

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with ARCHIE MIYATAKE

Interviewed

By

Karen Yamamoto

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NARRATOR: ARCHIE MIYATAKE

INTERVIEWER: Karen Yamamoto

DATE: October 7, 1995

LOCATION: San Diego, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

KY: It's Saturday in the first week of October, and I'm interviewing Archie Miyatake, the son of Toyo Miyatake the photographer who took pictures during the World War II internment camp of the Japanese Americans. [recording paused] So, you were saying that the streetcars is what kept the community alive?

AM: Yeah, this is the 1st street line here, and you can see the streetcars that used to run through here. It was called the P Car Line, with the letter P.

KY: Oh, okay.

AM: And it goes pretty far east into East L.A., where a lot of the Japanese used to live. And also on the other side, it was quite a ways to the west side, southwest L.A. Of course, they had to transfer to another line—it was a J Car Line—that used to go all the way to southwest L.A. So, it was very important transportation for the Little Tokyo area because it used to bring in a lot of people from east side as well as the west side area. Now, things have changed where East Los Angeles—well, not that many stores like Little Tokyo but restaurants. There's quite a few restaurants on the east side of Little Tokyo. And then, the west side, naturally, there's a lot of Japanese restaurants up there, but there's not that many Japanese living in the southwest L.A. anymore. They are still quite a few living there, but, as far as Little Tokyo is concerned, a little after World War II when the Japanese companies started to move into downtown area—where they had their offices, you know for a Japanese company like Mitsui, Mitsubishi—they still have it there. So, most of the trade activity is done in that area. That's why I guess at nighttime there are some businesses for those types of people who are coming to eat to Little Tokyo.

KY: You think that Little Tokyo post-World War II was really important—

AM: Yes, it was quite important. For one thing, when we came back, this whole Little Tokyo area was all black people.

KY: It was?

AM: In fact, they used to call it Bronzesville. I think there was a little town in New Orleans or someplace out there called Bronzeville. When the people from the South moved over here during World War II, they worked in the defense factory. There was an extreme shortage of housing, so when the Japanese left here, Little Tokyo, they moved in over here. There were stores and nightclubs and things like that. It was quite flourishing during World War II. And all the hotels that were there, people were living there, commuted to work from the hotel. There was a pretty well-known nightclub right on 1st and San Pedro. What was it called? I always know it. I just can't think of it. I'll think of it as I go along. But, it was still operating about a year after we moved back. So, I used to go listen to some of the jazz bands that used to come there. At the time you wouldn't know their names, but one of them was called the Cement Mixer. They were quite popular. It was a quartet, I think, African American singers and musicians. In fact, right behind this—it doesn't show here—but there's a far east restaurant further down, further east from this picture. Right behind there, there were about two or three wooden houses, and Japanese people used to live there. Of course, when we came back, all of it was gone. It was turned into a playground; this playground is called Bronzesville Playground. It was a big open area in the back of these buildings, which is the north side of 1st Street. This is now declared a historical preservation. Anyway, all those houses were cleared-out and turned into Bronzesville Playground, and one of the houses, I was born in.

KY: Oh, neat. (laughs)

AM: So, I was born right in Little Tokyo.

KY: I see!

AM: And then, while I was still a little infant, my folks moved to East L.A. because it was, well, not so crowded, because the house happened to be where my uncle and his family used to live. We lived in that place temporarily, more or less. And after I was born, we moved to Boyle Heights, East L.A. Well, anyway, even though we lived in East L.A., we used to come into Little Tokyo almost every weekend because both my father and my mother were working in their business.

KY: Was it the photography?

AM: Yes, right. (phone rings) I used to come over here. My uncle had a confectionary store right around here, so I had a place to go and spend the weekends in Little Tokyo. I had a lot of friends that lived in Little Tokyo. I remember playing on the sidewalks in the back of the buildings, playing hide and seek, (laughs) things like that. But anyway, not just right here was the concentration of the Japanese. Oh, I

don't know, must be seven to eight blocks surrounding this Little Tokyo, there were a lot of homes. Japanese people used to live right in the Little Tokyo area, so it's like a community already.

KY: So, the community provided economic sources, housing, community support for one another?

AM: Yeah. And there were—well, there's quite a few churches now again, but right after the World War II, there were one, two—Zenshuji, _____ (inaudible), Union Church, Higashi Honganji was in East L.A. They went to Little Tokyo much later. Oh, the Koyasan Temple! [There were] about four churches for the Japanese there. In fact, there was a—I don't know what you call it in English—it's a Shinto shrine, I guess, behind these buildings on the north side—quite a bit north—in fact, that's still preserved. Well, it's not preserved, but it was taken it was taken or somebody—by this Doctor Ichioka in East Los Angeles. Anyway, he passed away a long time ago. I don't know who's left in their family. I heard it's still there, but it's pretty run-down. Right now, the Little Tokyo Business Association is thinking of trying to get that into Little Tokyo someplace because the Japanese people—especially the ones that are here from Japan, the recent ones—they're very much into the Shinto shrine. They believe in it. They thought it might be a good thing to bring into Little Tokyo. Not for those people only, for the community—not only the Japanese Community but for everybody. It would be something of interest to the community in general, so there's a little movement in that direction. Where it's going to be place is another thing. It might be in Weller Court.

[00:10:31]

KY: Wow. Is there room? (laughs)

AM: Well, there's a space shuttle there now, so I don't know where they plan to put it. It might be put into one of the shopping plazas. I don't know.

KY: How neat. So, how did the community differ from prior to World War II and after?

