

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with BEN KUROKI

Interviewed

By

Arthur A. Hansen

On October 17, 1994

OH 2385

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NARRATOR: BEN KUROKI

INTERVIEWER: Arthur A. Hansen

DATE: October 17, 1994

LOCATION: Ojai, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

AH: This is an interview with Mr. Ben Kuroki by Arthur Hansen, and the date is October 17, 1994. The interview is being held at approximately thirteen after nine in the morning, and the interview is being held in Ojai, California. The interview is being conducted jointly for the Japanese American Project of the Oral History Program at California State University at Fullerton and the Japanese American National Museum in Los Angeles, California. May I call you Ben?

BK: Sure. (laughs)

AH: Thanks. Ben, in all the things that I've read about you while preparing for this interview, one thing that doesn't get discussed very much is your parents. They're alluded to, and I have a sense of approximately when they came here and where they came from in Japan, but there's little else mentioned about that. So, could you give me some background information on your parents as you've give me some background information as you've picked it up over the years through the family and through other sources that you may have consulted? What's the respective backgrounds of your mother and your father?

BK: We get into this thing about my memory, of course. All I can tell you is that my father came from Kagoshima, and my mother came from—I can't think of the name of the place now in Japan.

AH: Yokohama wasn't it?

BK: Well, yes, but then I think she moved later to a place called Nara or something like that. I can't tell you much more than that. She came over as a picture bride, and my father came over on a freighter. His first job was setting up pins in a bowling alley in San Francisco.

AH: Oh, really? (laughs) He was a pin boy!

BK: Yes, and from there he joined these railroad section crews in Wyoming—it was on the Union Pacific Railroad—and I guess that's where he met and married my mother. At one time they were renting a boardinghouse there for railroad workers, and eventually, why, the Union Pacific Railroad section crews took him into Nebraska. That's where he saw the fertile valleys of the North Platte River Valley and decided that farming is what he wanted to do. I think there were about a dozen other Japanese man who also became farmers in the North Platte River Valley.

AH: At about the same time?

BK: About the same time, yes.

AH: And had defected, so to speak, from the railroad section gang?

BK: Yes.

AH: I take it your father left Japan sometime in the 1890s? I was citing some arithmetic based on some figures that I saw cited about 1945. I think they were writing that your father had come to this country fifty years earlier, and I wasn't sure if that was accurate or not.

BK: Well, I can't be very accurate at all on that. I don't know when they left Japan.

AH: So, you don't know if it was before the turn of the century or not?

BK: No, and I don't know why they left. We've talked about it here even recently, that it's too bad that we couldn't communicate with our parents to really understand why they left. The only thing we know is that they never went back, which is quite unusual. They had the opportunity to do it. We had families, with all the children, all had sufficient funds to let them go back. We asked them if they wanted to go back, but they never wanted to go back.

AH: When did your parents pass away about?

BK: Oh, let's see, my mother passed away about five years ago—I guess it was—and my father passed away while we were newspapering in Michigan. I can't remember the exact date. (chuckles)

AH: He must have been pretty elderly when he passed away.

BK: Oh, yes, he was eighty-seven.

AH: Was he about ten or fifteen years older than your mother?

BK: I think so. I'm not sure.

AH: But, she lived until five years ago.

BK: Yes, she outlived him quite a while.

AH: At the time that she passed away, where was she living? What part of the country?

BK: They, of course, did most of their farming at Hershey, Nebraska, and then my oldest brother bought them a home in North Platte, which is about thirteen miles from there, in the city and that's where they both retired, and they were both living there.

AH: Oh, so they both lived in Nebraska until their death in Nebraska?

BK: Yes.

AH: Do you still have a family presence in Nebraska?

BK: Yes, my oldest brother George is still there at Hershey.

AH: Is he still farming?

BK: Oh, yes. Not a whole lot. His son has taken over.

AH: Which brother is this?

BK: It's my oldest brother, George.

AH: How much older than you is he?

BK: Probably about eight or nine years older than I am.

AH: I know you're from a pretty large family, ten kids—five girls and five boys.

BK: Yes.

AH: Roughly, what's the range between them, and where are you in the family? Right smack in the middle or towards either end? Where are you?

BK: I'm probably pretty much in the middle, and most of them were spaced a year to about a year-and-a-half apart. As you know, I have jokingly said that everyone that everyone knew what my father was doing in his spare time. (chuckles)

AH: That's right. You must have gotten a laugh from that group when you said that, too. I was thinking about that. (laughs)

- BK: Yes, they really enjoyed that. But let's see, they had five boys and five girls, and I was the third oldest son.
- AH: Your parents had a wonderful sense of gender symmetry, didn't they, with the five and the five.
- BK: Equality.
- AH: Were there others, too, who didn't survive infancy?
- BK: Not in our own family. Some of the children, like my oldest brother and others lost some at a young age, but we were all pretty healthy. (chuckles) And father worked the hell out of us on the farm from sunup to sundown.
- AH: Was the oldest of the siblings a girl or a boy, your oldest sibling?
- BK: Oh, it was a boy.
- AH: Okay, so your parents even had a boy first. (chuckles)
- BK: Oh, yes.
- AH: They did everything right on that! (chuckles) Now, they always talk about farm families, you know, raising hands to work rather than mouths to feed. I suppose there was a little of both, but was that common for the families around there to be quite large like that because ten is pretty big?
- BK: I think generally the Japanese families around there were fairly large. (chuckles) I don't know, maybe they didn't know much about birth control at that time.
- AH: I read somewhere, when you were talking about Hershey, you said that area was an era that had about two other Japanese families in the immediate vicinity, but that within a fifty-mile radius there were perhaps twenty other Japanese families. Does that sound about right?
- BK: Yes, that's about right. There were two or three families living in the city of North Platte that were not farming, but it stretched a few miles in the valley there.
- AH: How far is Hershey from North Platte? Nine miles, is it?
- BK: No, thirteen miles.
- AH: Thirteen miles. And what Japanese family do you recall being the closest to you?
- BK: Well, there were the Mizunos, and I think they probably lived about five miles from us.

AH: Okay, and was there somebody else living between you and the Mizunos? Were there other farms in that area?

BK: Oh, yes, they were all Caucasians.

AH: Okay. Now, your best childhood friend, who got killed during the war—Gordy Jorgensen?

BK: Right.

AH: Where did he live?

BK: He lived in the town of Hershey.

AH: Okay, and how far outside of the town of Hershey was your family's farm?

BK: About a mile.

AH: Oh, just a mile away from the town.

BK: Yes.

AH: And there was a high school in Hershey itself?

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: But, very small. I saw an item which said that your graduating class consisted of fourteen kids, so I'm figuring that there were maybe about fifty to sixty students in the entire high school, right?

BK: Sure. I used to brag that I graduated in the top five of my class. (laughs) Of course, there were only ten of us, really.

AH: You probably, out there on the farm—what I see is that you used to grow principally is your father is usually listed as a potato seed grower. Now, what exactly does that mean? I'm not from a farming background, so what's potato seed grower?

[00:10:00]

BK: Well, eventually, he became a potato seed grower, but when they started out it was just a normal farmer with potatoes and corn, you know. (phone rings)

AH: Do you want to answer that? What we were originally talking about wasn't potato seed as such. It was different thing.

[recording paused]

BK: They used to grow a lot of vegetables, and the vegetables were sold to the grocery stores in North Platte, and also we had what they called the sand hills around there. The people living in the hills there used to come to buy vegetables and potatoes for the winter.

AH: Come right to your farm to buy them?

BK: Oh, yes. It used to be quite an important part of the operation. And then, eventually, as my older brother got in control of the farm, well then he proceeded to get into what they call the certified seed potato growing. And the potatoes, for the certified seed, would usually be sold in the southern states, particularly in Texas or other places.

AH: And then, they would plant them down there?

BK: Yes.

AH: Is your brother still growing the seeds in Hershey?

BK: Yes, he's still doing the seed part, as well as regular table potatoes.

AH: Is there another generation going?

BK: Yes, he's actually pretty much retired now, but his son, as I think I mentioned earlier, has taken over the operation.

AH: So, there's a lot of continuity now?

BK: Well, yes. It's a pretty good sized operation.

AH: And it's held up then, even though farming has been—

BK: Oh, it's been pretty tough, economically. There are times that my older brother wonders whether it's worth trying to work for your son and get things straightened away, but I guess they're doing okay now.

AH: How would you characterize your own economic situation as a family growing up from the time that you were a kid until you entered the military in World War II?

BK: Well, as I've told you, there were ten kids, and we had to work from sunup till sundown, seven days a week. (chuckles) Even in the wintertime, we had to work. We had to sort potatoes and sort beans and that sort of thing, so it was a never-ending thing. (chuckles)

AH: There are, of course, a lot of people who actually are fairly well-off who still push themselves. They just get into the habit of it. Would you describe your situation as a

family that was wanting for things? Because a lot of this time was during the Depression.

BK: Well, we were terribly poor. The work was so hard that (chuckles) it's just unbelievable. When it would rain, we'd figure, "Oh, boy, we get to go fishing today." But then, we'd have to clean out the horse barn or the chicken coop, and there just never was a break all year long. (chuckles) I think at least 90 percent of the children were just waiting for the day that they could get away from the farm. The girls would take off and go to Chicago, or whatever, as soon as they got old enough.

AH: Did nine out of the ten kids, did they leave the farm?

BK: Except for George, we all left the farm, yes.

AH: And none of them farmed after that?

BK: Well, my younger brother Fred, who volunteered for the military service at the same time I did, eventually ended up after the war getting into farming again.

AH: In Nebraska or elsewhere?

BK: Both. He got interested in farming in Texas where the seed potatoes were going.

AH: Oh, really? He followed the seed potatoes, eh?

BK: He was really doing quite well there for a while, and then they ran into problems with labor and a fire that destroyed the shed and stuff. He's retired, too. But, he got back into farming.

AH: Four out of the five boys in your family ended-up in the military during World War II. Who was the one that didn't? Was it George?

BK: It was my oldest brother since he was running the farm and taking care of things at home.

AH: So, did he get a deferment because of that?

BK: Yes.

AH: Was your father able to work pretty hard at that point, or was he starting to get frail by the time of the war?

BK: He worked so hard. It was just unbelievable how hard those people in those days worked. He suffered a serious heart attack on top of a haystack when he was stacking hay at the age of forty.

AH: Wow, way before the war then.

BK: Oh, yes, but he recovered, and he was pretty active all the time after that. But, at that time, when my older brother took over, my father was pretty much ready to retire, I think. I think my parents had moved to North Platte by then.

AH: To go to grade school, did you go also to Hershey, or did you go somewhere else?

BK: Well, I started at a little country school called Nichols, which was about five or six miles from Hershey, but that was only for about a year or two.

AH: Why was it that you went there instead of Hershey? Didn't they have a grade school in Hershey?

BK: We lived in Nichols when we first moved—see, I was born in Gothenburg.

AH: Where is Gothenburg? I saw that lots of times.

BK: Gothenburg is right near Cozad, which is about twenty or thirty miles east of North Platte. But, my family moved from Gothenburg to Nichols, a community where there was no stores or anything, and then after that they moved to Hershey, or actually one mile north of Hershey.

AH: And you were about how old when you when you moved to Hershey?

BK: Well, I must have been about six years old.

AH: Since you were born in 1918, it was probably 1924 or something like that, that they moved to the farm outside of Hershey, right?

BK: According to the records, I was born—actually, in 1917. (chuckles)

AH: Oh, really?

BK: Well, it's the strangest thing because when my wife and I decided to go to Japan for a trip—this was after we moved to California—we had to get passports, and I had to ask for my birth certificate. And the state of Nebraska had a little problem getting one because when I was born they didn't even have a doctor, so my birth was not ever recorded.

AH: So, it was a midwife?

BK: I guess so.

AH: Or your father maybe. (chuckles)

- BK: Probably my father. But anyway, I guess the census takers came along about five years later and said, "You'd better get this recorded." So, they had what they called a delayed birth certificate. They had to get some neighbors to testify that I was born. (chuckles)
- AH: Did they get the date right, as far as the day of the month? What date did they put on your birth certificate?
- BK: Well, they had the month and the day right, but they apparently didn't get the year right. (chuckles)
- AH: So, what age do you think yourself being now?
- BK: Probably I was born in 1918, but it's legally I'm down as 1917.
- AH: So, you would be seventy-five now?
- BK: Seventy-six. Or seventy-seven. Seventeen from 1994. (laughs)
- AH: Seventy-six or seventy-seven? (laughs)
- AH: So, after you transferred into Hershey, you were able to go to grade school there?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Now, is this when you—no, you wouldn't have met Gordy then because he would have gone to school probably in North Platte. No wait, Gordy Jorgenson, did you say he lived in Hershey?
- BK: He lived in Hershey.
- AH: Okay, so you would have met him in grade school?
- BK: I don't exactly remember when we became close friends. I don't know when he moved to Hershey, but it was during our high school days. He needed to have work, and he wanted a job. So, he would stay out of school and work and get a job with our family during harvest time.
- AH: Did you you hire other people like that to help at harvest time?
- BK: Oh, yes. And I used to stay out of school as long as three weeks at a time without ever going back to school, and the teachers got to sending messages that my family had better get me back into school if they wanted me to pass.
- AH: Was that fairly customary for farm kids to be out during harvest time?

BK: No, I don't think it was customary, except in our case. (chuckles)

AH: And this was true for your siblings, too?

BK: Yes, my parents needed help so badly, and they didn't hesitate to keep you out of school.

AH: How many acres were you farming there in Hershey?

[00:20:00]

BK: Well, that's another one of the stories about my father. (chuckles) He always wanted to hit it big, and he always farmed about twenty or thirty acres more than he could handle. It was just that every year the weeds would take over.

AH: I saw some statistics dealing with the sports you played and a description of that, and it said you played basketball and baseball and then were a half-miler, too, at the high school. How'd you get the time to do that when you were working all those hours?

BK: (laughs) I wasn't much of a track player, but basketball was a big thing in little towns like that, and I used to practice after school and then have to walk all the way home in the dark for a whole mile. It scared the heck out of me when I was a little kid!
(laughs) But, you know, that was one of the things that my dad enjoyed more than anything. My mother never went to basketball games, but my dad would always go to our games. Of course, at least four of us in the family played basketball.

AH: So, your dad demonstrated some forgiveness, as far as work, in order for you to practice, and he enjoyed watching you play?

BK: Oh, yes. He would go there, and he would scream his head off. (chuckles) People got a big kick out of how much interest he was showing, anyway. It was really something.

AH: You played baseball, too, didn't you?

BK: We had high school baseball at Hershey, but I wasn't very good.

AH: It probably is cold enough in Nebraska so that the baseball season is shortened a bit, isn't it? (laughs)

BK: Oh, yes, our baseball season was very short.

AH: Seven or eight games maybe?

- BK: Yes, that was probably all. The school was too small for a football team. By the time youngest brother got around to high school, why, they had what they call a six-man football team.
- AH: That's a small number. Did your youngest brother start there during World War II?
- BK: No, he was already out of school by World War II because he was a freshman at the University of Nebraska, I think.
- AH: You graduated from high school in 1936, right?
- BK: That's right.
- AH: And then, your youngest brother of the brothers would have graduated when? About 1940 or so? Just before World War II?
- BK: Probably just before World War II, yes.
- AH: By that time, it had even gone down to a six-man football, right?
- BK: Six-man football finally became popular in the schools so the small schools like Hershey could have a team.
- AH: They still have that around, you know.
- BK: Yeah, I think they do. I think they still have that at Hershey.
- AH: Has the population in that—I think you've answered—the population in the area around the Platte River Valley area, still a small sparse population?
- BK: Well, the city of North Platte River has grown like most cities. I don't think Hershey's probably has changed one bit. (laughs)
- AH: Well, Hershey had less than five hundred, I think, when you were there.
- BK: Yes, 487.
- AH: Yes, that's the figure I saw. Was there a difference between the town kids and the farm kids? I mean, you lived outside of the town and were farming. What about the kids in the town? What did they do, their families, for economic wellbeing?
- BK: Well, it was Gordon's dad, he used to come out and work for us. He used to stack hay. I remember he even worked for fifty cents a day during the Depression, and that's the way most of the towns—there wasn't any other thing there. Most of them worked on the farms.

AH: Unless you were a high school teacher or something. But then, they had some stores and things in Hershey, right?

BK: Oh, yes, there were a couple little grocery stores, but Hershey was a very small town.

AH: Most of my Nebraska history comes by the way of Willa Cather's novels. (laughs) And I did an interview a few years ago with my wife's grandfather, who was from McCook, Nebraska, so we talked a little bit about Nebraska. But, did most of the people who lived in the Hershey area share any particular ethnic background? Was there a Czech community or Italian? I mean, did something stand out as a group?

BK: Not that I can remember. Our next-door neighbor was a Swede, out on the farm, but I don't remember any particular ethnic groups.

AH: I get the feeling, from reading about that period in the biography about you that Ralph Martin wrote, *The Boy from Nebraska*, that there was a fairly democratic ethos in that area, that there were people from lots of different backgrounds, but being Japanese wasn't something that set you apart from the other people, adults or students. Is that true or not?

BK: Well, we knew we were different, and I think it was always sometimes a little bit uncomfortable, especially whenever our family would go into North Platte or a place like that because when my parents met another one of the Japanese neighbors, they would converse very loudly in Japanese and bow and all that stuff. People would walk by and they would stare at them, and it was very uncomfortable for me. I mean, we knew we were different, and, at that time, we never dated or anything like that in high school. It wasn't any problem. You know, I didn't feel any racial discrimination as such.

AH: But, when it came to dating, say, it would be almost the situation as in California? Although there were many, many more Nisei, they still had a parallel social group.

BK: You just kind of knew you were supposed to keep your place or whatever it is they did. (chuckles)

AH: Ralph Martin alludes a lot in his book to an apparent girlfriend that you had by the name of Mary. Now, he never gives a last name, and so there's no way of telling what her ethnic designation was or when you had met her or what. Who was that?

BK: Well, she was a girl from North Platte, and we don't like to talk about that too much because of my wife. She's not too pleased with the fact I included it in the book, but Ralph and I felt that it was only normal for a soldier to have a girlfriend.

AH: Especially, you weren't a totally young soldier either. You had graduated from high school in 1936.

BK: That's right. I think it was during the war.

AH: Was she a Nisei.

BK: Yes.

AH: And in North Platte would there have been more?

AH: Were there more Nisei then in the Hershey area? I mean, because it was a bigger city, would there have been, say, maybe seven or eight families in North Platte?

BK: I think that was about it. There weren't very many. There was one family that owned a hotel there in North Platte, and I don't remember what the others did for a living.

AH: Would it be farfetched to call the group of families that lived in that area surrounding North Platte and Hershey a Japanese American community? Or was there a sense of community? You know, a lot of the more elaborated Japanese American communities had language schools and then they had churches that they went to in common. Was there anything that gives it a configuration of community?

BK: No, I don't think you could call it a Japanese American community at all, but there were two different groups. Particularly, I think it was a result—most of the Japanese people who lived in the city of North Platte and there was a Reverend Kano there. He was a so-called Christian.

AH: Was it Methodist?

BK: I don't remember what his denomination was now. I can't think what it was. Of course, my parents and most of the Japanese farmers were of the Buddhist religion.

AH: Were they able to go anywhere to express their religion? Was there a Buddhist temple in the area?

BK: No, not as such. The minister used to come out of Denver and hold meetings and that sort of thing once in a while, but it was very rare.

AH: And a lot of the working on Sunday probably prohibited too much churchgoing for the family, right?

BK: Oh, that's right. There was a time when our parents got quite interested and decided that we needed to have a Japanese education. So, in the summer they would have Japanese school for us kids. Of course, we hated that because we felt summer was a time (chuckles) to get away from school.

[00:30:04]

AH: Who had the school for you? What do you mean?

BK: Well, the parents just got together and hired an old gentleman who needed the work.

AH: Oh, he come to your house or someplace in North Platte or where?

BK: No, they had an old building that was on one of the farms where a Japanese farmer's family was farming, so we used to go there.

AH: What did you learn there, Ben?

BK: We didn't learn a darn thing. (laughs) A couple of times we played hooky and didn't even go. We really got chewed-out, but we hated it because we just wanted to get away from school. Some of the other Japanese kids, they did pretty well.

AH: Now, I think I've read about your family with respect to language, what has been said is that your parents never learned to read and write in English, but it also seems to suggest you never learned to read and write in Japanese. Is that accurate or not?

BK: That's very accurate, yes.

AH: But, you spoke Japanese from early on. It was your first language, right?

BK: Yes. It was very poor Japanese, of course, but we were about to communicate with our parents all right.

AH: How did you make the transition—and think about that for a second. Now in schools they have English as a Second Language as well as other bilingual programs, but I'm sure you didn't have anything quite like that at Hershey. Well, it wasn't Hershey but the small town that you did start in. Do you remember going there to school and, all of a sudden, being confronted by the fact that you didn't have the linguistic currency of the class so to speak and that you were speaking Japanese and they were speaking English?

BK: Of course, even before you got to school in a family like ours, your brothers and sisters were all talking English, so I think the transition there was not as difficult as it might seem. It might have been more difficult for my oldest sibling. But, I have thought about it a couple of times, the impact of my schooling, because I kept wondering about the impact of, and I can vividly remember I guess it was about second grade when Beatrice Smith was my teacher. Every morning the first thing we did was to recite the Pledge of Allegiance. Well, I can distinctly remember I didn't know that they were talking about for maybe two months before. I just used to move my lips, act like I knew what it was going on. But I can still remember that I didn't know what it was about. But eventually, of course, it had a big impact on me.

AH: You know, I'm thinking actually that a lot of kids, whether they were brought up in an English speaking family, would have thought that the Pledge of Allegiance was mumbo-jumbo for the first few months.

BK: Except that they were rattling it off so well that, you know—

AH: At least the words sounded familiar, right?

BK: Yes, so I tried to go along with them and make believe that I knew what I was doing. But I can just distinctly remember that I didn't know what it was about.

