

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with CHERYL GERTLER AND TRAVIS MITA

Interviewed

By

Arthur A. Hansen

On May 5, 2002

OH 5287

This is an edited transcription of an interview conducted for the Center for Oral and Public History, sponsored by California State University, Fullerton. The reader should be aware that an oral history document portrays information as recalled by the interviewee. Because of the spontaneous nature of this kind of document, it may contain statements and impressions that are not factual. The Center for Oral and Public History encourages all researchers to listen to the recording while reading the oral history transcription, as some expressions, verbiage, and intent may be lost in the interpretation from audio to written source.

Researchers are welcome to utilize short excerpts from this transcription without obtaining permission as long as proper credit is given to the interviewee, the interviewer, and the Center for Oral and Public History. Permission for extensive use of the transcription and related materials, duplication, and/or reproduction can be obtained by contacting the Center for Oral and Public History, California State University, PO Box 6846, Fullerton CA 92834-6846. Email: [coph@fullerton.edu](mailto:coph@fullerton.edu).

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: CHERYL GERTLER AND TRAVIS MITA

INTERVIEWER: Arthur A. Hansen

DATE: May 5, 2002

LOCATION: Fullerton, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

AH: This is an interview with Cheryl Fay Gertler and Travis Okura Mita by Arthur A. Hansen. The interview is being done on May 5, 2002, and we're conducting the interview at the offices of the Center for Oral and Public History at California State University at Fullerton. This interview is done under the aegis of that program's Japanese American project. The time of the interview is twelve minutes to two. I want to identify the two people and explain the nature of what we're going to be talking about based upon who they are and who they're related to.

Travis Okura Mita is the grand-nephew of one of the interviewees for the Japanese American project and the subject of a publication that I'm preparing, a memoir with the late James Matsumoto Omura<sup>1</sup>, otherwise known as Jimmy Omura. Jimmy Omura's first wife's name was Fumiko Okuma, and she was known as Caryl Omura when she was married to Jimmy Omura. She later got married to a man named Martin Gertler, so Travis Okura Mita is the grand-nephew of Caryl Fumiko Omura Gertler. Cheryl Fay Gertler is the daughter of the late Martin Gertler and the late Caryl Gertler. So, that's the situation.

We're going to try to find out about a person who I have read about a lot and seen pictures of and heard even an interview with, but know very little about the full context of her life after she got divorced, in 1947, from Jimmy Omura. We'll see what we can find out today. Cheryl, why don't we start out with having you talk just freely about what you have known about your mom's background and take it right on through her relationship and her marriage to and her divorce from Jimmy Omura. Okay?

CG: I'm going to say everything free talking here. I don't know very much about their marriage. My mother was young when it occurred, and I know that they went to Denver to go to a free zone to avoid the evacuation or to stay outside the evacuation area. As I read your article, Art, it kind of filled in some gaps for me. My mother didn't talk that much about it. She did, till the end, have hostile feelings toward the

---

<sup>1</sup> James Omura, O.H. 1765.1, 1765.2, 1765.3 & 1765.4, Center for Oral and Public History.

- JACL. I took her to see *Rabbit in the Moon*, which is a documentary that was shown at Sundance. There actually is a photo of her in there with Jimmy Omura. That film \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) her feelings about the JACL and what they perceived in \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) the camps.
- AH: She saw that film?
- CG: Um-hm. It was just by coincidence. I saw a quick blurb in the *L.A. Times* of the one big showings downtown and took her with me.
- AH: Could you talk a little bit more about her reaction to that film?
- CG: She felt that it was accurate. You could still hear the hostility, the bitterness toward the JACL. She thought that they had done them in and that they had—I can't think of the words now, but the feelings that I received from her were that they really had betrayed the Japanese American community in the camps. I don't know the whole structure of how it was in the camps. I'd like to know more about that. But, it seems that they were sort of the people who were the wardens who were in charge of distributing the benefits and the food and other things around the camp, and there was a feeling that they had abused that power to help themselves and their friends.
- AH: If you had decided to take your mom to see this film, it means that you knew something about your mom's relationship to this episode of her life, right?
- CG: I knew that she was married to Jimmy Omura.
- AH: Had you ever had conversations about that marriage, since it preceded the one to your father?
- CG: A little bit. Your article talked about—and I didn't see any of the exchange of letters, so I don't know that much about it, but the sense of money affecting it—I think money affects any relationship. My sense from her as to why she couldn't stay married to this person was his personality, that he could be mean. He could say mean things. So then, she sort of pointed out as I was growing up that he could be nasty at times, and she just didn't want to deal with that anymore.
- AH: You mean she used that as a negative reference for you to avoid people like that?
- CG: Right.
- AH: Don't get tied to somebody that.
- CG: Who can be nasty or don't be nasty yourself. She always treated me like \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) that you should treat yourself with respect and that respect of others was very important. I'm not what that meant in terms of how he might talk to her in front of other people, or even other people. That didn't carry over.

- AH: Some of that comes across in the letters, too. I mean, her letters to him. She was very unbuttoned during the period of their separation in her determination not to come back and in explaining the reasons why. Some of these same kinds of sentiments came out at that particular time. Did she tell you anything more about the conditions of their relationship? We've been talking a little bit off tape about that they might have met in the floral business. What was her relationship with the floral business? He was a buyer for the Amling Floral Company up in San Francisco. Did she work at a flower shop?
- CG: My understanding is that she worked at a floral shop making arrangements.
- AH: Did that carry over into her life? Did you see evidences of her interest in flowers?
- CG: She always cared about gardening, and I recall her being a flower arranger. That's where it would come out. With the little girls, she might do a little tea ceremony with us and she'd make the floral arrangements. That's how I knew that she'd worked in a florist shop. And, of course, she was always interested in gardening after that. She never once referred to a lack of money during those years, and she didn't refer to money being an issue for them. You probably know that my growing up was in a lower middle class family, so money was always—there was never money for us.
- AH: So, she never changed that situation?
- CG: No. It didn't affect her marriage. She stayed with my father till the end, and they seemed to have a very good marriage.
- AH: Was that the only other marriage that your mom had?
- CG: That's the only other marriage.
- AH: When did your parents get married?
- CG: Well, of course, it was after the war. She got divorced in 1947. I think they were married in the early fifties. I'd have to go back and count the years.
- AH: And your dad passed away when?
- CG: In 1987.
- AH: So, he pre-deceased her by over ten years then.
- CG: By twelve years.
- AH: Where did they meet? Do you know about the conditions under which your parents met?

CG: They met in San Francisco, and I think they met at a bridge game. My father was a master bridge player, and she was either learning to play bridge or had already learned. I'm not sure how the bridge system works, but there are regular games set up and that's how they met.

AH: How would you describe your father in terms of his personality, his political philosophy, his just general—

CG: Both my parents are liberal, liberal Democrats. My father came from a Polish Jewish background. My grandfather had come from Poland and landed at \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) in Chicago, and they were active in the unions out there. So, he came from an active political family. My father was very bright. I think he bordered on a genius level, but sometimes geniuses don't do well in the mainstream. I thought he was a terrific father and just fascinating because he was the type of person who—Dad read through ten books at a time. He also was someone who probably wouldn't work well in the day-to-day nine-to-five grind. The money was always a little bit precarious for us, but they seemed happy. My father had a temper, but it was never directed at my mother when we were there. My mother had a very firm rule, and I can't recall a day that they ever had a fight in front of us.

AH: What did your dad do for a living?

CG: He had gotten his math degree, and I think he did bookkeeping. When we moved to Las Vegas when I was young, he became active in the gaming industry as a dealer, and then he would make side money playing poker. That whole mathematician thing. My mother was a waitress.

[00:10:12]

AH: In Las Vegas?

CG: Um-hm.

AH: When was that that you moved to Las Vegas?

CG: We moved there when I was in first grade, about five or six.

AH: So, what would that be?

CG: That would have been in the early sixties, 1962 or something.

AH: When were you born?

CG: I was born in '57.

AH: Are you the oldest or the youngest or the middle?

CG: I'm the middle child. I have a brother who was born in '55 and a sister who was born in 1960.

AH: What are their names?

CG: My brother's name is Darryl and my sister's name is Marna.

AH: So, your parents were married for about five years before they had their first child.

CG: You mentioned \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) children. My mother was, particularly in those days, an old mother. She had my sister when she was forty.