AM: Okay, one of the big differences that hardly anybody _____ (inaudible) was the living quarters surrounding Little Tokyo.

KY: Before?

AM: Right now.

KY: Oh, right now. Okay.

AM: Whereas before, you look in Little Tokyo within the ten block area—let's say surrounding Little Tokyo—you'll find Japanese living there. So, even the schools had quite a few Japanese American students.

KY: What happened to everyone? Was it after the war or during the war when people relocated?

AM: Well, one thing, when we came back after World War II, a lot of those homes were torn down and warehouses were built.

KY: Oh.

AM: See? So, it became kind of an industrial area around there, so there was little left of it. There used to be some apartments on 2nd Street, but they were eventually gone because they were old buildings. Oh, for a while though, after we came back, since all the black people moved out, the Japanese people moved into those hotels. So, in those days, there were a lot of people living here. But, as Parker Center went up, they tore up the whole north side of 1st Street between San Pedro Street and Los Angeles Street for the Parker Center. That took a lot of places to live away, and then the renewal of Little Tokyo, which started about fifteen years ago maybe. _____ (inaudible). But, that took away a lot of the little hotels along 2nd Street, so when we first came back, these hotels were just full all the time. You go during the day or even late afternoon, you walk into the hotel, these hallways, people put rope across it—

KY: Because it was so full?

AM: They would do the washing and hang it there.

KY: Oh, I see.

AM: So, I never did bother to take pictures like that because the only thing we could do is make them embarrassed. It would embarrass me, too, taking pictures like that, so I didn't take any pictures like that. I just remember by sight what I saw.

KY: So, what did you enjoy taking pictures of?

AM: Beg your pardon?

KY: What did you enjoy taking pictures of? Your favorite subjects, people or buildings, community life?

AM: Oh, people, community life, yeah.

KY: Are these all pictures you took?

AM: This one I took, and then this is where the Parker Center is.

KY: Oh, look at that.

AM: This is where we were located. This was actually taken before the war, so we weren't here. We were down further east. So, this site right here would be where the bank is right now, Pacific Heritage, or now it's taken over by Cal Fed or something like that.

KY: Was it common that women used to dress in their kimonos?

AM: No, this was some type of special opening of this one movie, I think. That's where I got these girls wearing kimonos. I guess it must have been—see, these *hakujin* people came on this limousine.

KY: Oh, my goodness. (laughs)

AM: Now, this is after the World War II. Bronzeville ten-cent store is still here when we took this picture. Right here is where the Kajima Building is now located. Miyako Hotel was one of the hotels that most everybody knew about. It was like a landmark. If you're going to stay in Little Tokyo, that was the place to stay, although, it wasn't a really ritzy hotel or anything. So, the Civic Cleaners—see, eventually, they changed the name to Miyako Cleaners, but it was operated by black people. There's Civic Cocktail, Civic Photography. Well, this was still probably owned by Japanese by then. You know, they were still going through the process of changing the names. And this is Bronzeville ten cent store.

KY: So, if you said this area was predominately African America, how did the Japanese start—

AM: See, what happened was—okay, after the war ended, the defense factory slowed down the production of things, and therefore, people started getting laid-off. As they get laid-off, they have to go look for a job. As they find jobs somewhere else, they would have to move-out. And then, also, too, as residents start to move on, these businesses start to go down.

KY: Right.

AM: They wanted to sell their business, so that's where the Japanese came in.

KY: Right. So then, after World War II and after these people relocated—I mean, African American then Little Tokyo began to flourish?

AM: Yeah. Started to come back again. I remember there were some ugly incidents, black people fighting among themselves, gambling debts and things. Every once in a while, you'll see police arresting somebody. I think right in back of the studio where we were located, there were rolling the dice—just a matter of \$2. They got in a big argument. This man pulled-out a screwdriver, stabbed the black guy. The guy ducked and it just hit his hat and the hat was just stuck onto the screwdriver. (laughs) So I thought, Well, boy, this is some rough area.

KY: Oh, yeah.

AM: But, eventually, as the people moved out—wherever there was a vacancy, there was no problem with the owner having to find a tenant. They were more willing to move back into Little Tokyo. Plus, some of the buildings were owned by Japanese, so these people, naturally, would try to encourage people to come back because they own a building, which was part of Little Tokyo. They don't want to see it go down. For their own interest, too, they would encourage people to come down.

KY: And how about your studio? You said it was on 1st Street when you came back. Was it still there?

AM: No. That place—anyway, we couldn't get in there. And then the place where we moved in was owned by a family named Cominsky. They used to sell candy and cigarettes and thing like that. They were like a wholesale.

KY: Okay.

AM: And my father knew this family from before. So, they found out that there was a space, and he went to go talk to the owners. The owners said, "Yeah." So, he was able to rent that place. Actually, it was rented by some Japanese, the whole ground floor. But, there's one section, which was just a small section, which used to be a Japanese jewelry store before World War II. So, we moved into that small section. Eventually, we were able to expand all the way back. My father had friends like that, so he was able to find a place. The original location was—I forgot what it was—but eventually that turned into a Japanese kimono shop, something like that.

[00:20:54]

KY: Okay. (laughs)

AM: And then, the owner—see, the bottom floor used to be commercial. Upstairs was a hotel, where we used to be before World War II. So, my father knew the people that operated the hotel part of it, and these people, the husband, right after the war ended, he passed away so I guess wasn't going back into the hotel business anymore. So, my father just looked around for somewhere else. That's where we stayed all the way until we moved over here.

