

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

Little Tokyo of Los Angeles, California

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KATSUMA MUKAEDA

Interviewed

by

Dave Biniasz

on

November 28, 1973

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INTERVIEWEE: KATSUMA MUKAEDA

INTERVIEWER: Dave Biniasz

SUBJECT: Little Tokyo of Los Angeles, California

DATE: November 28, 1973

B: This is an interview with Katsuma Mukaeda for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project by Dave Biniasz at 125 Weller Street in Los Angeles, on November 28, 1973, at 3:00 p.m.

Mr. Mukaeda, I wonder if you could tell me what you remember about Little Tokyo, its conditions and boundaries, just prior to World War II?

M: Prior to World War II, I had an office in a building on First Street and Central Avenue. At that time, the conditions were about the same as right now except for a few frame buildings on East First Street. These particular ones are at First and Central and at the north side of East First Street, between Los Angeles Street and San Pedro. A few more frame buildings were at the north side of East First, between San Pedro Street and Central Avenue. The rest of them are about the same, but on the west side of San Pedro Street between First and what is now Temple Street, they were mostly frame buildings except for the Olympic Hotel Building in that section. And it was an old, old, building.

B: What was the morale of the people then?

M: Before the war?

B: Yes, before the war.

M: Well, they were well settled in Little Tokyo, but their financial strengths were limited because they just deposited their savings with two Japanese banks, the Yokohama Specie Bank and the Sumitomo Bank. And they could not buy real property in their name. They were mostly tenants, leasing or renting. The buildings were so old that if an earthquake came the buildings would surely shake and

crack up. From an engineering standpoint, it was dangerous.

B: I'd like a little more clarification on the second question. I know there were many laws which discriminated against the Japanese as far as owning property.

M: That's right.

B: But it seems that there were still a lot of small businesses in Little Tokyo. Did the Japanese own these businesses, and if so, how did they come to have these businesses in Little Tokyo?

M: Some families had a second generation young son, and businesses were in their name, but there were very few--very, very few. Others formed corporations with the majority of the stocks issued to an American citizen, who was, of course, at least twenty-one years old. But the investments, you know, were very few in the Japanese town.

B: So most of the people rented, is that right?

M: That's right . . . of course, under the treaty between the United States and Japan, we could lease real property for commercial purposes.

B: So these people rented the property. Did most of the people also live here in Little Tokyo?

M: Most of the people who lived in Little Tokyo were in apartments and some rooming houses, but a majority of them had some businesses outside the area of Little Tokyo.

B: Now, during the war, Little Tokyo became a black community.

M: That's right.

B: Did the Japanese, as former residents, know what was happening to Little Tokyo while they were in the camps?

M: I don't think they knew, because they never came back to Little Tokyo until after the war.

B: Did news of Little Tokyo come to the camps?

M: No.

B: To what camp did most of the residents of Little Tokyo go?

M: Not to any one in particular. There were ten evacuation camps and the people went to different camps, separately, so each camp had their families. The Nisei were coming of age about that time, and they enlisted in the Army from the camps.

- B: Now, you said there were some businessmen who did own their business, the second generation sons.
- M: That's right.
- B: What happened to these businesses during the war?
- M: Well, they had a friend who they asked to look after it or they asked attorneys to look after it. So it was taken care of by their agent or attorneys, and they also rented.
- B: After the war, how did the Japanese re-establish themselves in Little Tokyo?
- M: They had to buy back property from these colored people, you know, and the owners of the property knew how Japanese take care of their property, see?
- B: Yes.
- M: So they welcomed the Japanese right away, whenever the opportunity came to take over the premises. And little by little they bought it back, either from the colored or whoever occupied it.
- B: So some of the Japanese families did sell their property when they left?
- M: I don't think they sold it, because they had no time to sell. So they'd ask an agent or attorney to keep it in their custody. A man named Ueda sold that building over there (points) before he evacuated for a very small amount of money.
- B: When he returned, did he buy it back?
- M: No. He sold it but he couldn't buy it back, because the new owner . . . well, I think the price went way up at that time. They couldn't pay that amount.
- B: In 1945, the order stating the Japanese could go back to their homes came out. How soon after the order was issued did the Japanese start coming back to Little Tokyo?
- M: It was right after V-J Day. I think it was August 15, that some people came back. There were two or three men that came back, like this man named Ueda. It would be worth your time to drop by and ask him some questions. He was the first one to come back here and open a store. He knows more about Little Tokyo than I do, because I came back to East First Street in February 1946. At that time, Japanese people were already doing business, although it was not complete and it was partly owned by colored people.
- B: Did the Japanese have any real problems moving back in or reclaiming their old homes after the war?

