

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with JAMES OTSUKA

Interviewed

By

Stephen Gould

On February 27, 2005

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NARRATOR: JAMES OTSUKA
INTERVIEWER: Stephen Gould
DATE: February 27, 2005
LOCATION: Westminster, California
PROJECT: Japanese American

SG: Today is February twenty-seventh, Sunday, and I am interviewing Jimmy Otsuka at 11:12 in the morning, and we are in Westminster. This is his mother's house, and I am interviewing Jimmy for the project that I'm going to be writing a book [about] the Japanese American experience in Orange County agriculture. Jimmy, when were you born?

JO: I was born January 3, 1952 in Santa Ana, California.

SG: So, what were your earliest memories growing up in Santa Ana or Orange County?

JO: My earliest memories are just living on the farm, working a lot. When you live on a farm and you're one of the children, you're expected to work because you're part of the workforce. Back then my father couldn't afford to hire a lot of workers so the kids were expected to carry a lot of the load. During that time my grandmother was also living with us, and back then Orange County wasn't like what it is now obviously. We had chicken coops and different kinds of animals around, not livestock for commercial purposes but for our own consumption, and that's what I remember most about my early childhood.

SG: I grew up with chickens, too. They were my pets. We had thirty chickens at all times in Tustin.

JO: Ours weren't for pets! They were for food! (laughs)

SG: Well, we used it for food, but when you're a little kid you can play with the chickens.

JO: We would play with them. Then we would become mostly attached to them so it was not a big deal for us to kill them and eat them.

SG: Tell me about your grandmother. What was her full name?

JO: My grandmother's full name was Atsuma Otsuka, and she came from Japan. My recollection of her, she always seemed old from the time I started remembering her, but she was always working. I remember her picking strawberries all day long and maybe she actually wasn't that old, but, to me, she appeared old because of all the weathered skin and the face. But, she was very healthy. I remember her putting in full days of work.

SG: So, how old was she when she died?

JO: I believe she was approximately seventy-seven years old.

SG: Did she speak any English or very little?

JO: Very, very little. Very little.

SG: And so you spoke Japanese from the earliest time so you were able to communicate with her?

JO: I was able to communicate with her. My father was born in the United States so he spoke very good English, but he spoke Japanese also. My Japanese is very limited just through communicating with her, and unfortunately, after she passed away, I didn't speak Japanese that much. My father spoke English, so I lost a lot of it, which is very sad.

SG: So, your grandfather died before you were born?

JO: Yes.

SG: Did you hear any stories about him?

JO: One story I heard about him was he came from Japan in the late 1800s maybe, and he was working on the railroads. That was his first job, and he settled in Signal Hill area of Long Beach where he started farming, not necessarily vegetable farming, but livestock, poultry, pig, cows, things of that nature, on a small scale. He had two boys and four girls. Those are my uncles and aunties.

SG: Are they still alive?

JO: I know one uncle and three aunties are still alive, and they all grew up on that farm. Then they moved to Downey, California, where they started farming vegetables, and, when World War II broke out, and they had to relocate the Japanese my father and my uncle joined the United States Army. They served for two years in the United States Army, while my aunties they were relocated in the concentration camp, relocation centers.

SG: Was that in Poston or Manzanar or where?

JO: Poston.

SG: Have they told you very much about Poston?

JO: I haven't spoke too them too much about Poston.

SG: They are a little bit reticent in talking about it?

JO: I suppose if I really started asking questions they wouldn't hesitate to answer my questions. They don't come out and start talking about it. It might be something they might want to forget. I don't know, bad memories, maybe.

SG: So, your mother also was in Poston?

JO: My mother was in Amache, Colorado.

SG: Colorado?

JO: Yes. Then, after the war, she moved to Minnesota (phone rings) with her parents. She was working there, and, at that point, my father was still—they weren't married yet. Then he met my father. One of his GI buddies in the service was my mom's brother. He introduced my father to my mother back in Minnesota, and, after the war, they got married and moved to California. My father started helping this other farmer because he didn't have any resources to start his own farm so he was helping another farmer. He saved some money and took out some loans, and he was able to purchase his own small plot of property in Santa Ana, five acres, in 1946 at the price of \$15,000.

SG: For the whole—

JO: Five acres in Santa Ana, the original parcel that he just sold.

SG: On Fairview.

JO: On Fairview. So, it was 1946 he started farming on his own.

SG: Was it the 241Army outfit that your father served in?

JO: I don't know. He served as a translator in the Philippines.

SG: Oh, in the Philippines. So, that was different than—a lot of the people were in the 242.

JO: Or the 442nd.

SG: Yeah. So, he was sort of by himself as a translator. Did he tell you any stories about the war?

JO: Oh, not very many. Most of them were pleasant, I guess. Not pleasant—but he didn't have anything negative to say about it.

SG: So, he didn't say any horror stories or any of his favorite escapes from danger?

JO: No, no, he never was into the battle in the front lines. He was more or less in the back doing the translating. He talked about playing baseball more than anything when he was in the Army. I guess those are the fondest memories of the Army. He was a good baseball player. If you were a good baseball player, you got to be on the Army team, travel and play.

SG: So, did you play baseball, too?

JO: I play baseball.

[00:10:00]

SG: Your mother's experiences, what's your mother's full name?

JO: My mother's full name is Stella Otsuka, and she was born in Sacramento, California.

SG: In what year?

JO: Nineteen twenty-four.

SG: Does she tell any stories about growing up in Sacramento?

JO: Most of my mom's stories are very pleasant. She never harps on anything negative in her past. She only remembers the good things. She never brought up anything negative about the past. Even while she was in the camps, relocation center, everything was positive. She was pretty young at the time, so she thought it was a new experience, kind of fun.