KY: Oh, okay. And when did you decide to move back?

AM: Well, we were—see, we bought the next door building, which is _____ (inaudible) Café.

KY: Okay. That's big. Nice.

AM: Yeah, well, this is a theater right here. So, from here to here, is only about fifty feet frontage, what we had. And we were going to build a building, but then after we moved over here. Anyway, the project didn't work out, so we decided not to build up there. And then, as you know, at the times and such right now, the banks are hard on trying to lend money, so we're just at a standstill. I still belong to the Little Tokyo Business Association. In fact, I'm on the executive board. I feel like an outsider now. (laughs) But, by 1948, I think Little Tokyo was pretty well on its way; going back to what it used to be. And then, when the redevelopment started, then churches moved back, and they were able to build this cultural center and the theater.

KY: Right.

AM: So, in that way, it has gotten a lot better, because unless something is done—I guess most people think Little Tokyo is going to lose its image. In order to get people to come to Little Tokyo, you have to have things where you can have functions to attract people. Well, because of the economic recession right now, I know Little Tokyo right now is kind of quiet. Have you been down there?

KY: Yeah, just a couple weeks ago.

AM: It's really dead. One of the biggest problems there is people having trouble with parking. It costs so much to park. You found that, too?

KY: Oh, yeah. (laughs)

AM: Where did you park?

KY: On the meter and the ticket people come by so often. There are so many tickets on there. It's better to pay the \$4 than the all-day permit.

AM: It's better to do that. Another problem they had was crime.

KY: By the old Japanese or outside?

AM: Outside people. You park the car on the street—if you're on 1st Street it's not as bad, but if you're on other streets surrounding the area—if you leave anything in the car, you get broken into. So, they formed this thing called Little Tokyo Anti-Crime Committee, and they've been working hard on it the last two, three years. They really brought the incidents like that way down. They have a volunteer group, which helps at nighttime. And then also, they chased out the homeless people. You don't see too many.

KY: That's right. I saw the campaign signs, Don't Give Money.

AM: Yeah, but in order to do that, there's a group that supports homeless people. If you just tell them—you just chase them out, they'll get at you.

KY: They are going to say, “Where we going to go?”

AM: Right, so what they tell the homeless, they give them an address where to go—if you need it—and that way, you chase them out. Then they can’t say anything. So, you just can’t go up to a homeless camp and tell them to get out of here. (laughs) So, the times that it was really busy in Little Tokyo, where it attracted a lot of people all the time—I think there was a lot of people living like in East L.A., southwest L.A.—those days people used to come in to Little Tokyo.

KY: Why do you think that they came to Little Tokyo, instead of supporting the supermarkets and other stores?

AM: Well, because supermarkets didn’t carry Japanese things. Now they do. They’re not a lot of restaurants in outlying area areas. You go to Gardena—Gardena used to be a really dead town, and now you see a lot of little shopping plazas here and there. And there’s a lot of communion stores. So, people in Gardena, they say, Well, we don’t have to go to Little Tokyo. We’ve got everything here.

KY: But, at that time, there was nowhere else to go?

AM: No. Now, another thing, too, right after World War II, people from San Fernando used to come into Little Tokyo to buy their weekly groceries. You couldn’t buy anything in San Fernando, and it was a carryover from before. San Fernando is primarily agriculture, prior to World War II, and so these people used to come into wholesale produce, bring all their vegetables and produce. On the way to go back, they would stop at Little Tokyo and do shopping. Also, on weekends, people used to look forward to coming to Little Tokyo. I remember my wife; she used to live in San Fernando. She said, “It was a big treat to come to Little Tokyo.” But, as you know, San Fernando agricultural farming is just about done. In fact, it’s gone. It’s all developed into residential. They’re moving further north to Oxnard, Ventura. Now that’s too far for them to come all the way, although, right after World War II, people used to come from Oxnard to Little Tokyo. There wasn’t a freeway or anything like that to make it convenient but _____ (inaudible).

KY: Do you think that, in your opinion—after World War II—do you think the reason why Little Tokyo flourished and Japanese American people looked forward to coming here—was there a lot of discrimination going on at the time, a lot of harsh feelings and could that be the reason why they weren’t supporting local stores?

AM: Yes, well, because of discriminations I’m sure that’s one of the big reasons why people from the outlying area used to come into Little Tokyo to shop because of discrimination and language difficulty. If you go to Little Tokyo, you could do everything in Japanese. When it comes to Nisei, Sansei, Yonsei, they might speak English perfect, so they don’t have that problem. So, language and discrimination was probably one of the biggest factors for Little Tokyo’s survival at that time.

KY: And what do you think it is now? What do you think is the key to survival for Little Tokyo today?

AM: Well, the businesses are turning more tourist oriented.

[00:30:04]

KY: Yeah.

AM: See?

KY: Okay. Interesting.

AM: Until the big riot, the Watts Riot—in fact, this year I think there's about 50 percent increase in Japanese tourists from Japan compared to last year. Now, until then, because of the riot, tourists in Japan were encouraging people to go elsewhere because, if the tourists go back and complain to the tour company saying, "I got my suitcase stolen at the hotel and all that." They don't want to hear that kind of thing, and you can't blame them. I remember when people that stayed in some hotels up there right in L.A.—Japanese people are very trusting. If they go to the counter, they'd leave their suitcase wherever they were sitting and walk-up to the counter and leave everything there. You could do that in Japan but not over here. They would get their suitcase stolen. Or, I heard of cases where even workers, maids used to steal some things out of the suitcase at their rooms. Things like that happened and a lot of bad news went back to Japan. [recording paused]
I guess because the yen is so strong, and I don't know what other factors but there are a lot factors that encourage people to come over here, which is a good thing. Another thing is Nomo the baseball player. He's helping a lot, too. (laughs)

KY: He's helping a lot. (laughs)

AM: Well, they make tours into L.A. when they think Dodgers are playing here, so it may be one of the days they might be able to catch. If you go to the gift stores at Dodger Stadium—Kurt was telling me, "Oh, they take it back by the bunches, and they could sell at a big profit in Japan."

