CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

Japanese American Evacuation

O.H. 1328

NORMAN Y. MINETA

Interviewed

by

Duff Griffith

on

February 10, 1975

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INTERVIEWEE: NORMAN Y. MINETA

INTERVIEWER: Duff Griffith

SUBJECT: Japanese American Evacuation

DATE: February 10, 1975

G: This is an interview with Norman Y. Mineta, congressman of the 13th district in California, by Duff Griffith for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project, at Mr. Mineta's office at 1245 S. Winchester Boulevard in San Jose on February 10, 1975, at 9:00 a.m.

Congressman Mineta, perhaps we can begin with your background--where you were born and raised and so forth.

M: I was born and raised in San Jose, California, and attended grammar school there until 1942 when all of us were evacuated to the Santa Anita Assembly Center. There were no schools for us at Santa Anita; then we were sent to Heart Mountain, Wyoming, where I was able to attend school. In April 1943 my dad got a job teaching Japanese at the University of Chicago, under the Army Specialized Training Program. Although he left at that time, my mother and I were not able to leave the Heart Mountain camp until November 1943 and move to Illinois. We lived in Evanston and my dad commuted to South Chicago where the university was located. We lived there until after the war, at which time the West Coast was reopened to those of Japanese ancestry. We then returned to San Jose. I re-enrolled in junior high school and later went on to graduate from San Jose High School in 1949 where I served as student body president. I attended the University of California at Berkeley where I received my degree in Business Administration in 1953. I received my commission on graduation and was ordered to active duty and was in the service until 1956, when I returned to join my dad in the insurance business that

he started in 1920. I've lived here ever since.

G: Was your father also born in the United States?

M: No, he immigrated from Japan in 1902. He landed in Seattle, and then worked his way down to Salinas--from one lumber camp to another--where his uncle was working as a rancher.

G: How about your mother?

M: My mother came in 1912, and they were married in San Francisco about that time. Then they moved to a place just south of San Jose called Edenvale. In 1919 they moved to North Sixth Street in San Jose and lived there until 1928 when my dad built a house on North Fifth Street which became our family home. It still stands there today.

G: Had your father known your mother in Japan?

M: Very slightly. He used to know her brother very well because they were school chums, so they used to write to each other all the time. Then around 1911 or so, he wrote to his friend and said, "You know, I'm about that age where maybe I'd better consider getting married. Is there anyone who you think I might want to marry?" And so, the fellow wrote back and said, "Well, what about my sister?" (laughter) My father replied, "All right, send her picture over." So to that extent she was a "picture bride." That phrase literally meant that you saw pictures of a lot of women then you'd say, "What about her?" Then you'd send for that woman and end up marrying her--and it would all be arranged by what is called a Japanese Baishakunin /go-between/. But in my dad's case, at least he remembers who she was and the fact that she was the kid sister of a very good friend.

G: What are your earliest memories of the internment?

M: I think the events leading to the internment probably have as much significance as the internment itself. As far as my personal recollections, I would say my earliest memories were of moving from San Jose when I was about ten. At that time--with a young boy's perception--it was really more of a matter of, "Gee, great! I'm going on a long train ride!" It was really, in effect, the first long train ride I'd ever been on. I'd taken the train to San Francisco several times, but nothing of this magnitude, where I was going to be on the train overnight.

G: Did you sense anything emotionally disturbing about this move?

M: Oh, very much so! My father had very strong ties here in San Jose and formed a group in the late 1920s of those who wanted to permanently reside in the United States. You see, there were many who thought of coming over here to work and accumulate some money and later return to Japan. But there were also many who came with the intention of staying, raising their families and becoming a permanent part of the fabric of our society. These people needed some kind of mutual bolstering because those who wanted to go back to Japan would berate those who wanted to stay. My dad was instrumental in putting together a group in San Jose of those who wanted to permanently reside here. Consequently, he had strong relationships with city and county officials and the business community--he had made many friends.