SG: So, what was the pleasant story she told about the relocation camps?

JO: How the women would get together and make their own clothes or they'd garden or cook. She never said anything about being discriminated against or hatred or any of those types of feelings. She just tried to make the best of the situation presented, which is basically how most Japanese people are.

SG: So, did your mother and father tell you anything about their courtship?

JO: What little I can remember they don't speak about it too much. Just that my mom's brother, which is my dad's friend in the Army, brought him home one day and said, "I have a sister. You want to meet her." And that was kind of it. Back in those days, there wasn't a lot of courtship or anything like that.

(phone rings)

SG: So basically, we have sort of pleasant experiences related from the concentration camps that you've heard about. Some people call them relocation camps; other people call them concentration camps. Did your father, of course, have more stories about what went on in the relocation camps than your mother?

JO: No. My mother has more memories of the relocation camps than my father. My father rarely spoke of _____ (inaudible).

SG: Your father hardly ever spoke about it because probably he was in the war most of the time so he didn't spend very much time [there].

JO: The only thing negative he had to say—he didn't speak about it much—was they lost their farm in Downey because they had to relocate.

SG: Now how many acres did they have in Downey?

JO: Oh, I don't remember.

SG: So, they owned the land?

JO: They owned the land, right.

SG: And unfortunately, they didn't have—the Sakiokas had people to take care of their land.

JO: Right. The fortunate ones had someone to take care of their land, someone they could trust, and they held on to it for them. But, other ones, they would go behind their back. They came back from the war; there was nothing left. It was gone.

SG: Do you know how many acres they had in Downey?

JO: I don't remember.

SG: It's sort of a bad memory. Did they ever get compensated for that? Some people got compensated.

JO: He never got compensated for the property. The only thing they both got compensated for was the, uh—you know when they compensated—

SG: The standard compensation that everyone got?

JO: Right.

SG: What do you think was the transition that you saw? Your grandmother spoke mainly Japanese and then your mother and father spoke more English than the grandmother. And then, you spoke very little Japanese after your grandmother died and more English. Did you see any conflict between generations, not necessarily in your family, but the people that you knew where there was sort of like each generation was more and more American and less and less Japanese and the older Japanese wanted to hang on to the old traditions and the cultures and the way of doing things and the younger people wanted to be more American. Did you see any of that in your family or other families that you knew?

JO: There wasn't too much conflict between the Nisei, my dad's generation, and my generation because the way we grew up, my generation, everyone was struggling still because my parents and the other parents that are the same generation as my father were still struggling trying to make it in this country. So, the kids, we weren't spoiled. We grew up working and appreciating whatever we had. Whatever food was served we didn't complain. The biggest difference I see is my generation and my kids' generation. That's where the big gap is. Because we're very fortunate, some of us had a little bit more success so we make it easier on our kids. They didn't have to work as hard as we did. We tried to make it better for them but, in retrospect, that's probably hurting them because we spoiled them. They became more Americanized, they don't work as hard, and some of the old Japanese traditions are lost.

SG: What are some of the old traditions that come to your mind that are lost?

JO: One main tradition that I think occurred to me is we always used to eat together just about every meal. It was rare when we didn't eat at the same time. Unless we were going to eat at six o'clock, we were there. There was no excuses. You were there to eat. They didn't have to say anything. We just knew. Rarely did they never have to tell us, "Hey, why weren't you at dinner?" Everyone sat down for dinner, and we did not eat until my father was there. A lot of times he was working late. He had responsibilities. He was working out in the field, something happened, an emergency or something. Unless we knew he was going to be home very, very late—

SG: So, you sat at the table until he arrived.

JO: Well, not just sat at the table, but we waited around. The food was ready, but we didn't eat until my father—

SG: So, you showed respect for your father?

JO: Right.

SG: Now your children's generation.

JO: We're lucky if we eat together a couple times a week! I have three kids, but, if we all sit down at the same time and eat together, it's very rare.

SG: What ages are the children and their names?

JO: I have a daughter, Amy, she's twenty years old, she attends the University of Hawaii. I have a son, Dean. He's a senior at La Quinta High School. He'll be graduating this year and I have a seven year-old Koby. My observation is, my son Koby, he might benefit more from Japanese tradition and sitting down and eating at the same time more than the other kids through the fact that since I've sold the farm I'm around more than before. When I was still farming, I was working late. I was never home. The kids, they were playing sports and other activities so it was hard for us all to get together. I told them, "Don't wait for me to eat dinner." I never expected them to wait for me to come home, but the old Japanese tradition was we waited. We didn't complain. We didn't even think about complaining and saying, "I'm hungry. I want to eat now." We didn't even think about it.

[00:20:38]

SG: Do you think part of the change is that when you were a little kid you didn't have all kinds of money to go out and eat on your own?

JO: That's exactly true.

SG: Nowadays your children, if they're out with friends or whatever, "Well, I could go home to eat, but why don't we eat over at our favorite hangout."

JO: That's exactly true.

SG: And, in your day, when you were growing up, you didn't have the money to go out and eat with your friends.

JO: That's right. We didn't have the money, but we kind of had that respect we'd go home and eat. It was rare occasions that we didn't my father would just give us that look and he'd say, Where were you? We wouldn't say anything to him but we knew he wasn't happy about it.

SG: Now when you were growing up did you eat mainly Japanese food or American food or whatever was on hand or what was your usual thing when you were growing up.

JO: Well, that's interesting. The Japanese American farmer, you could call it Japanese food, but it's really not Japanese food because traditional Japanese food, the kind of Japanese food that farmers wives are making, the people from Japan wouldn't recognize it. They wouldn't know what it is besides the rice and the pickled radishes.

