't know about that—

AB: *Yes!*

KI: No, but it was funny because, when you're out in Chicago, we—my girlfriend used to live with her brother. And girlfriends, all the single people—about five people used to live in the same apartment. So, they would always get together, and they would ask me to come over on the weekends and have a good time with them. And then,

- you know, sometimes these fellows would ask me to go to the movies and this and that. My girlfriend says, "You know, he wanted to marry you, but he says she's too good for me." (laughs)
- AB: I told you. I told you! You told me your round about age. I never, never would have guessed it. Never! Oh, your skin is beautiful.
- KI: Oh, no.
- AB: Seriously. *Seriously.*
- KI: I think I was very fortunate. But, you know, it's a funny thing, because when I was born, my father had this very educated man from Japan who married on the northern tip of Honchu, the coolest part of Japan.
- AB: Lots of frostbite. (laughs)
- KI: He was single, but anyway, he knew a great more knowledge than my father did. I think he went to school a little further than my father. And, when I was born, he told my father how to name me, helped him to find a name for me, and then he says I'm going to be a very fortunate girl, a happy girl and all that. My mother used to tell me that when I was growing up. (laughs) All these things, you know, they come back to you when you look back.
- AB: Was your mother a pretty woman? Do you look like her?
- KI: Well, when I came back from Japan and we used to ride in the street cars to go shopping, the streetcar fellow would say, "I thought you were sisters." (laughs) She was shorter than I was and petite, too. (laughs)
- AB: I told you. Okay, is there anything else that you would like to add or anything about your experiences?
- KI: Well, you're mainly asking me about the camp life—
- AB: And your family and your family life that revolved around it—
- KI: When I look back, I tell myself everything was for my own good to look out and seek and I guess that's what I did.
- AB: Cause had you not been there, you wouldn't met Charlie. (laughs)
- KI: That's right. I did have suitors in camp, too. (laughs)
- AB: Oh, I'm sure. Kuni, I'm looking at you, I'm sure you had plenty of suitors. (laughs)

KI: No, not plenty, but they were—the Issei ladies that they wanted to put me and this other couple together.

AB: And not of them were doctors, you said, “No!”

KI: No, I just didn’t care for this fellow. It’s funny, when you get old and look back, the people that you’re interested in, they’re not interested in you. (laughs)

AB: That always does seem to happen with most.

KI: You haven’t gone through that yet.

AB: No, no, unfortunately.

KI: I was married at twenty-six.

AB: At twenty-six.

KI: Nowadays, twenty-six is young.

AB: Yes.

KI: Because my son got married after thirty.

AB: Oh, I think it’s smarter to wait. I really do think it is. You know, I’m going to go ahead and turn this off. Is that okay?

KI: Sure.

AB: So, you don’t have anything else that you want to add?

KI: No.

AB: Are you sure? Thank you, thank you from the bottom of my heart, Kuni. It’s been wonderful.

END OF INTERVIEW