AH: Your mom, I know, one of the things is that Jimmy and she were not able to consummate the birth of a child, and your mom was very concerned about that and consulted a lot of medical advice. And she had different treatments to try to allow her to be able to have kids, and that never happened. It's interesting, because as I mentioned to you off tape both of them ended up having families by their second spouses.

CG: And she started having them older, at thirty-five, which back in those days—it's old now, so back then—

AH: Were you born in San Francisco?

CG: I was born in San Francisco.

AH: And you were about five years old when you went to Las Vegas?

CG: About that age.

AH: How long did you live in Las Vegas?

CG: I stayed there until I graduated high school. My mother stayed there a little bit longer.

AH: So, that was a long move then. It wasn't just a short-term thing. Did your father stay in the gaming industry?

CG: He always did, at some level. It's a very fluid industry in terms of where you work \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) hotels down there. He was sometimes a dealer, sometimes a floor manager, sometimes at craps. She always worked as a waitress.

AH: Did she do it for a long time?

CG: She did till she retired. She was with the Restaurant Workers' Union, which is what actually financed my way through college. I got a scholarship from them.

AH: I just directed a very successful master's thesis by a guy that was from Las Vegas that worked on that union. It's such an incredible, successful union at a time when other unions have been taking a bath in America, and that particular union is *so* strong. It's heavily Hispanic right now, but it's incredible. Some of the different dynamics of that, some of them make for high drama, some of the things that went on. That's quite interesting.

Tell me a little bit about your mom's side of the family and how you got to know them and in what context you knew them because she had siblings, and I haven't been able to figure out the nature of her family. I see fleeting references to her mom, but it's usually of somebody who's dying. Then her father—during the time that Jimmy went over to Hillsboro, he mentions a few things about the father. Then there is some correspondence, I believe, with a sister named Yoriko when Yoriko is at Topaz with the family. What can you tell me from conversations with your mom and observations even and interactions that you've had with her family? What's her family like?

CG: Travis is good for this because he knows the whole breakdown of the family tree much better than I do. I lived in Las Vegas, and they were still all in the Bay Area. We wouldn't see them on a regular basis, so I'm not used to growing up with family. She was closest to Travis' mother, Auntie Yori.

AH: And Auntie Yori is how—

CG: I think she's the oldest.

TM: Yeah. She was the second child.

TM: There was a brother of Caryl's as well. His name was Takeo. Takeo was born February 26, 1909, and died March 1981.

CG: In New York. She referred to him also. I think when he passed away—

AH: He's the oldest, right?

CG: —whatever he had, he left to my mother. It wasn't very much, but whatever he had, she got.

AH: Did he get married?

TM: No. Never married, never had children, as far as I know.

CG: He was estranged, I think, from the family, as I understand it.

AH: Do you think he was gay?

TM: No. There's nothing that ever said anything like that.

AH: There's a lot of people from that generation—I've been involved in two marriages and both of them had uncles that just disappeared from the family and were never heard from them again. They went to New York. Well, it's a cosmopolitan sort of place, it's a Mecca, and it gives you some room for being able to express differences that you can now express more openly but couldn't then.

CG: My mother said he had differences with my grandfather, her father. He was a tough old guy.

TM: Yeah. He was very mean, very tough. My father, James Yuji Mita, told me instances where Takeo was growing up that one of his sisters actually stabbed him with a fork, that his own father slapped him so hard in the head that—

CG: On his ear.

TM: In one of his ears. He was deaf in one of his ears.

AH: This is Caryl's father?

CG: Right.

AH: So, he was fairly abusive.

CG: He was tough.

TM: He was by the book.

CG: My mother, she always spoke fondly of her mother, but I think she felt that my grandma had a difficult time over here. First, my grandfather had gone back to Japan, picked up a bride, and brought her back. And she was just unprepared for what she was going through.

AH: Was there an age difference like there was with most Issei couples, of ten or twelve years?

TM: Between Yojiro and Kise?

AH: Is that the names of the—

TM: Caryl's parents would be Yojiro Okuma, who married Kise Gohara. Yojiro was born—

AH: When did they get married?

TM: I don't have an actual marriage date. I can probably find that in some of the records I do have at home.

CG: Was there about ten years difference?

TM: Kise was born January 22, 1886, and Yojiro was born October 20, 1878, so he was about eight years older.

AH: Do you have a sense of when he came to the United States?

TM: In 1907.

AH: Then he went back in—

TM: Yojiro came originally in 1907, went back to Japan, bought a wife. Somewhere in-between there—I have the notice at home—he had some sort of accident, or someone in the family had an accident, and he went back to Japan again and then came back. I think in '27 or '28 he came back again.

AH: Did he have the usual array of Issei jobs? Was he working on the railroad or a field worker or what?

TM: He was a cobbler. He was a shoe repairman.

AH: And did he have a store in San Francisco?

TM: He had two stores. I'm trying to remember which one came first. He had two stores, one was on Dubose Avenue in San Francisco, and the other one was on Divisadero Street in San Francisco. He was well established, had a business. From what I was told, the family lived upstairs in the shoe shops. When they had one of the shoe shops, they lived upstairs above and then the shoe shop was down below.

AH: So, the Okumas were an urban family then.

TM: They were well established in San Francisco. My grandmother went through all of her years – she was born in San Francisco.

AH: Where did they go to high school, the kids?

TM: I can tell you. I have my notes right here. My grandmother, Yoriko Mita, went to grammar school first in San Francisco, California, at Hearst Grammar School.

AH: That's an irony. (laughs)

TM: The document I'm looking at was the war relocation application for leave of clearance. I'm fairly familiar with this one. She went through Hearst Grammar School about 1922 to 1928, and then went to McKinley Grammar School in San Francisco from August 1928 to December 1929. Then she went to Everett Junior

High School in San Francisco between January 1930 and June 1932 and went to high school in San Francisco at Mission High School August 1932 to June 1935.

AH: So, it was in the Mission District, probably, where they lived then, in that area. That's great. I'd like to get a copy of some of these things, if I could, because that's wonderful information.

TM: I have Caryl's parents as well. I have Yojiro and Kise's war relocation applications as well.

AH: So, you have her grandparents as well as—

TM: My great-grandparents.

AH: Okay. I'm one generation different here. She was an older mom.

TM: Because she looks so young.

AH: What's the difference in your age?

CG: There are twelve years difference, which is one reason we didn't know each other very well. He was a kid when I would go up to visit the family.

AH: Are you his aunt?

TM: No, cousin.

AH: You're his cousin.

CG: His father is my cousin.

TM: There's a picture I'm holding up that you can see. That's Cheryl holding me in the picture. You can see there is an age difference.

AH: That explains right there. So, you've known each other for a long time, though.

[00:20:03]

TM: Yeah.

CG: This is my mother on the back.

AH: When are those taken about?

TM: There should be dates on that one.

CG: Twenty-five, thirty years ago?

AH: Age eleven.

TM: That's different. Turn it over on the back. There's a little Post-It on the other side.

CG: That was early '74.

TM: So, growing up, I growing up was a lot younger, so I didn't have an appreciation as much for the family until I started to get older.

CG: That's my brother.

TM: That's Cheryl and Darryl.

CG: I'm in there on the other side, the chubby little—

TM: This is Caryl's grandmother, Yoriko.

AH: It's interesting because you do have Jewish as well as Japanese features. I think that's real interesting. I was just listening to an interview that was done with somebody from Boyle Heights the other day, and they were talking about how liberal the Jews were in terms of—they were saying that blacks would always follow Jews in their settlement patterns because Jews would find ways of providing jobs for them and things that other groups wouldn't. That was real interesting. But, I can see, especially in the early fifties, Japanese were not the model minority. There were still the residual things from the war. And intermarriage between Jews and Japanese makes a lot of sense. Now they're both considered model minorities.

CG: That's also true because my mother said that my grandfather had a lot of opposition to that marriage.

AH: You mean about the second marriage.

CG: The second marriage.

AH: Let me hold off on this because, unfortunately, we don't have a video.

CG: My impression is that her parents liked Jimmy. They didn't want to see that end. I don't know if that was because it was a divorce, which was shameful in those days, or that they just liked him.

AH: Did your mom ever tell you that they got married secretly?

CG: I don't remember her saying that.