AH: Were there kids that were from other ethnic backgrounds who also had a language difficulty?

BK: Well, there were some Chicano kids, and I imagine had the same problem. We had one Chicano family that worked for us in our sugar beet fieldwork. They just lived about fifty yards from our house in a little shack, so I'm sure they had the same problem.

AH: Since you were in the middle of your family's children, you did have siblings coming home and starting to talk among themselves.

BK: Right.

AH: I know from interviewing a lot of Nisei that sometimes there was really a bilingual structure to the household. When you were talking with your parents, you spoke in one language, but when you were talking with your siblings, you were talking in another language.

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: Did your oldest brother, who stayed in farming in Nebraska, who was a path breaker in a sense by going to school, has he remained more Japanized, so to speak, then the rest of the kids in the Kuroki family?

BK: Yes, I think definitely so. At least he was able to communicate pretty well with my parents, especially in Japanese, which wasn't so with some of us. (laughs) It's kind of a funny thing, but I was always disjointed because my mother never learned to read or write English. I mean, I just can't believe that you can come into a country and adopt it and not learn the language. I mean, it just still baffles me.

AH: From what I understand, it was very common among Issei women not to learn the language, in part because their husbands did most of the interacting with the outside community.

BK: Right.

AH: I know I was reading, in 1952, when your parents got naturalized, they didn't really read or write English.

BK: No, not at all.

AH: Yet they persisted in doing this and going ahead with it.

BK: But funny things happened once in a while. When the kids would get together and they'd start talking about something that was going on in English, and then mother would come and whack them on the head because she knew what the hell they were saying. (chuckles)

AH: She'd pick up certain things, right?

BK: Yeah, certain things she knew what you were talking about. (laughs)

AH: I guess it's just having the confidence of being able to risk saying the wrong word. Because I've had that same experience. I had translators with me when I was interviewing some Issei woman. And then the Issei woman would get frustrated by the translator and just blurt it out in English. She wanted to answer it directly.

BK: Right. Yes, you're thinking they don't know anything about English, but say something that bothered them and they knew damn well what you were saying.

AH: You said your parents never went back to Japan, but how many of the kids have gone to Japan on a visit?

BK: Let's see, myself, my brother Henry used to go over there on business. Probably about half of them have been there.

AH: We'll talk about the first time you went to Japan later in the interview because that was under different circumstances, but when you've gone to Japan after the war, have you visited places that have any family significance? Have you gone to see where your mother or father came from or met relatives?

BK: No, we were just on one of these ten day tours or whatever it was though I could have taken a day off to go. Because she was from this area called Nara or something like that, but my brother and a couple others went together. That was probably about ten years ago. They met relatives that they didn't know anything about.

AH: Did you ever have any visitors over here from Japan to the United States to see—

BK: No, never did, as far as I know. But my mother corresponded regularly with her side of the family, and she always used to send them money. And that was quite a source of irritation between my father and mother because we were pretty darn poor ourselves. I mean, we were very poor most of the time.

AH: Was there a—and sometimes there is in these marriages I've found out—class difference between your mother's family and your father's family, would you say, from what you can put together?

BK: Yes, I always heard my father brag about Kagoshima and coming from a better area or something. I didn't know much about my mother's side.

AH: Now, your parents, obviously, had a lot of kids. The relationship, did you see it as a close relationship between your mother and father so that you would say, even though it might have been an arranged marriage, it was a love match?

BK: Boy, I'll tell you, I don't think it was a love match. (chuckles) I wouldn't recommend picture marriages to anybody. (chuckles)

AH: So, they were productive, as far as having kids, but they weren't that—

BK: I can remember all the fights they had. Some of them were just quite terrible, but they still managed to stick it out to the end. I guess that's something. (chuckles)

[00:40:00]

AH: How big a place did you have? I'm trying to imagine this farmhouse of yours with twelve people in it. You know the standard picture you get of Japanese farmhouses here, which I've seen, and in Hawaii, which I've seen, are pretty small. And when they're here, they're not built to last. They're moveable. Now, Nebraska is a different situation, I think, in that you weren't having alien land laws imposed on you so you could buy some property and be in a place for a longer duration. But was the house fairly substantial or not?

BK: No, it was very small. I was talking about it recently with my sister. You can't imagine how small that place was until I went back and saw it about ten years ago.

AH: It's still there?

BK: It's still there.

AH: Oh, really?

BK: There are a couple of irrigation ditches right behind the house. I used to think, as a kid they were huge, but they are such small ditches. And that house is so small. I can't believe that we got that many kids in that house. Of course, we used to have a little shed outside—they used to call it the boy house—and some of us slept out there. But even then, it's unbelievable how they packed them into one house.

- AH: So, when you see something in the paper now about an immigrant family from Mexico or from Southeast Asia, and they've got twelve in an apartment, et cetera, it's not totally strange to you when you reflect on it. (laughs)
- BK: No, I know it can be done.
- AH: So, you probably didn't get a lot of privacy then, although you could take walks out into the farm and be by yourself and get space, outside space.
- BK: I don't know. We didn't have any privacy. We didn't have time for privacy. (chuckles)
- AH: Did you have any surrogate families around that were almost like relatives, in that your families commingled, whether Japanese or not in ancestry, but were there families that were significant other families, so to speak?
- BK: No, I don't think so at all. We were very independent, I think. I don't remember anything like that at all.
- AH: There was a period of almost five-and-a-half years between the time that you graduated from high school until when you went into the military, which is a gap in the historical record relative to you.
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Tell me a little bit about those years. We don't have to talk a lot about Mary during this time, (laughs) if you don't want to, but what was happening in your life during that period?
- BK: Well, let's see, I graduated from high school, and at that time we had what you'd call a semi-trailer, a large truck in which we hauled our own potatoes and produce. We used to go to Scootsbluff, which was about 120 some miles away. There was a big potato growing areas there, and we used to go up there and buy potatoes and bring them back in the wintertime and supply stores with that. We'd go down to take the potatoes, and also down to Oklahoma City and down to the Rio Grande Valley in Texas and bring citrus back.
- AH: Oh, really?
- BK: Yes, so we were kind of in the commercial trucking business as well as hauling our own produce.
- AH: So, when you're described as a truck driver sometimes in these stories I've been reading, that's the origin of that?
- BK: Oh, yeah. And that was the five-and-a-half years after I got out of high school.

AH: Did all your siblings do this too? Your brothers?

BK: Oh, no. No, my brothers went to the University of Nebraska. My second-oldest brother finished at the University of Nebraska, and then my younger brother decided he would like to go to college. At that time, I wasn't exactly interested in college, so I stayed on the farm and helped with the truck part of the thing.

AH: So, who was it working on the farm at that point?

BK: My oldest brother George and myself.

AH: And that was it?

BK: Yes.

AH: Okay, and then your father, also?

BK: Right.

AH: Oh, I see. Had the management of the farm started to shift to your brother by this time, or was dad still firmly in control?

BK: No, the management was pretty much shifted to my oldest brother years before that. I mean, he was always running the thing.

AH: Oh, really? Was it because of language skills, health, agricultural knowledge, or what?

BK: I think it was just everything probably. We were the first farmers around there to buy a brand new John Deere tractor, and it was because my oldest brother was just more knowledgeable about those things. Well, he had attended the University of Nebraska for a year, too, before they brought him back to the farm.

AH: Which one?

BK: George.

AH: He went to the University of Nebraska?

BK: Yes. My father suffered serious health problems—a condition of the heart—and he couldn't do it, so they asked him to come back home. And then, in his place, my second-oldest brother Henry went to the University of Nebraska.

AH: Okay, so you had the model before you came along of two brothers, one going to school and then coming back, and then another one staying at school?

BK: Right.

AH: What did Henry major in at the University of Nebraska?

BK: Business administration.

AH: Okay. Now I see from looking at the Nebraska map and trying to plot different places and connections with you, I know where Hershey is in one portion of the state and then York is where you later had a newspaper, it's over in the Eastern area in Lincoln and the University of Nebraska. And it's quite far between Hershey and Nebraska, so there's no way that somebody would commute? So, when somebody went there, they resided there.

BK: That's right.

AH: Now, how did your brothers afford to go to school at the University of Nebraska? Scholarships or family money?

BK: It was family money. It was my oldest brother—at that time, of course, they always worked when they went to the university.

AH: Now, your father and your mother—or maybe just one of them—must have had a strong attitude about the value of education. Is that right?

BK: Well, that was definitely my mother's side. Yes, she was very strong for education.

AH: Was it a source of discontent for your oldest brother George when he had to return to the farm or not?

BK: Well, the Japanese had the old system where the oldest one is responsible for taking care of family matters. I'm not sure that that's what it was, but I kind of feel that it was.

AH: But, I've talked to older Japanese who, during that same period, felt rather disgruntled because in a way they lost the opportunity to go to school because they had to stay with the family property, and then they saw their younger siblings go off to school.

BK: Yes, I think that's very true. I remember my oldest brother cried considerably, and that he was really was upset. He didn't want to come home from the university.

AH: What was he going to study when he was there?

BK: I don't remember what he was trying to major in, but he probably had more potential than any of us, as far as, you know, getting someplace.

AH: So, he was a very good student, then?

BK: Oh, yes, he was a good student.

AH: Now, you had a different situation in that you had some choice in a way, that you could have gone to the university or you could have stayed there? Is that true?

BK: Yes, that's very true, and my younger brother Fred wanted to go, so I said, "Go ahead." I was at that time perfectly satisfied with what I was doing. It wasn't much but—(chuckles)

AH: Was he a better student than you? Who's your next youngest brother after you?

BK: That's Fred.

AH: That's the one who went into the military? Was Fred a better student than you in high school?

BK: He was a better athlete than I was, but I don't think he was a better student.

AH: So, you weren't actually clearing the way for a very outstanding student or something?

BK: Yes.

AH: Okay, so George was a better student than both Fred as well as you, right?

BK: George was even a better student than Henry, the second-oldest brother who went to the university and finished in business administration.

AH: But ultimately, you went to school, too, so all of the boys in the family spent at least some time at the University of Nebraska.

BK: Yes, all of us.

AH: And four out of the five graduated?

BK: Three.

AH: Three out of the five. Who's the one that didn't graduate?

BK: Fred didn't graduate and neither did George.

AH: Okay. George didn't, but Fred didn't either. I got it straight now! George is the one who did not go to the service, and George and Fred didn't graduate from school. You get to that time at the University of Nebraska. What was the University of Nebraska like at that particular time? Was it, for example, a very accessible state university, in terms of having a low tuition or what was it like?

[00:50:20]

BK: When I went?

AH: Yes, when the Kuroki boys were—

BK: Well, it was easily accessible. I have to laugh like hell because (chuckles) the reason that I ended up there was because of my marriage. My wife was from a very strongly educated family, and they insisted that I needed to get an education.

AH: Oh, really? So, going to college wasn't your choice then?

BK: No, I wasn't going to get to marry her if I didn't go. (chuckles) They didn't say so outright, but—I was out of the Army—and I didn't have anything better to do anyway—so I thought it was a good idea. But, the funniest part of it was I thought that I had not graduated from high school.

AH: Why is that?

BK: Well, when I was in the senior class, we had freshman initiation. We got the freshman boys and we chased them a mile down the South Platte River and we painted their penis' with green paint. (laughs)

AH: The seniors did that to the freshmen?

BK: The senior boys did that to the freshmen boys. There were only five of us, anyway.

AH: Farm kids can be really tough, can't they? (laughs) And primitive.

BK: And the superintendent, he really got mad. He said, unless you apologized, you will not graduate. We never apologized, so I just presumed that—so when I asked to send my transcripts to the University of Nebraska and found out that I had graduated, I was tickled pink. (chuckles) I couldn't believe it, that they didn't carry out the threat.

AH: So, there were probably only about five or fewer of you involved in this, right? But, none of you knew you had graduated then for sure, huh?

BK: Well, I didn't anyway. (chuckles) I don't know about the others. (chuckles)

AH: So, your future career then, as far as you were looking at it before the war intervened, was actually to stay on the farm and farm. Is that it?

BK: Yes.

AH: You were going to be a farmer.

BK: Yes, I was satisfied with that.

AH: Were you having a pretty good time during that intervening period between graduating from high school and entering the military?

BK: Well, you know, I was enjoying myself, and I was satisfied. And, of course, the minute the war broke out they froze all their funds. All the banks froze all Japanese funds, so the trucking just stopped. We couldn't go anymore. So, the day after Pearl Harbor, my brother Fred and I decided we were going to volunteer for military service.

AH: Was Gordy Jorgensen also somebody who did trucking during that period? Was he somebody who you sort of continued to be a buddy with?

BK: Oh, yes, we were good friends. Gordy was president of the class and I was vice president, and we used to go hunting. Oh, god, I used to go hunting with him when we were just little bitty guys. I still remember we'd go out on the North Platte River and build a duck blind and take some live decoys from our farm. And we were so small that when we fired that .12 gauge shotgun it would knock us clear through the back of the blind, you know, and our shoulders would be black and blue. (chuckles) We were just little kids.

AH: Do you still have strong kinds of feelings of the landscape where you grew up in Nebraska? Is that a place that figures powerfully in your mind?

BK: Oh, yes. We used to go pheasant hunting, and we played hooky all day the first day of pheasant hunting. We'd go out and get our limit in about fifteen minutes and bring them in, see, and go back out again. (chuckles)

AH: Did you have miserable winters there?

BK: The winters are miserable, of course, yes. I remember there was snow ten feet deep. (chuckles)

AH: When you were doing this trucking in the prewar period, you were seeing a lot of different areas. Were you experiencing different reactions to you in these different places? Can you recall being introduced on a more wide and deeper basis to racial discrimination or prejudice or anything that you had experienced in the enclave there of Hershey and North Platte?

BK: I don't remember any discrimination or anything like that that bothered me. I mean, I did notice that when we went down into Texas there were an awful lot of Chicano people, and, when we stopped at some of the markets, like there in San Antonio, it was almost 90 percent Chicanos. We'd go down to the Rio Grande Valley, and there were a couple of Japanese families down there. We even bought some stuff from them, but I didn't notice anything really different. I did notice it when the war broke

out. One day when we were coming back from Texas—and this was before they froze the funds—man, there was some pretty vicious stuff down there.

AH: In Texas?

BK: I think it was in Oklahoma, actually—we were about halfway back home.

AH: What kind of stuff?

BK: Well, we stopped at a restaurant to get a little lunch or something, and this guy was making snide remarks.

AH: Who was with you?

BK: Another drive who—

AH: Japanese?

BK: No, he was Caucasian. So, that was when I first felt the thing about the war.

AH: So, the brunt of the attack was on you at that point?

BK: Oh, yes. They were making insulting remarks at that time.

AH: Were there segregated facilities in the areas that you went to in Texas for blacks? I'm interested—they have that question about if you're Asian and you're in the South and they've got segregated public facilities, when you have to use the bathroom, where do you go? I'm wondering if you confronted that?

BK: Not when I was in the trucking business. But when I was in the early stages of Army life as a recruit, I was down in Florida and started to get in the bus and I didn't know which way to go. (chuckles) It said, For Whites only, and I didn't know whether I was white or which—so I did go in the back with the blacks, and then a couple of Black person said, "No, get out of here. You don't belong in here."

AH: Oh, they talked you out of there?

BK: Yeah, a couple of women, "Yeah, you don't belong here." That was the first time I didn't know which way to go because they had—

AH: You had to be shooed out!

BK: It said, "For Whites only," and I thought, Oh, god, I'm not white. (chuckles)

AH: But in Texas it wasn't a problem then?

- BK: Not at the time. When I was in the trucking business I didn't notice it.
- AH: Just go wherever you'd go, right?
- BK: Yes. I did notice the blacks and how they were living down there. It was quite unusual. You'd see them sitting out there in front of their homes, and they were living pretty tough lives at that time.
- AH: So, you did this trucking for probably about four or five years?
- BK: Oh, yes.
- AH: Did you continue to work on the farm in between hauls? Were you still, especially during harvest time, farming?
- BK: Oh, yes. Of course, we were hauling our own produce when we were working on the farm during the summer when our own crops would come in.
- AH: It sounds like the business was getting better, though, at that juncture. I mean, you were starting to come out of the worst of it. Your brother George was able to change family fortunes a little bit so that you could get this John Deere tractor, and you were able to send a couple of kids went off to college, and you were able to expand this trucking operation. From what you've told me, and I may be wrong, it sounds as though, if you were not rolling in dough, there were incremental economic shifts upward at that point.
- BK: Yes, it was interesting because we even went and hauled strawberries out of Arkansas. We went clear down to California and hauled back lettuce and grapes and things like that.
- AH: Oh, you came to California?
- BK: Yes, only a couple trips.
- AH: Where'd you go to? Salinas or somewhere?
- BK: Yes, we went one trip to Salinas, and one other trip was down here in the southern part of the state where the grapes were coming in early.
- AH: That's a pretty long haul.
- BK: Yeah, we were hauling them to Oklahoma City. This _____ (inaudible) was interested in our work.
- AH: Were you and George starting to talk a lot about expansion at that point?

BK: No, not really. Not that I remember, anyway.

AH: When Fred came back—now you said Fred did not finish school to the farm from the university. Was it because of his going into the military, or did he return to the farm and work with you and George?

[01:00:06]

BK: Fred returned to the farm. He wasn't doing too well in college. (chuckles) He just happened to be there about the time the war broke out.

AH: But, you were having the Kuroki brothers farming at that point.

BK: Yeah.

AH: Were there plans at that time to start elaborating this thing, expanding, buying acreage and things?

BK: No, not at all, as far as I can remember. But, as a result of the war, my brother George—the farmers (chuckles) all hit it big, and he was able to buy a couple of hundred acres of choice land.

AH: By that time you guys were off—

BK: Getting shot at. (chuckles)

AH: Yes, all four of you, right? This thing is blinking, so I'm going to stop this and put on a new tape. [recording paused] So, with respect to the military, which is the centerpiece in the minds of most people about your life because of you becoming the first—and for a while who people called the only Nisei war hero—it got started, as most things do, not heroically but in terms of you just being at a certain place at a certain time. And what I've been able to read about it is this—and please correct me if I'm wrong—for some reason or another you were down in a basement with about fifty Nisei in North Platte. Mike Masaoka was then going around the United States developing this organization that had been in existence for only about ten years, the Japanese American Citizens League [JACL]. And it was during this time—Bill Hosokawa tells this story, and there are a couple of stories there that I know aren't quite correct. Mr. Martin has a couple of incidents about this that don't seem to be right from what I've read from your own [writings], but that Mike Masaoka was speaking to you, and, all of the sudden, some plainclothesmen walked in and asked Masaoka if he could step outside so that they could talk with him. He said, "This is pretty important," and they replied, Well, this is important, too. He went out and they arrested him and he was gone. Now, is this correct? Amplify on this situation.

BK: Yes, as far as I can remember, that's what happened. When Pearl Harbor had happened, he was talking to us. I can't remember exactly if he was trying to sell us

on the JACL but it seemed to me there was something in there, too, about dual citizenship that—whatever. Anyway, while he was talking to us, they got the word that Pearl Harbor had been bombed, and they moved just like that. The FBI came in there and arrested him.

AH: And you're sitting in the basement by yourselves, right, the fifty of you?

BK: I don't remember where we were exactly when we left the basement and all that, but I know they definitely arrested him. And he had one hell of a time getting out of there. They finally got in touch with Governor Maw of Utah, who was a close friend of his and who knew him well.

AH: Well, it's kind of strange that there is some kinship between you and Masaoka in this regard, that both of you became well-known in connection with the Japanese American role in role War II. Both of you had four siblings that were all in the military. He had lost—I don't think you did—but he had lost a brother. Both of you were actually from areas where there weren't large Japanese American communities. He had more, of course, in Salt Lake City, and by then had become Mormon and then he was a debater, and then came out to the West Coast. The next thing you know, he was a national director and not long after that you were being catapulted into fame in Japanese America but outside it, too, as a result of your war exploits. So, this ironic intersection of the two of you in North Platte, of all places—now the idea was to try to get a local JACL chapter?

BK: Just a chapter going.

AH: And you didn't have one at that time, right?

BK: Oh, no, I didn't even know what JACL was.

AH: Okay, so you and your brother came to this together, to the meeting?

BK: I don't remember now whether my brother was even there, but I know that they got all the young Japanese Americans in the areas to come to it. I don't even remember how many there were now. There must have been around thirty.

AH: Well, the way the story goes is that one or two days after this that your father told you—the way he has it is that you and Fred were at the meeting and you came home and your father told you both that you should join the military. Ralph Martin has the story twisted a little bit is that he has you went first to this place 150 miles away—which the name of is—

BK: Grand Island.

AH: Grand Island. And then, it says that didn't work out and then you came to North Platte and got the runaround there, and then you went to Grant Island.

BK: Yes, that's right. I didn't realize that Martin had that situation reversed. What happened is that the day after Pearl Harbor, which was Monday morning, my brother Fred and I decided we were going to volunteer. We asked our dad if it was okay, and he said, "Yes, this is your country, and you should go." I was quite pleased over that, and I always have been. So, we went right straight down to the North Platte recruiting station, and they said, Okay. They signed us up and everything, and then we wouldn't hear a damn thing from them. Two or three days go by. We took our physical, and there wasn't anything wrong with our physical. It was okay.

AH: And no problem with you going in there?

BK: No problem at all. But then, Gordy Jorgensen, hell, all of my high school buddies, they were all going in. But, it was two weeks, and we still hadn't been accepted. So, I thought, Oh, hell. We now knew why we were getting the damn runaround; they weren't sure they wanted Japanese Americans in the Army at that time. So, I heard on the radio that Grand Island was taking recruits for the Army Air Force. I said, "Well, hell, that sounds great." So, I called up the recruiting sergeant down there, and I said, "Will you take us?" I said, "Is our nationality any problem?" He said, "Heck, no." He said, "I get two bucks for everybody I sign-up." (chuckles) We drove right on down there, he signed us up, and away we went.