KY: Oh, yeah.

AM: So, things like that, that kind of helps people come back into Los Angeles. I see a lot of young people nowadays, too. There's duty-free stores in Little Tokyo, which we never had before, and they are doing darn good business. I see buses—how many buses? Five, six buses parked right next to the store. So, it's more tourist oriented seems, huh?

KY: Yeah, yeah, instead of—to keep the culture alive, it's more tourist oriented.

AM: And so, the Little Tokyo Business Association, this year on January seventh, they invited two singers from Japan. They did two performances in one day, which is pretty hard. But, both performances were sold out. They're going this year to Georgia—those two singers—and on the way back, I think we asked them to perform again. That's why some people are saying, "Geez, to have the same singers come again is kind of questionable." But see, people over here are hungry for the old-time songs from Japan because they're old Issei now. And if they are Nisei, they're pretty old. There's still a lot of Kibei/Nisei—the ones that were educated in Japan, they're hungry for that type of singing performance. And they are two sisters, singing these old Japanese lullaby songs and old songs, so they were a big hit. Now, after the performance, one of the sisters stayed—one went to New York, but the one that stayed—no, they both stayed at the retirement home, and these ladies were just—not only ladies but there were some men there. They really enjoyed it. I saw one lady who used to use a walker to walk around. When these two singers came, she didn't even use the walker or the cane. You know, that really struck me. If they're that happy seeing things like that, it is well worth it.

KY: Definitely.

AM: So now that we have retirement home for the Issei. Believe me, they are not Issei in there. They are Nisei now. They're in there seventies and eighties. So, that's why—well, there's Keiro, which was established ten years ago. Now they have a thing like Keiro on the South Bay area, too. They have senior citizens home in San Fernando Valley, too, so times have changed, you know? Let's see, the thinking of the Issei is you never send a parent to place like that. It was considered shameful. A son or a daughter is supposed to take care of their parents when they get old. That's how it is in Japan. Even in Japan, it's changed, too; they are senior citizen places. They come from Japan to study these places—facilities that are set-up here by the Japanese—and they go back and try to do the same thing. Now, when the retirement home first opened, they were having a very difficult time getting people to come. But, the people signed-up to go there and live there. They were really happy. And I got calls, not once or twice—this lady called me on the phone. "Can you come over to my retirement home? I want you to take pictures." She asked me to take a picture of her with this building in the background. So, I took it, and she said, "You know what I'm going to do? I'm going to send this picture, and I'm going to write a letter in Japan. Tell them I'm staying in a nice place like this in retirement here, and that I'm really enjoying it. Just to give it a positive image, because in Japan they hear that grandmother or somebody is staying in retirement home." In Japan they are saying, "What's the matter with them? Their son and daughter, they don't even take care of their mother. But, things like that happened so the old concept is changing, the thinking."

As far as Little Tokyo is concerned, I still would say it's the center of the Japanese culture. I remember before World War II, I used to go downtown on weekends. I used to walk around different parts of Little Tokyo just playing. Walking through the back alley, I could hear shamisen music coming through there. I didn't think much of it, but then—see, it happened to be one of the kyomai school,

Japanese dance school. And somebody was playing shamisen while the student was learning the dance. Now they have this cultural center, and different teachers, maybe two, three teachers get together, and rent the space because it is quite expensive. They take turns teaching their own group. So, that's why right now people—like Friday or something, you see a little girl wearing a Japanese kimono. It's not a good kimono; it's just something to practice in. "Oh, you're going to go practice?" She said, "Yeah." So that's part of Little Tokyo life. So, I guess—I don't know why I notice things like that. (chuckles) Then during the Nisei Week, all these come out. The dance groups participate in the parade. They have a calligraphy class there. They put on an exhibit. Even different Japanese swords collectors, they put on an exhibit. It's a very interesting culture, really. That's why you see some *hakujin* come, just like you see in this picture, to see the Japanese movie. Unfortunately, there's no Japanese movie theater in Little Tokyo anymore. There used to be one in _____ (inaudible).

[00:41:33]

KY: Oh, that's right, in the _____ (inaudible)?

AM: Yeah.

KY: What happened?

AM: I think the war happened. I think another thing—you know, try to do something at nighttime in Little Tokyo or anywhere nowadays is hard, not only Little Tokyo. [It's hard] having people come out at night.

KY: Because of?

AM: All the drive-by shootings you hear about on the news, people are scared to come out, which is very unfortunate. So, they had a fundraiser for the Japanese health center, JCHI or something like that. Anyway, they had a fundraising to give scholarships to Japanese American nurses. They are trying to encourage bilingual, so in order to do that they give out these scholarships to these nurses so that they will have two languages. It's the first time in my life that they asked me to be a speaker.

KY: How neat! (laughs)

AM: I was never so scared. (laughs)

KY: But you do speak often, I think?

AM: No, I don't think I like doing it. (laughs) So, first they asked me if I would give a slideshow. "A slideshow? Oh, okay." And then a week before the event—

KY: Oh, really, a week before?