AH: Because everything that I've seen on it was that they did not tell anybody. He doesn't go into it, but it's the opposition that your parents had. It might have just to getting married, but also his family situation was such that if they used any kind of go-between to do any investigation, they would have found, first of all, tuberculosis through his brother, because his brother was a brilliant guy and very leftist. His brother was in sanatoriums for years. Then the other thing they would have found is that the family was fairly dysfunctional, that on Jimmy's side there was poverty, but there was also—probably his father had alcohol problems. And if anybody would have investigated, they would have said, Who is this guy? So, they might object. Then later on, when it comes to an out-marriage, in a sense, the bottom line, he was Japanese, whereas, your father is Jewish. It might have seemed more like they approved of Jimmy than they actually did at the time.

CG: My recollection is that somebody, her parents, tried to talk her out of divorcing him.

AH: That might have been the case.

CG: It could be because divorce was not something that was socially accepted back then.

AH: Yeah. And he just doesn't go into a lot about his in-laws. In fact, I don't think he knew his mother-in-law very well at all. But your mother-in-law's death, I think, was pivotal to the fact, not in causing, but in precipitating the timing of the divorce. Because I think it caused her to go back, and then once she got back in, there was no way for her to think about coming back to Denver.

CG: I was also thinking that my grandfather had a mean side to him towards my mother and so did Jimmy.

AH: They probably couldn't have gotten along.

CG: (laughs) Maybe my mother looked at it and said, "This is my future?" Her mother had \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible).

AH: Possibly. That's really possibly the case, that she saw—and a lot of times you end up marrying your father, but you could also make the decision *not* to marry your father or stay married to your father.

CG: Right. Like \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible) said, "This is not where I want to see myself in thirty years."

AH: So, there was this opposition to *your* father, though.

CG: Right.

AH: Did it continue, or did they get to know him at all?

CG: They did get to know him. My grandmother did.

AH: Your grandmother did.

CG: So, my grandfather did.

AH: And your grandfather didn't get remarried?

CG: He did not remarry.

TM: Yojiro? No.

CG: But, she said that he came to like him very well. He wouldn't say it quite outright because my father treated him well. My father put up with his insults and everything else. (laughs)

AH: But, he liked him.

CG: He ended up respecting him.

AH: Did your grandfather—and you could maybe answer this, Travis—did he stay a cobbler for a long time?

TM: That would be my great-grandfather, Yojiro. As far as I know, there was a long gap where he had one shoe shop and then had another shoe shop, so he kept the job as a shoe repairman.

CG: After the return?

TM: After the return, I'm not sure about that.

AH: How could it be your great-grandfather and your grandfather, and yet you're cousins?

TM: Cousins once removed.

AH: Okay.

CG: His father is my first cousin.

AH: Okay. Then I'm back on track again. Say that again, because that was blowing me away, about his cobbler—

TM: He had his cobbler shop. When they came back to San Francisco after the camps at Topaz, I'm not sure what he did immediately after. I do know eventually he wasn't working as a cobbler, and he was staying with all of his children. He would stay with some of his children until he drove them nuts because of drinking or was very mean to the kids. There was an incident I was told about where he was in a rocking chair, and one of Caryl's sister—he was staying with Caryl's sister, Kiyoko Morishita—

AH: She's the third oldest in the family?

TM: First there was Takeo, who was the oldest.

AH: He's the one who went to New York.

TM: Yes, he's the one who went to New York. Then Yoriko was the next.

AH: That's your grandmother.

TM: That's my grandmother.

CG: My mother was next.

TM: Actually, Kiyoko Okuma was next.

AH: There is some correspondence in the files with her, too. Then next?

TM: Next was Fumiko Okuma, or, as everybody else calls her, Caryl. I always knew her as Auntie Fumi. Then the youngest was Toyoko Okuma.

AH: So, Caryl is second to the youngest.

TM: Yes.

AH: What's the age gap between Caryl and her youngest sibling?

TM: About two years.

AH: When was Caryl born? What was the year?

CG: Nineteen twenty.

AH: So, she was twenty years old when she got married, or nineteen maybe, depending upon the time of the year.

CG: Right. In fact, when all these events occurred during World War II, she was a rather young person. You think about it, being a college student there.

AH: This is amazing. Well, she was a college student during the time of the war.

CG: Right.

AH: She went to Denver University.

CG: That's right.

AH: She was studying biology, too.

CG: Of all things. (laughs)

AH: Then she went back, and she tried to go to school again. Did she end up going to school at San Francisco City College for a while?

CG: She did. I thought that she may have graduated. My father, who was a big supporter of education, the Jewish side of him, I think he encouraged her to go back and finish her education.

AH: I'm curious about this. Did your mom ever have a lot of friends in the Japanese American community?

CG: Driving over here, I thought that one of the problems—not a problem—but I really grew up in a white community, thinking white. If you think about where I come from, it's white middle-class. We didn't really have a lot of ties with the Japanese American community. It's a little bit foreign to me.

AH: That started even with Jimmy and your mom. They lived largely apart from the Japanese. I mean, they had Japanese American friends, but they lived largely apart. I even think that they would not have liked going to camp.

CG: She had no interest, for example, in going to Japan. I went to Japan after law school.

AH: And he never went.

TM: But she went. Didn't she go?

CG: She did not go. She had no interest in going there. She did not associate herself as being Japanese.

TM: Whereas, her sister, Yoriko, my grandmother, went to Japan in '69 and sought out all of her ancestors, sought out anybody who was a cousin, or whatever. She wanted to meet everybody from the family.

AH: Did you grow up apart or within the Japanese American community?

TM: Basically, what happened was Caryl's sister Yoriko raised my father Jimmy, or James, and he was always brought up within the Japanese community. He was a part of the Japanese division of Boy Scouts in San Francisco.

AH: Probably in the drum and bugle group there.

TM: Yeah. She raised him fully within that, always loved being involved with the Japanese community, kept in close contact with all of her friends from camp, had several Japanese friends, was very much into keeping contact with her roots.

[00:30:00]

AH: It's kind of interesting. I think that probably one of the attractions that Jimmy would have had for your mom is just that she was not so centrally involved in the Japanese American community. Then they go off to Denver, so they don't have the camp experience. And then, her life plays out where she marries outside of the community, whereas, the rest of the family is in camp, and your grandmother being one of them. Then she raises her kids, in part, within the community, so some of those early years and those experiences were really quite significant. So then, when you two would get together, it was largely just family things.

TM: Yes. Thanksgivings, Christmases.

CG: And just once in a while. But, my mother was closest to his grandmother. When I first had curried stew, it was through his grandmother.

TM: I remember growing up, and every time I'd visit my grandmother, if the Gertlers were coming, she would tell me, "The Gertlers are coming. We really want you to be here." She would call me up. Even as a young boy, she would say, "The Gertlers are coming." It was a big deal for any of her family. She would say the same thing for her other sisters as well. If they were coming over, she always wanted us to be around. At family get-togethers, to me, as a child growing up, it was a big deal because they were coming over, but, at the same time, I didn't have the appreciation I do for family like I do now today.

AH: How many people of the siblings got—your uncle who went to New York, Takeo—

TM: He was known as Thomas.

AH: Takeo or Thomas did not have any kids. But, of the other siblings, did any of them marry outside of the Japanese American community?

CG: One married a Chinese.

TM: Let's see. Let me get my notes here. It will make it a little easier for me. I'll start from the top, I guess. Actually, I'll just start anywhere.

AH: Because it would have been a little bit more unusual for *that* generation. Now, for your mom's generation, no, it wouldn't have been.

TM: Part of the thing, I think, with Caryl and Jimmy marrying each other, if it was some sort of a secret wedding, I don't know anything about that. My dad might know more

about that. If that were to be more of a secret wedding, I know that Yojiro was really by the book. You had to go to him and have a *baishakunin*, a go-between. If you did not have that, he sent you way, because what happened when the camps started, Caryl's sister Kiyoko, my grandmother's sister Kiyoko, wanted to marry Ted Morishita, or Toru Henry Morishita. In order to do that, Ted went to Yojiro, to Caryl's father. He wanted to marry Kiyoko, and he went to him and asked for his daughter's hand in marriage. And Yojiro, being the person that he was, sent him away. He said, "Go away. Come back when you do this properly. You need to have a *baishakunin*, a go-between, to talk to me, and go away."

AH: I can understand that Jimmy would not have liked that. He wouldn't have gone for that kind of old-world system. I can see why they would have had to get married secretly.