AH: That is kind of interesting because they were changing the status of Japanese American even before Pearl Harbor.

BK: Yes.

AH: I mean, it's probably that business that it was in Nebraska more than anything else.

BK: Well, I can understand the recruiting sergeant in North Platte. He probably was getting all kinds of mixed orders whether or not to accept anyone of Japanese ancestry. Hell, they froze all our cash accounts in the banks. We couldn't do anything business wise.

AH: But luckily, this guy at Grand Island was an entrepreneur. He was getting two bucks a recruit. (chuckles)

BK: Yes, and it was the strangest break because there's only been one or two other Japanese Americans that even got into the Air Force, and my brother Fred and I got in there. The first damn thing they did was that they kicked him out, sent him to a trench-digging engineers outfit in Arizona, and I don't know why they missed me. I really don't.

AH: It wasn't from something Fred did?

BK: Oh, no.

AH: I mean, he wasn't out painting people's penises green or something, was he? (laughs)

BK: No, I think it was because he was Japanese that he got kicked out. But I don't know why they didn't kick me out the same time.

AH: That's amazing. You guys weren't stationed at the same place initially or you were?

[01:10:00]

BK: Oh, yes, we were stationed together. I remember talking to him at times about how damn rough it was. You know, it was terrible at the start. We felt so damn guilty and everything because of what was going on. But, the amazing thing about it is—and you've probably seen that in the stories you've read—that twice they tried to transfer me out of the Air Force, too. And both times I beat the rap, and I don't know why. I had to beg with tears in my eyes. I still keep the letter from this one squadron adjutant in Florida. I knew the outfit was getting ready to go overseas, and the notice went up on the bulletin board that I was being transferred. I thought, Oh, god, here I go. I'm going to get the same treatment by brother Fred got, you know. I went in there and begged with him, "Please don't transfer me. I want to go overseas." He remembers the incident to this day. About four or five years ago he sent me a letter. I have a copy of it if you'd like to see it sometime.

AH: I would. So, now, in those days, the Army Air Corps was just that, it wasn't a separate Air Force branch of the service.

BK: No, that's right. It was the Air Corps.

AH: But, it had some autonomy, so that you actually got recruited into the Army Air Corps, as opposed to just going into the Army and then getting assigned to the Air Corps. Is that right?

BK: Yes, I was in the Air Corps, and they sent me first to an Air Corps Clerical School in Colorado, and I finished my clerical school there with the others. Then they sent me to Barksdale Field, Louisiana, and that's where the B-24 squadrons were being formed. The first time they were going to transfer me out was there at Barksdale. Then we went to Fort Myers, Florida, for initial training there, and I was still the clerk. The best thing that they could assign me to was—I can't even think of the word now. Anyway, it was part of the Signal Corps. That's the only assignment I had at that time. But finally, I got to go overseas with the group. As soon as we got into England, of course, they started flying missions right away. And, boy, the war was rough at that time. We were the first B-24 group there.

AH: Before we get into that, one thing that I read—and I just saw this recently and it really surprised me—it said that although you were a turret gunner, that you actually could fly, and that even before the war you had almost qualified for a pilot's license. Is that right?

- BK: Yes, at North Platte, I was taking flying lessons for piper cubs. That was another reason I was excited about getting into the Air Corps. I liked something like this.
- AH: So, you'd been taking flying lessons, say, from 1938 on?
- BK: Yes, around then.
- AH: And your brother too?
- BK: No, no, just me. Yes, I was doing it for kicks, learning to fly.
- AH: So, when you were at Grand Island and actually recruited into the Air Force, you said, "Oh, boy," and you really meant it.
- BK: Yes, I was real tickled. And the Air Corps was new. We knew it was new, and it was kind of a glamour group and all that stuff. (chuckles) So, I was real excited. But, boy, it was strange how it worked out.
- AH: When you were going through this initial training that you were just alluding to, even though you weren't going to be part of any kind of bomber crew it seemed like, were you getting experience in training for being in a bomber crew?
- BK: Oh, absolutely not.
- AH: Okay, so you weren't getting near an airplane then?
- BK: No! (chuckles) You know, that was the strangest thing. When we went to Barksdale Field, Louisiana, I saw those big B-24s flying in and laughing I said, "Oh, my god." I was so damn excited. But you know, I wouldn't go near that plane. The first thing they'd say, if something happened, they'd say I was the one that was doing sabotage or something, and I didn't want to risk it. And even there in Fort Myers, Florida, I didn't go close to one of those planes.
- AH: So, it's like being on a great football team, except you're the water boy, or something like that?
- BK: Yes, and they wouldn't let you get near the team.
- AH: But, you still had your eye on the prize, in the sense that that was a dream, right?
- BK: I didn't really know whether I would ever have any prize or anything when we got to England, but like I was saying, it was the beginning of the war, and it was really tough. And these young guys that went up as gunners, it was the first time they had seen combat, too, and some of them froze. They couldn't pull the trigger on the guns, and they knew they'd had it, so they'd fly one mission and they were through and they'd come down. So, they needed gunners really badly, and they had not trained

anybody to be fill-in gunners or anything. So, I heard that they needed gunners, that two or three of the guys just cold couldn't take it, and so I went to the armament officer and he said, "Okay, if you want to be a gunner, we'll send you to school." They sent me to gunnery school in England with two or three other guys in the squadron that wanted to become aerial gunners. We were there only about two weeks. It was run by the English.

AH: You were the only Japanese American, right?

BK: Oh, yes. And I didn't even fire a single round of the .50 caliber gun. All they did was just give a little instruction in some of the things about it. (chuckles)

AH: That was your training?

BK: That was my training. And, boy, (chuckles) I got signed to a crew right away.

AH: When you were a kid, you had done some duck hunting and the like, so you were familiar with a gun.

BL: Oh, yes.

AH: And then, you had some flying, so both of the activities that are involved in being a gunner—although, they're dramatically different from one another—you had some sense of it and probably had some feeling that you were a good shot, didn't you?

BK: Well, yes, that wasn't a problem. Even in basic training they had us target practicing, and I qualified as an expert in marksmanship.

AH: How were your eyes then?

BK: Oh, they were great. They were 20/20.

AH: Okay, no glasses then?

BK: No glasses. It was only through flying combat missions and looking in the sun all the time for fighters that hurt my eyes quite a bit.

AH: So, you weren't afraid to go up in airplanes and you knew that you had some marksmanship capabilities and you also had something to prove.

BK: Yes.

AH: So, the three things kind of came together.

BK: Yes.

AH: When was the first time you went—before you talk about that, help me because I don't really—as I wrote to you, I'm certainly not a military historian, but I grew-up, as a kid knowing something about planes because we'd collect information on them. We played war games when I was a young kid in New Jersey. My plane was always the P-38. But initially, you were flying B-24, Liberators, right?

BK: Right.

AH: Tell me a little bit about—because the B-29 is a lot bigger, and you were not going to get into that plane until you're in the Pacific Theater. But, this original plane that your crew called the Red Ass, (laughs) this was a B-24 Liberator.

BK: Yes.

AH: Tell me about that airplane. What was it like and how exciting was it for that particular time and how did it hold up against the ones you were fighting against when you were going to Africa and going into Italy and things?

BK: Well, it was a heck of a good plane, as far as that goes. I don't know how else to describe it. But, at that time, they had what they called windows on the side that opened for waist gunners. That was my first assignment; I went up as a waist gunner.

AH: Were there two waist gunners?

BK: Yes, one on each side.

AH: Okay, and another gunner in the front.

BK: And a tail gunner in the back and a turret gunner on the top, and then the bombardier and navigator in front had guns, too, in front. Some planes had belly turrets, too, but not ours.

AH: And then a pilot as well and a copilot? How many people were in a B-24 typically when you went out on a mission?

BK: Oh, I think there were about nine. There was an engineer and there was a radio operator. Let's see, there was a top turret gunner, two waist gunners, a tail gunner—so there's four gunners.

AH: And is there any sort of, among the crew, any sort of relative status among the gunners, et cetera as to a turret gunner, a waist gunner or not?

BK: No real status.

AH: Like usually you play sports and have skilled positions and then non-skilled. Are there ones that are more opportunity or more danger?

[01:20:00]

BK: I think the top turret gunner was probably a little more respected position, but I don't know it made any real difference.

AH: And more vulnerable, too, or were all the gunners about equally vulnerable?

BK: They were all vulnerable.

AH: Okay. Was it typical that since somebody would be killed sooner than another, like a higher incidence of death for one of those gunner positions or not?

BK: Not that I know of.

AH: So, you never felt like you were in the death seat, like you do in a car when you're occupying the front passenger seat?

BK: No, there wasn't anything like that. You knew if your time came you were going to get it, so—(chuckles)

AH: And would it be more frequent that just one or two people would be killed, rather than the whole plane going down?

BK: It's possible, yes.

AH: But, you were all in it together, though?

BK: Oh, sure.

AH: I mean, literally, in a sense like that.

BK: Oh, sure, yes.

AH: Okay, so the first flight you ever went on was in from England?

BK: We were stationed in England. We started to fly two or three missions there, and we took off but the coast always had a problem with the targets being socked-in by clouds. We had to come back and land, and then never got off to a real mission. Then overnight, well, Rommel was beating the hell out of the Allies in North Africa.

AH: So, this was still in '42 then?

BK: Yeah. So, immediately they called us to go over there. I went into North Africa and flew my first mission over a target called Bizerta. That's when our tail gunner got wounded, shrapnel came through and got him right above the head. That was my first experience with a casualty.

- AH: Now, you didn't even see those things happening until you got back or something?
- BK: Well, when he got hit, he apparently radioed up to the people up front somewhere that he had been wounded because we knew he was hurt. We went back there and pulled him out of the tail turret. He was unconscious and we brought him up there. And the strangest thing was that the only thing I learned in gunnery school in two weeks was to never give a morphine injection to anyone with a serious head injury. So, when the copilot came back from the front of the plane to give him morphine, I shook him off. I don't know whether I saved his life or not. To this day, he doesn't know about it, and I'm going to tell him about it here, probably in a month or two. I'm going to go down and visit him in Phoenix because I know where he is.
- AH: Oh, so he's still alive right now?
- BK: Yeah, he's alive and he knows—and I may not have saved his life, and then again, I might have. Then I took his place, and every mission I'd fly, I'd look up there, and there was that big old hole where that thing came through and got him.
- AH: But once you got assigned a plane like that, it sounds to me like you kept it. It sounds to me like Red Ass was with you guys for a long time. Is that right?
- BK: Oh, yes, we flew quite a few missions after that together.
- AH: Okay, but then you would still have some of the damage on the plane?
- BK: Oh, yes, they just left the hole there. They didn't bother to fix it. (chuckles)
- AH: What is the turret made of then?
- BK: Just metal.
- AH: But, you had to see out of it. Was it hard plastic?
- BK: Oh, out of the front it's plastic, yes, but where the shrapnel came in was all metal. It was up there on top.
- AH: The shrapnel went right through that, huh?
- BK: Yes. I don't know how many missions I flew as tail gunner, but then I also moved up to the top turret. They shifted us gunners around.
- AH: How did they make a decision on that, like where you were going to be?
- BK: Well, that was up to the pilot if he wants you to go to the top turret and then you get somebody else to fill in.

AH: So, the pilot is kind of like the captain the—

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: The pilot makes the decisions.

BK: Oh, sure.

AH: Oh, I see, okay. So, that's not made up higher than him. He makes those decisions. You weren't particularly anxious to be in any one against another? I mean, you didn't find yourself more comfortable in one position than another?

BK: Well, I liked the top turret. It's a little warmer up there. (chuckles) And the tail and the waist were terrible.

AH: It's really cold, you mean?

BK: Oh, yes, and then a couple of my friends, it froze their fingers off. It's so cold. They had these electric suits at that time. Some of them would get too hot, and (chuckles) they got burned by them. (chuckles) They were having all kinds of problems.

AH: An electric suit?

BK: Yes, electric warmers just like electric blankets. It'd get way below zero. This one friend of mine who was a gunner froze his finger off. I'm even going to go see him, too. He lives down in Phoenix with his other kid. He's always going around with a stub like this. (laughs)

AH: (laughs) How high [did you fly] on those kinds of missions? Because later on, in your most famous mission in Romania, you're talking a lot about being so low to the ground. On these flights on the B-24 Liberator how high were you on these first couple of flights?

BK: Well, most of the times they went in about seventeen thousand feet. It varied some, depending on where you were going. And, of course, the most historic one of all is when we went on the Ploesti oil refinery, we went in at approximately 250 feet.

AH: Boy, that's really low. I was just thinking, I mean, you could see things.

BK: Oh, it was unbelievable. And these huge, you know, these storage tanks would explode and the flames would be higher than the plane, and our pilot would turn the plane sideways just like that, and you could feel the heat. It was so hot.

AH: So, you didn't experience any problems with cold on that day, huh?

- BK: No. (chuckles) Well, they went in and started the mission at a fairly high altitude, but, golly, as we got closer towards the target, we'd go over some of these small towns and people were waving. It was on a Sunday, and they were all in colorful clothes. They didn't know we were the enemy, I guess. But, that's how low we went in.
- AH: And, if go lower, you can get more mileage out of your gas. Is that right? One of the items I read said that you fuel held up longer because that Ploesti one was a very long flight, is that right?
- BK: Yes, it was very long, and it was the only airplane that could make it at that time. The B-24 had an auxiliary bomb bay gas tank, and that was the only reason we could make it.
- AH: Were the B-29s developed yet when you were using the B-24?
- BK: Oh, no.
- AH: Okay, so those were still in production at that point?
- BK: Right, right.
- AH: Okay, and so the B-24 was the big bomber at that time?
- BK: Well, actually, the B-17s—there were more B-17s than there were B-24s. They all made fun of the B-24. They called us pregnant cows, and the B-17 was more sleek.
- AH: But, you were larger, right? Tonnage was—I know I saw on the B-29s it was an incredible amount, something like thirteen thousand pounds or something like that.
- BK: Yeah, it was only like half that on the 24.
- AH: But, it was made fun of as a pregnant cow because it was—
- BK: It wasn't exactly a beautiful plane, in that sense, but it was a good plane. It got me there and back. (chuckles)
- AH: Now, one time you actually were really a captive in North Africa, weren't you?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: It's kind of unclear to me exactly what happened there. Could you explain that?
- BK: We were over there to stop Rommel, and then after he was pretty well contained, they called us back to England. We left at night, we were going back toward England, and our navigator got lost. He didn't know where we were. We were running out of fuel,

and finally we decided we'd better go down and a bunch of mountains and stuff came into view. We landed in an open pasture like place.

AH: A pretty smooth landing?

BK: It wasn't bad at all, considering what it looked like. (chuckles) We didn't know what was going to happen. We found out we were in Spanish Morocco. These natives came out there with guns and clubs and everything, and, boy, it was close. It was really close. The waist gunner stayed in position, and he was told to start firing if they started anything. There was some pushing and shoving around, but about that time one of the Army officers came over there and took over and they herded us into town. So, they took us from there to Spain. We were interned in Spain because that was a neutral country. They kept us there. The U.S. government had to barter with Spain to get our crew out of there.

AH: Your whole crew right?

BK: They gave them brand-new cars and stuff like that to get us out of there. They took them out according to rank pretty much. The captain and pilot and so forth, they went first in a group of about three or four, and I think I was in the last group of about three or four. Then we went back to England.

[01:20:36]

AH: They were eying you kind of strangely I think not knowing quite who or what you were, right? (chuckles)

BK: Yes. Anyway, while we were there, I was still pretty gung-ho at that time, and I wanted to get back into action, you know.

AH: How long was this period from the time you were in Morocco to Spain and stuff?

BK: Well, we were in Morocco probably a couple weeks, and I asked my pilot if it was all right if I try to escape and go back to my outfit. (chuckles)

AH: Oh, wow! (chuckles)

BK: He says okay, so I took off one night. (chuckles) I didn't get too far. The next morning they caught me and brought me back. But anyway, the thing was that out of all the things that had happened to me during the war, that incident of being interned in Spain probably saved my life because when I got back to my squadron in England, I didn't recognize a soul. They were all gone. They were all shot down. We had new replacements just in that period of time. We were interned about three months.

AH: Were most of the losses suffered from raids on North Africa?

BK: No, when I got to England, they were hitting deeper into French targets, you know, where the enemy was really giving them problems.

AH: When you were hitting Italy, et cetera, when was that? Was that afterwards?

BK: That was early on, because when we went over there to stop Rommel, they also sent us on missions to Italy.

AH: Would you go from England to both of those places?

BK: No, we were stationed in North Africa in the desert near Tobruk.

AH: So, you would go across the Mediterranean then?

BK: Yes, we would hit targets in Italy as well as—

AH: After you left Spain, where did you go then?

BK: They took us to the Rock of Gibraltar, and then flew us back to England to our outfit.

AH: And it was in England where you saw that everybody in your squadron had changed?

BK: Yes, I went back to my regular squadron. Boy, that was really a stroke of luck that we got interned in Spain.

AH: How long do you stay with that same group of people on the one airplane like that? I mean, does a team stay together as long as they're alive?

BK: Yes, and at that time, if you completed twenty-five missions, you could go back to the United States.

AH: What I'm trying to develop is, is there a real intimacy—I've got to turn this over in a second, so I'll turn it over now. [recording paused] What I'm trying to establish is the sense of family that developed on a particular bomber. Is this a group that gets rotated around quite a bit, either through death or through transfers, or do you become a sort of cohesive, a solidarity kind of family?

BK: Oh, yes, you become a very close family. A radio operator named Red Kettering used to really keep our morale up and worked closely with us. I really flew with a lot of different nationalities, too. I had a Jewish engineer, a guy named Holbridge. We had a Polish gunner. I even flew five missions with a full-blooded Dakota Indian pilot, a guy named Chief Moran.

AH: Now, who was the main pilot during this time?

BK: The main pilot was Jay Epting, and he was from Tupelo, Mississippi.

AH: Was he pretty much your pilot throughout all of this, too?

BK: He was a tremendous pilot and very young, too.

AH: Does this group ever get together? Are there reunions among that very crew or not?

BK: No, strangely, we've never had any reunions. I've never been very much for reunions anyway because primarily it's the officers that get together, but I have had some great moments with my crew members.

AH: But, on a one-to-one basis?

BK: Yes, after the war ended. It's only been about five or six years ago, I guess, that I wrote to my pilot, Jake Epting, in Mississippi, and he was not very well and wasn't expected to live much longer. He was so tickled to hear from me.

AH: Did he live much longer or not?

BK: No, he didn't. I think it was about a year later that he passed away.

AH: Do you still have contact with the Jewish engineer?

BK: No, I never heard from him again after we left. But my pilot from the Pacific, Jim Jenkins, went to accounting school after he got back from the war and became a CPA. And so when I got into the newspaper business there in Williamson, Michigan, why, he did all my books for me, and he did them for me at cost. He didn't charge me hardly anything. This is a wonderful relationship that still continues.

AH: When you're doing the fighting sort of thing, you're obviously involved in fighting other airplanes, but then there's also bombing of sites and stuff, too. Which were you doing more of? Is it mostly the fighting of other airplanes?

BK: It was the job of aerial gunners to help bring the plane back from any enemy fighter planes.

AH: But, I mean, all of our missions then—none of your mission were bombing missions. They were—

BK: They were bombing missions, except the gunners were there to protect the plane from enemy fighters.

AH: Okay, so the plane itself had a role to deliver bombs?

BK: Oh, yes.

- AH: But, as a fighter, what you were doing was warding off other fighters, so you were actually carrying on a different kind of relationship.
- BK: Oh, yes.
- AH: Yours was plane-to-plane, and the other was plane-to-target, right?
- BK: The bombardier, navigator, and the radio operator all had their jobs for the particular mission.
- AH: Well, the reason I'm bringing this up is that you were somewhat abstracted from what was happening with the bombs and who they're hitting, or what they were hitting, right? I mean, you were preoccupied. It was more of a *mano a mano* duel with another plane?
- BK: Except when you were over the target and the bomb bay doors were open, and you knew they were getting ready to drop the bomb—"Let's get the hell out of here. Let's get going!" (chuckles)
- AH: Are you ever close enough to see another pilot that you hit or not? I mean, do you feel that? Or does it happen so fast that you don't know if you've hit them or not?
- BK: It happened so fast, and then there are so many guns shooting. There is only one time that I can ever remember that I—we were going to bomb Rome. There was a twin-engine Italian fighter came in at the top, right directly at our plane, and I know I hit him because smoke started coming out. I kept watching to see if he exploded when he was going down, but I never knew for sure whether it did. That was the only time. The other times—you see, you always fly in formation with a plane on your left and a plane on your right, so that you've got three planes going together. You've got a whole mess of guns shooting at enemy aircraft when they come in, so it's pretty hard for anybody to say, "I got him," or even hit him.
- AH: Right. So, when you think about assigning credit and the way the media assigns credit, doesn't it usually go to the pilot then?
- BK: Well, it has to be verified by somebody. It could be verified by some other gunner in the formation, but generally it's very difficult to verify that. The only time that they can really do that is when a plane is crippled by anti-aircraft or whatever and has to break from formation and fly all alone. That's when the enemy fighter planes really converge on him. They see a wounded bomber, and then they really take after him.
- AH: But, it's a corporate effort then, when you're on a plane?
- BK: Oh, yes.

AH: Okay. So, a lot of the acclaim you yourself got came from not specifically what you did on that airplane, but the fact that you were involved in these missions and then you were of Japanese ancestry.

BK: More the latter than anything else. I mean, I didn't do anything spectacular, as far as shooting down enemy aircraft or anything like that. But, it was just that I had so much to prove, and my situation was entirely different than anyone else's.

[01:40:16]

AH: I know you were supposed to take twenty-five missions, and then what you did was to volunteer to go on an additional five missions, which almost proved fatal for you.

BK: Yes.