- We would eat a lot of vegetables stir-fried with a little bit of meat. A small amount of meat and some sauce and lots of rice that would be a traditional food for us, and we grew up like that. I still cook or make those kinds of dishes. I still enjoy them.
- SG: Did you mainly eat the vegetables you raised?
- JO: Yes.
- SG: Because that's the way we grew up. We had a little mini farm in Tustin, and the usual meal had five of our own vegetables that we raised right next door to where we were. So, we had what we raised, and that's the way you grew up.
- JO: That's another thing about the kids these days. They don't eat vegetables. If they eat something it comes out of a can, whereas, I grew up since I was a young boy eating vegetables, and I liked it. You didn't have to force me to eat it I liked it I like all vegetables.
- SG: So, the title of my book is *Between Two Worlds: The Japanese Experience in Orange County Agriculture*. Did you feel pressures when you were growing up from people you went to school with to become more American at all?
- JO: I was never pressured to become more American. I played sports in high school. My father was sort of a sports fanatic. Either I played sports or I had to work on the farm, so it was nice. I enjoyed sports, so then I didn't have to work on the farm. I remember summer vacations my brother and I, we actually looked forward to school starting in September because we were working everyday. We didn't complain. That was just a way of life for us, but it was kind of a break for us when school started because, you know, when you're a young kid you like to play sometimes. I'd never trade those experiences. I'm glad my father made us work because we learned to do a lot of things. We learned to become handy, fix things, make things on our own.
- SG: You didn't have money to go out and buy new stuff.
- JO: We didn't have money to buy new stuff, and my father didn't have time to fix broken things for us. If we broke something, we had to fix it. He didn't have time, he was too busy, too tired so we learned how to fix things on our own. Like, if we had a flat tire or the chain comes out or breaks, you fixed it.
- SG: Now when you worked on the farm, did you get any compensation an allowance, or did they pay you something per hour? Or what did you usually do?
- JO: My father was very fair. He didn't expect us to work for nothing because he because he knows if someone works hard they need a reward so he would pay us. I remember every summer, when September would roll around, my brother and I, we would have a good chunk of money because we couldn't go anywhere to spend it so we would

- buy our school clothes. He would never tell us don't waste your money on this and that because that's your money you spend it the way you want to spend it.
- SG: When I worked on my little mini farm, that was a lot-and-a-half right next door. I didn't get paid, but I could sell the crops to our next door neighbors to stores and stuff, and that's how I got compensated. I sold the produce and fruit and everything. But, my father, when he worked on Irvine Ranch, he worked for years without any pay as such, but his father, as soon as he was able to drive—he graduated class of 1930 Tustin High School—he gave him a brand new Chrysler Royal. So, that's how he got compensated. He got a brand new car. Now most of the Japanese farmers in your era, their sons got paid an hourly amount? Did you have friends among other Japanese?
- JO: I had a lot of friends that grew up on Japanese farms.
- (phone rings)
- SG: Yes, yes. All right, I'm interviewing right now. I already talked to her, so can I talk to you later? I'll talk to you later. All right. Yeah, I've got to finish this interview.
- JO: But, I don't know if the fathers spoke to each other, but it seemed like all my friends that came from farms they had their own money. They all worked, and they had their own money because they were all able to buy their own cars in high school. They weren't new fancy cars, but we were able to buy our own cars.
- SG: What is the first car you bought?
- JO: The first car I bought was a 1962 Ford Falcon Station Wagon, six cylinder. Kind of a piece of junk but man I was so happy.
- SG: It could go pretty fast with a six cylinder on it? It's a light car, right?
- JO: No.
- SG: It was a gutless wonder?
- JO: Right. Gutless wonder. Hey, I was the only one who had a car among my school friends, so I'd give three other people rides to school. Back then, having a car was a big deal no matter what kind of shape it was in.
- SG: And what school did you go to?
- JO: I went to Santa Ana High School.
- SG: My grandmother graduated class of 1901 Santa Ana High School.

JO: Wow. That's the oldest high school in Orange County.

SG: Yes, it is. And what year did you graduate?

JO: Nineteen seventy.

SG: Now in 1970, Santa Ana High School was a pretty mixed racially mixed—it had blacks and whites from the northern part of _____ (inaudible) town.

JO: Back in 1970, it was predominately white, small percentage of Hispanics, and a very small percentage of blacks. Asians, I think there were maybe four or five going to school.

SG: Were they Japanese?

JO: There might have been two or three other Japanese total in the school, two Chinese, and that was it.

SG: Were they sort of your friends, the other Asians?

JO: Other Japanese? Not really. There wasn't another Japanese there at my grade, so I didn't have any Japanese friends at school. Most of my Japanese friends were Japanese farming community.

[00:30:13]

SG: So, were there social events or were their community events that you met the other Japanese? What were they?

JO: Oh, yes, there's the Orange County Buddhist church. They have festivals there so many times a year. Other than that, socially, I didn't meet that many Japanese. I met more Japanese after I graduated college or, during college, when I started playing these sports on Japanese sports leagues. Then I met more Japanese.

SG: What kind of Japanese sport leagues were there?

JO: Oh, basketball and volleyball, softball. These leagues were created just so Japanese could kind of get together. It was a good idea. Our Japanese population is so minute among other races that it's hard for them to get together.

SG: Were you more tied to the farm than your Japanese friends that were in these other social leagues, or were they about the same as you?