TM: Kiyoko wanted to get married so that she could be with Ted during the camps, and he sent him away. As far as my grandmother, she met my grandfather, Makoto Mita—he was originally Shinichi Misumi. He changed his name when he came to the United States. They married, and I know that Yojiro, even though he was Japanese, did not approve because it was in camp when they married. Basically, my father was conceived, and then a few months later they were married in camp. Yojiro did not like that because it wasn't done properly, I'm sure. I'm speculating on that, but I'm pretty much sure that's the way it happened.

On the other side, you have Toyoko Okuma, Caryl's other sister, who married Bill Kawahara, who fought in the 442nd, so that marriage, I guess, was completely Japanese. Then on the last one—we covered Kiyoko, Yori, Fumi, and Toyo, so they were all pretty much Japanese, except for Caryl when Caryl married Martin. From that generation.

AH: It's sort of funny. Your mom, when you think about it, first married—

CG: She was a rebel.

AH: Yeah. Wasn't approved, really, and gone through the things. Then she doesn't go with the family to camp. She resettles. Then she married someone who was Jewish.

CG: Although she told me that she tried to talk the family into moving, but it was this whole sense of this is not going to happen. Nothing's going to happen to us. Nobody would pick up and go with her.

AH: They weren't that Loan Ranger-ish in the sense that there were five thousand other people in Denver. It was a fairly elaborated Little Tokyo of its own there.

CG: I was thinking about how these things might carry on. It's hard to think of my mother when I think of her now as a Japanese soccer mom. (laughs) But working the graveyard shift to make sure there was food on the table. But, in her own way, she was always more liberal than the other mothers politically, and my father, of course,

was very politically left wing, coming from a Chicago union family. She was always very adamant free speech. Now maybe we know why, because of her marriage and the experiences they had in Denver.

TM: I know that for Caryl's mom in the camps—my grandmother, Yoriko, Caryl's sister— took care of Caryl and Yori, then all the other kids' mothers in camp. The stories I was told were, when the 9066 hit and the letter went out saying that everybody was going to have to go to camp, the family first thought it wasn't true. It wouldn't happen. So, the family was okay to stay. Then as they came out and they realized it was going to happen, the stress of it caused Kise to have a stroke. During her whole time throughout camp, she was, from what my grandmother even wrote down in the notes, an invalid. My grandmother had to—she worked in the mess hall. So, she would go to the mess hall, work, get food, bring it home.

AH: Yoriko worked in the mess halls.

TM: Yoriko worked in the mess halls. That's where she met my grandfather.

AH: And bring the food back to the barracks.

TM: Bring the food back to the barracks. All of her waking moments, whenever she was awake, she was taking care of her mom, her mom, Kise, in the camps. From what I was told from a family relative, she told me that Kise was incontinent, and Yoriko would go in, would clean her up, take all the dirty clothes out. You didn't have a bathroom inside of your barracks. You had to take the clothes out to the middle of the washroom, wash the clothes, bring them back, and then she would just keep taking care of her mom the whole time.

AH: Caryl and Yoriko's mother, your great-grandmother, when did she die?

TM: Five days after leaving camp, October 31, 1945.

AH: And she died in San Francisco? Did she get there?

TM: She got to San Francisco, I believe. With the health condition she was in at the time, she was out of the camp. I don't know if she knew it at the time, but she did make it out of the camps and five days later passed away.

AH: Your mom, Caryl, did once go to the camp to see her mother when she was in—excuse the pun here—grave condition. But, she did go there at that particular time, I remember. Jimmy went once to the Granada camp in Colorado in this employment service that he and your mom were running, but then she went once to Topaz. So, I know that they both had seen the inside of a camp, although they hadn't really, either one of them, lived there. Did she mention anything about that?

CG: She talked about being able to go into the camp to visit the family, and then the awful feeling of just being able to leave the camp and nobody else being able to go with her. There was guilt but also the astonishment that because I lived here, what makes me different from everybody else?

AH: Your socialization is a little bit different because you actually get some camp stories, don't you?

TM: My grandmother would tell me anything. Anytime I asked her, she would tell me stories of camp.

AH: You being of the Jewish background, you have a double camp sort of experience, don't you?

CG: That's right. My mother—not that she totally shunned all things Japanese. She did serve Japanese food and had Japanese dishes, but she did adopt the Jewish religion, and she was very active in the temple, the sisterhood, and everything else.

AH: Why don't we stop here. [recording paused] Okay. Now we're picking up our informal interview with Travis Mita. Travis, why don't you set the background for your relationship with the Gertler family, how you are connected to Jimmy Omura's first wife, Caryl, or as you call her, Aunt Fumi. Why don't you talk a little bit about how that figures in your life, okay?

[00:40:21]

TM: Okay. Caryl, or as I know her, Auntie Fumi—my father always called her Auntie Fumi and my grandmother, Yoriko, always called her Fumi, so I always knew her as Auntie Fumi. Caryl Fumiko Okuma, who married Jimmy Omura and later married Martin Gertler, was the sister to my grandmother, Yoriko Okuma, who later, in the internment camps at Topaz, Utah, married Makoto Mita, who was once Shinichi Misumi. In the camps, my grandmother and grandfather, Makota and Yori, met, ended up marrying. They had my father in the camps, and they also had my uncle in the camps at Topaz.

AH: Why don't you, before you proceed, talk a little bit about both your grandmother and your grandfather and what you know of them and what their personalities were like, from your perspective.

TM: Starting with my grandmother, my grandmother, Yoriko, was like a best friend to me growing up. She was somebody who I could go home, pick up the phone, call to talk to just for advice. Some of the advice she gave me over my lifetime, I still use to this day. She always cared very much for me. If I would come over for dinner, my grandmother would make whatever I wanted. If she was making spaghetti and I wanted rice, she would make rice with the spaghetti. It didn't matter. Whatever I

- wanted, she would go out of her way. If it was something else, she was making Japanese food and I wanted biscuits, she would make biscuits, whatever I wanted.
- AH: She was a doting grandmother, then, huh?
- TM: She would do whatever. I told you earlier, we used to joke around and say we had to bring the bungee cords out of the car to tie her to her chair to keep her from doing too much work for us, because she always wanted to take care of us.
- AH: Was she this way with all of her brood of grandkids?
- TM: My baby sister might have a little bit different opinion. She felt—I'm assuming that she felt that she didn't get as much attention as I felt I did. As it was put by a family relative, my grandmother was meant to take care of people. Her purpose in life was to take care of people because she did it so well.
- AH: Did she have any problem with the fact that your mother was non-Japanese?
- TM: My mom would know more about that, but, from what I understood, she accepted her into the family. From letters I've read between my grandmother and my mother back in 1969, they got along really well. But, when my mom and my dad divorced, my grandmother did not take it well, and my mom was not a welcome part of the family anymore.
- AH: When did that divorce occur?
- TM: That was about, I would say roughly around 1974, '73.
- AH: When you were very young, five years old or so.
- TM: Yes. I was pretty young at the time. I remember my dad leaving the house, and I remember feeling responsible for it. I remember questioning my mom as to, "Did Dad leave because of me?" My mom always reassured me that, no, it had nothing to do with me, so I felt better about that.
- AH: Did you continue to have a relationship with your dad?
- TM: Yes. My dad would come by—as a kid I pictured it that he came by a lot. From what I understand, my dad probably came by at least once a month. I know he took us out on several different trips. We went gold mining. We went river rafting a lot. We went hiking on different camping trails. But, my dad, as a kid growing up, he would always—from what I remember, at least once a month he made the effort to pick us up and take us out and go do things.
- AH: Did either of your parents get remarried?

- TM: My father did not remarry. My mother did remarry to a man named Charles Rice. They remarried, I believe, in Washington on Valentine's Day. I can't remember the exact year, but it's probably around '83, I think.
- AH: So, your father is still a bachelor then, huh?
- TM: Still an eligible bachelor.
- AH: What does he do for a living?
- TM: He's retired. He used to teach storytelling at San Jose State. He met my mom, I know, when they were special education, like for handicapped kids, I think at San Francisco State University. I think that's where they were working at the time.
- AH: They're both professors?
- TM: My mom eventually taught essentials of anesthesia, a class that I took and I became—
- AH: So, you were influenced by her.
- TM: Yes. I became an anesthesia technician because of my mother. But yeah, my mom was into education as well.
- AH: When you say your dad taught storytelling, was he an adjunct faculty member or a regular faculty member?
- TM: He was a regular faculty member at San Jose State.
- AH: That was his full-time job then.
- TM: I think he only did it for a short period of time. From what I understand, he did teach storytelling. Even current stuff now, he teaches storytelling with a Japanese storyteller named Nagumi.
- AH: Where?
- TM: In the Bay Area. She talks about the camps, and he goes around and gives his experiences about the camps, what he remembers from being a kid and from what he remembers his parents telling him.
- AH: That's fascinating. So, you heard a lot of stories then from your own father about camp.
- TM: Yeah. I heard stories from my father. My father was born in the camps in 1943, December 5th, 1943. He stayed there till the family left the camps. And my grandmother was always open about talking about the camps with me.