I've mentioned many times that there were only three times when I'd seen my dad cry: once on the 7th of December, 1941; the second time was when we left on the train to go to camp, and the third time was when my mother passed away. I remember on the 7th of December, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, he was in the little office at home, crying, and saying, "Why did they do it? Why? Why?"

Well, soon after this, the evacuation notices were posted and then came the tension and the anxiety of "What to do now?" We had to sell our car--a relatively new Packard at that time--for a very low price compared to what he had paid for it. People knew there were all sorts of distress sales going on, whether it was a person who had a store and had to get rid of his merchandise, or a farmer who had to make arrangements for his farmland. In the meantime, all of our things had to be packed and stored because we could only take those things which we could carry. We had to get shots--there were just a lot of things that had to be done in a very short period of time! So that kind of anxiety was translated into a form of trauma as well, and it had its reverberations within the family. We could feel the tension and it all culminated when we boarded the trains on May 29th. For me it was, as I said, a little different: I was a boy going on a long train ride. I had asked my mother if I could wear my Club Scout uniform that day. But yes, it was a very traumatic experience.

G: I've heard that Heart Mountain was one of the better camps . . .

M: Better in what sense?

G: In that there was less regimentation, and in general a much looser structure. Concerning your family, were all

of you able to eat together, or did the children eat separately?

M: No, we all ate together as a family. Even in Santa Anita we ate as a family. We had meal tickets which corresponded to the mess hall--the yellow mess, the red mess, or the blue mess--and you would come through the line and the mess steward would punch your ticket for breakfast, lunch or dinner. At Heart Mountain we also remained a family unit in the mess halls.

G: Was there any breakdown of discipline, as far as the children were concerned?

M: No, I don't think so; in fact, I would say there was probably even closer supervision! After all, you were in a room about the size of this one--say fifteen feet by twenty-five feet--a family of anywhere from four to seven people. This was your living room and bedroom, and there was a potbellied stove--everything right in this one room. I'd say the length was all right, but width-wise it was a little narrow.

In terms of "better," I really have no point of reference because I'm not sure what the other camps were like.

I know other camps had more incidents of trouble, in the form of riots and fights. We had several at Heart Mountain, but not nearly the magnitude of the events we were aware of at Poston and Gila in Arizona, and especially at Tule Lake. We had some flare-ups; once we had a rock thrown through our barrack window. You see, my brother-in-law was very active in the JACL /Japanese American Citizens League/, and they had adopted cooperation with the evacuation as their national policy. As much as we objected to the evacuation we were still going to go along with it, and in the long run prove our Americanism and our loyalty to the country. We were going to cooperate fully with the authorities in making sure that the evacuation went off as smoothly as possible. At that time my sister was engaged to him, so he came to visit us, and everyone was aware of the fact that he was the executive director of the JACL. So those people who objected to the JACL's position broke two of our windows.

G: Are there any other specific incidents of violence or upsets that you recall?

M: Well, not at Heart Mountain. The biggest incident I remember occurring was the riot at Santa Anita, which involved approximately two to three thousand people, and they brought in the Army with tanks, machine guns--there was actual shooting going on.

G: Were you present?

M: Yes. In fact, a friend and I observed all of it. We were sitting on the fence of what they called "Anita Chiquita"--the practice field next to the Santa Anita Racetrack, but on the same grounds. We sat there while the bullets went zinging by us--and here we were ten-year-old kids!--and then we'd go running up to try and peer through the brush and see more of what was going on. We were not really in the cross-fire, but we were close enough to hear the bullets winging by us. When you think about it now, you sort of laugh and think, gee, we were really lucky, because it was a full-scale riot.