AH: By that time, were there other Japanese American involved? Because I remember reading something ["Completes 33 Combat Missions; Sgt. John Matsumoto Called Dependable Aerial Gunner"] in one of the camp papers [the *Granada Pioneer*, 23 August 1944] that a little bit later there was a Japanese American who was also involved in the Air Force, and I think there were a few others who flew, too. Had that been happening by the time that you came back to the United States after your European missions were over?

BK: You know, I don't think there was ever any other Japanese Americans in the Air Force that flew bombing missions. I have never been able to verify that, of course, but I know that the Air Force didn't allow them to fly, so the chances are very slim that anybody else got in. And if they did, I've never heard—this is the first time I've ever heard anybody say what you just said.

AH: Well, I'll show you a document later on because I didn't know that either. A couple of times it's mentioned it says, He's one of the very few Japanese Americans in the Air Force. And this one actually was featuring this person who had been involved in these different missions. I'll show you the article. It appeared in one of the Manzanar papers or something. I'd gone through all of those, and they were talking about this person.

BK: Well, that's interesting. I figured that I was the only Japanese American to bomb the mainland of Japan, because I had to get special permission from Secretary of War Stimson. They would not let any Japanese Americans fly.

AH: Well, he was only involved in the European Theater. He was not involved in the Pacific Theater.

BK: I know there were some Chinese Americans involved over there in the European Theater, so it's possible there was somebody else, but I didn't know about it.

- AH: But, you met some Asians, some Chinese Americans who were in the Air Force?
- BK: There was a Chinese American that was flying in B-17s over in Europe about the same time I was. We were both written up in this one book I once read.
- AH: Well, this decision to go the extra five missions, there was some thinking that went into on your part because—I mean, I know you don't have a death wish or any kind of sense of suicidal impulses. But, after twenty-five [missions] this was the unwritten rule, that you can come back and what happens after twenty-five? You can just serve out the rest of your term in the military by not having to go up in planes and not having to go on any more missions?
- BK: Well, you come back and they'll send you to rest and home and then they'll reassign you to instruct other gunners.
- AH: So, it would be ground duty pretty much thereafter?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Okay. But then, you stayed on for five, which meant that you were the only one who was doing that? The rest of your crew that you were going to be with was pretty much going to be new that you were going to be with?
- BK: Oh, yes, they all thought I was crazy for doing it. (chuckles) That's a stage in your life, you know, when you're young and you have no responsibilities or connections. You'd never do that if you were married or had a family or anything like that. That's the way all those pilots were over there. They were young kids, practically, some of them nineteen, twenty years old, and you're all gung-ho. I was still waving the hell out of the flag. I wanted to prove myself a little bit more than anybody else, so I volunteered for five extra missions.
- AH: On one of those missions you had tough times, too, didn't you?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Your face got frozen and—
- BK: It didn't get frozen, but I was in the top turret and something hit the top part of my turret and the plastic blew off. I've got a picture of it there.
- AH: With the plastic off?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Let me see that photograph, because I'd like to see what that was like.

BK: Maybe we'll take a break now and I'll also show you that photo.

[recording paused]

AH: So, the plastic had been blown off of the turret. And now that we've seen this photograph, the whole turret is draped over your head. When was that picture taken?

BK: When they replaced the turret, the next day after we landed or whatever, they took a picture of the old turret.

AH: Okay, and was that your very last—was that your thirtieth mission?

BK: Yes, that was my thirtieth.

AH: Did you decide on five or was it open-ended, and there just happened to be five more?

BK: It just happened to be five. That was the fifth one.

AH: Okay, and so after the thirtieth was over, then you got cycled back to the States?

BK: Yes, and that's another one of the strange things that happened to me during the war. Like you were saying earlier, I was in the right place at the right time. Of all the places they could have sent me for rest and recreation leave, they sent me to Santa Monica, California, at the old Edgewood Beach Hotel. So, I was maybe the first Japanese American to come back to the West Coast after the evacuation.

AH: So, you were staying at the Edgewood Hotel. I remember reading that it was a rather posh place. Now, who was there at that hotel? I'm trying to get a sense of who's staying there. My father-in-law was in the service in Hawaii, and sometimes they allowed them to stay at one of the two beautiful hotels on Waikiki Beach. Now, how did that work?

BK: Well, those were all war veterans who, if you finished your tour—

AH: Were they all Air Force people or not?

BK: This was strictly Air Force rest and rehabilitation quarters.

AH: What were you allowed to do when you were in Santa Monica? Were you able to walk freely around the streets?

BK: You could do whatever you wanted.

AH: Did you?

- BK: Oh, sure. And the darndest thing was—you remember I told you about this guy who had his fingers frozen? Ed Bates was my squadron mate, and they had put him in the same room with me, so the two of us celebrated all the time. (chuckles) We had a hell of a time.
- AH: Did you have much of a problem being Japanese and being on the West Coast at that time? Because this would have been—at the beginning of '44 you were here in February, but were you actually back in '43 in Santa Monica? I'm trying to figure out when the last of your flights was?
- BK: Well, I think I came in '43. I think it was near December.
- AH: When you came back, did you first go to Nebraska before you got to Santa Monica?
- BK: Oh, yes, sure.
- AH: Tell me a little bit about that because I'm interested in that when you first came back what you did.
- BK: I first came back and landed in New York.
- AH: It sounded like you gave a talk even at Hershey High School when you came back, but I'm not sure. I know you did after the war itself, but when you first came back to visit your family—
- BK: When I first came back, the only thing that I can remember is that I stopped in Omaha, and I went to see the family of Dick Lang. Dick Lang was one of the gunners in the plane that flew on the right side of us in Ploesti; he was flying the right wing. Dick Lang was in there, and their plane was on fire from front to back. It just sank and blew up, exploded into a million pieces. So, I stopped in Omaha to see Dick Lang's parents, to tell them what happened. And they were forever grateful that I stopped. They thought it was an act of God. Also, in the same plane Junior Canfield was the copilot. The Langs wrote and told Junior's wife that you had stopped, and so then she wrote me a letter and asked me to describe what happened. So, I told her, and she was forever grateful, too.
- AH: Where did the Langs live?
- BK: The Langs lived in Omaha, but I think Junior Canfield's wife was in Utah at the time.
- AH: Okay, but you visited the Langs, and then you wrote to Canfield's widow, right?
- BK: And you know, it's only between about three years ago that Dick Lang's sister came and visited relatives in Omaha, and then drove through Hershey and stopped at my brother George's house. The Langs are still tearful and grateful that I stopped and told them about what happened to Dick.

AH: About how far is Omaha from Hershey?

[01:50:00]

BK: It's quite a ways. Let's see, Grand Island is 150, so it must be over 275, 300 miles, I imagine.

AH: Okay, so you stopped at Omaha en route to your own house then.

BK: Yes, that's right.

AH: When you got home, the family must have been a little smaller with all your brothers in the military.

BK: Oh, yes, it was only George. He was the only brother actually there. But I stopped in North Platte and Russ Langford. He was manager of Nash Finch, for which we did a lot of hauling of produce from Texas. He was so tickled to see me that he drove me home all the way to Hershey to my folks.

I was just talking about that the other night to my daughter that some of the things that I regret about my parents were their old cultural ideas of things. You don't hug each other. Japanese people don't hug each other, they don't kiss each other, you know? I don't ever remember my mother kissing my dad or even hugging each other. So, Russ Langford drove me all the way home, and my mother came out. She didn't even shake my hand. She didn't hug me. Here, I just felt like, God, I'm just lucky to be alive, you know?

AH: Right, right.

BK: I was so embarrassed because Russ was watching all the time. You figure that they'd be tickled pink to see me come home alive, and nothing happened.

AH: Yet, they were tickled pink.

BK: Oh, well, sure they were. You know they were glad, but it's really something when you think back sometimes about our heritage and how things are. Their old customs still prevailed at that time anyway.

AH: When you got back when did the publicity dealing with you start? I know when you got to Santa Monica there was some publicity. Was there some in Nebraska, say, at [North] Platte?

BK: Yes, there were all kinds of publicity there, long before that even. There were two small daily papers there at that time, and when we bombed Ploesti and survived—those that survived—the War Department sent telegrams saying that we were okay. This one daily paper in North Platte bannered the headline: KUROKI BOMBS PLOESTI! (laughs)

AH: You as an individual, huh?

BK: Yes, I couldn't believe it. (chuckling)

AH: So, your parents had some sense through your brother—

BK: Oh, yes. By that time, quite a bit of publicity had already been given to me in other mediums. But the big thing was that when I got stationed at Santa Monica that was when things really developed as far as publicity was concerned in my regard. You probably remember reading that I was asked to appear on Ginny Simms' radio program. At that time, there was no television to speak of. Radio was really the big thing.

AH: You know, I had never heard of the Ginny Simms program but now that I read about it, I hear all kinds of things. It was like Phillip Morris? What kind of show was the Ginny Simms program? And who was Ginny Simms?

BK: She was a singer, and she was very popular. She probably was number two next to Dinah Shore. She and Dinah Shore were the two top ones. So, the Ginny Simms radio program was a big show.

AH: So, she was fairly young at the time?

BK: Oh, yes, sure.

AH: And attractive?

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: But, she was well known to you, even when you were in Nebraska? Was that something you'd heard on the radio?

BK: Oh, yes, sure, I knew who Ginny Simms was.

AH: Oh, okay. Because I know you're going to have dinner with her at some point.

BK: Yes, we were to go over to the Brown Derby and have dinner, and I was to go with her on the show. I'd tell my buddies back home in Hershey, you know, and then [came] down here, and get ready to go on the show. But no, there was no deal. NBC said that the Japanese American question was too controversial.

AH: Now, they were having it at the studio live, right?

BK: Yes, that's right.

AH: And Ginny Simms was there?

BK: Right.

AH: Now you had gone it said with two other buddies that went to dinner with you and Ginny Simms. Do you remember that at all, that there was a couple of other guys at the Brown Derby with you and Ginny Simms?

BK: Well, I know that one of them was a guy named Sergeant Evans who was assigned to the thing.

AH: Was he a public relations officer?

BK: Yeah, he was a public relations sergeant. He went with me.

AH: Did you get close to being on the air?

BK: No, it was after—I'm getting a little confused now. Like I told you, I can't remember any of these things too well anymore. Because eventually, you know, they did bring me back to appear on the Ginny Simms program [on February 22, 1944].

AH: Yes, I know, and I'm going to get into that, because there's a remarkable story involved with that appearance.

BK: Oh, there was a tremendous amount of publicity that came out, even in the L.A. papers, that I'd been kicked off this program.

AH: So, you were reading those papers at the time. You were at the Hotel in Santa Monica and had access to them there.

BK: Oh, sure.

AH: But it was just a little bit before the show, sometimes like maybe a day or so before the show, that you were told you couldn't get on? Or was it the very day of the show?

BK: It was the very day of the show. In fact, as I remember, Sergeant Evans was driving me to the station and found out that it had been cancelled.

AH: Now, when that was canceled, did Ginny Simms talk to you a little bit?

BK: Not that I can remember. I can't remember the details now of what she was like at that time. I can remember when we finally came on. Anyway, that was kind of the beginning of things. And then *Time* magazine did an interview with me, too, and ran my picture at that time. The publicity was getting out, so the people at the Commonwealth Club, this Ruth Kingman who was—

AH: Fair Play Committee Chair, right?

- BK: Yes. She realized that I was out in California and available. She immediately contacted the Air Force public relations and lined up my speech with the Commonwealth Club, and, of course, that was a prestigious group then.
- AH: You know, I was thinking a lot about that. The Commonwealth Club a pretty elite group of San Francisco.
- BK: Yes.
- AH: And the fact, the people that you got to know through that appearance were the president of Stanford University [Dr. Raymond Lyman Wilbur] and the vice president of Berkeley [Dr. Monroe E. Deutsch], some very eminent people. Now, you had a high school education, been working on a farm, and, all of a sudden, you were going to give a talk to them. Did you struggle over that or not?
- BK: Oh, I was scared to death, you know? What was even worse was that I didn't know what to expect. But when I got into San Francisco and got my room at the Palace Hotel, I went out in the streets and got a newspaper. There I saw on the front page of the San Francisco *Herald Examiner* a story with the headlines that said: JAP TO SPEAK IN S.F. I thought, Holy mackerel!
- AH: Of course, that was a Hearst paper, right?
- BK: Yes. I was thinking, I'm just going to speak. They're calling me a Jap, and I'm going to speak. I thought, Wow. I was really scared, and so I went back to my hotel room. The day I gave that speech, of course, it was all I could do just to read it. It was written by Bob Evans, the staff sergeant.
- AH: Did he help you write your Commonwealth Club speech?
- BK: Oh, yes, he wrote the thing.
- AH: Oh, really, he did?
- BK: Hell, at that time I couldn't (chuckles) even write sentences, I don't think. But this Major McFadden had accompanied me on the trip on the train, and he was seated right down close by the podium. Of course, the speech went over real well, and they gave me about a ten minute standing ovation.
- AH: That's incredible. And there were a lot of people in attendance, too?
- BK: Yes. When I looked at Major McFadden, he had tears coming down his face because he was worried sick, too, how it was going to go off. So, it was quite a thing. You know, the funniest thing about it was that the story got coverage all over the country. And this was when the Bataan [Death March] atrocity stories were breaking. The

same day I'm on the front page with the Bataan atrocity stories. And the *Chicago Tribune* ran front-page, both stories, side by side practically.

AH: Those two stories together, huh? That was an incredible juxtaposition.

[02:00:00]

BK: Yes. And like I said, it wasn't so much what I did in the war, but my timing. You know, I was always there at the right time.

AH: Or the wrong time, depending, huh? (laughs)

BK: Yeah, or the wrong time. I want to show you this. Let me find it.

AH: I'm going to turn this off. [recording paused] So, what was the pitch when they originally talked to you? I mean, you had just been turned down by this Ginny Simms thing and were very disappointed. Then, all of a sudden, here comes the Commonwealth thing.

BK: Right. (chuckles)

AH: You probably were thinking, Uh-oh, this could be *déjà vu*.

BK: Yes.

AH: But, it turned out not to be. Was this something that the Army had wanted you to do because they realized what good it could do, or that you realized that it could do a lot of good for Japanese people in the United States or what?

BK: I don't think the Army had anything to do with it, other than allowing it to be done. I think it was people like Ruth Kingman who were instrumental in getting me there. And, of course, she was working very closely with Monroe Deutsch, who was the vice president and provost at the University of California, Berkeley.

AH: And you saw them as people who were really supporting Japanese Americans, too?

BK: Oh, yes. Also, Deutsch was a key member of the Commonwealth Club. I don't remember whether he was president then or whether he was just on the board, but he was quite instrumental that I appeared there, too. The strangest thing about it all is that, as a result of that Commonwealth appearance, it was the only reason I was able to get to the Pacific. Deutsch and Ray Lyman Wilbur of Stanford University, and Chester Rowell, the editor of the San Francisco *Chronicle*, the three of them sent a telegram or a letter—I don't remember which—to Secretary of War Stimson, because I think they knew him, too.

AH: These were all Commonwealth members, weren't they?

- BK: Yes, and they asked Stimson to make an exception in my case. The War Department regulations said that no Japanese Americans would ever fly in the Pacific. It worked, you know, so the timing was perfect. When I was told that I couldn't go to the Pacific because of this War Department regulation, I wrote Monroe Deutsch a letter and asked him if he could help me. Boy, he jumped right on it. (chuckles)
- AH: Do you remember that time in San Francisco, other than the Commonwealth Club appearance? Do you remember being there for a while and did you get a chance to go to dinner with Deutsch or Ruth Kingman or any of these other people?
- BK: No, the only other thing was that after my speech Deutsch took me to the Berkeley campus to speak to a small group. I was so nervous and after that thing there, that's the only thing I remember. I was glad to go back to Santa Monica.
- AH: You ended up giving quite a few talks after that. Did it get to the point where, after having somebody write this first speech for you, that you started to understand the rhythms of being able to write talks and give them yourself? I mean, were you becoming like a lot of these ballplayers that go into major league sports? At first they're not speakers, but after a while they're dealing with the media a lot they develop enough poise and polish and confidence that they can give talks. Did that happen to you?
- BK: Well, not really. I didn't have any talent for speaking like that. I think in most cases I just simply told my story, which took care of itself. You might want to shut that off. I want to show you this as long as we're talking about it. [recording paused] Anyway, I went back to Santa Monica, and, of course, they got me onto the Ginny Simms radio program, and then I did make an appearance there.
- AH: I don't know if you remember this yourself, but I was reading this. The *Manzanar Free Press* ran a little article about how, when you got on that show, how you almost didn't make it for that.¹ It was saying that you were taking the train to Los Angeles from Fresno, and that a big downpour of rain so the train couldn't continue so it seemed as if you weren't going to make it to the Ginny Simms program. You got off the train, got out on the highway, hitchhiked a ride down to Santa Monica, and then appeared on the program, (laughs) which I thought was amazing on several accounts. First of all, being able to do that, and how much you wanted to do it, and then also that here you were of Japanese ancestry during a time when Japanese people were not supposed to be on the West Coast, hitchhiking on the highway. (chuckles) Somebody picked you up and took you down there. I thought it was great! Do you remember that at all?
- BK: Yes, it did happen, but I don't remember the person who picked me up or anything. (chuckles) I should have remembered that.

¹ "Kuroki Almost Fails to Make Broadcast,"
March 11, 1944

- AH: But then, you did get on the Ginny Simms program?
- BK: Yes, they did get me on there. And then, I was there in Santa Monica—I must have been there about three months.
- AH: What did you do on the Ginny Simms program exactly? Tell your story? Or did you do a soft shoe or what? (laughs)
- BK: I don't remember what I even did on the show now. It must not have been very important.
- AH: But, the important thing was getting on it, right?
- BK: Oh, yes. I always want to correct that, because I made a lot of fuss about them kicking me off. They did get me on there eventually, but it was because they got so much adverse publicity. Some of the editorials that came out in the papers in Los Angeles really hit them hard.
- AH: You had a long R and R period there then, because you came back to the United States in late 1943, went to Nebraska to visit your family, came out to Santa Monica, went up to San Francisco, and came back to Santa Monica and you must have been there for quite a spell.
- BK: Well, I think it was about three months. I'm not sure. Maybe it wasn't even that long. Then I was assigned to the air base at Pueblo, Colorado, where they were training Air Force people to replace those in Europe.
- AH: What would you have been there, a teacher?
- BK: I was assigned as an aerial instructor, teaching aerial gunners, because of my experience. (chuckles) The darndest thing was that there's an awful lot of air turbulence around Pueblo and Colorado Springs because of the mountains. We'd take these gunners up for training sessions and they'd all get air sick and then I was the only one out there firing the gun at the targets. (chuckles)
- AH: So, you would go up again in the plane?
- BK: Oh, yes. Then when we came back to land at the base—these were all new pilots who were getting trained—they'd miss the runway. (chuckles) It scared the hell out of me.
- AH: (laughs) Geez, that was worse than the battles!
- BK: Trust me, I said, "This is worse than combat." (laughs) I never had to worry when we were flying with Jay Epting.

AH: So, you were actually back then in the Air Force as far as you were on another assignment?

BK: Yes, and it was during that time that the War Relocation Authority asked me to go to three of their relocation camps, the internment centers.

AH: Did they ask? The way I've seen it sometimes, the War Department had ordered you to do this.

BK: Well, yeah, the War Department eventually had to cut the orders, of course, but the original request came from the WRA. Of course, it might have been both, I'm not sure. Because they were forming this 442nd unit in Minnesota, or wherever it was that they were forming it. It was an all-Japanese American unit, and they were trying to draft some of the kids out of these internment centers, as well as getting volunteers. So, my job was public relations. And that, of course, was quite an experience. (chuckles)

AH: Before we get into that experience specifically, what kind of background did you have relative to these camps? Because you were from Nebraska, and I don't think any of the members of your family were in camps. Or did some of them, your sisters perhaps, end-up moving to areas before the war where the people got evacuated?

BK: No. Our family was completely away from all of that.

AH: Okay, so had you during this time visited any of the camps, or was this going to be your first time?

BK: No, I had not visited any of them. The only time that I heard about them was when I was in Europe, and I picked up a magazine and saw a big article in there about the Native Sons and Daughters of the Golden West in California who wanted to put all the Japanese people into concentration camps.

AH: So, when you were flying on your assorted European missions, you were rather oblivious, except for this one reference, that they were going to, but you didn't even know about this complex of camps that were here?

[02:10:06]

BK: I was oblivious, except for one other thing that I had picked up from an article in Europe. I read in it that they were having a national governors' conference, and that Earl Warren was cited as trying to urge all the other governors to put the Japanese in concentrating camps and that Governor Dwight Griswold of Nebraska told him off, saying that he didn't go along with that at all.

AH: What was Griswold, Republican or Democrat?

BK: He was Republican.

AH: So, was Earl Warren, of course.

BK: Warren was still attorney general at that time?

AH: He later, in 1948, ran [unsuccessfully] for vice president of the United States on the Republican ticket headed by Thomas Dewey.

BK: He then became a Supreme Court justice. (chuckles)

AH: That's such an irony, his whole career. But I guess we live long lives and are capable of different kinds of education. So, in preparation to go to the camps, did you have to go back to Washington, D.C., and meet with Dillon Myer, the head director?

BK: No, they just gave me orders to report to certain places, and the first one was Heart Mountain. It's been so long ago that I don't remember all the details, except that I was really shocked when I came up to the entrance of the internment center and here were these guards all wearing the same uniform as I was wearing (chuckles) and inside were all my people, you know? It was really shocking.

AH: Now, Heart Mountain's background was that when they had the volunteers for the combat team in early 1943, there were very few from Heart Mountain who volunteered to join, and there was some resistance to it. Then I saw that you were in the right place at the right time, sometimes at a place that could be perceived as the wrong time because the only organized draft resistance movement was at Heart Mountain. I know that when you went there, one of the things you did was to talk to this draft resister group, the Heart Mountain Fair Play Committee. And there was a certain amount of sparks from what I can tell, but I want you to tell me about this because I've seen things and heard things from people who were on the other side of the podium at that time. What are your recollections of the Heart Mountain experience?