AH: I've got to turn this over right now. [recording paused] Speaking about storytelling, in talking with your grandmother, who was open with you about things, what kinds of stories did she ever tell you about Caryl, her sister, or Auntie Fumi?

TM: The stories about Auntie Fumi, there weren't any stories of her in camp because Caryl wasn't in camp. But, as far as the stories outside of camp, I remember hearing that she married a guy—I had no idea until I started researching it. I heard she married some guy named James Omura, Jimmy Omura, and I didn't know who it was until about—I heard of who he was, but I did not know anything about him until I started to research it over the past few months. Then it became more clear who they were talking about. But, I always knew that she did marry somebody—I was under the impression that it was to get out of going to camp, she married somebody and left. But, as I started to hear more, I learned it's much bigger than that. My stories about Fumi aren't that many, other than I remember family get-togethers with her.

AH: What did you think of her?

TM: Oh, I loved her. She was a great aunt. She was really nice. I do remember she was kind of stern, but she was always nice and loving and always treated us kids really great. My grandmother was always excited when she would come over, so she would say, "Auntie Fumi's coming to visit," to my dad. And my dad would do whatever he could to try and get of all us kids up there, my sisters and myself.

AH: Did Yoriko and Fumi seem to be close?

TM: Yes. They were very close. They were probably the closest of the sisters. They were always talking back and forth. I have a lot of my grandmother's records after she passed away, and there's lots of different contacts they made, whether it was planning family get togethers or just letting each other know what they were doing, or keeping in touch. I think that Yoriko was closest with Caryl, Auntie Fumi.

AH: Since Caryl is no longer with us and we have to recollect her through things that she's written and through things that other people can tell us about her—and you were much younger, of course—but you did get a chance to know her, and she lived longer than the rest of her siblings, including your grandmother. She just died two years ago in 2000. What would be some stories you, the son of a storyteller, might tell somebody like me about your Auntie Fumi? When you think back about family gatherings or about a special toy or gift that she gave you or a visit that you had with her, what kinds of things would encapsulate her in your legacy of passing along of her?

TM: My best recollections are just times spent playing with them, with different toys or games or things at the house. I remember always wanting to try to play games with everybody. My grandmother had a room in the back of the house that was set up and had several different games, like Connect Four, or we had card games or things like that. I remember we'd try and get that stuff out to play with it. But, right off the top

of my head, I can't picture a certain time or anything that stands out, really. I just know that when the family came over and got together, we always just enjoyed each other's company.

[00:50:17]

AH: Did you ever go over to Las Vegas to see the Gertlers?

TM: No. It was always in San Francisco, at my grandmother's house in San Francisco.

AH: So, you came together very periodically then.

TM: At Thanksgivings or Christmastime, we would get together, not on a definite regular basis, but from the pictures you can see when I show you, the families got together whenever the family had time. But, it was usually for a Thanksgiving or Christmas. It was a planned get-together.

AH: Would you say you saw her as much as a dozen times in your life?

TM: I'd say at least a dozen times.

AH: Her kids would be quite a bit older than you? I just met Cheryl, and Cheryl is twelve years older than you. What about the other siblings, Cheryl's siblings?

TM: The other two kids, Darryl was born in '55, so he is about fourteen years older than me, and Marna was born in 1960, so she's only nine years older than me. I remember Marna coming by, too. I remember Marna coming over. I remember Cheryl and Marna both coming over and playing with us as kids.

AH: What do you remember about Martin Gertler?

TM: He was always really nice, from what I remember. I think the times I met Martin were even less than when I met Caryl, so my memories of him were just that he was a nice guy. I probably met him less than five times that I can think of, so memories of him would be very little.

AH: So, he's a little bit shadowy to you as far as a personality?

TM: Yeah, recollections of anything from that side of the family are very small, very little. My dad remembers much more than I do.

AH: You know the kids better than you do the parents? Or wouldn't you even say that?

TM: I would say it's almost equal. It's very little, just contact through family get-togethers.

AH: You mentioned something off tape. Cheryl, who we were just talking to, you said became a lawyer, right?

TM: Um-hm.

AH: And her sister's name is?

TM: Marna.

AH: And Marna did what? She graduated, probably, from UCLA?

TM: Marna graduated from UCLA, and currently, I think she's working for Disney right now, in Florida.

AH: Does she work as an artist, or does she work in marketing?

TM: I want to say it has something to do with marketing. I know it has something to do with their logos or something. My contact with them was only reestablished over the past five months or so. I just finally re-contacted them due to the fact that I was trying to contact everybody from my family for my wedding, and I was unable to contact any of them to invite them to my wedding. From that, I started trying to find them for a while. I was unable to find them for that, and my grandmother told me that they keep in contact with their families, so I decided that it was my mission to try and make sure I find all the family members and reunite them, at least let them know where everybody is so that we could have contact if anybody wanted it.

AH: What's the name of the male Gertler sibling?

TM: Darryl.

AH: Darryl is the oldest, as we've established, of the three. What does he do for a living?

TM: Like Cheryl told you, he's a waiter in Las Vegas. My recollections of Darryl are also very little. I know we got together at family get-togethers. It seems that as a kid growing up, the person I really remember the most were Cheryl and Marna, because they always seemed to pay more attention to us as kids. When they would come over, they would play with us and do different things. So, I remember more talking to them or playing with them, as a kid, because they were older than me, than I do Darryl.

AH: Since this wasn't on tape, I'll add it. When we talked to Cheryl about her brother being a waiter, Cheryl remarked as to how her mom, Caryl, did not particularly like that. Even though her mom had been a waitress and worked in the gaming industry for years in Las Vegas, she wasn't happy, maybe because she had an insider's perspective of what that life was like and didn't want it for her own son. Did you go to—I take it you didn't go to Caryl's funeral?

TM: No. I had lost contact. One of the sad things—when I recontacted Cheryl, I ended up calling Cheryl at her law office. I was so excited because I thought, Great, now I can talk to Auntie Fumi and maybe hear some more stories about my grandmother and learn more about the family and things like that. That was really one of the even more disappointing things was to find out that she had passed away. Cheryl told me that she had a great mind all the way up to the very end, could have told me a million stories, but I missed the opportunity because I was about two years late. Even still, I was still happy that I'd finally made contact with Cheryl, and I knew I could get hold of Marna and Darryl and do what my grandmother wished me to do, which was to keep in contact with the family, which has become a very important part of my life now. Just making contact with them again, I've been able to learn a lot more of my own family history.

AH: Well, it's been important for me for you to be interested in it. It comes at a very propitious time, I think, to be able to get this information. I really appreciate it.

TM: I should probably say how I met you.

AH: Why don't you?

TM: I met Art because of doing my family history research. I was searching on the Internet on Ancestry.com, and I saw a posting about James Omura. I wasn't sure if it was the right person because it said that his original name was Yutaka Matsumoto. I thought this is probably not the right person, but I'll email anyway and see what comes back from this email. I got an email back. I can't remember the lady's name that emailed me right now. But she emailed me and told me about Art, so I really quickly emailed Art and let him know who I was and my relations and that I would like to talk to him, which eventually brought us to this day here today.

AH: Right. This has happened fast. This is only a couple of weeks ago. I'm not sure which of the two you talked to, and their relationship to James Omura is a little bit vague, too, but they're related to Jimmy through his older brother. His older brother and he lost contact when they were young boys and had no contact throughout the remainder of each of their lives. Jimmy didn't even know when his older brother passed away, but his older brother was banished from the Bainbridge Island Japanese American community by their father. The reason was because they thought of it as a disgrace to the family. He had been involved in a couple of things, and one of them involved a shooting accident where he actually inadvertently, wielding a gun, being silly, shot Jimmy. That led to his banishment, but it meant that Jimmy and he were never in each other's lives after that. They had a middle brother, named Casey. Casey was in touch with both Jimmy and his older brother, so he was a sort of go-between. I've got a lot of letters between Jimmy and Casey but don't have anything, really, between Jimmy and his long-lost older brother.