It all started when the Santa Anita officals distributed a list of "contraband" articles: hand irons, knives in excess of four or five inches, and regular AM radios. Well, one day the Army came through and started to inspect the barracks for "contraband" articles, and people really got up in arms about this invasion of privacy of their barracks, so before we knew it, there was a full-scale riot and the MPs complete with armed carriers and jeeps with ring-mounted machine guns, came to put it down. Of course, our response was, "Wow! Look at the weapons, look at the tanks, and look at the jeeps and all that stuff coming in!" Of course, to others it had a different impact. Other than this, I really don't recall any other specific details aside from some of the flare-ups at Heart Mountain, which were very minor.

Heart Mountain was really out in the middle of nowhere--it's not one of the vacation spas a person would normally go to, and even if we did get out of camp there really wasn't anywhere you could go, what with the military patrols--but Eddie Kimura and I--the same kid I went with to see the doings at Santa Anita during the riot--used to go sledding. It was a great sport to get into a great big box in the wintertime, and find a little hill and just go tumbling down the hill inside the box, letting the slippery snow and the wind push you down. As I recall, Kotex 24 boxes were great for this kind of sport! (laughter)

One time, as we were sliding along, we went right under the fence and were picked up by the military police, as if we were breaking out of camp! (laughter) So there we were, around eleven, being picked up in the jeep, threatened and just scared out of our wits! And then going down to the brigade and sitting there crying and promising, "No, we won't ever do it again," and having them go after my dad, and he coming down to pick us up.

G: What was your dad's reaction? Were you punished?

M: No, not really--other than the fact that he thought we ought to be more careful; otherwise, we might get shot.

We also had a governmental structure in camp where each block would have a block council, and the block council would then elect a block manager. My dad was block manager, so again he was participating in a leadership role.

G: Do you think this is how you developed an interest in politics?

M: Both my parents have always been active in community affairs. I remember when I was in grammar school before the war, my mother would attend PTA /Parent-Teacher Association/ meetings. Because of her own limited knowledge of English, I wasn't really sure whether she understood what was going on at all those meetings, but she always felt an obligation to the kids to go to those meetings and have her presence known. I guess she had such consistent attendance that they made her treasurer or something like that. And, of course, she was active in our own Japanese Methodist Church . . . the Women's Society of Christian Service, and she also participated in Red Cross drives. So she and my dad were both very active in the community.

G: Do you think that this experience colored your thinking in any way politically?

M: Sure, there's no question that it has. There's no rancor or bitterness from the evacuation experience, but we are always products of our experiences and I think this is part of my feelings about government. If we'd had people in the government who were really sensitive to constitutional law, to civil rights, and to human decency, then the evacuation might not have occurred. And I feel a strong commitment today of making sure that, under any circumstances, something similar to this will never occur.

In terms of how government should deal with its people, I have a different perspective: I don't think the government ought to be playing a perfunctory role in dealing with the lives of citizens. And as I've said in my State of the City message when I first became mayor, "People don't interfere with the business of government, because people are its business!" Whether it's the FBI /Federal Bureau of Investigation/ or any other agency, they have to live and work within the bounds of the law. I am strongly committed to the idea that citizens ought to be able to petition their government on grievances.

During the long period of time that I've been involved in community affairs, I've tried to find out what community

feelings are in order to put into effect those kinds of programs. I tried getting better communications between City Hall and San Jose citizens. I divided the city into sections and each month the City Council and the major department heads got out into the neighborhoods to let the citizens express to them how they perceived city services, how they want to see things changed, and their own hopes and desires in terms of what's happening in their own neighborhoods of San Jose. I just felt that government had to be a lot closer to the people, that officials had to be more accountable to their people, and this all comes out of the experience of having gone through the evacuation--of being the subject of acts of discrimination.

G: Were you subjected to any discriminatory acts prior to the evacuation?