JO: No, I think I was tied to the farm more than they were. A lot of my playmates were regular kids from the neighborhood. I shouldn't say neighborhood because we were kind of isolated. The kids I went to school with they thought it was so great that they

- could come to this farm in the middle of the city with chickens, open, their parents aren't watching over my shoulder make sure I'm not going to get hurt. We could build things, cut wood, pound nails, dig holes, play in the dirt.
- SG: When you say you were isolated, what do you mean you were isolated?
- JO: Back then Fairview Street was called King Street, and our farm was west of King Street. And, on the west side of the street, there weren't any other houses. On the east side of the street was a residential area.
- SG: Was it considered sort of a flood plane?
- JO: Yes.
- SG: Way back when, there were a lot of Chinese that farmed in that area. Did you hear any stories of any Japanese farming?
- JO: I didn't know that.
- SG: Yes, in the burning of Chinatown that happened. I wrote a book on that.
- JO: This was in the 1800s?
- SG: In 1907. They moved a lot of the Chinese to what they call China Gardens on King Street because of the flood plain.
- JO: King and—
- SG: South of _____ (inaudible), right there was your farm was right around that area. They farmed there because it was periodically flooded, and so it was probably good farmland because of all the sand and everything.
- JO: That's what my father told me. He said that that area was flooded so many times—
- SG: So many nutrients
- JO: —the soil was perfect. I mean, after a heavy rain, the next day we could walk out there, and the mud wouldn't even stick to your feet because it was sandy.
- SG: Did you ever live through any floods at the farm there?
- JO: No. The Santa Ana River never flooded
- SG: It never flooded on that side while you were there? Because I just wrote a book on the floods of the Santa Ana river basin, and the last big flood that went through there was 1938. It was really big.

- JO: I remember I had friends. They were farming in Fountain Valley on Warner and Newhope, in that area, and I guess back in the in the sixties they had the—
- SG: Sixty-nine.
- JO: Sixty-nine when they had the heavy rain, the Santa Ana River didn't overflow, but it became so saturated, it started seeping into the fields.
- SG: There are some areas that are under sea level in Fountain Valley, so I'm not surprised. So, what friends did you have in Fountain Valley that might have been on the farms that were really low? Do you remember any of their names?
- JO: The Miura family, M-i-u-r-a, John Magarro, he's still a friend of mine. He's not a lot older, about fifteen years older than I am. He was actually my dad's friend. He was between my dad's age and my age. When my dad passed away, we're still friends. I still play golf with him once a week. He used to farm that area. He used to tell me a lot of stories about flooding. Sadakadane used to farm in the area.
- SH: How do you spell his name?
- JO: S-a-d-a-k-a-n-e.
- SG: What was his first name?
- JO: It was Mamo, M-a-m-o, and Maso, M-a-s-o.
- SG: What street did he live on? Do you remember?
- JO: The wife still lives on Hazard and Euclid, Hazard just west of Euclid. They kind of farmed in that general area. The Ito family—I'm sure you've heard of the Ito family?
- SG: Yes.
- JO: They used to—as a matter of fact, they farmed right here where this house is.
- SG: Really?
- JO: Right where this housing tract is here.
- SG: Yes. And you know Bill?
- JO: Oh, yeah, he's a real good friend of mine.
- SG: Um-hm.
- JO: A real good friend of mine. You know Bill?

JO: I'm trying to contact him. I talked to his father.

JO: All right, Tomio.

SG: He's quite a character.

JO: Yeah. They're very nice people.

SG: So, how many acres did they have here?

JO: It had to be at least fifty acres, maybe more, because they owned this whole housing tract here.

SG: So, it went from Brookhurst?

JO: Brookhurst to Margo and Edinger.

SG: Right. Did you know the Edinger family?

JO: No. I didn't know too many of the non-Japanese farming families. They were different type of farmers, different type of crops. We were the truck farm vegetable farmer, strawberry and vegetable farmers. The Caucasian farmers were growing lima beans. They had more land, too. (laughs)

SG: (laughs) You had more intensive. You had smaller—

JO: Labor intense.

SG: So, when you were growing up, did you feel any discrimination from people? Did they call you names?

JO: Oh, yeah, I'm sure every kid that was Asian, Japanese, Chinese, slanted eyes or whatever but nothing that really hurt me. I went to a racially mixed school. The grammar school I went to was mixed.

SG: What was the name of your grammar school?

JO: Fremont Elementary school. Back then, it was racially—I wasn't the only Asian in the entire school back then. Percentage wise, probably 80 percent wide?

SG: So, that was your elementary school. Was Spurgeon around then?

JO: Spurgeon wasn't around. I went to—it was called Medley—now it's called Carr—on Edinger. That was my junior high school.

SG: That was a little bit further.

JO: That was a little bit farther. I used to walk there every day, two miles. I walked to school there every day.

SG: And were there quite a few Japanese there or—

JO: I think there was one other girl in the high school—another girl in the entire school and maybe two Chinese. There weren't a lot of Asians in this area.

SG: So, what grade level did you feel the most discrimination?

[00:40:00]

JO: To tell you the truth, I never felt that. I never felt like, Hey why am I being discriminated against? I never felt that. Maybe I was being discriminated against, but I wasn't aware of it. I wasn't a sensitive person.

SG: Did your parents ever mention any discrimination that they went through?

JO: My mother didn't. She never spoke of any discrimination issues. My father, I think he told a story one time, they were in the south, and I think the Japanese and the blacks had to sit together.

SG: Was this during the war or after the war?

JO: I think it was during the war.

SG: So, the Japanese had to sit with the blacks?

JO: Right.

SG: So, was he in the Army then?

JO: He was in the Army. He used to see signs that said, Whites on this side, and it wouldn't say black on that side. It would say Other, so he knew he had to go there.

SG: So, he had to use the other drinking fountains, other restrooms, because he was the *other*.