AM: —this paper article came out, Keynote Speaker. (laughs)

KY: Oh, goodness. (laughs)

AM: Anyway, they said they got more people coming in, more than expected. I was glad of that. (laughs)

KY: Oh, okay. (laughs)

AM: But anyway, that was a luncheon. I thought it was going to be evening, but it's a luncheon. That tells you right there that it's easier to get people out—

KY: In the daytime.

AM: So, I'm sure it's not only in Little Tokyo. It's in general that people would rather stay home. Because I remember I used to walk around the darkest place in Little Tokyo before, and I never used to worry. But, now people are very hesitant about doing that.

KY: Was one of your reasons to—well, what year did you move your studio out to San Diego?

AM: What made us come over here?

KY: What year was that?

AM: Oh, that was 1985.

KY: That was recent. So, because there's a large Asian population, was that one of your—

AM: Actually, we came here only on temporary basis. We were going to go back as soon as the building was ready.

KY: Oh, I see.

AM: But then, it didn't happen and then—I kind of still miss the place.

KY: You do?

AM: I'm not running the business anymore. My son is.

KY: Oh, okay, so you're retired?

AM: (laughs) So, I kind of watched the people come and ask me, “Did you have a hard time?” I said, “No, it wasn't too bad.” Some might call from someplace, from a gas station, and say, “We are right here. How do you get there?” We even had that a few times. But, after they get here—plus, here's a parking lot. Right!

KY: Oh, yeah, there's lots of parking. And most of your cliental or your customers, are they Japanese American? Or, do you have a wide variety of different—

AM: It's changing.

KY: Is it?

AM: Um-hm. In this area, there's a large influence of Chinese people or Vietnamese, so we get a little bit of those. But, we still have Japanese weddings. We get Chinese weddings, or Japanese and Chinese—intermixing, intermarriages.

KY: Interracial marriages. What made you decide to move back to San Diego? When you decided to buy a house?

AM: No, we were just looking for—in fact, we were fixing a place up in Little Tokyo, and the location was kind of questionable. So, all of a sudden, we decided not to do it. We spent quite a bit of money fixing it up already, but then we decided to come over here.

KY: Was a key factor an Asian population?

AM: No, my son just happened to be driving by here and saw this open rent sign and decided, Let's take this, just temporary. So, we let go of the other one and came over here. I don't know. That building, it was right in Little Tokyo, but it was really run-down on the outside. We spent quite a bit of money cleaning-up the inside. The parking wasn't good.

KY: Can I ask you some specific questions? [recording paused] I'm doing research—my interest is on Japanese communities and the relationship between the individual and the community, the ethnic community, and there's a relationship between the community and the community. Like it has a dualistic role. (laughs) There's a relationship between the individual and the community—(laughs) or is there a relationship? Is an individual's experience shaped by community?

AM: Well, that's a hard question. The individual—

KY: That's kind of my thesis—that's kind of what I want to work at. Is there a relationship between an individual's experience and the influence of the community, and so, to get to find out about that I was wondering—actually, I have a couple questions that might help me answer this. I was wondering, can you remember back right after the war was over and the transition period _____ (inaudible) and L.A., how was life? Was it kind of hard, physically, emotionally?

AM: Okay, there was a reason for us to go to Manzanar.

KY: You mean that particular—

AM: Uh-huh. It was my father's decision to go to Manzanar. Not only that—although we were not members of the Maryknoll church—it was a Catholic church—my father and the father of the church were very close. He used to help my father by sending him business and things. My father was very grateful to him. Anything to do with that church, my father used to do as much as he could to help. Okay, he talked to this father, and then my father told this father that if anything he would rather stay in California and not go to another state during the war.

[00:50:14]

KY: Okay.

AM: And naturally, the Catholic church was helping the Japanese community quite a bit. And some of the members—a lot of the members, I would say—had businesses in Little Tokyo. The reason for that was they were struggling in the 1920s, in the early years—the Issei. Okay, they have children. The husband and wife, they are both working trying to struggle to keep the business going. What to do with the children? Maryknoll was the place. That's why you will find that the parents are very religiously Buddhist but their children are very Catholic. See? I know a lot of family's like that in Little Tokyo. So, that's why my father was very close—although I didn't go to Catholic church. Although, I just went one summer when I came back from Japan to learn English; I went there. That was about the extent of my school over there. But anyway, it was a very close relationship going on between the Catholic father and my father. And so, when the time came for evacuation, my father was talking to this Catholic priest. He told him he wants to stay as much as possible in Manzanar. It just so happened that one of the early groups they were trying to get together was the Little Tokyo area.

Now, we lived in East Los Angeles, and so my father decided to sign-up and go with the Little Tokyo merchants to Manzanar. He wanted to stay as close as he can—or stay in California because he had a home in East L.A. In fact, he just bought. It was only a couple of years since we bought it. Again, I think he'd rather stay close with the people he did business with, so everything kind of pointed toward Manzanar. So, this Catholic priest said, "Okay, sign-up," and so my father did.

KY: Did he sell the house?

AM: No! Okay, now we were one of the very lucky few. We lived about five or six blocks from White Memorial Hospital. My father used to do work for the graduates of the Seventh Day Adventist Medical School. He was taking pictures of the graduates, individual pictures and then the classes. He was doing that for a few years. He put a for rent sign on the bulletin board at the school at the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. And then, a doctor who was on the staff said, "Oh, I'll rent it." My father said, "We are going to leave everything the way it is. We are not even going to take any of the furniture out, You just move in." They didn't have to bring anything. So, with that agreement, they came. They moved in. Now, I don't know after how long, but this doctor got transferred to Chicago. No, no, he decided to go into his own

practice in San Bernardino, so he found another doctor. He's an orthopedic surgeon. He moved in. So, when we came back, the house was just as the way we left it.