BK: Well, I never forgot the on incident. Of course, I was advised that they were a dissident group and that they were also having special guards to avoid any problems there. But, I remember getting up and speaking to the group, and one thing that I remember most was that I told them that "If you think Japan's going to win this war, you're crazy. They're going to get bombed off of the map." And I heard some hissing and booing, and (laughs) I never quite forgot it. But nothing else really happened, no problems.

AH: I guess the situation for the Issei who were in the camp was a couple of things. First, that they had been stripped of so many things—and then the idea that they might be stripped of their kids—but also there were a lot of Issei who truly felt that Japan was going to win that war. Even in 1944, when most people would say it was inevitable that they were going to lose, it didn't take a person like yourself to say that to them,

but they still had this power to suspend their disbelief and think that this was going to happen.

BK: Oh, very definitely. Yes, I certainly agree with that. I think that some of those dissidents might have even committed some sabotage if they had not been interned. I mean, you can't say for sure. But, it was an interesting experience, and, in a way, I couldn't blame some of them for feeling like they did. I mean, golly, you lose everything that you ever worked for in life and have it all taken away. And you being a citizen of this country, to have that sort of thing happen, I don't know how I would have reacted in the same situation. It's quite a thing.

AH: I know that one of the things that the people who were upset with you at Heart Mountain—and I'm not saying the whole camp was because there were three thousand people out there to greet you when you arrived, and there were very enthusiastic responses to most of the talks that you gave—although, after a couple of talks, I think the ardor cooled a little bit because I think there something you said about, "...bombing the rice out of your dishonorable ancestors." (chuckles) Was part of the difference there the fact that you were from Nebraska and had not been brought up, really, in a large Japanese American community like the people—like most of the people at Heart Mountain, many of whom came from Los Angeles and in Los Angeles you have the heartland of the mainland of the Japanese American population? You were not from Mars, of course, but anybody who came from Nebraska or New Mexico was not going to be living around large settlements of Japanese people. Was it a difference in your background, do you think, between those people and yourself?

BK: Yes, I think there was a degree of difference. I don't know how much.

AH: Did you feel at home, or did you feel like you were sort of estranged when you were in the that camp? Here's ten thousand people who had the same general features as you, but that didn't mean that they had the same cultural perceptions or same upbringing.

BK: I'm not exactly sure in that regard, but I have noticed that there's a difference between the Japanese from Southern California as compared to those in the state of Washington. I don't know exactly what it is. They seem a little more clannish here in Southern California—to me, that is. I know that coming from Nebraska there was some difference, but, at the same time, I think I was brought up under the same culture that they were brought up in. I can remember how proud my father always was about Japanese bravery or the Japanese will to fight when they defeated the Russian Army. That's all he ever bragged about. So, I think that would have naturally carried over even in the war against the United States, the Issei would have had some sympathy for their homeland. I think it was probably only natural.

AH: You know, it was ironic that during the times—not so much when you were at Heart Mountain but when you got to Minidoka—some of the news of what you had said

Heart Mountain had spread, like all news did, between those camps. It spread like wildfire.

BK: Sure.

AH: People think the camps were separate, but the grapevine moved information fast. One of the things that you had been quoted as saying was that your father had told you, as soon as Pearl Harbor happened, to join the Army, that that was your place. Actually, a lot of Issei fathers believed that culturally and politically the U.S. was the homeland of their Nisei sons and daughters, and that therefore they should support their country. But, a lot of those people said, Gee whiz. They doubted that your father was Japanese, Now, who would tell his son to go over and bomb our county when we're in this kind of situation?" They said, It must be because Kuroki was brought up in Nebraska because we can't imagine that he would want to bomb Japan. They questioned whether you were fully Japanese or not.

BK: You know, that was another thing, when you're talking about the difference, is the treatment that I got at Minidoka was so much different from that I received at Heart Mountain.

AH: What was the difference mainly?

BK: Well, jiminy, they came out there in a Jeep, decorated a Jeep, they had a band out there, and gave me a big welcome. Those people [in Minidoka] were mainly from the Northwest.

AH: Yes, they were. They were mostly from Seattle and the Northwest region.

BK: Their attitude was almost 100 percent different from the people at Heart Mountain.

AH: So, you felt a sea change in the attitude of the people when you were at Heart Mountain and then went to Minidoka?

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: I mean, you not only went from going from about a five thousand foot high elevation down to sea level, but you felt the difference in their response to you.

[02:20:07]

BK: Well, you know, I still look back to it, and many, many times I think about what a hell of a job those guys did coming out of there and going over in the 442nd and fighting like they did and the record that they established. I sometimes wonder if we're not missing the point. Maybe people have thought a lot about it, but there has to be some kind of major connection there between democracy and the meaning of democracy, because these kids that went over and fought in the 442nd, they were only

one generation removed from Japan. Most of them couldn't even talk to their parents and really communicate with them, probably. But somewhere along the road, after getting kicked in the teeth and losing all their rights and everything and treated like dogs and put into those internment centers, there was still something there that made them go fight for their country. They had to have faith. There had to be something about democracy that they learned when they were kids. It was like me. I think that in the second grade I finally learned what this Pledge of Allegiance was about. And growing up with the kids around Hershey and going hunting and playing basketball, when the war broke out I felt terrible. I mean, I hated being Japanese. But whatever it was, I had the right indoctrination, the right schooling, and whatever democracy had done for me was so deep that there wasn't any doubt in my mind that I was going to go defend the United States against Japan. There had to be something like that in all those kids that came out of those camps, because, man, they got treated badly.

AH: Yes, a lot of them did not go to Japan to fight like you did.

BK: That's right.

AH: I mean, in the sense that they fought mostly in the European Theater.

BK: Well, that's true. I realize that.

AH: Although there were obviously some who were in intelligence that did.

BK: Yes, there was a lot of them in intelligence, and some of them were right up there in the frontline, too.

AH: I think that made a big difference in some ways.

BK: There had to be something. I think we kind of miss the boat sometime in figuring out why it was that they really sacrificed themselves like they did after they got treated so badly. I think that it's a real tribute to democracy. Although only one generation removed, these people were absolutely wild and willing to put down their lives. It's a wonderful chapter, actually, in the history of this country.

AH: When you were at Heart Mountain, the draft resisters baited you a bit, I think, and you responded in kind. Some of them, to this day, nurture certain grievances against you. One thing you were quoted in the paper as saying, "These men are Fascists in my estimation and no good to any country."

BK: (chuckles)

AH: You were very gung-ho at that time, obviously. You re-upped and then you also fought to go up again and go to the Pacific Theater. So, I mean, you had a strong perception about what your role was. And I suspect for the draft resisters it wasn't simply a matter, as their opposition claimed, that they were draft dodgers, but there

was a perception, too, that, if you have citizenship rights, one of the ways to honor it is not necessarily put people behind barbed wire and then draft them out and say this is a wonderful reward.

BK: Yes.

AH: You've probably thought about these things over the years. I know the Japanese American community has wrestled with who to honor and who to dishonor, and they're finally reaching some sort of kinship over this, that were were all in this together and we responded with our various perceptions of Americanism in different ways. Do you feel a bit different now from how you did at the time, or not, towards those people who resisted the draft? Do you still continue to see them as draft dodgers rather than draft resisters, I guess is the question?

BK: Well, I think, in most cases, I can sympathize with their viewpoint. But, in my heart, I know darned sure that not all of them were patriotic, or that they were using the loss of rights as an excuse. There were some of those who were out and out loyal to Japan, not many of them probably, but had they not been interned, I think they would have gone back to Japan. Of course, part of it may be on the basis of the way they were treated. That might be good cause for that, but I know darn well that not all these draft resisters were resisting on the basis of principal. I was even called there to Wyoming when had a trial for those draft dodgers. The government had me there as a witness, but they never called me to testify.

AH: I never knew that. That's a new piece of information. I didn't know that you were called as a witness.

BK: Yes, I was there. I was there in uniform.

AH: You went to the trial?

BK: Yes, I was there at the trial. I was a government witness, but they never called me to testify.

AH: I never knew that. I've never even seen that in the accounts. Now, it's interesting that you mention this difference in the response at Minidoka because one of the things I've read is that when you arrived at Minidoka, unlike the situation at Heart Mountain where you were greeted by three thousand people, there was only a handful of people to greet you, and they were quite worried about that. It seemed this James Sakoda who was there and met you and talked to you—he was working as a sociologist in the camps there and taking things down. He said that he was quite upset that people had been so lacking in their support, and then, as you were there longer, they mobilized more things that happened and you won a lot of people over.

BK: He said that about Minidoka or at Heart Mountain?

AH: At Minidoka. Sakoda wrote that when you first got there, that there was very few people who greeted you at the gate.

BK: Oh, man, he was all wrong in that.

AH: Really?

BK: Oh, sure. I've got pictures and things that show the turnout there. Compared to Heart Mountain, it was tremendous. That's strange. If he had said it about Heart Mountain, I could understand it.

[recording paused]

AH: Well, one of the things was they felt that you were upset at Minidoka with the public relations officer² because he had manipulated your visit into an event that put you into an embarrassing position, that you were promoting so much the idea of the draft that than being able to speak person-to-person to them and that you were a little upset over his manipulations at your expense.

BK: Boy, that's a crock.

AH: Well, I know this stuff is somebody else's perception. I'll read some of this stuff right here. This was written by Sakoda when you just arrived at Minidoka. [It's called] Ben Kuroki's Arrival, and this is the personal views of James Sadoka who was writing this.

I feel very sad as I write this—sad for the bitterness that some people feel and their inability to sympathize with the feeling of others. I don't mind Isseis calling Kuroki all sorts of names, but for some Niseis to do the same thing makes me want to cry.

Arrival: Ben was scheduled to come in through the gate at 10:00 a.m. I went to the Ad Area a little before 10:00 and met [Elmer] Smith, the Community Analyst, and his staff standing around, too. I stood talking to them most of the time, looking around to see what was going on. Some of the Isseis working in the Ad Area were poking their heads out of doors, curious it seemed, to see what was going on. However, most of the people who were standing along the main road leading to the gate were Nisei. From the direction of Block 22, some boys and girls were walking up toward the gates. Some Caucasians were intermingles in the crowd."

A little after 10:00 a.m. a car drove up to the gate, and Sergeant Kuroki stepped out and shook hands with [H.L.] Stafford, who was the camp director, and others. He was dark and smiled wanly. The rest of the time he seemed greatly embarrassed, not knowing what to for with himself. He was placed in a Jeep. The girls crowded around him noticeably, probably to get a good glimpse of him. A small applause went up, and I clapped, too, not because he was a hero or anything, but because he was one of us Nisei. He was just as bewildered as the rest of the Nisei by the treatment the Japanese were receiving. His outlook was different from most of

² Angus A. Acree.

the people in the center, perhaps, but he was risking his life for what he believed to be our cause. The applause was weak, and there was practically no cheering. One Nisei was saying, "Let's take a look at our hero." He also remarked that he was shoved out of the office by his Caucasian supervisor. Some girls were saying, "Gee, he's cute." Another remarked, "He looks sick." The reception was cool. There were only several hundred persons out to greet him, and most of the people only stared at him dumbly. Some Issei hung on the fringes of the crowd, looking on rather disinterestedly. It was little wonder that Sergeant Kuroki looked embarrassed. As the parade moved down the main road, music was furnished by the Boy Scout band and a public address system. The Jeep on which Ben Kuroki rode was followed by passenger cars with Caucasian and evacuee dignitaries sitting in them.

Now, that's kind of interesting because you're both talking about the parade, but obviously you were perceiving it in a somewhat different way.

[02:31:23]

BK: Yes. Well, he's certainly right about my being embarrassed and bewildered, because I wasn't used to that sort of thing, to be put on a Jeep and to have a band playing. (laughs) Well, you know, I just couldn't get used to something like that.

AH: And, in each case, when you came to a WRA camp your immediate sponsor was the Community Council, and then you usually spoke to the Community Council. And you gave a lot of talks! One of things you did, when you were at Minidoka, you did a little interview. One of the questions I highlighted was—this was with young kids—How does it feel to knock an enemy down. You said, "People differ. I never felt proud of it." Then it says, *The girls left from the room, and Kuroki announced the nickname of his first plane was Red Ass. (laughs) They used to call him most honorable son.* It talks a little about the Ginny Simms program, and there was a lot written in here on the Minidoka thing. There's almost nothing about the Topaz one. But then, this was a group of *free thinkers* it says, and Kuroki got together, which is kind of interesting, it says,

*The other evening this guy that they called Whitey went after Ben after 10:00 a.m. and, when we got together. We did not have more than forty-five minutes because Ben said that he had to get back to poker session. I guess you had played poker with some of the guys in the camp. I said that perhaps he got his jolt in Heart Mountain, and he said he was more surprised when he came here than when he went to Heart Mountain. There he had at least received as good welcome and wasn't booed. The administration there was understanding, and he thought the only element there that he didn't like was the Fair Play Committee. When he came to Minidoka he felt that the whole atmosphere was different. It was a lot worse than at Heart Mountain. He met some of the administrative staff, but they seemed to be playing up to him and playing politics. He didn't like the way Acer [Acree]—the public relations officer—acted, for instance. He pointed out that someone booed him in the first meeting, which didn't happen at Heart Mountain."*³ So, I'm kind of wondering if

³ Friday, May 5, 1944

you maybe have your Heart Mountain and Minidoka visits sort of mixed up in your mind because this is sounding a lot like the Heart Mountain thing.

BK: That's unbelievable.

AH: Then it said, *We asked about his hometown, and he said that there were only two Japanese families in Hershey, but that there were about twenty Japanese families within about a radius of fifty miles. He said that they had Nisei gatherings and a Nisei ball team. They got along well with Caucasians and played games with them. During high school, he said, he got along well with Caucasians.* It went on to talk about that.

Now, the next center you went to was to Topaz, which was the most urbanized of all of the WRA camps because most people came from San Francisco. What was your experience, do you recall, at Topaz or are you gun-shy now? (laughs)

BK: It was very quiet at Topaz. Of the three places, I hardly remember anything about it, except that I think that was where I met Mr. Wada, or whoever it was, and that they had quite a successful agricultural program. Is that true?

AH: I believe, so, yes, but I'm really not sure.

BK: I think I was kind of impressed about that, but I don't remember much about any of the appearances there or anything.

AH: Well, you know, it must be kind of a blur for you because of the fact that you went through those three places back-to-back-to-back.

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: So, that you're going from Heart Mountain to Minidoka and then to Topaz, all in the space of a couple of weeks in late April and early May of 1944. Before you went to the three camps, you had gone to Salt Lake City, for a while, and you met with some of the leaders of the Japanese American Citizens League like Saburo Kido, national JACL president, and Larry Tajiri, the editor of the *Pacific Citizen*.

BK: Yes.

AH: Had you joined the JACL that time when you were in North Platte at the meeting or were you still not a JACL member?

NK: I don't think they ever got the chapter started in North Platte because Mike Masaoka got jailed and nothing was done, as I remember it.

AH: So, did you become a JACL member after? One thing I've read recently said that you'd been a long-time JACL member, but then it didn't go on to—

BK: I don't remember where I first joined the JACL, but I know I was with the JACL for a long time.

AH: But, it was probably after the war that you joined?

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: Did you feel that you were coached in any way as to what you should be talking about when you were in these camps, by either the War Department, the Japanese American Citizens League, or the War Relocation Authority? Because those three groups were all—

BK: No, absolutely not. I did not have any instructions from the government, and I don't remember anybody else ever giving me any instructions.

AH: Were you reluctant to do it, or were you anxious to do it when you were asked? I mean, comparing it with a bombing mission. (laughs)

BK: Well, a little of each, I guess. I was still a dirt farmer from Nebraska at that time, and I had not made any major speeches or anything, you know. I wasn't really cut out for something like that.

AH: But, it was probably one of the first times that you ever had—you know, every one of the camp newspapers are just are just covered with these stories dealing with you and then you were going to one event after another and sometimes there were huge crowds at the barracks auditoriums that greeted you. You were certainly, by all accounts, lionized by the kids. Kids just flocked around you. There are lots of photographs showing you signing autographs, and the teenage girls, you know, thought you were cute. And, of course, you were at that point really the first and almost only—because the 442nd, which was going to be developed later on never did develop what you would call individual heroes. At this point, you were one who people were focused on, as a Nisei war hero. Did you feel somewhat overwhelmed by this sudden celebrity? Put into current terms, it was almost like you were a rock star as you went into the three camps. Did you feel embarrassed by your celebrity?

BK: Well, I know I was embarrassed, especially when they brought out the band there at Minidoka, (chuckles) and put me on the back of a Jeep. I don't know. I think I was kind of bewildered, too, about it all. It's been such a long time, you know, I don't remember my exact feelings at the time. It was nice to be accorded the respect that I got. I remember at Heart Mountain they had a bus load of—I don't know whether they were draftees or enlistees—leaving that one morning, and so I went into the bus and wished the guys good luck. And I never quite forgot it, because the response was dead, cold silence.

AH: Oh, really?

BK: Not a soul reacted to say thanks or anything.

AH: You just felt a chill on the bus?

[02:40:00]

BK: Yes. Like, "What's he trying to tell us?" or whatever, you know? I kind of felt like that's what it was, and I remembered it for a long time. The nice thing about the ending of the story is that after the war I got a letter from a young Japanese American living in Chicago. He said he remembered that day that I came to the bus, and he thanked me for encouraging him.

AH: It's funny that he couldn't do it then.

BK: Yes. So, it was kind of nice afterward, but at the time I felt I was stepping way out of bounds, you now, to try to say something to them.

AH: What was your overall feeling, do you think, not about the reaction to you but about the business of the camps that Japanese Americans? I mean, when you went away, did you go away feeling, They're in a safe place. They're in a good place. They have a community that's vital and going, where they have a newspaper and they have these other kinds of different organizations, USO clubs and things like that? Or did you go away feeling, These are concentration camps, really, and this is a horrible thing? I'm wondering, on a balance sheet, what kind of balance did you draw?

BK: Well, I never really drew up a balance sheet, but I think the disturbing thing to me was the way they were treated, you know, to get put in there in the first place when they were citizens. And I kept thinking about these guards and soldiers wearing the same uniform I was wearing. It just is one of those troubling things. I don't know how to explain it. I felt sorry for them. I knew some of them deserved to be in there. I felt that some of them were even having a better life than when they were out in regular civilian life. Overall, you know, it had to be a real disturbing kind of thing. I know it had something to do with my wanting to keep on trying to improve the situation. It was about this time, or a bit later actually, that the first written news came back to the camps about the 442nd people over there. And then, the statements started coming out, Well, then they're not fighting against the Japs, they're fighting against the Italians. I think that had some bearing on why I decided finally to go on over to the Pacific. Of course, you know about the incident after I came back and a guy refused to share a taxi with me, and here I was wearing my uniform and all my ribbons. And then the Ginny Simms thing and all that. I just figured that I could still go out and prove myself a little bit more.

AH: Now the ribbons, not being attuned to military things, I don't appreciate as much as I should they each mean. Now, what is the Distinguished Flying Cross, the DFC? Because you had two of them by the time you came back—was that like on your own particular crew? Did everyone have two?

- BK: Yes, it was pretty much a group thing. The first Distinguished Flying Cross I got was for flying twenty-five missions. I guess if anybody was lucky to live through twenty-five, you deserved a medal. (chuckles)
- AH: So, it's not for a singular act? It was cumulative?
- BK: No, no, that's what I was saying earlier, that I didn't do anything outstanding as far as fighting was concerned.
- AH: And then the second one?
- BK: The second one was for Ploesti. See, Ploesti was actually called a bombing mission at first, but then later, historically, became an official battle. The Battle of Ploesti is what it was instead of just a bombing mission. And then, my second oak leaf cluster to the Distinguished Flying Cross was for flying the mission that I flew in the South Pacific in B-29s.
- AH: Okay, so this came later.
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Now, when you were here in the U.S. in 1944, even before you visited Heart Mountain, Minidoka, and Topaz, you were already trying to get yourself qualified to be able to go fight in the Pacific Theater? Because some of the things that you were saying in your speeches at the camps were that you were going toward—or had you already heard word that you were cleared for duty in the Pacific?
- BK: No, I had applied for it when I was in Colorado, and I had gotten word that I couldn't go because of my nationality.
- AH: Well, I've seen two things on that. Number one, it is said that they weren't taking people of Japanese ancestry to fight in the Pacific Theater. But, I've also seen it, even from you, is what the regulation was saying was that you couldn't fly B-29s.
- BK: Oh, yes, there's a lot of difference there. The first point is entirely wrong because they had all these people in military intelligence fighting over there in the Pacific Theater, so it couldn't possibly be right there.
- AH: So, it was flying B-29s that they [Nisei] weren't allowed to do.
- BK: In the Air Force, as I understand the thing from the information that I got, General Hap Arnold was definitely against Japanese Americans, and he was responsible for getting that war department regulation. He didn't want any Japanese Americans flying in combat.

AH: Okay, but then you were able to put on the pressure through Deutsch and these other influential people, so that you could participate in combat flight in the Pacific Theater?

BK: Yes, also I got as many of my friends as I possibly could, and one of them was a Congressman who later became a U.S. Senator, Carl Curtis from Nebraska. He telegraphed General Marshall immediately and got some action from his department. So, I had a group of people, but I think the key was Deutsch and Ray Lyman Wilbur and other people from the Commonwealth Club.

AH: So, you actually left the United States for this next tour when? Was it still in 1944?

BK: It had to be in 1944. That was sure interesting, too. Even after the letter came through that I could be on the crew, when we got ready to leave the United States—we left from our base in Harvard, Nebraska to Kearney, Nebraska, and the Military Intelligence people came up and told my pilot that they couldn't take me.

AH: Oh, gee.