Now, you have a lot of photographs, and I was really appreciative of getting those photos. But, you've also been doing genealogy, so the pictures are worth a lot, and the genealogy is worth an awful lot. But then, you've got something else that you

- and I have been sharing today, and there are some documents that relate to Topaz, which is the camp that the Okuma family went to, which was an important thing because your grandmother met her husband there, and this, in turn, led to your coming into this world with the name of Mita. Why don't you tell me what it is that we've been looking at and which you've kindly copied for me today, this document. You have a similar one for some other people in the family.
- TM: Yes. A few of the things I brought today—one of them is a descendents chart, and it shows exactly how everybody has descended from Caryl's mother's side of the family. It's from the Gohara side. Caryl's mother's name was Kise Gohara.
- AH: How do you spell that? G-o-h-a-r-a?
- TM: Yes. From that side of the family, I created a chart. I could create one also from the Okuma side. It's not as long as this one. It goes one generation less, so I figured it's the farthest back.
- AH: How did you construct that, so we have some sense—
- [01:00:00]
- TM: There's a program that I downloaded from the Internet called Legacy 3.0. From that program, I just started compiling all the family history and putting it into the computer, and basically I created this one descendent chart so you could see exactly how Caryl's three sisters and a brother were all related and where their families came, ended up, and how I'm related. The other document I brought for you to take a look was, my grandmother, Yoriko Okuma, who married Makoto Mita and became Yoriko Mita, I brought her war relocation authority application for leave clearance.
- AH: Does it have a date on it?
- TM: It has an approval expiring date that says that approval expires 7/31/43.
- AH: So, this was probably done in early '43.
- TM: Yeah. The things that really strike me on this are the fact that my grandmother was born in the United States, in San Francisco, lived her entire life in San Francisco, other than her time at Topaz.
- AH: And Tanforan, which is also in San Bruno.
- TM: Then I remember the stories that my grandmother told me about entering camp. I remember her telling me about her train ride to Topaz and how the shades had to be drawn down because people were going to throw rocks at them. Everybody wanted to harm them, so they felt that they needed to close the shades. I remember specific stories in camp of her talking about a man being shot in the camps, that he was out

- close to the wires. There were several different rumors that went through camp. The one that stuck in my head the most, that I always thought to be true, was that there was a gentleman who was out near the wires, and the guards took him out further than where the wires were and said he was trying to escape, so they shot him.
- AH: Mr. Wakasa.
- TM: Wakasa, yes. It turns out later from what the hearings said, I guess he was wandering near the fence, not outside of it. But, some of the stories that went through camp at the time were that people were saying that he was taken outside the wires by the guards and then shot.
- AH: Did your grandmother know him?
- TM: No. She knew of him but didn't know him directly. She might have had contact with him in the camps, but I don't remember her telling me anything about that.
- AH: Did your grandmother ever mention James Omura?
- TM: I knew of him because she had told my dad that that's who she was married to. I remember that she did know of him, and that she did know, of course, that her sister was married to him. I'm sure she knew a lot about them that she could have shared, but at my age—I'm only thirty-two right now—and my experience at the time, I was too young to appreciate what history I had in front of me. Now it's kind of sour grapes, but I get a chance to try and learn more about it. But, I wish that I would have asked a lot more questions, because I could have gotten a lot more history.
- AH: Well, you did quite a bit anyway, and you've got your whole life ahead of you. What are some of the other interesting things you find on this document, from your perspective?
- TM: The things that really hit me are, of course, the fact that she was always in San Francisco. Even after high school, she went to work several different jobs as a cook, a maid, between her schooling years, between 1928 to 1935—
- AH: Before the war.
- TM: Yeah. Before the war she was firmly established in San Francisco, as she was from birth.
- AH: Does it give her prewar address on there in San Francisco?
- TM: No, but I do have that. I can get the information to you. The next things are that she went to work. Even after high school, she was taking some vocational school. All the way up to 1938 she was taking a vocational school at the Practical Art Institute of San Francisco. She eventually began work as a maid. What I was told—well, what's

- on this document, it says from 1938 to December of '41, she was working in San Francisco as a maid. She showed me several of the neighborhoods where she was working.
- AH: Really? She drove you by there? Wow!
- TM: Yeah. I used to go to San Francisco and my grandmother would be my tour guide. I would get in the car and drive, and she would just tell me where to turn.
- AH: What things did she show you? Did she ever show you where the family had lived?
- TM: Are you talking about the Okuma family?
- AH: Yeah.
- TM: She never took me by where the Okuma family had lived.
- AH: So, it was where she worked.
- TM: The places that she took me by were the houses where she was a maid at the houses. My grandmother, from what I've been told by family members, after camp, she wanted to become a lawyer, but her father, which is the same father of Caryl Okuma, Yojiro Okuma, discouraged her from it because, I guess, he felt that being Japanese that she wouldn't get a job doing it, she wouldn't be able to be successful at it because of the times. So, she was discouraged from pursuing any of her other dreams. A lot of the family beliefs are that Yojiro, not only did he need her to take care of her mother, Kise, in the camps, but that also he needed her to help take care of him after camp as well.
- AH: Because he was without a wife very quickly, five days after he got out of camp, right?
- TM: Yeah. Actually, the family left camp on October 26th, 1945, and five days later, October 31, 1945, Kise Gohara passed away. My grandmother took care of Kise throughout the whole camps and basically did everything to take care of her mother in the camps. It was one of the things that she was kind of bitter about, but at the same time, she knew she did it because she loved her mother. She felt that the burden of taking care of her mother was completely placed on her and not the other sisters and not the brother, that it was her job to take care of her mom.
- AH: When did she marry your grandfather Mita?
- TM: They married in 1944 in the camps. I'm assuming they were allowed to leave to go to Fillmore, because it was in Fillmore, Utah, where they were married, which, of course, is outside Topaz.

AH: I'm glad you said Fillmore, Utah, because they wouldn't have been free to come to Fillmore, California.

TM: Yeah. My father actually kind of laughed. I recently discovered that he was conceived before his parents were married, my grandparents were married. And he said, "Well, there were some things that I didn't really want you to know, but now that you know them, it's okay." So, my dad told me, "I didn't want you to know that, but it's okay." My grandparents met in the internment camps. My grandfather was in Los Angeles when the war started, I believe, and he went to Santa Anita racetrack and then eventually ended up in Topaz. My grandmother went to—

AH: So, your father was conceived in Topaz.

TM: He was conceived in Topaz.

AH: And he wasn't born there.

TM: He was born there. He's even visited the spot where the hospital was and stood on the same floor that was there. The floor, I guess, was still there when he went back to visit the camps.

AH: And it was Fillmore and not Millard—

TM: Millard County. On their marriage certificate, which I have, it says Fillmore, Millard County, Utah.

AH: So, your dad is part of that generation that's become an interesting generation for people when they investigated those who were born in camp, children of the camps. So he was born as a result of the camp years. Did you say he's gone back?

TM: My father has also—James Yuji Mita. He was born Yuji Mita in Topaz. He's gone back to the camps to try and just, I guess, get a better perspective of what he went through as a young child.

AH: But, his stories of the camps would have to be hearing about it and reading about it, because he wouldn't recall that.

TM: He said he remembers the fences, he remembers the barbed wires, and he remembers having a good time.

AH: Wasn't he only less than one?

TM: He was, I believe two, almost three.

AH: I thought that he was born in '44.

TM: My dad was born December 5th, 1943.

AH: He may have some very faint memories.

TM: I talked to him about it recently. He said he does have faint memories. He does remember the fences, he does remember barbed wire, and his other memories are a lot of what his parents told him.

AH: And he had a parent that did talk a lot, too.

TM: Yeah, Yori always talked a lot.

AH: What was her husband like?

TM: Makoto? He came from a very wealthy family in Japan. His name originally was Shinichi Misumi. He renamed himself, because, from what I was told, there's still some gray area.

AH: He was from Japan?

TM: From Japan.

AH: So, he was an Issei?

TM: Like Yojiro. Yoriko's father was in Japan.

AH: She's a Nisei. So, she married an Issei. How much older was he than her? Do you have that?

[01:10:00]

TM: How much older what, the ages?