JO: He knew wasn't white, so he had to use the other side. (laughs)

SG: Now did he have any buddies from the war, other than Japanese buddies, that he talked about or he had any friends with?

JO: You know, I never really talked to my dad—that's one thing that I regret—about his war stories. He was just my father he rarely spoke.

SG: He was very quiet?

JO: He was very quiet. If you don't ask and ask and ask, he didn't tell you anything. I should have asked more questions about his past experiences, but I didn't. And I regret that because he's not one to just start—he's a listener.

SG: So, what year did he die, and how old was he?

JO: He died in 1997. He was seventy-five.

SG: Now did your family have any photos that they took or different things, or everything that they had before the war, it was sort of lost?

JO: I haven't seen one photo of when they had a farm in Long Beach and Downey. I don't have one photo. I have a few photos of the Fairview property.

SG: So, your family wasn't strong on memorabilia and letters and all that stuff? They were too busy working?

JO: Too busy working and we've kind of paid for it.

SG: You didn't save newspaper clippings and things like that. That's very common, very common with a lot of people whatever they had they lost during the war.

JO: Now you know people, they cherish photos and memories, but back then, they weren't that important. They had more important things to think about, like survival.

SG: Survival. So, what do you think the biggest challenge to you—when you were growing up what was the thing that you looked forward to do? Were you always thinking that you'd always be in farming or what was your—

JO: At one point, I wanted to get into dentistry or some type of profession. I wanted to go to college. I went over to Cal Poly San Luis Obispo for my first three years in college. I used to go home every other weekend because we had a little roadside stand. It was a lot of work, but back then I knew my dad was still struggling. Before I graduated, my major was business management. I always had in the back of my mind that I wanted to see if I could make a small farm operation be successful, not necessarily make tons and tons of money but to live comfortably so my dad wouldn't have to work so hard anymore. Remember my dad was everything: he was the foreman, he was the irrigator, he was the repairman, the mechanic, he was everything. He was the bookkeeper. He did the pay role. He did the banking. How could one person do all that? And I know a lot of my generation of farmers, they start bringing in more management expertise into the farming end of it. It's not necessarily growing the crop, but actually being a businessman about it. That's where the biggest change in farming took place, I believe, from my father's generation to my generation. It became more business oriented than farming. We started having specialized people,

the foreman, office personnel, people to take care of all the details that you couldn't so you could concentrate more on handling the bigger issues, administrative detail. At first, my father said, "Hey, why do you have all these guys doing these things?" "Because I can't do it." In 1976, I didn't formally take over the farm, but I just started running things. It was like a gradual process. He started stepping back, and he was good. He imparted his words of wisdom to me, once in a while—the typical kind of my generation farmer that kind of took over, we wouldn't listen to him sometimes. (laughs) And we regretted it! But, back then, we know more than you, bla, bla, bla wouldn't listen to him. Every one of my friends, we talk about it now. We say that we should have listened to the old man when he told us to do this and do that. So, we did try to pull us out of that farming mentality where you're the owner boss and doing all the work, and you're not making any money.

[recording paused]

SG: What's the age difference?

JO: My brother's three years older than me. He graduated college from Long Beach State College. He had a degree in microbiology. But, what's funny about him, he had a degree in microbiology, but the day after graduated he went right back to the farm. And he never wanted to leave the farm. That was his life; he loved farming. My brother was more science oriented, rather than business oriented. We got along well because he never questioned my business decisions about the farm.

SG: So, you were more the manager and he was more—what was his role?

JO: He was a field manager. He would take care of the fields and employees, mechanics—he was a good mechanic. He would do a lot of fixing broken equipment.

SG: So, what is he doing now?

JO: My brother, he passed away in 1996.

SG: Ooh. Was that a big shock to everyone?

JO: Well, he had diabetes and high blood pressure.

SG: Was he married?

JO: He was married and had four kids, and he was only forty-seven years old. He was forty-seven years old when he passed away.

[00:50:04]

SG: So, when did you find out that the city wanted to take—well, the school district wanted to take your property?

JO: I believe they first approached me in 2001. They were interested in purchasing the property. Legal expert friends and advisers, they kind of told me a past history when they wouldn't come out and wouldn't say it but kind of hinting me that with the possible condemnation coming down the road so I just kind of ignored it. They approached me again in the beginning of 2002, and I had to think of it from a business standpoint. What am I going to do? Stay here and fight them? No. Spend thousands and thousands of dollars of legal fees and this and that with the possibility of not winning, or should I take advantage of the situation and get the most out of it I can for the security of my family. Not only the security of my family, but my brother's kids and my mother because, at that point, my father had already passed away. I think it would have been very, very hard for me—it would have been harder for me if my father was still alive. My mother is very easy going. I know she was very hurt by it, but she was a very strong woman. She could adapt to changes because her whole life she's been like that. She's moved from here to there. She just keeps going with the flow. I knew she could handle that. My father would have a really hard time, very difficult for him. But, it was the later part of 2002. I made the decision to make a deal with them. So, we went through the negotiation process. The price was right. They offered to assist us with relocation, if I wanted to move my operation somewhere else, and I investigated that and did research on that. At that point, the prospect of being a small strawberry grower in Orange County and try to make money, very very not feasible. We had a unique situation where we were. I could grow five acres of strawberries because I had that outdoor produce market right in front there.

SG: A lot of street traffic.

JO: A lot of street traffic. We had that been doing that for thirty something years, not at that location but down the street. You remember when we had an original roadside stand down the street?

SG: Yes.

JO: We were there near Garden Grove Blvd and Fairview.

SG: Did you have land there, too?