M: Oh, sure, and it comes in different forms. It might be the subtle kind--well, I say subtle, but maybe it wasn't that subtle--waiting in a department store for a clerk to help you, while other people come up and get waited on first. It might be another kind, like when my wife and I were looking for an apartment. We'd call up and say, "Is that apartment still available?" and they'd say "Oh yes, come on over and see it!" But as soon as we'd walk through the door and say, "Hi, I just called about the apartment," the lady would say, "Oh, I think my husband just rented it a little while ago," and then she'd excuse herself and come back and say, "Oh, I'm sorry, but my husband just rented it." So you go back down to the corner gas station, pick up the phone and call back the same people, and they say, "Yes, yes! It's still available." So you know darn well what the mere presence of your face indicated--"No, we don't want you." This was going on then, and I think it's still going on today.

G: You still think . . .

M: Oh, sure! I think that Nisei, as Asians, are highly desired as employees, but they never get into the supervisory or management positions. They're the hard-working, conscientious drones, and they stay there. Maybe part of it is that Nisei aren't self-assertive, but nevertheless, generally speaking, you won't find many in administrative, supervisory or management positions.

G: With the impact Japan has made on industry, do you think the situation is changing a little?

M: No, I think that the specter of "yellow peril" surfaces. Two or three years ago, when Japan was doing so well and

the balance of payments were far in favor of Japan, which was accumulating vast American reserves in dollars, there was a strong resurgence of "yellow peril" and "the inscrutable Oriental" and this kind of feeling. A number of us were concerned and indicated to the JACL that perhaps we had better start preparing ourselves for another onslaught of anti-Japan attitudes that would spill over into anti-Japanese American feelings. We felt that we had to counter this with some kind of public relations program and be on the guard for any manifestations of anti-Japanese American feelings. So this is something that I'm not sure you ever really get over, at least in terms of saying, "Well, that's past history and you don't have to worry about it and you're fully accepted," because I just don't feel that's the case. You have to keep making a case for yourself all the time.

I think Asians have suffered from every kind of discriminatory act and prejudice as the blacks and Chicanos have, but the intensity has probably diminished in the last several years. But the problem still exists; whether it be in housing, employment, or trying to get into professional schools for these are areas in which Asians have difficulty, regardless of ability. They're just not getting their full measure of opportunity.

G: How is the JACL active in correcting this?

M: The JACL is the national organization which has been in the forefront of civil rights, equal employment and housing in conjunction with various other organizations--whether it be the National Urban League or NAACP /National Association for the Advancement of Colored People/, or Mexican American organizations.

G: Is there any formal organization comprised of those who were interned?

M: No, no one really likes to relive ugly memories. There are no "reunions" as such, but there have been several trips back to the camps. The JACL was able to get the California Historical Landmarks Commission to designate Manzanar as a historical site because of the camp that existed there.[1]

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[1]Additional information on the establishment of this historical marker at Manzanar War Relocation Center can be found at California State University, Fullerton, Oral History Collection in Interview #1366 with Sue Kunitomi Embrey by Arthur A. Hansen, David A. Hacker, and David J. Bertagnoli, dated November 15, 1973, pp. 57-76; Arthur A. Hansen and Betty E. Mitson, eds., Voices Long Silent, (California State University, Fullerton, 1974), pp. 161-189. Ed.

In 1962, my wife and I visited Heart Mountain, Wyoming, on our return from the national JACL convention in Seattle. We came through Yellowstone and went out fifty or sixty miles west to Heart Mountain.

G: What were your feelings when you returned?

M: Well, part of the reason for going back was just the curiosity to see what was remaining of the camp, and seeing this thing called the Heart Mountain again. What we saw in 1962 was quite different from what I remembered in 1942-1943. For one thing, that area was very arid and not really usable for anything, and today it's all being farmed.

A rancher came along in his pickup and asked us if we needed any help. I told him I had just wandered in here to look around, and asked him if he was ranching this area. I found out that he was a farmer, and that he came back right out of the service after World War II because the government allowed them to homestead the land, so he took the initial 160 acres and in subsequent years homesteaded more acreage. I asked him if he had lived here before, and he said, "Yeah, I used to live over in Deaver before the war and I remember this land wasn't worth a damn until those Japs came along and made it usable."