KY: You guys were lucky.

AM: Very lucky. And, when we came back, they were still living there. There was an addition that was added to the place before we moved out. It used to be just a roof, and then my father had it enclosed with glass so they told us I could move in there. So, I lived in that part. And then, there was a four car garage.

KY: Wow, it was a nice place.

AM: Well, it's one of the old houses that had a lot of garages, so my father and I came first before the family came. We put dry wall in the garage and made a living quarter there.

KY: So, how old were you at the time?

AM: About seventeen, eighteen.

KY: Wow.

AM: And so, I learned how to put a drywall up during camp because you had to put in your own drywall in camp.

KY: Oh.

AM: They would do it, but we had to wait for it. They brought a whole stack of drywall and stacked it in the middle of the block, and they said we were approved on our own to do it. It was taking so long, I guess they had a meeting and decided residents can do it themselves. So, there happened to be a carpenter that lived on our block, and he taught us how to do it. We put up our own drywalls in the camp. And so, by that experience, we were able to do the same thing out here. So, in that way—well, I guess even if we _____ (inaudible) Manzanar, the people to people relationship was very close because of the fact that most of the people were from the Little Tokyo area. Well, there were ten thousand people, so people from Little Tokyo only made up a small part of it.

KY: _____ (inaudible).

AM: They come; they filled in each block. Naturally, there were a lot of bachelors, so they would have to put them some place where they could be all bachelors. So, in that way, we were the lucky ones, I guess.

KY: _____ (inaudible), coming back, any adjustments.

AM: Well, you know, after some few years ago, they never did bother to talk about camp life. They didn't want to talk about it. And another reason why we didn't talk about it is through the years we were so busy trying to get back into making a living and to catch-up. So, that is one of the reasons why we didn't talk about it. We didn't even think about it after we came back. Well, we went back to visit the same place once in a while. But, other than that, I don't think I talked to my kids about it. Maybe that talk that I gave at the fundraising thing is the first time I talked that much about it, the reason why my father did what he did. One of the funniest things, there's a camera store called Kimura Photomart—his son is running it now. But, his father used to work with my father in camp. He was operating the studio in camp.

KY: Oh, he was?

AM: Um-hm. Well, this father's, Mr. Kimura, hobby was football. So, in the twenties, mid-twenties, he used to be a camera club that he belonged to. He used to take artistic type of pictures. Just not snapshots, but completely creative photography. Well, since my father opened a studio in camp, he decided he wanted to work at the studio. He was with my father from about 1944, '43 to about—it was fifteen or twenty years. When he had a chance to buy a camera store, he bought it, and that's when he left. So, he was a very capable worker. His son was born in camp. He said, "When we first came back, we rented a house. My son didn't know how to open the door."

[01:00:50]

KY: Oh, no. (laughs) Oh, because of the locks and everything [at camp]?

AM: Um-hm. He seen the latch; there's no doorknob.

KY: Okay.

AM: So, I mean, that's one of the things you kind of think, he didn't know how to open a door? You think that's just a small thing, but for kids like that, it's a big puzzle. You got a doorknob. What do you do with it? I wouldn't typify a thing but—

KY: _____ (inaudible).

AM: So, well, let me—we're making that switch from camp life to regular life.

KY: Did you feel comfortable talking about that?

AM: No, it didn't bother me.

KY: It didn't bother you? Oh, okay.

AM: The thing that really—I'll think of it in a second. There's this highway that runs along the front of the camp, which goes to Bishop. You've probably been there for skiing up there.

KY: Yeah. (laughs)

AM: You could see that right there—actually, you're about a hundred feet from the highway. Then there's a barbed wire fence. I used to think, My, gosh, right outside there, on that highway, is freedom. You could do anything you want if you were right there." Anything behind the barbed wire, you can't do a damn thing. It used to make me bitter. I used to think about schools, too. If I were out here, I would be going to Roosevelt High and look at all the fun that you can have. Probably learn how to dance—well, of course because of camp I learned how to dance because everybody else was doing it. Maybe if I was over here, I wouldn't. But still, just the idea of walking on the sidewalk—just that thing because there were not sidewalks. And then, I didn't know how to drive. I learned it in camp. I see the buses and trucks driving by, and I wondered how it feels to ride on that pavement. And then, when the first okay came out that it was okay to go down to L.A. on a temporary basis, then we went out the gate. What a feeling! And then, my friend was driving and about halfway down, he says "I'm kind of tired. You want to drive?" I said, "*Yeah, sure!*" I took the wheel, and I drove on that thing. And, you know, when you look out the horizon, you see all that space of the desert, what a feeling! Now I've got to see L.A. I wonder what it's like now. And after we came over the mountain, we came into San Fernando Valley, and, all of a sudden, we see a brown smoke covering the whole valley. "What is that?" I found out later it was smog. (laughs) Then we drove around San Fernando Road; there's no freeway. We came near where the Lockheed Aircraft Corporation was, looked and lo and behold, the whole factory and highway is covered with camouflage net.

KY: With what?

AM: Camouflage net.

KY: Oh.

AM: They made a hill, and they put trees and even little shacks on them to cover the factory. And, by the time I left L.A. to go back to camp again, that was gone. I just saw the short glimpse of it. But, it was a really good feeling to be able to drive on that pavement.