BK: So, I had to find my barracks bag—which was buried in the plane because we were all getting ready to go overseas—and I had to dig this letter out, this very same letter that I showed you today. And they showed it to military intelligence, and they said, Well, okay. Then we got over here in California for our next stop; the same thing happened here. The military intelligence came out and said “You can't go. Kuroki can't go with the crew.” Again, I had to get the letter out. (laughs) That's why I say that that document is really close to my heart. (chuckles)

AH: Is there any relationship about your daughters going to Santa Barbara and then Deutsch?

BK: No. Absolutely none.

AH: That was just a happenstance then. I was wondering—

BK: I just happened to hear about Deutsch being in Santa Barbara a little too late.

AH: You know, Ralph Martin's biography, *The Boy from Nebraska*, came out in 1946. It doesn't talk about your Pacific missions to nearly the same extent that it talks about your European ones.

BK: Yes, I've regretted that since, and I've thought about it several times, why he didn't dwell more on those later missions.

AH: He just simply mentioned the place: “Tokyo, Tokyo, Tokyo.”

BK: Well, he didn't dwell on it perhaps because that was one hell of an experience. Gee.

AH: Well, I need to hear a little more about it, because I couldn't find any other sources to any great extent. I know some of the places involved Osaka, Kobe, Tokyo, and Yokahama, but I don't understand [the big picture]. Maybe we'll hold this off until after lunch, but first of all, I'd like to hear about the B-29s, what they meant at that particular time and then actually the missions in Japan, what they meant to you as an individual, but then what was involved in the Pacific Theater at that time for you and your crew. We'll talk about that after lunch. [recording paused]

Well, we had a nice lunch here and walked our way into Ojai and back, and we're going to talk a bit about your missions over in Asia with B-29s. So, you're moving from these Liberator 24s to B-29s and you're moving from the Atlantic to the Pacific Theater, so why don't you talk to me a little about that. We've gotten past the hurdles of you having to show that letter several times to verify that you were indeed authorized to do this. And then where did you go initially?

[02:50:56]

BK: Well, we landed on Tinian, which is in the Mariana Islands, right next to Saipan.

AH: Which group were you with, incidentally?

BK: I was in the 505th Bomb Group. 5 The Island of Tinian, like Saipan, had just been captured by the U.S. Marines, say, two or three months earlier, or maybe a little earlier than that, I don't know. But, the thing was that there were still enemy stragglers that were hiding out in the caves and that sort of thing, and that's what made the first ten days to two weeks just pure hell for me. Because for everybody in my outfit, it was the first time overseas for them, you know. They were what you'd call trigger-happy. (chuckles) At night they had some native animals around there, like pigs and cattle, and they'd come rustling through the cane fields. And those carbines would open up, just bullets flying all over the place. (chuckles) So, I was terrified. If I had to go to the latrine at night, I wasn't about to go because I was afraid someone would shoot first and then ask questions. I know I looked like the enemy and they had all the stories about how they had come into camp and the like. So I have always contended that I should have gotten the Purple Heart for bladder damage (laughs) because I couldn't go to the latrine. I could go to the latrine at night, and, boy, there were several mornings there I could have died by the time I was waiting for that sun to come up so it'd get daylight. (chuckles) It may sound funny, but actually I felt a hell of a lot safer when I was on a bombing mission inside that B-29. (chuckles)

AH: It's kind of ironic now that we've talked about these two times you were training these gunners and stuff like this and the pilots were landing so erratically so your biggest fear during the war was on the ground. (laughs)

BK: (laughs) Yes. It would be funny, too, when we'd come back from our missions. They had some natives that were hired by the government, I guess, to clean up things around there. They would all stare at me, and they'd start jabbering, wondering what

I was doing there, you know? (chuckles) Anyway, it didn't last that long, but for about ten days to two weeks, boy, it was tough.

Anyway, B-29s, they were just like Cadillacs. They were all pressurized inside, so it was just practically air-conditioned. There was no more of that getting cold or freezing to death or anything, so it was really nice as far as flying is concerned. The enemy was very mild. They were tame compared to the Germans. Boy, the Germans, they were tough. I mean, they threw up anti-aircraft stuff that was just unbelievable, you know? That anti-aircraft stuff would explode, and that black smoke, it was so black and thick at times you just felt you could get out and walk on it over there in Europe. But, it was pretty mild in Japan by comparison. Then a lot of the time, we flew night missions, anyway.

I think about the only thing that I really kind of felt bad about when I was flying those missions over Japan, and especially on those night missions, was that we fire-bombed Tokyo and some of those big cities. I was in the tail turret. We'd leave the target, and I think for at least an hour-and-a half to two hours I could see the red ball of flames, you know, just figuring that there were a lot of children and women getting killed in there. It was almost impossible for them to extinguish those incendiary bombs. They're made to burn things. Otherwise, there's not a whole lot more to say. I don't know what you're interested in?

AH: Well, what about, apart from your feelings about women and children being killed, the fact that they were Japanese women and children? You had spoken rhetoric that might have been somewhat flippant about bombing the rice out of your dishonorable ancestors, but when push comes to shove, when you were actually there in Japan on a bombing mission, there had to be more to it than just rhetoric. What was the reality like for you?

BK: Well, actually that's one thing—I think it would have been different if I had been in the infantry and had hand-to-hand combat against Japanese soldiers. But, when you're in a bomber, and you're up there twenty-thousand feet and you're just part of the mission, you don't have that face-to-face or hand-to-hand combat. I just felt like any other American, I think. Like when we were in England, our bombardier was of German extraction, and he was dropping the bombs on those people over there. So, you know, once you're an American, why, it didn't really matter to me that way. They were the enemy, and I was flying with my crew to bring them back.

AH: Were there any perilous missions over there that were equivalent to the Battle of Ploesti?

BK: No, one time our engineer had trouble with transferring the fuel from the wing tanks, and we were not, according to the estimates, going to be able to make it back to base. Of course, when you're flying over there in the Pacific, it's all ocean. (chuckles) I mean, you don't have anywhere to go. So, the captain ordered us to lighten the load as much as possible on the plane so it could go as far as it could. So, we fired all the ammunition out of our guns, and we chopped the radar set—the very expensive radar set—and threw it overboard. We just threw everything we could out of the plane.

(chuckles) Finally, the engineer got the fuel to transfer, so we made it back. I think our pilot caught hell after that for throwing out the radar set an all. (chuckles)

AH: Well, of course, at the time it seemed necessary.

BK: Sure, at that time.

AH: Did you ever have nightmares that somehow or other you would be shot down and you would be in Japan with a Japanese face?

BK: Well, I didn't have any nightmares, but I certainly talked about it a lot with my crew members. Mostly it was on the lighter side. They used to kid me because back at the base they would say, "You'd better stick close to me or you're going to get shot by some of these trigger-happy guys." And so, I'd just come back and say, "Yeah, but when we get on the mission and we get shot down, you better stay close to me (laughs) because I'll bring you rice and fish heads." We just kind of joked about it. But, I don't know. I have talked with my brother-in-law a couple times, and, if I had gotten shot down over there, I might have been treated quite badly. I'm not sure about that, but fortunately, I didn't have to go through that experience. (chuckles)

AH: Tell me a little about the B-29. You told me about the B-24. Not only the relative difference in size, but also the different gunners stations and things on a B-29, are they pretty much the same for the B-29 or are they different?

BK: Oh, it's pretty much the same. The only this is, like I say, the whole plane is pressurized, and so you don't have any problem with it. In fact, they had heat and all that. It was like air-conditioned. I flew as a tail gunner all the time when I was in the B-29.

[03:00:00]

AH: You were saying that on the B-24, once in a while they would have a gunner underneath the plane.

BK: Yes, they had a belly gunner under some of the B-24s.

AH: On the B-29s, as a matter of course, did they have belly gunners, or not?

BK: Boy, you know, it's been so long ago, I thinking they did have one belly gunner under the B-29s. Maybe. I don't remember, now, for sure.

AH: They said something about the Sad Sake or something like that. Wasn't that the name you gave to you bomber?

BK: Yes. They were struggling for a name on the plane. Everybody had a name on their plane, and so I came up with the suggestion, "Well, how about The Honorable Sad

- Sake?” This was a takeoff on the Sad Sack in the Army, and then the *sake* was the Japanese drink. They said, Great! So, they called it The Honorable Sad Sake.
- AH: Okay, and did that crew stay together pretty much during that whole twenty-eight flights that you—
- BK: Yes, we stayed together. All of us flew together. I told you earlier about the pilot Jim Jenkins who ended up back in Michigan and became my accountant for our newspaper there.
- AH: Was the bonding between the group in the European mission and that with the group in the Asian mission any different? I mean, when you reflect on it, was one stronger against the other, or not?
- BK: Well, you know, on every crew, the individuals are different.
- AH: But, when you think back upon it nowadays, when you think of the crew, do you tend to think of the European crew or the Pacific crew?
- BK: I felt a little closer to the European crew because that was when combat was the toughest. I mean, with the enemy shelling or shooting and all that. It was a much tougher situation there, and I felt a lot closer to the men there because of what we went through.
- AH: So, it was just that the degree of danger was greater, and consequently, the bombing was greater.
- BK: That had a lot to do with it.
- AH: What finally ended you—because you again extended beyond the twenty-five flights. You did twenty-eight when you were over in Asia. What accounts for the additional three? How’d you happen to do those? Am I right in that?
- BK: Well, the missions were easier, I think, in the Pacific, and the quota there was thirty-six missions.
- AH: Oh, so you didn’t finish the quota there?
- BK: No, I didn’t finish the quota there.
- AH: Because the war ended?
- BK: The war ended, yes.
- AH: So, you were still flying when the war ended?

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: Where were you when the Hiroshima and the Nagasaki atomic bombings took place, the A-bomb, in August of 1945?

BK: Well, the bombings came from a plane in our outfit, but we weren't on the mission. So, the thing ended, and, boy everything was over right now.

AH: So, you knew some of the people who were involved in the A-bomb missions?

BK: I didn't know them personally, but they were from the same outfit. Even back in Nebraska, they were trained kind of separately. We knew they were having some special mission; we didn't know what it was about.

AH: I've read about your reaction to Pearl Harbor, but I haven't read about your reaction to Hiroshima, and I'm wondering now what it was. Do you recall?

BK: Well, it was a terrible thing to see all that many people get killed. I don't know. It's one of those debatable things. They claim that it shortened the war, that they didn't have to invade and lose a lot of lives. There's probably some truth to that. There's arguments on the other side saying that Japan had already made overtures to surrender. And sometimes it seems like the truth is a little bit difficult to arrive at in this situation.

AH: But, your situation was really unique, in that here, you know, this was a wonderful victory. I mean, that's the *coup de grace*. You end the war, and the calculations about body counts and the like come after the fact by historians and political people come. But, at the time, the war was over. Yet, at the same time the lives of many people of Japanese ancestry were also over. So, I'm wondering if you were disoriented—excuse the figure of speech—how you felt as a result of this whole event?

BK: Well, I don't know how to explain that. But you know what happened when the war ended and everybody was starting to fly home? The officers were all flying home—(chuckles)—and I got bumped and I had to come home on an old liberty ship that took twenty-one days to get from Tinian and Saipan to San Francisco. And the amazing thing of it was that the War Department had been trying to track me down for weeks. I was scheduled to appear on the "New York Herald Tribune Forum" with General Marshall and all the other big generals.⁴

AH: And Harold Stassen, as I recall.

BK: Yes. I finally landed and got headed toward my barrack, and I didn't even get to put my barracks bag down. They were calling me to report immediately, they put me on

⁴ General Claire Chennault and General Jonathan Wainwright.

- an Army transport plane, and I headed for New York. (chuckles) Once I landed there, they rushed me to the Waldorf Astoria Hotel.
- AH: Hold you point because I'm going to [turn the tape over]. [recording paused] So, they rushed you to the Waldorf-Astoria and the war department had been trying to get a hold of you this whole twenty-one days or so that you were out.
- BK: Besides that, I hadn't been paid in three months, all that time coming back, and I had a nickel in my pocket, and I was wearing the same uniform for twenty-one days on the boat. It looked like it would stand up straight by itself. (chuckles)
- AH: So, you were that grungy when you went to the Waldorf, huh?
- BK: Yes. In fact, before I went to the Waldorf, just before they put me on the plane, I asked them if I could send a telegram. So, I sent a telegram to my brother George in Hershey and asked him to send me \$100 to the Waldorf because I didn't have any money. (chuckles) Anyway, I got to the Waldorf, and I only had a nickel in my pocket. And I had to apologize to the bellhop. (chuckles) I told him I only had a nickel, and I hadn't been paid for three months, so I couldn't tip him. He understood. Then I immediately had my one uniform sent down to be cleaned right away and got squared away.
- AH: How much time did you have before you had to get on that forum after you got there?
- BK: I think it was about a day-and-a-half to two days, at the most.
- AH: I haven't seen anything about the content of the forum, just that the participants were distinguished people.
- BK: Oh, yes.
- AH: But, what was the subject of the forum? Weren't Marshall Wainwright and Statum on it?
- BK: I think it was mainly about the war and what needed to be done after the war.
- AH: What was your role on the forum? What did you have to do?
- BK: Well, I just told my simple story again. Once again, I didn't write the speech. They had Millard Lampell, with whom I was acquainted and he was with Air Force public relations in Washington, D.C., and he wrote my speech. He did a terrific job. As you probably know, it was reprinted in *Reader's Digest*.⁵
- AH: On those speeches that were written for you, did you get a chance to look at them?

⁵ "The War Isn't Over at Home," *Reader's Digest*, January 1946.

BK: Oh, sure.

AH: So, I mean, you went over the speech, and if there was something that you didn't care for you ask to have it changed?

BK: Oh, yes. There was no problem with that. The one thing that I remember most about that evening was that they seated me right next to General Wainwright. He was the fall guy for MacArthur, and he'd been in Japanese prisons the whole damn war. I was terribly uncomfortable because he kept staring up and down at me. And I was greatly relieved because, after I delivered my speech, he came over and shook my hand real warmly and just made me feel real good. Because after all, I knew that he wasn't been treated very nicely in the prisons all those years.

AH: So, the forum consisted in really not an exchange of opinions so much as a series of talks that each person on the panel gave about the war?

BK: Different things, yes, and whatever. I was too nervous to even remember what any of the others said. (chuckles)

AH: There wasn't a period for questions from the audience or anything, right?

BK: Oh, no, no.

AH: This was on a radio? Did they beam the forum or was this before a live audience?

BK: I think there was just a live audience. The newspaper had done all of the writing up of the individual stories.

[03:10:00]

AH: Now, during the time that you were on the Asian missions, were you starting to be featured in publicity things because I know it had happened when you came back from the European Theater? When you came back the Ginny Simms radio program and the Commonwealth Club appearance and everything because this was an even more newsworthy event, in a sense, for here was somebody of Japanese ancestry and this was the time when the PR started to really come on for 442nd and the heroics of that group. They didn't talk about the [Japanese American] interpreters were doing out in the Pacific so that was a hush-hush thing, so you were really, in a way, the whole Japanese American Pacific show. Did you get some publicity that you heard of?

BK: Well, there was some in the *Stars and Stripes*, and there was another military magazine over there, I remember, that came and did a story. Norman Corwin, the radio man, was trying to interview me, and we couldn't make connections. But otherwise, you know, there was nothing said publicity-wise that I can remember.

- AH: Now, I know that the biography that was done of you was by a person who had a *Stars and Stripes* background. Is that how you met him?
- BK: No. After my speech in New York that was done by Millard Lampell, I asked Millard if he wanted to write my biography. He said he couldn't do it or something—he made some excuses—but he added, "I'll find somebody to recommend." So then, he recommended Ralph Martin. We got together, and I think Ralph did a good story. Ralph has had a great deal of success since then. He's had two or three best-sellers, *Duchess of Windsor*—he's done several. I can't think of them all right offhand now.
- AH: So, you actually had approached somebody about writing your biography?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: What was your motive at that time?
- BK: Just to tell my story, because I thought I had had a most unusual experience. In fact, after I had made my Commonwealth Club appearance, Sergeant Bob Evans, who wrote that speech for me, wanted to do a book on me then. I told him that, "Well, I was going to go to the Pacific, and I thought I'd have a better story to tell after I'd been there."
- AH: As it turned out, like we discussed earlier, the Pacific part of your wartime story didn't get emphasized very much in your story. (chuckles)
- BK: No, it did not, but it's okay.
- AH: How much after the end of the war was it when you were there in New York and on this forum? What are we talking about? Very shortly after the Armistice and the war ended?
- BK: You mean, how much time was I spending in New York?
- AH: Now, how much after the war was officially over, after Japan had surrendered, were you in New York at the Waldorf Astoria?
- BK: I think they had already surrendered.
- AH: By the time you were there?
- BK: It had to be because I was coming home, and it's twenty-one days.
- AH: What I'm trying to figure out is how much after was this? Very shortly you mean?
- AH: Okay, so the mood in New York was still celebratory about the end of the war?

- BK: I think so, yes, and all these generals were on this forum, and they were talking about future prospects, I think.
- AH: Now, you must have been anxious to get home by this time, to just settle into normalcy, weren't you?
- BK: Well, I know I was really relieved that I had made it. I think that's because, unlike a lot of the fellows that went to war, I had, you know, two battles [to fight] all the way. And to have survived without—because there were so many of them lost. You know, just last spring, in the March or April issue of the *National Geographic*, they had a piece on the 8th Air Force in Europe, a nice article, and they said that twenty thousand U.S. airmen had been killed in Europe over European targets. And, boy, I'll tell you, when you see the statistics, I don't know how I made it. I really don't know how I made it and how I was so lucky that I could be in several good spots afterwards where I could do a lot of good for the Japanese American cause. I guess I have to really be grateful and thankful.
- AH: Thankful you weren't a statistic. Please tell me about your homecoming that time. You've already told me about when you came back from Europe and you went and stopped in Omaha and delivered some news of a very sad, tragic nature and then you're coming home to see your parents and your older brother. What about this time? Because this time you were coming home for good?
- BK: Well, I didn't know what I wanted to do, you know. I think I was like a lot of veterans, just wanted to kind of knock around for a while. I ended up in New York. Of course, I appeared on some other programs. What was that national radio show that—(chuckles)—I can't remember the name now.
- AH: "Town Meeting of the Air?"
- BK: Yes. I was on that and several other pretty good programs. So, Pearl Buck heard me, or read about me, and she had this East-West Association in New York and wanted to know if I would sign up and go on a speaking tour for her. So, I agreed to do that, and I did it for two or three months, I think. But, it wasn't very much, mostly with Kiwanis Clubs and schools and things like that.
- AH: Were you paid to do that then?
- BK: Yes, but not much, you know, just barely covered expenses.
- AH: Did somebody write those talks for you?
- BK: No, by that time I was just repeating what I had said, (chuckles) so it wasn't any problem there.
- AH: And you went all across the United States doing that?

BK: Mainly in the eastern part of the country. And then, I was getting involved some with Mike Masaoka and the national JACL. He was taking me around quite a bit on some of the trips to try to get the chapters organized and all that sort of thing. He was located in Salt Lake City for the national headquarters, and it was there I met my wife-to-be.

AH: At the national headquarters?

BK: In Salt Lake City.

AH: I was kind of wondering about something when you said at lunch today that your wife had started college at Idaho State, while it was still a two-year school—and then transferred to Utah. Did she go to Utah at the same time Mike Masaoka was there?

BK: No, I don't think he was a student anymore. This was after the war. But she was attending the University of Utah and rooming with Mike and his wife. She was staying at their house while she went to the university.

AH: Oh, so she didn't go to school before the war at the University of Utah, she went after the war?

BK: Probably, yes. Anyway, she went from Idaho State to Utah, and it was her third year, so she still had a year to go. That's when I met her and talked her into giving up college and marrying me. (laughs)

AH: That was a whirlwind courtship, wasn't it?

BK: Oh, it sure was.

AH: Because you got back to the U.S. probably fairly late in 1945, and you were married in 1946.

BK: It sure was. Like I told you earlier, her family was very strong on education, and so at that time I decided to enroll in the University of Nebraska and get into journalism. And the reason for that was that my friend Cal Stewart, he was a public relations officer in my bomb group in Europe, in the 93rd Bomb group, and we became close friends over there because he did stories on me. So, when I got back from the war, he was in the weekly newspaper business at O'Neill, Nebraska, which was about an hour-and-a-half's drive from where I lived in Hershey.

[03:20:06]

AH: Which direction from Hershey?

BK: Oh, It is kind of up in the sand hill areas, more towards the northeast. So, I went over to visit Cal and looked at his weekly operation and I said, "Cal, this looks like fun."

So, that's what I did. I decided to enroll at the University of Nebraska and major in journalism, and I finished in three years because I went during the summer and was all just gung-ho.

AH: Yeah, at first I wasn't sure if you had graduated because what they sent back said he me when I asked them about your student years there said, *He attended between so and so and so and so*, and I thought, Well, maybe he dropped out prior to graduating.

BK: I'll bet you they thought, because I was only there three years, I didn't finish.

AH: But then, I found other sources that said that you had graduated from the University of Utah. But, it's interesting, your minors were fascinating too. You had political science, English literature, and philosophy. And I was thinking, Here's a farm boy from Hershey, Nebraska, and then he comes back here and not only has a surprise major in journalism but in these other fields. How did that work out for you?

BK: Well, I had to take a certain amount of required courses, and that's probably where the philosophy came in.

AH: Did you enjoy your three years there at the university in journalism?

BK: Oh, it was great. One of the things that happened was that Kirkpatrick, who was on my B-29 crew in the Pacific, was also enrolled at the same time, and he was married and he already had three kids. (chuckles)

AH: Oh, really?

BK: So, we had two of them while we were there. Both of them were born in Lincoln while I was in school. So, we got along famously with the Kirkpatricks.

AH: So, you had a buddy? You each knew what the other had gone through, right?

BK: Oh, yes. And we'd gone through the war. I still remember when my wife had the first baby, why (chuckles) Kirkpatrick's wife went with me on the bus to see her. People on the bus were all staring at me like, you know—(chuckles). It was kind of unusual for them to see an Oriental, I guess, going with a Caucasian woman, and we were riding on the same bus.