JO: We leased four acres there. It was a small little roadside stand, and we did very, very well there. We did so well there that's when I got the idea to build this big place on our old property because I knew the owners of that four acre property were leasing. They were going to sell it in a few years.

SG: And when did they sell?

JO: They sold that in—I think it was 1988, '89. I built the new produce market in 1987, and I think in 1988 that other parcel we were leasing was sold and developed.

SG: Who was the biggest—did you ever—

JO: I'd say about two million dollars worth, four acres. And I could make in 1988, but I remember, when I was building this new place, it was something new for me. I went through the process with the city, with the permits, and my dad, I could tell he was just so nervous. "What are you doing?" "We're getting something big here." Because I transformed the whole area, you know where they were living. I took out part of the field, poured that whole concrete parking lot, and then in the back I build all these office buildings, coolers. I mean, our operation was completely changing. I bought new equipment, a forklift, big trucks. We go from these little things, a couple of pickups and flat bed truck, hardly my equipment to, all of a sudden, tons of money, and he was very, very nervous. I don't blame him. To me, that's something we needed to progress a little bit, because I had more mouths to feed. I've got kids, my brother—before it was fine. We were making enough to support my brother and myself, send us to college, and now I'm married.

SG: Did you have any other places you farmed, other than Garden Grove?

JO: Oh, yeah, a little farm, twenty acres in Orange where the _____ (inaudible) Miller property is in Orange Park Acres? I was farming twenty acres out there between 19—you know what, let me go back to the beginning here. My father used to farm but besides that original five acre parcel on 5th and Newhope, there's a family there called—their first name is Gaudy. He leased this property and farmed there. After that was developed, he was farming on Westminster and Clinton. There was a property there that we farmed.

SG: How many acres?

JO: I'd say maybe ten acres. Between five and ten acres. It was good.

SG: That was between what year and what year do you think?

JO: Probably early sixties.

SG: Your home farm was Fairview.

JO: I was always there. In fact, I don't know how my dad used to do it, because I would think, with a one man operation, five acres on Fairview would be enough for him, but he used to go down the street and—I remember distinctly that farm—I know I was only seven or eight years old. We used to farm tomatoes there, and then my family moved to Westminster and Clinton. We farmed there for maybe five years, and we lost that lease. All these parcels would get developed, so we had to keep moving. But, there was a lot of land in our neighborhood, five or ten acres, it's easy. You just keep moving. After that we moved to Garden Grove Blvd and Newhope the Bergamin family, a German family, they had an orange grove there. That could have been ten or fifteen acres. We grew strawberries there. They developed that. Then

we moved to Fairview and Garden Grove Blvd, the five acre parcel. That's when my dad started that roadside stand.

SG: That's when you started making money?

JO: That's where we started making money so he didn't need that much. Hey, we got five acres and five acres there, and we tried to sell most of it. We didn't hire anybody. I mean, as a family, we ran the stand. We were at the mercy of the wholesale market, and the wholesale market could kill you. We're sending quality produce, but they're not going to pay you for it because of oversupply. With the roadside stand, you can command the price you want. If you have the quality, people pay for it. First, we just started selling strawberries. It was a one person operation. My mother, she wanted to grow carrots, this and that, started adding more vegetables. My dad became very good at growing a variety of vegetables on a *small scale*. He taught me how to grow vegetables on a small scale. You could plant them one row at a time and keep staggering the planting where you have it continuously. So, you have a new crop coming every month.

[01:00:08]

SG: So, you had stuff to sell all the time?

JO: All the time. It's not like you grow a lot. It's all ready for harvest, and then you don't have any. It was a sight to see because you had a farm and a row of this, a row of this, a row of this. Next crop was the same thing in all different stages from new planting to the harvest of one item. We'd have maybe ten or fifteen items like that.

SG: A lot of work.

JO: It was a lot of work, a lot of work. I mean, you had to really watch it. There were so many different feeding and watering schedules and spraying schedule and fertilizing schedule. We became very proficient at it. This is at a time when the other farmers were becoming big. When my dad was growing strawberries, and he grew twenty acres of strawberries, you were big. And it was getting bigger, and you ended up getting bigger, thirty, forty acres. My dad started going the other way and started growing his little vegetables.

SG: What did the other farmers think about that?

JO: Well, they're more eagle oriented, right? I kind of felt like I want to get bigger. That guy's got a big tractor and good truck and everything, but you kind of get jealous because everyone thinks bigger is better, right? We're going the other way but going in a complete different direction. We're trying to retail everything, so we're cutting costs. But then, down the road, these big guys, you reach a point where you start getting too big, and then you start getting diminishing returns. Then we grew. We had the ten acres on Fairview, and that was about the time I graduated college in

1975, and I kind of took over the farm. I leased some more property on State College and Cerritos, Edison property.

SG: I know where that is.

JO: I was growing strawberries there. We were at a point where I kind of had people in place, and I had people running the little produce stand. My mother, I told her “Don’t even go there. You paid your dues. You don’t need to.”

SG: But, she still wanted to?

JO: She’d come for a couple of hours and go home. You know, she was fine with that. She was happy. My dad, I would give him a certain job, “Okay, you take care of supply thing. You don’t have to do it—we had a foreman. He would take care of all that. He would just come check on him once in a while. Everything was working out. My brother would take care of the harvesting crew.

SG: How many acres did you have on Cerritos and State College?

JO: Twelve. Twelve acres there.

SG: Strawberries?

JO: Strawberries and vegetables. It was getting to a point where I knew more vegetable ground than strawberry ground because we were selling so much, especially when I built that new store, because we were selling a ton of vegetables. I had to build a big cooler for it, and, at that time, I was also going to the L.A. market three or four times a week to buy more. There were certain vegetables that I wouldn’t buy because you couldn’t find high quality.