KY: Oh, yeah. (laughs)

AM: And after almost four years, I mean. And then, I made about five or six trips after that, going back and forth. I was doing that—it must have been about June and July that I was doing all of that. And then, I found a job re-touching negatives, which I learned while I was in camp working for my father. So, I found a job and came back

first when they said it was okay. Maybe that was after August fifteenth when the war ended. On the day that the war ended, I was in L.A.

KY: You were?

AM: I happened to be down there getting myself ready to go back, finding jobs and things. I was walking along Broadway, and I was staying in East L.A. at a friend's house. But, that day I happened to be on Broadway, and then, all of a sudden, I see paper confetti coming down. People throwing it out. They ripped-up the telephone books, and they throw it. They shredded the telephone book. It seemed that was the favorite thing that they did because part of the thing you can tell was part of the telephone directory. And then, I see people on the sidewalk, yelling, "The war is over!" And they're hugging each other. I was a little scared because, being Japanese American, they might say something, but nobody said anything to me. All they said was, The war is over. They didn't even say we defeated Japan, they defeated the Jap or anything. I guess they were so fed-up with war by that time that they were just glad that the war was over.

And so, after that, I went back to camp again, and that's when I started helping my father pack up things to come back. One of the things that my father did before leaving camp was he—there used to be a man in a nearby town selling eggs in camp. He used to come once in two weeks. Well, when he heard that the camp was going to close, this man told my father, he said, "Well, I guess I won't be seeing you anymore because the camp is going to close." He says, "Yeah." So, he said, "I guess I won't be needing this car anymore." It was an old 1929 Ford.

KY: Wow.

AM: My father said, "You won't? How much do you want for it?" He said, "Two hundred."

KY: That was a lot for that time.

AM: Oh, yeah. Because the only income we had was—for me it was \$12 a month because I had the apprenticeship. My father was getting \$19 a month, but he was doing a little work for Bullock's photo studio at L.A. He wrote to this man saying that if you want me to re-touching, that he'll do it. So, he used to mail-in some negatives for him so my father could retouch. So, he saved some money that way, and so he bought the car with that.

KY: Wow.

AM: And then, a little after he bought the car, this Russell Sage Foundation funded some fund for an author to write a book. It was called *The Beauty behind Barbed Wire*. It was about artifacts and things that people made in camp, and he went to write a book about it. So, he asked my father if he would go to Poston and Gila and Manzanar—Manzanar is where—we took everything there, and then he wanted additional pictures

of Poston and Gila, the same kind of pictures. This was around September, I think, of that year, '45. And so, my father said, "I guess we've got to use this car." It was an old car, and there were things wrong with it. So, my father asked my cousin's husband to help drive. So, he took the car, and he drove most of the way, this relative. And there's a center right in the middle of the desert [where] the car broke down.

[01:10:47]

KY: Oh, no. (laughs) Then what happened?

AM: And so, this fellow in his days before going into camp he used take, in particular, these Model A Fords apart and put it together himself. He knew the car inside out. So, that's why we took him, in case of trouble.

KY: (laughs) Oh, I see.

AM: He would be able to take care of it. So, he lifted the hood up and looked at it. What happened was an engine mount that holds the engine up—this engine mount fell apart. The engine just dropped.

KY: Funny. (laughs)

AM: Got down to the frame, which was scrapping the thing that turns the car, so he looked. It's desert, there's nothing around, so, "Let me look under the front seat of the car." You lift it up and you look and there's junk, all kinds of junk in there. That's where people kept their tools and things for fixing flat tires. Well, this man, because he lived in Owens Valley—well, not because of that maybe—but he probably did a lot of his own repairs, so he threw a lot of things in there. Among them was a railroad spike. So, he found that and said, "Well, maybe I can do something with this." And so, took that thing—and there was a hammer in there—and he put the thing between the frame and the car and the engine. He hammered that thing in there, and slowly the engine came up.

KY: Wow.

AM: And so, that's how we finished everything.

KY: Oh, goodness.

AM: Well, when we were at desert center, we went to eat lunch. And we went to this restaurant, the three of us. We walked in, and a very big cook came out. He went like that.

KY: Really?

AM: Yeah. “You’re not welcome.”

KY: Was this the first time you encountered any of this?

AM: It was the first time I encountered anything like that. So, I thought, Oh, *this* is what they are talking about. We went to another restaurant, and they welcomed us. I remember very vividly, there was a counter on the left side. There were about four, five men sitting there. They all turned around and looked, and I said, “I wonder why they are looking at us.” And then, from the back came the cook, a great big guy. And he went like this, so we walked out.

KY: How did you feel?

AM: I said, “I’m not ever going to come back to this little town again.” So, that was the only bad incident that we had, except for the car trouble.

KY: Did you guys feel like that in L.A.?

AM: No. In fact, after we settled down in L.A., my father was still using that car, and he had a flat tire. And as soon as we pulled the car over, this one car pulled-up, “I want to help you.” It was a black man, and he was really nice and helpful. And I thought, Gee, this is sure a nice man, for helping my father. So, that kind of mended things a little bit. But unfortunately, that car was stolen in front of the house. (laughs)

KY: Oh, no. (laughs)

AM: Getting a car like that was being stolen. Of course, people see, that particular year—around that year—it’s pretty much in demand by young people. They take the engine out, and they put a big engine in there. Then they paint it, and they put big tires on and things like that. Well, this happened to be a four-door sedan that, uh—
(unidentified woman’s voice)

KY: Oh, thank you. (laughs)

AM: I had a spare tire on the front fender, which made it look like a real classical looking car. So, that was going on. (laughs) Anyway, we did our business with that car. I remember helping my father take wedding pictures. And then, we found another car. A friend of my father, he had it in the storage. Something happened and—I guess they stacked so many things on the shelf that the shelf broke and smashed the roof a little bit.