AH: In Lincoln, which is a college town, and probably more cosmopolitan than most towns in Nebraska, were there quite a few Japanese Americans living in the town or going to the school?

BK: No, I don't think so, not very many. They've been sending me stuff—they already had it last week, a big reunion of people who came out of camps and went there. The university accepted these students early on.

AH: From the camps?

BK: Yes, the University of Nebraska was one of the few colleges that really extended themselves. They wanted me to come back to the reunion. But, I told them I didn't feel that I was—you know? I wasn't interned. I was a native Nebraskan, so I didn't really fit into the picture.

AH: Was there a Japanesetown in Lincoln, or not?

BK: No, absolutely not.

AH: So, if you were to go to a restaurant, it likely would be a Chinese chop suey place or something?

BK: Oh, yes, it'd be Chinese. I don't remember, I don't think there was even a Japanese restaurant in town. But, there were a few students from the internment camps in there, and according to the figures that I had, it looked like maybe twenty students. But, when I was on the campus, I didn't know anyone personally.

AH: Now, you certainly earned your G.I. Bill, didn't you? (chuckles)

BK: Oh, as I've said, that's the best thing that came out of World War II. That was a wonderful thing, and I'm real pleased that I had a wife that made me go to college and the G.I. Bill was there to help us through. Golly.

AH: She later finished school, didn't she?

BK: Yes, it was just this year.

AH: So, when she graduated from Northridge, this was it, right? (phone rings)

BK: Yes.

[recording paused]

AH: When you were going to Nebraska, your wife was working somewhere in Lincoln?

BK: Oh, no, she wasn't working. We'd had the first baby, and so she was home during that time.

AH: So, the G.I. Bill was paying for not only your tuition and books but also for family support.

BK: Well, I was working part-time, too, at the university's public relations office. And also, I was taking whatever jobs I could, and I worked out in the railroad yards unloading plywood out of the freight cars. (chuckles) So, I had a good experience.

- AH: I was going to ask you if you had any continuing celebrity from your wartime activities, (chuckles) but, if you were working in a lumberyard, probably not, right?
- BK: We were getting some real small piece of royalty from the book, but we used to spend those on our vacations.
- AH: Well, that book was published in 1946, and you didn't start at the university until 1947.
- BK: That's right.
- AH: So, tell me a little bit more than you have already about your collaboration with Ralph Martin. Where did the book get written? Was he with you for quite a while? Or was this through communication, or what was the arrangement?
- BK: Well, Ralph definitely came out to Hershey, for one thing, so he could get the feel of the community and talk to my sister and others who were there.
- AH: It sounds at the beginning of the book like he was there while you were giving a talk at the high school.
- BK: I don't remember talking at the high school, but I remember we went to an American Legion meeting. (chuckles) There was some discussion about how they were going to buy a monument or something for veterans, and some guys made a racial remark about, "Oh, that's probably those goddamn Jews." (chuckles) They were talking about the price of the monument or whatever it was. And, of course, Ralph Martin is Jewish.
- AH: Oh, really? And he was right there with you at the meeting?
- BK: Yes, he was there at the meeting. (chuckles) He wrote a stinging article about it in the *New Republic*. The American Legion got a hold of it, and they were going to take the character away from poor old Hershey's American Legion. So, my friends in the Legion asked me, "Can't you get him off our back," you know? I said, "Well, it's too damn bad that you guys—it's your own fault." (chuckles)
- AH: Did you and Ralph Martin get to be pretty close during the time that he was writing your biography?
- BK: Oh, yes. We spent quite a bit of time together. I had some notes that I gave him. He apparently didn't pay too much attention to them because most of them were notes I took in the Pacific. (chuckles)
- AH: One of the things he says at the beginning of the book that I found interesting, is he acknowledges your very fine memory. He also talks about how you had kept a meticulous diary during the time that you were in the Asia.

BK: Yes.

AH: I was wondering about a couple of things in that connection. Number one, did you keep a diary before you got to Asia? And if so, do you still have that? And if not, why did you start keeping it in Asia and not while you were in Europe?

BK: I didn't maintain any diary from Europe, and I don't know why I got started with one in the Pacific. Maybe it was because Sergeant Evans wanted to do the book on me there on what I had done, and maybe I got to thinking that, well, maybe I'd better keep some notes if I get on the Pacific.

AH: And this diary, obviously, Ralph Martin had access to.

BK: Oh, yes, I gave him everything.

AH: What's happened to that diary?

BK: Oh, I never kept it. I just threw it all out. (chuckles)

AH: Oh, so it doesn't exist now?

BK: No, no.

AH: Did you just keep it during the time you were in the military? You didn't continue a diary in the postwar years, did you?

BK: Oh, no, it just covered when I was in the Pacific.

AH: And were they cryptic kind of entries, just short things?

BK: Yes, I was trying to put down my feelings about combat in the Pacific. Like I said, they must not have been very good. Martin didn't use any of them. (chuckles)

AH: It's too bad you discarded it.

BK: It was too cumbersome. You should have seen all the letters that I got from the Reader's Digest, after the New York appearances—I had almost three hundred real nice letters. I kept them for years and finally decided this is getting too cumbersome to keep carrying them around.

[03:30:00]

AH: Now, if there had been a Japanese American National Museum at that time, there would have been a place to deposit them.

BK: Yes, that would have been great.

AH: So, you got rid of all those letters, too?

BK: I threw all those out, too. (chuckles)

AH: So, over the years, you've made some choices as to prune out and what to keep. What do you think the residual material represents? It's like when people went to camp, they had to make decisions of, What can we carry and what things have to go? You know, when there's a fire in your home, you keep certain things and what's the residual [material] constitute?

BK: Well, for one thing, you know, before I even knew that there was going to be a National Japanese American Museum, the people at the Japanese American Historical Society in San Francisco contacted me and paid for my plane fare to come up and do a live videotape for them. At that time, I thought they were the only group around, and so I gave them as awful lot of my stuff. I gave them my medals, I gave them my uniform, and all the papers that I felt were really important.

AH: What kind of papers did you give them?

BK: Well, it was copies of Secretary Stimson's letter to Monroe Deutsch.

AH: You didn't give the original in some cases, you gave copies?

BK: Yes. I even made a pretty good donation to them. I gave them a lifetime donation. So, that's where the important stuff went.

AH: I think that's a good place to put them.

BK: Oh, yes, I'm satisfied. And then, this new one comes up. I personally feel like they're competing against each other.

AH: Well, I hope it turns out that the mission of each of them is different. One of them is keeping more papers and the other one is keeping artifacts that can be displayed. There is a big difference between their missions, I think, but it takes a little while to get them articulated. They'll get their lines of communication.

BK: But, I have a small scrapbook of pictures, and it's been ripped up so much. People have taken pictures out of it that they wanted, and so I haven't done much anymore. But, I did prepare an extensive photo album on my appearance in Lincoln, Nebraska, for the Nebraska State Historical Society, and I have several things in there that I would like to show you.

AH: I'd like to see them. Now, let me ask you this, you finished your college education at the University of Nebraska and already the biography by Ralph Martin was out. The biography must have netted you some notoriety as a result of it?

BK: Yes.

AH: I even kind of have a feeling that that at one point when I was younger I read that biography. I mean, the story was just so familiar when I read it recently that I thought, Could I, when I was in school, have picked this this thing up and read it?

BK: It's possible.

AH: The library copy that I have now was purchased not too long after Cal State Fullerton got started in 1959. It was called Orange State Teacher's College, and it's a first edition of the book. Clearly, it used to be checked out a lot by our students. In recent years, it hasn't been checked out so much.

BK: I'll be able to give you a copy of the book probably sometime before next year. What's happening now is that we're having a family reunion in Lake Tahoe in 1995, next year, and those who are in charge asked me if it would be all right to copy the book and give it to members of the family that want it because you can't buy it anymore.

AH: It must have been out of print for years, hasn't it?

BK: The strange thing was the Ventura Library had a copy, and it was so worn-out that they were starting to lose it. So, the head librarian asked me for permission to reprint it, and I said, "Well, it's fine with me, but you better check with Ralph Martin, too." So, she did. She got his okay, they've reprinted it, and they have a copy for the library. So, I told this fellow in charge of the family reunion, "I'll contact Ralph Martin again, and we'll have some more copies printed up." So, I'll be able to get you one then.

AH: Great. So, it did get reprinted then, but many years later?

NK: Oh, yes.

AH: But, as you mentioned earlier, at the time it was published in 1946, enough copies were sold to give you some royalty payment, right?

BK: They were very small. (chuckles) But, the book has done a lot of good, I think, and my family has really appreciated it.

AH: Did Ralph Martin stay in touch with you over the years?

BK: Oh, yes, he called me from San Francisco just last year. Every time he comes around, he gives me a call.

AH: Does he give you copies of his newest books?

- BK: No. (chuckles) He doesn't do that, but what I've enjoyed is that in the cover of each of his new books, he always lists all the books that he's written. *Boy from Nebraska* is the first one on the list. That was his first book.
- BK: He was very young at that time.
- BK: Oh, yes.
- AH: In fact, I think he was younger than you were when he wrote the book.
- BK: Yes.
- AH: So, you were really two kids together at that point.
- BK: Oh, sure.
- AH: Did you make any publicity stops with respect to that book? Or was that part of that tour that you took with—
- BK: Yes, part of it. I made an appearance at the Boston Book Fair and a couple other places, but it wasn't much.
- AH: It was published by Harper Brothers, a very big publishing house.
- BK: I'd even forgotten that. I can't remember anything anymore.
- AH: See this book here?
- BK: So, you've got a copy? Oh, this is a library book?
- AH: This is the library copy from Cal State Fullerton that I was telling you about.
- BK: Oh, I see.
- AH: You know, it was put in the university library when the school was called Orange County State College. I see from the library slip that it was first checked out in 1966, which is when I arrived at Cal State Fullerton. (chuckles) I got a kick out of that.
- BK: There are still some copies available. You know, there are these book companies that do searches or whatever.
- AH: Yes, sure, book search services.
- BK: For extinct books or whatever they call them. (chuckles) My niece down in L.A was trying to get copies of the book for her kids, and she was able to get three of them.

- She paid about \$50 for each one of them, though. She was told that the reason for the high cost was that Bill Mauldin wrote the foreword to it.
- AH: Well, that's kind of an interesting foreword, too.
- BK: Oh, it's a terrific foreword.
- AH: Did you ever meet Bill Mauldin?
- BK: Yes, I met him, but only once.
- AH: In connection with the book?
- BK: Yes, and I thanked him, of course, for his foreword, but I thought that was a terrific piece that he did.
- AH: I think so, too. But, it was a nice linkage, wasn't it?
- BK: Yes.
- AH: Ralph Martin's first book and maybe your last. (laughs)
- BK: I'm sure of that.
- AH: When you arrived at the University of Nebraska in 1947, was the word out that you were this war hero and that there was this book about you and everything?
- BK: Yes, Chancellor _____ (inaudible) gave me a special welcome, and he and I were put on the front pages of the University of Nebraska alumni book. And Ken Keller, the assistant in the public relations office, was Governor Dwight Griswold's secretary. I had gone especially to see Governor Griswold because of his stand on behalf of Japanese Americans. So, there was a lot of continuation there of good things that had gone on.
- AH: So, this feeling in December of '91, when you went back to make this nice presentation and were really touched by Nebraska's response to you, it's pretty deep, your feelings toward Nebraska?
- [03:40:00]
- BK: Oh, yes. The pinnacle or the best thing that happened to me out of the whole war is my state making me special guest for that occasion. I think it's really worked both ways. If I show you the letter from the director—his name is James Hanson, too.
- AH: Oh, really? (chuckles)

BK: With an o-n, though.

AH: At the historical society?

BK: Yes, that was a tremendous experience.

AH: Unfortunately, or fortunately, life goes on, and it was going on for you from 1947 to '50, in the classroom and outside of the classroom trying to cobble together a living and keep your family going. You had one child already before you got out of college, right?

BK: Right. Two. (chuckles)

AH: Okay, so by 1950, you had kids and you needed a job. I don't think you even stayed around for your graduation, because you were off to accept this position of a weekly paper in York, Nebraska.

BK: I never got my diploma. It was mailed to me. I gave them \$3, I think it was, and they mailed it to me.

AH: And that was an experience I'd like you to talk about because the first edition of that paper you purchased, instead of being eight pages long, turned out to be forty pages long.

BK: That's right.

AH: How did that come about, that these people all chipped in and got this advertising for you and everything?

BK: Well, the key person there again Cal Stewart, who was my friend that had weekly newspaper up in O'Neill. And also _____ (inaudible), who was publisher of the paper in the town next to him called Neligh, Nebraska. They were the two that spearheaded the thing and got at least a dozen other weekly newspapers staff, printers, editors, and publishers—all converged on York to put out this first edition for me.

AH: Do you have a copy of that anywhere?

BK: Yes, I have it.

AH: Could I take a quick look at that for just a quick second? [recording paused] It must have overwhelmed you to have an eight-page paper turn into a forty-page publication. What we're looking at is the Nebraska newspaper. Are these all the people that pitched in?

BK: Yeah, that's some of them.

AH: And this is you at the time?

BK: Sure. One of the reasons I wanted you to read it is I think that I was the first Japanese American ever in the weekly publishing business. I was a pioneer, as a result.

AH: (reads) *The first Japanese publisher of a general newspaper.*

BK: I've never heard of anybody else. There might be, but I have no way of proving it.

AH: Not a vernacular newspaper but a general one. That's great. Well, then you had to run a newspaper, and from what you wrote to me, that was harder than having operation democracy!

BK: Well, you know, I was all guts and no brains.

AH: But, you were the owner of this paper then when you came out to York? Were you buying the paper?

BK: Oh, yes, I bought it.

AH: Where did you get the money to buy it?

BK: My mother-in-law. (chuckles)

AH: Oh, really? This was an investment?

BK: Oh, yes.

AH: Was your wife going to work on the paper, too?

BK: Oh, yes, she helped out. But, it was a very bad decision to buy the paper, because it was a weekly paper, and, at the same time, there was a small daily in York, and that meant I couldn't get any fresh news because the daily prints all the obituaries. Then, too, all the advertising goes to the daily paper, because when the stores want to run an ad, they can't wait till a weekly paper comes out.

AH: But, you didn't know how to do market research at the time?

BK: Oh, well, I was just all gung-ho and excited about getting into the newspaper business. It was a bad move, but I was very fortunate to get out of there with my shirt.

AH: How long were you there in York?

BK: Just about a year.

AH: You were able to sell the paper?

BK: Yes, I sold it to a good publisher from Crete, Nebraska, the head of a good operation there. So, he made the same mistake that I did, and he should have known better than to get into competition with a small daily.

AH: How big a town is York?

BK: I'm not sure what it is now, but it then must have been about four thousand.

AH: And two newspapers, huh?

BK: One was daily and one was weekly, and there's a lot of difference between the two. Well, I had no experience and no business background going into it. I should have worked for somebody first. (chuckles) But, I got all excited and jumped into it. In the long run, it probably helped me some. I learned a lot in a hell of a short time.

AH: Your initial reception was very nice. Did York turn out to be a good context for you to work and live, aside from worrying about the paper?

BK: Yes, most everybody was very good. They had a couple of larger business managers there that were pretty damn nasty and lied to my face and all that sort of thing, but I guess that happens in any town.

AH: Did you establish any friends there at York? Or were you preoccupied with the paper?

BK: Well, we established some longtime friends. Can I shut it off now to show you this letter?

AH: Sure. [recording paused] When things didn't work out so well in York, but you did, as you say, get out of there with your shirt still intact. But, you stayed in newspaper business.

BK: Oh, definitely.

AH: Where did you go from York?

BK: Well, from York we went back to Idaho to where my wife was from.

AH: To the Pocatello area?

BK: Yes, and Blackfoot, Idaho, is next door to Pocatello. It's about twelve miles or so. There was an opening there for a circulation manager on a small daily, so I took that position and started working there. Very shortly thereafter, I was promoted to editor of the paper.

AH: Were you doing any writing when you were the editor of the York paper? Did you write a lot of editorials?

BK: Not only editorials, I did all of the reporting. I mean, I did all of the writing. I had to write all the copy and then edit all of the writing. I had to write all the copy and then edit it all. It was a one-man operation, except for the back shop.

AH: So, when you went to Nebraska as a journalism major, you started to build up your confidence in being able to write, correct?

BK: Oh, yes. I wrote a piece for the Omaha *World Herald* even before I graduated. But, it came naturally to me. I enjoyed it. I didn't have any real big talent, but it was good enough for that kind of work.

AH: So, you ended up writing a lot of copy for York, and then when you went from the circulation head to the editor of the newspaper in Blackfoot—

BK: Blackfoot, Idaho, a small daily paper.

AH: What was the name of that paper?

BK: The *Blackfoot Bulletin*.

AH: Do you have any copies of that around?

BK: Oh, no. I guess I was only there a couple years or so. The man who owned it was Pete Kimball, and he lived in the town next to Monterey?

AH: Carmel?

BK: Yes, Carmel. He lived in Carmel, and he used to be a former editor of the San Diego daily paper.

AH: Oh, the *Union*?

BK: He bought the Blackfoot paper, and so I was working for him when I was editor. He talked to me and he said maybe he'd like to sell the paper and get into something a little bit bigger. I said, "Great, that really sounds great." So, it didn't take him long, and he had the thing sold.

AH: But not to you?

BK: Oh, no! No, I didn't have any money or brains at that time to even run a daily paper, let alone a weekly. But, in the process, why, he was going to find another paper for me—I mean, a bigger one that he liked. I guess it's like buying a house. He had as hard time finding something that he liked. We looked at several papers, and the first

thing I knew, I told him, “Pete, I can’t. I’ve got to go to work. I don’t have any way to support my family.” (chuckles) So, I went to work for the North Platte *Daily Bulletin* there. They needed a reporter.

[03:50:06]

AH: You went back to Nebraska?

BK: Yes, they needed a reporter, so I went back there.

AH: Did you live in Hershey when you went back there?

BK: No, we lived in North Platte. In the meantime, I started looking around for some weekly paper for myself and saw this opportunity to buy one in Michigan. So, I checked it out, and everything looked great.

AH: Where was that in Michigan?

BK: In Williamston, Michigan, which is a town of a little over two thousand.

AH: Near what?

BK: It’s right near East Lansing, next to Michigan State University. So, it had a good class of people living in town, and they made a difference on education and everything else there. In order to get in there, of course, I had to have some money. (chuckles) I talked to Mr. Kimball, who sold the paper in Idaho, and he loaned me \$10,000. I didn’t have to sign a piece of paper or nothing. I couldn’t believe it. No, ifs, ands, or buts. He just loaned it to me. That’s how I got started in Michigan.

AH: Now, you said in your letter to me that situation worked out quite nicely. You even won some awards with the paper.

BK: Yes, and there again, like I told you, I was short on the business side acumen. I mean, (chuckles) my weakest part has been business sense, but as far as news and editorials, we won general excellence awards practically every year.

AH: Now, was your wife, as the kids were starting to grow up, taking an even larger part in the newspaper?

BK: Yes, she handled the society page for me, so to speak, every week. That was quite a job to get the information from the women about what was going on.

AH: Did she have a journalism background at the University of Utah?

BK: Oh, no. No, she had an English major background, though. She’s a very good proofreader and all that, so she did quite a bit of work in the office.

- AH: How did you find living in Michigan? I mean, you tried living in Idaho near her parents, and then you lived in Nebraska again near your parents. Now you were off by yourself there in Michigan, weren't you?
- BK: Yes, it was quite an experience because there were no Japanese, no Orientals at all in the town. I don't think they had ever seen one. In fact, (chuckles) there was some problem of even buying the paper. The paper was run by a widow. Her husband was a newspaper publisher, he died, and so she was handling the paper herself and finding it a pretty tough job. So, the newspaper broker contacted her and told her he had a prospective buyer, and when she checked around town as to whether they would accept a Japanese American, I guess she got some (chuckles) negative input, and so she wanted to back out. She told the broker she wouldn't sell.
- AH: So, you were still, even at this point when you were a certifiable war hero, you're still running into this well into the 1950s.
- BK: Oh, yes, and I could understand it for her having some qualms about it, but the broker put the pressure on her. He says, "I found you a legitimate buyer, and if you don't accept it I'm going to sue you." So, she backed down. And that's how I got started there.
- AH: So, it was financial pressure then?
- BK: Yes. So she had no excuses; she couldn't turn me down.
- AH: How long did you stay in Michigan?
- BK: We were there for ten years.
- AH: So, that was like the '55 to '65 period. Is that right?
- BK: Exactly.
- AH: Because I know you came out to California in 1965. At lunch today your wife mentioned that one of the reasons you decided to move to California was that you thought that your kids ought to have some contact with other Nikkei, Japanese Americans. So, that was a concerted thing you thought about. Was that how you made a decision on that or were there other things playing into that too? Were there other things playing into your decision to move, too?
- BK: Well, that was the main factor because as I explained it, our oldest daughter, Kerry, was about to finish her senior year of high school. She had applied for universities around the country and was accepted by the University of California at Santa Barbara. So then, we got our heads together and decided, "If we don't move now, we'll be here in Williamston the rest of our lives." We debated about it and thought about it, and

we thought, Well, this is a good time to move, and we'd like to be near our kids. And that's how we ended up coming to California, eventually.

AH: Now, you didn't have a paper prospect here or a job prospect even, did you?

BK: No, and this is another part of my sad story in my newspaper experience. The broker sold the paper to two men from Wisconsin, and they were not able to handle the job. I didn't think that they'd have problem with two of them. One of them was an advertising specialist, and with two of them, I figure they could handle it. But they couldn't, and they went into bankruptcy. Then the court took over the paper, and so we had to resell it.

AH: So, the one sale fell through?

BK: Yes, and the neighboring weekly paper continued to publish the paper while I was in court proceedings. The publisher of the East Lansing *Press Courier*, Harry Stapler, made an offer that was acceptable, and so he purchased [the newspaper]. In the meantime, because of the bankruptcy proceedings and everything, we, of course, lost quite a bit in the process of selling the paper. So, I decided that I'd better find a job and go to work.