SG: It was cheaper to buy them rather than to grow them.

JO: Certain vegetables were cheaper to buy.

SG: Which were those?

JO: Squash, depending on what time of the year it was, because certain vegetables I couldn’t buy because the taste was completely different. I had had to supplement what we grew with apples and oranges and the whole line.

SG: You couldn’t grow apples?

JO: No, I couldn’t grow apples, mangos, peaches, everything, so I had the big truck going into—I used to drive that big truck into L.A. at two o’clock in the morning. I could go at one or two o’clock in the morning to try and get back by six or seven o’clock to try and take a little nap.

SG: When would you sleep?

JO: During that period, I wouldn't sleep very much. I didn't get to do much with my kids either. There was about a ten year period there that's all I did because I was just starting this new venture, and I thought I had to sacrifice.

SG: So, do you regret that a little, that you didn't have as much time to do all the other stuff?

JO: No, not really. I never really thought about, Why am I doing this? I never regretted it. I just do it. Anyway, when I lost the lease at the Edison property, I moved out to the Orange property.

SG: What year did you do that?

JO: That was in 1997. The year my dad passed away I moved out there. By then, my dad was kind of slowing down. He used to ride around, enjoy life, shake his head, every time I'd make these moves. *Now what are you doing?* (laughs)

SG: So, you had the Orange property from what year to what year?

JO: Nineteen ninety-seven to two thousand and two.

SG: When you sold your property, you had no retail?

JO: No retail.

SG: How many acres did you have in Orange?

JO: Twenty.

SG: That's a lot.

JO: That is a lot. That is a big step up. I had to buy another tractor and another truck.

SG: So, what did you do with all the machinery when you sold the property?

JO: A lot of the other farmers bought some, most of it Tanaka farms. Do you know Glenn Tanaka?

SG: I'm supposed to talk to him, yes.

JO: He's good to talk to, easy to talk to. He has a lot of good stories.

SG: So, it's a big transition from working all these hours and then, all of a sudden, the school district comes in and closes—what was the month that your place got fenced off and you no longer did operate?

JO: I think my last day of conducting business was Labor Day of 2002. It was kind of sad. That last day at the little stand we had customers that had been coming for over thirty years, and it was kind of sad. I still have the mailing list. They said if I ever open another place to let them know.

SG: Were you thinking of doing it and you just gave up after?

JO: I was seriously thinking about doing that I wanted to do that again, but the more I looked and investigated, no.

SG: So, how much did they give you for your five acres?

JO: That's something I'll keep under wraps. (laughs)

SG: (laughs) Hopefully, they gave you money for all your stand and all your equipment.

JO: Right. But, I had to tell you it was a very agonizing process. Dealing with them is not a pleasant experience.

SG: Now weren't you sort of upset that here they close you down Labor Day 2002, and the land's just sitting there. This is February 2005. The land's just sitting there and all that beautiful produce land just sitting there.

JO: That's true. Very sad.

SG: Three years you could have been farming and—

JO: I could have been saving them money because they wouldn't have to upkeep or maintain it. I mean, my mother doesn't even like to go by there. We used to keep it immaculate. We knew we were in a retail business with people coming by all the time, so we try to keep the fields like a garden.

[01:10:00]

SG: Now there's weeds.

JO: Weeds, dirt, graffiti, it's all over.

SG: It makes you sick.

JO: You're right.

- SG: Well, so who do you think it was hardest on, you or your mother or your wife?
- JO: It was probably hardest on my mother, but she adapted so quickly. I give her a lot of credit. I could tell it was hard on her. When I finally moved all the things out of her house, the old house, she was sad. But then, she moved in here.
- SG: It's nice.
- JO: It's nice. It's not just that the house is nice, but my little boy, seven year old, he can walk over here. He rides his bike over here. And the thing that's good, she sees me—my mother used to see me every single day when I was at the old place.
- SG: When you had Fairview, every single day, and now you see her every single day still because now your office is here.
- SG: Oh, your office is here.
- JO: How many parents can say they see their grown up kids every single day? She still has a lot of her old friends. I mean, her schedule is very busy. She goes out. She has a lot of energy. She still drives. She likes to help elderly relatives. She's always running around taking them food, taking them to the store.
- SG: What elderly relatives?
- JO: My dad's sister. She must be close to ninety. She only lives five minutes away. She goes and checks on her.
- SG: What's her name?
- JO: Her name is Helen Narasaki. That's my father's older sister.
- SG: Is she someone that would be willing to talk about her experiences?
- JO: I don't think so. She's just—it's hard for me to have a conversation with her because she's so quiet. She doesn't speak or hear well. It would be difficult.
- SG: Who else does she take care of?
- JO: This other woman, the Sadakane family. Well, not family—the mother's living the same age as my mom. She doesn't drive anymore. She lives on Hazard and Euclid. So, she goes and checks up on her.
- SG: So, how do you spell her name?
- JO: S-a-d-a-k-a-n-e.

SG: And her first name?

JO: What is her first name? (laughs) It slipped my mind. I know her name, but it slipped my mind.

SG: How old is she do you think?

JO: I think she's probably in her eighties.

SG: And her husband's gone?

JO: Yeah, he's gone.

SG: It's nice that she can go out and help other people.

JO: Yeah. And the, there's the Miura family, M-i-u-r-a. Mary Miura, they used to farm in Fountain Valley, but she lives in Tustin. Now she's been here. There are still a lot of farming widows. Most of them are in their late seventies and eighties.

SG: Other than the Irvine Ranch, who are the main ones that you know that are still farming, that still have a little bit of land that you know?