Well, that's true. When the people in the camps started raising potatoes, they set in their own drainage and irrigation system and actually reconverted that land while they were in camp. By growing their own food, they really made that area usable again. The Shoshone River ran nearby, but they created a canal system and a number of irrigation projects of their own which made the place productive in terms of farm products.

This farmer was explaining that as a veteran he was able to homestead the original 160 acres, and then later on he picked up another 160 acres. We were also surprised to learn that certain buildings were still remaining and were now used by the Army Corps of Engineers. The great big signboard commemorating the gold-star veterans of Heart Mountain was there--weather-beaten and the names no longer legible and you could still see the plaques where the names of those who were killed in action during World War II were painted.

In 1965 I had completed Command and General Staff College, through the Army Reserve, and graduated from Fort Leavenworth. My wife and two-and-a-half year old son came out to Fort Leavenworth and on our way back we drove through Colorado to Amache, where my wife had been in camp. That was totally different! At Heart Mountain,

barracks were built on wooden foundations, but at Amache they were on concrete slab foundations, so you could get up on the fender of the car and see acres and acres of concrete slabs where the barracks used to be. Now, of course, it's all overgrown with tumbleweeds and sagebrush.

G: Were any of the buildings still standing?

M: No, there was nothing left at all. The only remains of the camp were the slab foundations. The town closest to the camp, Lamar, was within walking distance and evidently, in the latter part of 1944, they were even allowed to leave camp. When we went into town to get some gas, we drove the path that her family used to take from camp to town to go to the movies or the ice cream parlor. That was something we could never do; we were never allowed outside the camp.

G: Why do you suppose there were differences in administration at the various camps?

M: Well, for one thing, even if you got out of camp in Heart Mountain, Cody was the nearest town--and that was maybe twenty-five miles away. And even if you did go into Cody, what would you do?

I think we were the largest camp with about twenty-seven thousand,[2] so they probably had some control problems. So, not knowing how to deal with us, they didn't allow free movement of the people. Amache was probably a smaller camp with seven or eight thousand, so they were able to have a little better control system. But, I'm not sure that there was any design, on the part of the camps, to be different--I think it was strictly a control problem.

We were able to get a permit to leave Wyoming to go to Illinois when my dad got the job. At that time, they didn't allow accompanied family travel, so they let dad go first, about April of 1943, and we were able to leave in November. I remember we got to Evanston, Illinois, on Thanksgiving Day.

G: Is there anything else that you would like to add?

M: Well, I think there's no question that following Pearl Harbor hysteria and emotion was the rule--the law of the

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[2]Records show Heart Mountain's population approximating 10,000.

land--rather than constitutional observance. Even the Supreme Court really reflected the tempo of the times--the hysteria of the war. Interestingly enough, the decision justifying and validating the evacuation is still on the books.

G: Is there any way that it could be . . .

M: Title II of the Internal Security Act allowed the Department of Justice to retain one of the camps, Tule Lake, in a dormant condition so that if it became necessary to use it again . . . but a bill to do away with Title II, of course, was finally passed in 1970. There were some very strong feelings that the camps were going to be used against the blacks, the anti-Vietnam war people . . . and before you knew it, people would be herded into camps again!

G: Do you feel that the possibility of the camps happening again was a result of the Nixon administration?

M: I think there was a growing polarization in the 1960s--culminating with the Watts riots and the riots in Detroit--and with it I think there may have arised the thought, "We may have to throw 'these kinds of people' into camps." So the JACL was there to make sure that the existence of these camps and the FBI's ability to maintain them was eliminated. This was done only as recently as 1970. I think civil rights, civil liberties are very tender--sometimes tenuous rights--and we have to be that much more alert to their protection. There's got to be a constant reminder lest we fall into the trap of saying expediency is a better route. It's possible.

G: Well, thank you, Congressman Mineta, on behalf of the Japanese American Oral History Project at California State University, Fullerton, for your time and cooperation.

M: Any time.

END OF INTERVIEW

MINETA