- M: No. Of course, there wasn't enough housing, so everyone had to get together either at the temple or some place until they could relocate.
- B: Were there improvements on the housing?
- M: There was a hostel in some church or temple, such as the Nishi Hongwanji Buddhist Temple in Los Angeles.
- B: So people stayed in a church or temple?
- M: Yes, temporarily, until they could relocate and find a permanent place to live.
- B: Were conditions any better when they came back? Did the Japanese find their homes in worse conditions than they left them in?
- M: Well, I didn't feel that way, but many people felt very hard. If you had a private home you would take some friends with you and it was crowded, there was no question about that. People usually took relatives or friends into their home.
- B: Were there any changes in the community as a whole?
- M: Well, at that time, our future was very bright. I would like to describe it because already the second generation Japanese had proved their loyalty to the United States by enlisting, even from behind the barbed wire. They were the ones named as the most decorated battalion of the whole United States Army. At the same time there was not one single sabotage or any un-American activities by Issei. I think you know Issei.
- B: Yes, it means first generation.
- M: Already our second generation leaders had started movements for civil rights. It looked like our future was very bright, because there were no more militarists in Japan. The relationship between the United States and Japan was entirely different when Japan lost the war. But American people were able to recognize that Japan could start a new country of democracy. Americans found out that Japanese were an advanced nation. They used to call us one hundred years in advance, culturally, of any nation in the whole Orient.

In this country the Nisei succeeded and gave us full recognition of our civil rights. Now we could become citizens of the United States, enjoy owning property here, and we knew our life would be in this country. Otherwise, if you can't buy property, you don't know what to do. You have no place to raise your children. It was so uncertain. But this war decided everything: the Japanese people decided to be loyal citizens of the United States. They firmly made up their minds.

B: Would you say that the war and relocation turned out to be a good experience for the Japanese?

M: Sure. This evacuation--of course, legally you might say that it was an infringement of American citizens' rights or oppression--but, when a war breaks out between countries, emotions are heightened and they become strong. Particularly when Americans were suspicious about Japan so many years before the war and when the Japanese Navy attacked Pearl Harbor . . . well, emotionally, if the Japanese went around as free people, particularly on the Pacific Coast, it might have been dangerous. I think it was better to be relocated some place, but they shouldn't have had a watchtower or sentry at the camps, or the barbed wire. That was a mistake. They were mostly American citizens and the children were mostly American citizens. They shouldn't have had that kind of security. But I'm a different case, I was put in an internment camp. Under international law they can intern the leaders of the community in an enemy nation community, and I was the President of the Japanese Chamber of Commerce in the year the war broke out. I was president of it for about ten years before that, too. But the relationship between the two countries was very bad, so the people in the community asked me to be head of this organization. It was the central organization of the Japanese community. So they arrested me the night of December 7, 1941.

B: That night?

M: Yes. Of course, I was more or less advisor for the Japanese Council at that time. Naturally, under this international law they can intern us. But even after we were interned, the American government thought about it and had hearings to release me. The hearing board said, "Mr. Mukaeda, you should not come here from the community." So I proved my loyalty was always with America, even when I was interned in camp. I couldn't tell everybody that I wanted to fight for the United States after I was interned, you know. But whenever troubles came, or maybe when troubles were coming up, I always settled them or stopped them. When I was interned, I was the spokesman of the camp. It was most peaceful and everybody had a pleasant life. The food served was good, and we even had a regular fence around the camp. But with my words, they trusted me. We could go out every afternoon wherever we wanted to go, see?

B: Yes.

M: I got my last letter and a recommendation from the government when the war ended. They had to segregate the people who wanted to go back to Japan from the ones who wanted to stay in this country. The head of the camp asked me, "Mr. Mukaeda, if I ask my officers to handle this business, it will take three or four months because I don't have enough people. So I will give you the entire file on this body of eight hundred people. You organize the office and ask the people whether they want to go back to Japan or not. Either

way, handle all the business. I will furnish you with typewriters." So I organized the office and questioned the people, about forty or fifty of them. And half of the time I worked for them. But later on . . . you know the census office is a very sensitive office, yet they said, "You're all right, Mr. Mukaeda. You can work in the census office." I worked in the census office later on.

My feelings toward the United States--maybe the other people may feel differently--but from the very beginning, when I came to this country, well, I was born into a pretty good family. I didn't have to come to the United States to make money, but my family consented to my coming here because I wanted to study in this country. I loved American people and America itself, already before I came here. So I didn't have any trouble associating with American people when I was attending school, college or the university, no trouble at all. About fifty-five years ago I was at the University of Southern California and the sorority girls used to invite me over all the time. At that time, it was so strict, you know. Sorority mothers were so strict that boys would hardly visit the sorority house. That's the way it was living in this country.

- B: I'm sure your information will help us very much. Perhaps we can talk with you again at greater length.
- M: Yes. That's the way I raised my son. I have only one son, but he is a retired Army pilot, a Lieutenant Colonel, and he went over to Korea twice during that war and Vietnam too.
- B: Thank you very much, Mr. Mukaeda, on behalf of the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project.

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