AH: Your grandfather than your grandmother.

TM: Let's see. Yori was born April 19, 1917, and Makoto Mita was born August 21, 1908, so about nine years, almost nine years difference, somewhere around there. Makoto changed his name to Makoto Mita, eventually, legally. When it became legal I think it was 1956, somewhere around there, where it became legal to become a citizen.

AH: Fifty-two.

TM: He changed it, I think, in '52 or '56 legally to Makoto. He jumped ship from Japan. As a young kid, he—I should probably start farther back, and I'll get to that part really quick. He was born the son of Fumi Sakagi and Tokojiro Misumi, so he was

born a Misumi. But, he was put into a navigational school where he was supposed to learn how to navigate ships. The family was extremely wealthy. He had five maids just for himself. They lived in a twenty-one to twenty-three bedroom house. They were extremely wealthy. The family had originally fought for a Samurai warlord or something like that, back in Japan, so he had inherited three pieces of land, where the name Misumi, which got changed to Mita, came from. He had three pieces of land, or three fields, three parcels. My grandfather actually wanted to keep that still around.

AH: Let me pause this for just a second. I want to see if you have any—[recording paused] We just took a look at the correspondence boxes in the Jimmy Omura papers, and interestingly enough, we found a series of letters, some going back as far back as 1946 and then some going as recently as 1984. So, there was at least almost forty years of correspondence, and both your grandfather and your grandmother, of course, are involved. You were just referring to your grandfather as Mitasan, and here was a letter in which Jimmy is thanking Mitasan for his courtesies. This was when Jimmy went back to Hillsboro with his then wife Caryl, and this was after Caryl's mother had passed away. He stayed there for a little while before returning to Denver. Of course, she never returned to Denver to be with him again, and within a couple of years the marriage was dissolved. But, this shows that there was that family connection, and I think that's very interesting. I wanted to ask you—again, going back to some of the materials that we were talking about—is there anything else on this leave clearance that you'd like to specifically point up?

TM: Yeah. Questions number 27 and 28 I find to be *the* most fascinating part of this, other than the other history I can obtain from this. One of the most controversial things at the time were questions 27 and 28. Question 27 states, *If the opportunity presents itself and you are found qualified, would you be willing to volunteer for the Army Nurse Corps or the WAAC?* My grandmother put that she was physically handicapped. She put, *I am physically handicapped.* And the biggest thing about this document that really gives me a sense of how she felt at the time was number 28, where it says, *Will you swear unqualified allegiance to the United States of America and forswear any form of allegiance or obedience to the Japanese emperor or any other foreign government, power, or organization?* My grandmother's response was, *Provided the United States government guarantees (1) the security of all the constitutional and civil rights as explained in the U.S. Constitution to all American citizens regardless of race, color, or creed.* And the last point on here was, *equality and justice.* It looks like it was a little bit incomplete.

AH: Is there a number three? Is there anything under the three there? Because it doesn't come across on my Xerox. Does it come on yours?

TM: Yeah, there's a (3) right there.

AH: But it doesn't have any words.

TM: I think what she wanted to do was she wanted to put the quality and justice, and then number (3) would be, less of race, color, or creed.

AH: This is the thing that Omura has been most noted for is the constitutional guarantees. It's clear that there had been, probably, some conversations and some correspondences between Caryl and her sister Yoriko. They were both close, and the influence probably went both ways. She's standing on constitutional rights, too. This is a very interesting document.

TM: Now that I just thought about it, one of the other things that really stood out was number 23, where she was asked to list, *contributions you have made to any society, organization, or club*, and she listed down the following organizations: She put down the American Red Cross, San Francisco, California. She also put down the JACL in San Francisco, California, and the Salvation Army. It just kind of leads me to wonder what her opinions would be on the JACL and what her sister and Jimmy Omura had to go through with the JACL. I just wonder how supportive they would be *after* this document was written.

AH: I think this is interesting for a couple of reasons. By this time, '38 to '42, she was in the JACL, but she left the JACL at the time of the evacuation. Another interesting thing is that, remember we were looking at the photographs in San Francisco and it looked like there were some Salvation Army people there. And here she's listed as one of the organizations that she was affiliated with was the Salvation Army. I think that we've got two—you can see how these public documents are very revealing.

There's an interesting thing I see right away, and one of them is when she's listing her siblings, and she lists one of them as Fumiko Okuma, sister, and she says that she resides at 2008 Larimer Street in Denver, Colorado. But it says she's a sandwich shop proprietor, and that's where she ran Caryl's Malt Shop, which was selling sandwiches as well as malts. So, I thought all this really ties her together ideologically, it ties her together in terms of her outlook on the Constitution, and it ties her together just the awareness of what her sister, who was not in camp, was doing.

TM: Also, in number 9 and 10, it talks about Caryl's parents, Yoriko's parents, about Yojiro being born in Fukuoka-ken, Japan, and being a shoe repairman, and that Yori's mother, Kise Okuma, was also born in Fukuoka-ken, Japan, and her occupation at the time of the camps, I guess, was that she was an invalid at the time.

AH: It says, *None, invalid*, for occupation. And then, at one point, it was asking for political affiliation, and I believe it said Republican. Where did I see that on this form? Here it is. It's number 7. *Are you a registered voter? Yes. Year first registered? Nineteen thirty-eight, City Hall in San Francisco.* And it says, *Party? Republican.* Jimmy Omura, in spite of people thinking because he was progressive, was a Democrat, was regularly affiliated with the Republican Party, too. So, there are some correspondences here.

TM: A lot of my recollections, too—I have a hard time looking at some of these documents because I know my grandmother, and I know the type of person she was. For me, it pains me to think that anybody would ever think of her as a bad person and put her in a camp. Because she was a short little lady. She was like five feet tall and harmless. I still have a hard time, to this day, to look and know what they went through.

AH: Did you get to know the siblings of Yoriko and Caryl? Those two were quite close in age but also close in their bonding and really tight as sisters. Did you know the other members of the family? I don't think you could have known one of her younger sisters because she died in '66 and you weren't born until '69, and that was Kiyo. But did you ever meet the older brother that went to New York?

TM: No. My father has memories of Takeo, or Thomas, as my father calls him. He remembers all of them, but for myself, I have very limited memories. I don't think I ever met Takeo. If I did, it was a brief encounter.

[01:20:14]

AH: Then there's another sister.

TM: Caryl's other sister—she had Toyoko. I know our families did get together. I probably only met her maybe about five times in my life or so. I have pictures that I remember, but I was very young at the time.

AH: When did she die, according to your statistics?

TM: Toyoko Okuma died in September of 1981.

AH: You would have been about twelve then, so if you did meet her, you might remember. Where did she live? Do you remember? Was she up in San Francisco too?

TM: I think she was up in San Francisco, or at least in the Oakland/Alameda—I know her daughter right now, Sandy, who I just reestablished contact with due to my research and trying to find everybody in the family, Sandy currently lives in San Anselmo, California.

AH: And does what for a living? Do you have an idea?

TM: She's a registered nurse. I just met up with her because she came down here for a nursing convention. We're kind of both in the healthcare field. She held great pictures of the family that I obtained from her. She made copies of pictures. She printed them out on some paper so I could have the copies as well. They're the pictures I brought to share with Art today.

On that side of the family, I really don't have too much of memories, but I always know that my grandmother was talking—the names I always heard: Auntie

- Kiyo or her brother, Takeo, or Auntie Fumi, of course. We got together with them. Most of the memories I have are things that I found as I've gotten older, because I've had a chance to appreciate what history is there and what has happened to the family. I even remember my grandmother going through the redress, where they ended up eventually being reimbursed for being in the camps. I have lots of different little memories that kind of come out as I start to think about different things, of what she's told me and what I've learned of what they went through. But, at the same time, I still wish I would have asked a lot more questions, because she was more than willing to talk about it.
- AH: You mentioned to me that you have these leave clearance forms. And the whole so-called *registration* crisis in early 1943 revolved around attempting to fill these forms out and the way people responded to questions 27 and 28. Those were the ones that you had particularly pointed out, but those were the questions that the government riveted upon too. These were used either for leave clearance so that you could leave the camp to go someplace else, or you went into the military. The War Relocation Authority and the military both had these forms.
- TM: I know that my Grandmother Yori and her sisters, I guess they used these papers as well for their husbands to leave camp to go work picking beets or pulling beets, or something.
- AH: Topping beets.
- TM: Yeah. So, they used those to actually leave the camps to make more money for the family, so they could go work outside of camp and send more money back to their family. I know my grandfather, at one point, had left the camps to go out and make more money for the family, I'm assuming.
- AH: These were not permanent leave clearances. They were short-term leave clearances where you could go out for seasonal work and then come back. But, a lot of people went sometimes as much as a year, and then came back and hoped to replenish family's finances. Who do you have these forms for, which of the family members?
- TM: I have them for my grandmother, Yoriko, and Caryl's parents, Yojiro Okuma and Kise Gohara Okuma.
- AH: Do you have those with you today?
- TM: I don't have them with me today, but I can get them to you.
- AH: That would be great to have copies of those because I think they're really important.
- TM: I'm trying to remember if my grandmother is the one that filled them out for them, because I don't know how much writing that her parents did at the time. I want to

say, just off the top of my head, I think my grandmother is the one that filled out her parents' forms for them.