I was kind of concerned at first, you know, because I'd heard a lot of things about California being anti-Japanese and that early on that graduates from the universities couldn't even get a job in California after they graduated. But, I was extremely surprised. I stopped in San Luis Obispo, Ventura, and Santa Barbara. I stopped at those three towns coming down the coast, and I was pretty much welcomed at all of them. I was really surprised that they would listen to me. One had an opening but said that the managing editor was not in and wouldn't be back until the next day. I couldn't wait and decided to come down and see all three of them. In Ventura they had an immediate opening, and so I decided to accept that position.

AH: What was the open position in Ventura?

BK: It was to work on the news desk, writing headlines, and editing.

AH: Were you at this point not interested anymore in buying a newspaper or didn't have the money to even consider this option?

BK: I was interested, but I didn't have the money. After the fiasco of selling the paper in Williamston, I decided I'd better just settle down for a little while and see how it was going to go. I think it was the best thing that ever happened to me. It probably saved my life, because if I had owned my own newspaper and was going at the pace I was in Michigan, I probably wouldn't have lasted more than ten years at the most.

AH: You would have just burned out completely?

BK: Yes. It's really tough on your health when you work on your own paper. Maybe it was good and maybe it was bad, I don't know, but when I went to work for a daily paper, I was only working forty hours a week. Back there in Williamston, Michigan, I had worked at least sixty-five hours a week. I was working like seven days a week, and this job in Ventura was like working a part-time job for me at forty hours. (chuckles) I'd go to work early and I'd be out by two o'clock, and I could go play golf. You know, it was just unbelievable how soft and easy the job was.

AH: Did your wife get a job there right away, too, at the newspaper?

[04:00:00]

BK: No, that was kind of a strange coincidence, but I think it was about four or five years after I'd been working there that this Hong Kong flu, or whatever it was, came on. All the proofreaders there were getting the flu, and they needed someone desperately. So, I told the manager editor, "Hey, my wife can do proofreading." He called her up and said, "Come on down right now." She was there ever since. (laughs)

AH: She even lasted beyond you, right?

BK: Oh, yes, even beyond me.

AH: So, from writing the headline and everything, you ended up becoming a news editor, right?

BK: First, I was moved up to chief copy editor. Then they launched a Sunday paper, so I became the Sunday editor. After that I became news editor. So, when I became news editor, I'd go to work at five o'clock. I'd always open up the plant; I'd be the first one there. My job was primarily to design the front page, and I handled all the wire news copy and coordinate the local news and filled the pages. So, I'd do to work at five in the morning and I'd be down at one o'clock, and then I'd go play golf. (chuckles)

AH: The same newspaper is still in operation, right?

BK: Right.

AH: It's a solid newspaper like the *Santa Barbara News Press*, in the sense that it has a long history as a paper?

BK: Yes, right. At the time I was working on it, they had a circulation of a little over forty thousand. I don't know what it is now, but I think it's probably closer to sixty thousand.

AH: It's the main newspaper in Ventura County, isn't it?

BK: Oh, yes. It's very good newspaper. The only thing is it's a little bit pro-Democratic. (laughs) I was a Republican from Nebraska. I think it really squashed one of my promotions to becoming a managing editor. The guy that got the job didn't even have a college education.

AH: But he was a Democrat.

BK: He was a Democrat. Definitely. (laughs) He was in with the right people. But, I was happy with my work, and I thoroughly enjoyed newspapering all my life. I wouldn't trade it for anything in the world. Boy, you know, when I was the news editor, the wire service, if anything happened anywhere worldwide, the bells would start ringing, there was a bulletin coming over, and I'd know what was going on. It was really interesting. The only bad thing about newspapering was that journalism as a profession is the lowest paying profession there is. It's absolutely the worst.

AH: It's precarious to own your own paper these days, too, unless you know how to syndicate it.

BK: Oh, independently owned newspapers have been getting less and less all the time. The papers are getting gobbled up. Either that or they can't compete nowadays with television.

AH: Has the Ventura paper been purchased by the Scripps-Howard or anything?

BK: Yes, they're merged, and there have been some heads rolling there. My goodness, it's changed so much that I don't recognize the people there at all now.

AH: So, it becomes less of a local paper when that happens too, doesn't it?

BK: Yes. One thing I would like to just mention about the Williamston experience, though, is that I felt that we were able to accomplish some very good things while we were there. For one thing, we got the city manager form of government for a small town like that. And we were able to get a swimming pool for the city-probably the only small town that size in Michigan that had a public swimming pool. And all this was not easy to do. Even the Kiwanis Club wouldn't endorse our swimming pool.

AH: So, this was newspaper crusading?

BK: Oh, definitely. And the city manager was a bitter fight because there were certain people who had had their way for years in this small town, and they didn't like to be bossed around by the city manager. Eventually, it led to the city managers being fired. I wrote an extensive front-page editorial naming names (chuckles) of people who should have known better and should have supported the city manager.

AH: So, in some ways, that period that you were in Michigan was the most vital one, in terms of really doing newspaper work. I mean, even though it was putting your life at

risk, the stuff that you were doing, crusading for causes and getting involved in [municipal] politics, but you were really immersed in this.

BK: Yes. And, you know, it was such a small town, and everybody knew what was going on in the town—I mean, you couldn’t fool anybody—but they wanted to see how much guts the newspaper guy had to print the truth in the paper. (chuckles) The only scoop that I ever scored there in ten years was when I found out before anybody else that Superintendent Bochstaler was resigning from the schools, and I asked him, “Please, don’t tell anybody about it.” I also asked the head of the school board, “Please, don’t tell anybody about it.” And they didn’t. They helped me out. Then when the paper came out, people said, “I didn’t know he was going to resign!” (laughs)

AH: You were a prophet, right?

BK: I scooped them for the first and only time. (chuckles)

AH: Hold your point. It’s time to [turn over the tape.]

[recording paused]

BK: This is not about the scoop, but I had some run-ins with the city council because of their policies. The mayor got so disgusted that he wrote me a letter and he said, “Why don’t you go back to Outer Mongolia?”

AH: Oh, wow! (laughs)

BK: He didn’t think I would print the letter, you see, because of what he said.

AH: And you did?

BK: I printed it. As soon as it came out, his wife read it and called me up and apologized. She was shocked that her husband would write something like that! (laughs)

AH: (laughs) You really embarrassed him by putting it in the paper word-for-word.

BK: Yes. But, that was one of the policies that we had at the paper, that I would print any letter. Anytime anybody wanted to criticize the editor and publisher, they could do so, and I would print it. The mayor from this little town of Weberville wrote to one and said, “Why don’t you go to hell?” And I printed it. (laughs) I printed the letter, and the people in Weberville, I think, are still laughing about it. He didn’t think I would print it, I guess. (chuckles) But, you know, it was a wonderful experience.

Then I had this one city councilman who was the state pathologist there in Williamston. He had a running battle with me. He would take his story to the Lansing daily paper and to the other county seat paper in Mason, Michigan, and give his side of the story to them, but I would print my side of the story in our own paper.

- (chuckles) We had a running battle. You know, I practically called him names.
(chuckles) But anyway, the best thing that happened to us, I think, was that when we got ready to leave Williamston, he came over and shook my hand and said he was sorry to see me leave.
- AH: He appreciated a worthy adversary, right?
- BK: Oh, yes. You know, it just made me feel good about the newspaper experience there. I think that what happened in Williamston and York proved that a minority person could go into a community and start a paper. It proved also that not everybody was going to agree with you, and—
- AH: And that they could tell you, as the editor, to go to hell.
- BK: Yes.
- AH: But on different grounds, other than—
- BK: I thought it was quite an experience. Our girls went to school there, where there were all Caucasians and no minorities. So, it was a good experience for them, too, and I think a good experience for the community.
- AH: Your oldest daughter Kerry, then, went to U.C. Santa Barbara.
- BK: Right, and then she went on to UCLA for her master's or teaching certificate.
- AH: In what fields?
- BK: She's in elementary school teaching. She's bilingual.
- AH: What's her other language aside?
- BK: Spanish. Boy, she can talk Spanish like you can't believe.
- AH: You had a second daughter who was born while you were still in college.
- BK: Right.
- AH: What is her name?
- BK: Her name's Kris, Kristyn.
- AH: So, they both must have been born between '47 and '50.

[04:10:04]

BK: Yes, right. They're only about a year-and-a-half or two years apart. She graduated from the University of California, Berkeley, and also from U.C. Davis. She went to Davis first and then she got her master's degree from Berkley.

AH: What field is she in?

BK: She's a librarian.

AH: Oh, really?

BK: Yes, she was head librarian at the Saint John's Seminary College.

AH: In Camarillo.

BK: Yes. Only a couple of weeks ago-or maybe it's been a month now—she took the librarian's job at Westmont College in Santa Barbara. It's not headline bearing job, but the greatest think about that job is that if she works for a couple years or so, her son Jessie will be able to go to college free, which is tremendous.

AH: Free. I take it that, since Westmont College is a Christian school, Kris is probably a Christian?

BK: Oh, yes, she's very religious. She's the only one in the family that's really religious.

AH: But she's been at a Catholic seminary and now at a Protestant school.

BK: Yes, quite a mix. (chuckles)

AH: What is her own religions affiliation, aside from Christian? Is she a Protestant or a Catholic?

BK: Yes, she's Protestant. So she's doing real well there at Westmont. And then our youngest, Julie, graduated from UC San Diego. She's strong in art, so she majored in graphic arts there, but she didn't like working for corporations doing graphic arts work. She was influenced by Kerry, the kindergarten teacher, and so she got her teaching certificate and now is beginning to teach elementary school up there in St. Helena.

AH: This is Napa County?

BK: Yes.

AH: Now, she's the one your wife was referring who came about eight years after the other two?

BK: Right.

AH: So, she was born in Michigan?

BK: Yes. One of her children is my namesake, John Ben Cooney. She just had another arrival here two or three months ago, so she now has three children.

AH: Do you have more grandkids by your other two daughters?

BK: Kerry does not have any children, and Kris has just the one son. He's doing real well in school.

AH: Have your kids over the years shown some interest in your background, in terms of what you went through during World War II and your different exploits? I mean, it's girls and it's military which usually has a certain gender preference for men and things. But the pride and acclaim that you received, have they shown any interest in that?

BK: The youngest one has shown a great deal of interest in Joseph Cummings Chase, who did my portrait. He did one extra copy for me, and she has that because she's interested in art, too. The other two, I don't know. (chuckles) I think it's typical of Japanese Americans, they don't express themselves much about things like this, and at times I wonder if they really care or whether it's just their nature. I don't know. (laughs)

AH: Well, I think it's kind of interesting that the youngest of the daughters is the one who has shown the most interest. Because I think when her generation was coming along, that generation started to show more of an interest in the whole ancestry and background of what happened. You know, I kind of think of you in terms of the old Simon and Garfunkel, "Where are you, Joe DiMaggio?" Some people probably think, "Where have you gone, Ben Kuroki?"

BK: (chuckles)

AH: Up until the 1991 celebration in Nebraska and the outpouring of your home state Historical Society, was there a long period in which the war hero was not present, in the sense that there weren't people coming and talking to you about that or there was no commemoration of that? Was there a normalizing of your existence? For thirty years was there sort of a forgotten period or was there some continuity always?

BK: Generally speaking, it was probably kind of a forgotten period; but on the other hand, it always came up every now and then. I'm grateful for my war experience because it stands up for itself. Even there in Michigan, one of the auctioneers from the cattle business came up and told me one day, "You really had some people getting on you, getting on your back, and I really told them off." Even here in Ojai when I join a golf group and they're all Caucasians, I have this inner confidence in myself to know that I don't have to take anything from anybody. My record will speak for itself. So, I do have that comfort even years and years later. I'll take it right with me to my grave.

AH: Have there been periodic articles that appeared on you that were just sort of like, “Whatever happened to—?” Because when I did a literature search in the library through the *Reader’s Guide to Periodical Literature*, I expected to find a few more articles here and there and it seemed like from 1950 on there was a long period of time where there wasn’t mention of you in the mass media. I don’t know whether the JACL, say, did things for you during that period, or what. Did people like Mike Masaoka sometimes bring you back into the fold by calling upon you to speak? What exactly was happening with that part of your life during the time when you were running these newspapers?

BK: Well, I really dropped out of the Japanese American situation. I don’t know why. Maybe part of it’s my fault because I’m not outgoing like my wife is. But I belonged to a Japanese American Golf Club there in Oxnard, and it included all of Ventura County, and they even named me president of the club one year. And I inaugurated a thing here on the Fourth of July up at School Park where they rent the park and bring all their family and friends for a barbeque. It’s a kind of a strange thing with the Japanese Americans. They never once invited me back to the events, yet I had inaugurated it for them. Not one of the golf club members ever invited me back again. So, I haven’t belonged to the club for quite a while. I’ve had a couple of clubs members openly say, “Well, Ben Kuroki, he loves publicity.” I think they’re kind of jealous or whatever. It kind of turned me off, and so I pretty much stay out of the picture and I’m very quiet.

About three months ago I was invited to speak at the installation of the 442nd new officers in the first part of the year. And the reason I declined is I don’t want to get up there and brag about what I’ve done. It seems like there’s some jealousy there or something, and I prefer to not go. Didn’t tell them why, just told them [it was] for personal reasons. So, I’ve kind of stayed in the quiet side because the Nebraska thing was just great. This was done by my home state, so I felt really good about it.

[04:20:04]

AH: What about the Japanese American Historical Society?

BK: That was very good, too. They’re a good bunch of guys, and they treated me really nice.

AH: About how long ago was that?

BK: Well, it seems like maybe already ten years.

AH: No, kidding?

BK: It was before I knew anything about the museum, that’s for sure. Maybe it’s not been quite that long ago. It seems that long anyway.

- AH: Has anybody ever approached you about the possibility of making the Ralph Martin biography of you, *Boy From Nebraska*, into a movie?
- BK: No. Larry Tajiri wrote a piece in the *Pacific Citizen* once. God, I can't think of the actor's name now, but he was interested in playing my role. He wasn't Japanese. Anyway, that's all I have ever heard, as far as the book is concerned.
- AH: And nobody has ever done a documentary film dealing with your experience?
- BK: No, I don't think so.
- AH: Not as a major motion picture but just using your photos and things like that as a true life story.
- BK: No, I don't think so. Here about four or five years ago, there was an anthology compiled on the 20th Air Force. I contributed an article to that. But I was very disappointed because they made some gross mistakes in it and I didn't have the opportunity to proof the copy.
- AH: So, what is that book called?
- BK: 20th Air Force I think it what I said on there. All of our books are thrown together for the move there!
- AH: Have you ever thought about sitting down and writing your autobiography?
- BK: Oh, I've had people who tried to encourage me to do it, but I'm not talented that way. (chuckles)
- AH: Well, you have the double background of the experience and then writing about it!
- BK: I've thought many times I'd write about my experience at Williamston, Michigan, because it's so unusual to have an Oriental publisher go into town and write editorials and tell people which way they ought to go. There's some very interesting things that happened there, but I just don't have the talent, I don't think, to qualify for that kind of a project. I've enjoyed life, it's been good to me, and I've gotten a lot of notoriety. I think I've done a lot of good. I feel like I've done as much if not more than anyone else for the Japanese American cause individually. I was in the right places at the right time, and they were absolutely unbelievable the things that happened after that.
- AH: What's happened over time, it seems to me, is that your individual situation during World War II has been eclipsed somewhat by the corporate experience of the 442nd. When people talk about what led to the acceptance of Japanese Americans after the war, it's how many people were involved in this.
- BK: Yes.

AH: But I think there's a linkage between the two. It's probably quite right to this huge number as a group with all the their medals and decorations, but you in the prefigurement and a microcosm of that group because you were doing it before anyone else was doing it and you were getting decorated for it and getting publicity. The same kind of scenario worked for them. Lots of them were doing it, they were getting the medals, and there was the publicity. I think that one without the other, you know, is not the whole story.

BK: One thing is for sure, and that is that my experience was maybe 100 percent different than theirs. Because I was alone in the groups or squadrons, whereas they were together. I mean, they could go to town with two or three of their friends. I was alone. I hated to go into town. The guys in my tent would say, "Come on, let's go," and I would excuse myself and say I didn't feel up to it. But, the reason I didn't go into town was that people would stare at me and make remarks.

I remember one time in Florida when my buddy talked me into going into town. We went in there, and first thing, the people sitting at the next table with their kids were staring at me and making remarks. So, my buddy went right over there and told them off, in no uncertain terms: "Get off his back." I dealt with that. I remember—you know, (chuckles) I was a grown man, already twenty-six or twenty-seven years old. There were nights that I stuck my head in the pillow, and I cried. I was so damn lonesome.

AH: On the other hand, your situation in Nebraska, as well as in the military, was kind of different from the soldiers in the 442nd, in that the 442nd was a segregated unit. Your experience in Nebraska was integrated. Your experience in the military was integrated. Your experience after the war has largely been integrated.

BK: And it still is. I'm not included in Japanese golf things and so what? I feel I've had a great life, and I'm real grateful.

AH: But like some other people who have done things for the Japanese American community and are themselves Japanese, it's almost been doing it for the community rather than in the community. Have you dropped out of the JACL, or do you still maintain a nominal membership in that organization?

BK: That was another thing. I dropped out of JACL many years ago. That may be why you haven't read much about me, because they know that I don't support them.

AH: Was there something that precipitated your dropping out of the JACL?

BK: Well, it's personal, entirely personal with Mike Masaoka. I haven't been in the JACL for years and years. I think they do a good job and they're okay, there's nothing wrong with them. But, I'm not a joiner. I don't enjoy those things, but they were nice to me. When I was in Michigan and publisher of the paper, they had their biannual convention in Detroit and gave me special recognition with all the other big wheels, all in tuxedos that they invited there. (chuckles) They gave me credit for my

Commonwealth Club appearance being a turning point in the attitude toward Japanese Americans. They gave me a plaque and all, so it isn't that I don't associate with them. (chuckles)

AH: You were a little reluctant to do this interview.

BK: I know.

AH: I wrote you a letter and asked you about doing it, and when you first said you didn't want to do it, I was really disappointed. I was hoping you would do it. What were your feelings? The same thing about not wanting to rehash the past?

BK: I don't know what it is, but I thought Lincoln was going to be my last hurrah. I mean, I've said that in print: "This is my last hurrah." And then I had this experience with this anthology I was telling you about where I contributed an article, and I hated to find the damn mistakes that they made, for these stay there for the rest of your life. It's not right—I mean, it's just not correct—and I didn't want to get into something like that again. Part of it, too, is just old age and memory. I don't really enjoy sessions like this, although it hasn't been nearly as bad as I thought. (chuckles) You must get tired of doing interviews like this, too, don't you?

AH: Well, I always learn a lot from doing these interviews, you know, not just about a given person's experience and perspectives but about human nature. I certainly have today.

[04:30:07]

BK: Well, I appreciate what you're doing, because I know it will last for a long time and will help the cause for Japanese Americans, I'm sure. I mean, this can't hurt us any.

AH: No, and as I told you, when this gets transcribed, I'll send you a copy of the transcript so that you can proofread it for accuracy. Before closing this interview, do you have anything else that you want to add to it?

BK: Well, I have here an editorial that I wrote about my father at the time of his death.

AH: When was this written? While you were still in Michigan?

BK: Yes, I wrote it for publication in the November 26, 1958, issue of the Williamston *Enterprise*.

AH: Why don't you read that editorial right onto the tape?

BK: Okay. Also, we were publishing another paper about the same time called the Meridian News, and it's about my father. The editorial title is: "The American Dream Come True." It says, *Sam Kuroki is dead and buried, and I wouldn't mention*

it except that his story is a story of the American dream. His name wasn't Sam, it was Shosuke. Years ago, a neighboring farmer, a big tall Swede, threw up his hands and quit trying to pronounce Shosuke. He just called him Sam, and the name stuck.

Sam was born in Japan, and before he was twenty he hopped a freighter for America. He never saw Japan again. He came to America because he wanted a new way of life in a land of freedom and opportunity, which was the same dream of Smith the Pilgrim, with Wiesnewski the Polish, or Greenbaum the Jew, which is the American dream. He set up pins in a bowling alley in Frisco, slaved in the local coal mines in Wyoming, operated a boardinghouse, and worked on a railroad section crew until he spotted the fertile land of the Platte Valley in Nebraska. That was it. Farming was his life, his dream. But, his dream was punctuated with nightmares of hailstorms completely wiping out the crops, of drought and Depression and debts. There were good years, too, and he always hoped to hit it good, but he never did.

Sam worked harder than any two men, and by the time he was forty he collapsed atop the haystack with a heart attack. He wasn't expected to live to see sixty, but he made it to eight-six, mostly because he had the desire to live in this land of his. It really wasn't his country until 1952. He was a Japanese alien until then. That was because the American statutes prohibited any Japanese to become a naturalized citizen. Congress changed this law after World War II, and Sam went before the district judge in 1952 to become a U.S. citizen at the age of eighty.

And this is the point of the story. Sam was living on borrowed time then, and he really had little to gain in citizenship at that age. Except that it added to his dream, the American dream. It was that same patriotism, that same feeling he had the day Pearl Harbor was bombed. It was he who urged his two sons at home to volunteer immediately for the armed forces, the U.S. Army. And nobody waved a flag, so to speak, as hard as Sam, who eventually had four sons in the service.

No, Sam never struck it rich, but he raised ten children and lived a good life, a long life, and now he rests peacefully in Lot 34, E-95, a symbol of the American dream come true.

AH: I think on that note, we'll end this interview.

BK: Very good.

AH: Thank you very, very much, Ben. I appreciate tremendously having had this opportunity to talk to you on tape, and for posterity, for the Japanese American Project of the Oral History Program at California State University, Fullerton.

BK: It's been a pleasure.

END OF INTERVIEW