JO: You know we were just talking about that the other day with my friend because there aren't too many Japanese farmers that own their own land anymore. I was one of the last ones. The only other one I know is the Bunya family, B-u-n-y-a. They're the ones that have that little stand on Hazard and Euclid. Are you familiar with it?

SG: I think I remember that.

JO: They have the strawberry stand there, and their farm is right there. They probably only have three or four acres. They own that. I do not know anybody else that owns their own property.

SG: Did you know the family that was near Disneyland, that Japanese—

JO: Oh, I know him. That's right, they still own that property.

SG: Now how do you spell their name?

JO: Fujishige, F-u-j-i-s-h-i-g-e.

SG: Now that was a very sad story.

JO: A very sad story.

- SG: What was the name of the person, the first name of the man who committed suicide when they condemned the property there? He was your father's age.
- JO: Right. I don't know his name.
- SG: They condemned part of his land, and he took it hard that he killed himself.
- JO: And then, the remaining parcel that's left there, I guess they made a deal with—
- SG: The survivors?
- JO: No, he had a brother, Hiro, H-i-r-o, and didn't they purchase that last parcel?
- SG: I have no idea.
- JO: It was an astronomical amount of money. The property is sold, but they're letting them farm there until they develop it. The year after that property sold, then he passed away so now that the brother and sister the kids the brother is still into farming.
- SG: How many acres are still left?
- JO: I think there's fifty acres there.
- SG: A big parcel of land near Disneyland.
- JO: I read in the paper, we're talking about ninety million dollars or something.
- SG: Did you know that man that committed suicide at all?
- JO: No, I didn't know him personally. I knew his brother.
- SG: What was the reaction in the Japanese community when all that happened?
- JO: Shock. I know that the brother, and I know the son of the person that committed suicide. His nephew, he's still farming now he's about ten years younger than I am. They don't care about money. They want to farm. When you look at them, they don't have any trucks no new cars, no new clothes, jewelry.
- SG: That's the way the Sakiokas were when they came to the warehouse to deliver the beans. They had a truck that looked like it was old, before World War II, that they came in. They didn't spend a lot of money on equipment, although they certainly had enough money to buy the fanciest thing they wanted.

JO: It isn't a lot of money. They were doing what they loved. That's why he committed suicide. They were taking away something he loved to do. He didn't care about the money.

SG: How many acres do you think they condemned? About another fifty?

JO: Probably. They're millionaires several times over, but that wasn't the point.

SG: It was his life. He was attached to the land.

JO: The funny thing is, even the nephew is like that. His name is Jack, and I know him personally. He's the same way. For a young guy, you would think his generation, he could have that kind of money, play golf for the rest of his life, but no, he's the same way. He could wear fancy clothes and buy a new truck.

SG: He loves the ground just like my father. He just loved to till the soil. It was his therapy. It was something he loved to do.

JO: The thing about the farming community, I know it's very small now, but it's still pretty tight. I know they get together every week in Irvine and eat breakfast, and once in a while I'll go.

SG: Where do they eat breakfast?

JO: They eat at The Snooty Fox. It's on Lake Forest and Moulton.

SG: What time do they meet there for breakfast?

JO: Usually, it's around _____ (inaudible).

SG: So, how many people eat there?

JO: It all depends there could be like four sometimes there's eight or ten.

SG: And what are some of the names of the people that eat there?

JO: Oh, there's Paul Murai, John Magarro—Glenn Tanaka comes every once in a while. Not only farmers but people in the industry like the suppliers, like the strawberry plant nursery guy, Roger Hamamura, Ron Yamasaki. Most of it is—

SG: Talking and getting together.

JO: Yeah. It's funny because, if something happens, right away everyone knows about it.

SG: It just spreads. Do they have any other place where some of the farmers get together?

JO: No. I remember ten, fifteen years ago they would do it more. My father used to go once in a while. They used to go to Denny's on Harbor at one time.

SG: We used to go down there and meet with some of the Japanese—

JO: They were farming on this area before they moved to Irvine.

SG: So, most of the Japanese farmers moved to Irvine [because] there's no land?

JO: A lot of farmers, they're farming in Miles Square, where the park is. They're farming there right here, all Fountain Valley area.

[01:20:04]

SG: Did they generally have a pretty good relationship with the Irvine Company?

JO: No. (laughs)

SG: They complain!

JO: They complain. Even the person in charge of the land management at Irvine Company, he's pretty tight with them.

SG: What's his name?

JO: His name's Pete Changala.

SG: Sounds like the old El Toro family.

JO: Yeah. That is.

SG: How old is he?

JO: I thought you know maybe about fifty.

SG: I went to school with a Changala. I'm fifty-seven so it's probably a younger brother.

JO: Yeah, it's probably the same family.

SG: They lived in El Toro for generations.

SG: Now my family remembers Brad Hellis used to be the vice president of the Irvine Company way back before '59. It was a different era back then so farming was a different story.

JO: Oh, yeah. I mean, the price of rent—seriously, I can't figure out how they make any money.

SG: How much are they having to pay nowadays for rent?

JO: It's up for bid now. There's not a set price. There's a bidding war.

SG: Oh, a bidding war for the good land.

JO: It could go up to \$4,000 an acre.

SG: Just to lease it for one year?

JO: One year.

SG: So, is there anything else that you want to mention in this interview. I think we're going to have to go into another one because we're just scratching the surface having mentioned a lot of things.

JO: Not at this point. I'm sure the other farmers can help you out. I'm sure they have some interesting stories. Glenn Tanaka will be a good one.

SG: Well, I'm sure you have some more to because I haven't even gone into how you met your wife, so we have other stories to tell.

JO: Okay.

SG: Thank you very much.

END OF INTERVIEW