AH: We could probably check Yoriko's handwriting on this, too.

TM: I'm pretty sure my grandmother is the one who filled them out. She sat right down with them and asked them—because the questions on here, I'm sure at the time my grandmother didn't know a lot of the stuff, so I'm sure the information she obtained from them was information she learned as she was asking them.

AH: Well, and if Yoriko wanted to be a lawyer at some point, she was probably very bright. And she was the oldest sibling that was in the—no, he lived in a separate dwelling at Topaz.

TM: Takeo. He didn't live with the family there at Topaz.

AH: Then Yoriko would have been the oldest of the girls in the family?

TM: Yes. Yoriko was the oldest. Well, Takeo was the oldest. Takeo was the firstborn.

AH: Then comes Yoriko, then comes—I'm blanking on the one sister. I know Kiyoko was the youngest. Toyo, was that one of the sisters?

TM: Yeah. Toyoko was a sister.

AH: And you're sure she's not older than Yoriko?

TM: Yes. Yoriko is the oldest of the sisters.

AH: So then, she did have the role of taking care of her parents during the camps, and then even after the camps, as you explained.

TM: It was only five days after the camps that she survived, but yeah, she did take care of her up until her—

AH: I mean, she had family responsibilities, because she even got somewhat thwarted in her professional aspirations because her dad wanted her to take care of him.

TM: Yeah. Well, there's also—not definitely confirmed, but there's also rumor in the family that Takeo was sent back to Japan for disciplining, which seemed to be kind of a common thing at the time. My grandfather was also put into a Buddhist shrine for disciplining so that when he came out he'd be a good kid. So, I think Takeo was sent back to Japan to be disciplined so when he came back—

AH: Before the war, you mean.

- TM: Before the war, yeah, as a kid. Takeo was about six years older than my grandmother, Yoriko. The next born was Kiyoko, and after that was Fumiko Okuma. Everybody seems to know her as Caryl, but Auntie Fumi was born next. Then Toyoko Okuma was born last.
- AH: Why do you think that you know her as Auntie Fumi? Is it because her grandmother called her that? Fumi rather than Caryl?
- TM: My grandmother, I guess, when she would talk to my dad, it would be my dad's aunt. Fumiko, or Caryl, was my dad's aunt, so my dad always called her Auntie Fumi. So, as a kid growing up, whenever I heard we were going to meet with the Gertlers, my dad would say, "Auntie Fumi's going to be there." So, I always thought of her as Auntie Fumi.
- AH: But, that probably came from your grandmother, from Yoriko, who would use the family name Fumi. What I'm saying is, the letters that we were looking at, when she writes—
- TM: Caryl.
- AH: Well, a lot of times when she wrote to her, it said, *Dear Fumi*. When Yoriko was writing. So, I take it that within the family, that was the name she had? Caryl was more of an American name.
- TM: I never knew the name Caryl until I started to search. I never knew her as Caryl. Even when I started doing my searching on ancestry.com, I never once put Caryl. When I finally found that people had called her Caryl, I found Caryl Okuma on ancestry.com. I found the death notice that she had passed away.
- AH: Oh, you did find that?
- TM: Yeah, it's on there.
- AH: I'd like to find that. Can you send that as an attachment to me?
- TM: Actually, I think you can get it. All you do is go to ancestry.com and type in Caryl Okuma, and it will come right up.
- AH: Just send it to me once, because I'll forget that. And I really want that. Also, I'd like to do that genealogical thing for my ownself and for my wife. I'd really love to do that. So, there is a little death notice on it?
- TM: Yes. And it even states that her parents' last names were Gohara and Okuma.
- AH: Where did she die? Do you remember? Did she die here in Los Angeles?

TM: I know Cheryl knows the answer to that.

AH: Cheryl would probably even have an obituary notice.

TM: Cheryl knows that for sure. You'd have to ask her to be certain on it, but it was in California. I can't remember exactly what city. I do have the record at home. I can get the information to you.

AH: Well, I think, for today, we've probably pretty much wrapped it up, haven't we? We have a lot of things to go through, but we've gone through quite a bit. We're winding down a little bit on our tape. Is there anything that you would like to add? Is there something that you would either like to add or ask?

TM: One of the basic things, I just want it to be known that currently I, myself, want to work on something. It's not going to necessarily be detailed on James Omura, but I'm working on my own documentary, own history of the family. And I'm possibly thinking of making some sort of—if it's only a documentary, that's fine, but maybe even something that turns into a movie because it's a story that my ancestors need to have told, because what happened to them was not right. For me, it pains me because I know my grandmother didn't deserve what she got, so for me to remember her in a way of saying that, You didn't deserve what happened to you—I loved her with all my heart, and I hope to be able to write something that is worthy of being published and put on TV or something.

AH: Was your dad very close to his mom, to your grandmother?

TM: Yes. My dad and her other son, Roy, they were both very close to their mother. They both had their own opinions as to what should happen with her after she passed, which got them into a lot of arguments, which still disrupts the family to this day. But, we're hoping to get all that stuff resolved.

AH: So, you're close enough to the concentration camp experience to be able to say that you had a father who was born in camp.

TM: Yes.

AH: And you had a grandmother who, against her will, of course, was part of a mass incarceration. And this happened to be your best friend, in a lot of ways, your grandmother, and a person that really showed you a lot of family history in her own way by taking you around and showing you San Francisco and telling you stories. How did your mom respond to, real quickly, things Japanese and the background? She sounds like she was a liberal person.

TM: My mom always had an appreciation for the Japanese culture.

AH: And she's still alive.

TM: She's still alive. She eventually ended up divorcing my father but always, throughout her whole life, had a great appreciation for Japanese culture.

AH: And promoted your awareness of it?

TM: Yes. She never restricted me from knowing anything. Basically, she was disowned for marrying my father, and her family didn't talk to her for about eight years or so, somewhere around there.

AH: Did you meet her family?

TM: Yes. They eventually accepted us in. The day before my mom's father passed away, we had a very long phone conversation, and he was—

AH: On his deathbed practically.

TM: Yes, on his deathbed. It was the day or the day before he died, a couple days before he died possibly.

AH: What was he showing you?

TM: We were watching a baseball game on TV together, because he played professional baseball. We were watching a baseball game on TV, and he was talking to me about the game. We sat through about eight innings of a nine inning game together and talked about the game.

AH: And his health was okay at that point?

TM: He was dying.

AH: Was he dying of cancer?

TM: Cirrhosis of the liver from alcohol.

AH: But, he was well enough to be able to watch that game.

TM: Yes. We shared it on TV together. He was at the hospital, and I was at home.

AH: And he actually spoke about your dad and your mom?

TM: He mostly just wanted to bond with me, so we were just talking different things back and forth. The guy was really into baseball. He had played professionally.

AH: And he hadn't really come out as far as recognizing his grandfather's role to you before this?

TM: You mean as far as my mom's father?

AH: Yeah. This is who we're talking about, right, who was bonding with you?

TM: Yeah. Well, in his notes, he has several notes from when he was going to AA rehab, and he realized at the end of his life he made bad decisions about my mom marrying my father. He realized his mistakes and that he should not have treated her the way he did.

AH: So, he was an alcoholic?

TM: Yes.

AH: And so too was Fumi's father?

TM: I believe—yeah. From what I've been told by the family, he was drinking heavily and the family had to support him. All of the daughters ended up taking him in. Most of the daughters did. He went from each daughter's house for his living arrangements.

END OF INTERVIEW