KY: Oh, no.

AM: And said he wants to get rid of that car, so my father bought that. (laughs) That’s the only thing he could get. It was hard to find cars to buy. There was a shortage. So, I think that car was assembled in Mexico because, instead of miles on it, it had

kilometers. It was confusing. (laughs) Well, I went on a honeymoon with that car. Of course, by that time, I had the speedometer changed.

KY: Oh, you did? (laughs) How funny.

AM: Well, anyway. I think right after we came back from camp—like I told you, there were people living in hotels and had clothes hanging all over the hallway and things. You go to church, their main sanctuary—the one church was the Buddhist church—had rope going crisscross, and then you had people hanging blankets to make a living quarters for themselves.

KY: Oh, I see.

AM: They lived like that. And I remember going out to Burbank by the Lockheed Aircraft Company, and there was this trailer park. I guess the government or somebody bought a whole bunch of these trailers; they were all painted kind of gray color. I guess like a camouflage. And as the factory slowed down, all these trailers became vacant, so the Japanese people moved in there. So, they were living in trailer parks, a lot of them, so I took pictures of those things.

So, going back and getting adjusted, one of the hardest things for the Japanese was finding a place to live. I remember my father's place, eventually this doctor moved out, so the whole family moved back into the house. But, there were about three or four families, outside of our own family, living there. There must have been about thirty people living in that house, so we used to eat—we had to schedule it where one group of people ate at certain time, and the next group came to eat at the kitchen. So, that kind of living went on for a while until they eventually found places to live. So, I think that period where they can make this adjustment was really hard.

KY: Were people having problems finding places to live because communities or the real estate brokers wouldn't sell to Japanese Americans?

AM: Well, there was some of that, yeah, I'm sure. In fact, when I bought the home in Montebello in 1960—about early sixties. I went to buy this one particular house in northern part of Montebello; they wouldn't sell it to me. Says, "I'm sorry, I can't sell it to you. My best friends are Japanese, but I can't sell it."

KY: _____ (inaudible).

AM: Oh, yeah. They told me right to my face. So, I had to buy it further south. Eventually, this law was passed where you can't discriminate on basis of race for selling houses. So, that changed.

[01:20:04]

KY: So, you had to wait that long before the law passed, before you found a home?

AM: Oh, yeah. Maybe it was earlier than that. Yeah, it was late fifties and early sixties, around there. That law was not in existence at the time.

KY: Was that why so many Japanese were living in Little Tokyo?

AM: Yeah, that and East L.A. The real estate brokers were not that fussy about selling to minorities in East L.A. because it was mostly Asians or Latinos that lived there. But, if you wanted to go out to a little bit better area, that's what happens. The adjustment did take quite a few years, until a lot of the people were able to settle down because of the housing shortage. So, there was a hostel on Evergreen Avenue in East L.A. There was an Evergreen hostel. I don't know if you heard of it. That building is still there. That was set-up with the help of the government, I think. They used to have these hostels for internees to try and start a new life in Chicago and New York. During the wartime, they had these things set-up so that people that lived in camp relocated to Chicago. If they don't have a place to go, they would go to these hostels whatever city has these things. Cleveland I think had one, too.

KY: Was that assigned specifically for Japanese Americans?

AM: Yeah.

KY: Wonderful.

AM: And then, from there, they would look for a hotel apartment to live.

KY: Just to kind of get you on your feet?

AM: Yeah. Some of them even had jobs, but they don't have a place to live. So, they would go to a place like that until they found a place to live. So, I remember there was a thing like that. And they would have dances there for the young people so they would have something to do. I remember going to a few of those dances. What else happened during the changes? Oh, yeah, you had other questions.

KY: Oh, yes, lots of questions but whatever your comfort is like.

AM: I seem to sidetrack.

KY: Oh, no, but I enjoy it. Oh, one question before I forget. I always wondered, when your dad was taking pictures of the camp—because I've been to the Japanese American Museum, and I've seen all those pictures—was he commissioned to do that by the government or anything like that? What inspired him to take pictures of camp life? Because those are some of the only pictures we have in the Asian American community.

AM: Yeah. Okay, when the war broke out, he had to close his business. He realized, of course, that we were going to have to get evacuated. And then, when the posters

went up saying that, in this area, certain people have to get out by certain date—they have this big sign they put on telephone poles or a bulletin board. And the time came for closing the studio; he packed everything and put it into storage. But, he kept this one lens and some film holders. He didn't tell any member of the family that he is doing this. He put it away and this camera—what happened was he used to like to go to this pawn shop on Main Street. There were pawn shops, lots of pond shops. In fact, there is still some there. He would look for cameras, real bargains. And he knew enough about lenses, so he goes to these pawn shops and looks at the cameras. He looks at it real close and looks at them, "What kind of lenses are there?" And this camera that he bought happened to have a German lens on there. The whole camera was made in Germany. It was one of the old holding cameras that opened up like this. He bought that, probably only paid about \$25 for it. He had that and when the war broke out, he took the lens out that camera. Then he got some holders, which he used to use, and he smuggle that into camp.

KY: Because you weren't supposed to bring—

AM: No, no cameras, because we were still living in California. See, from the coastline, five hundred miles inland, it was considered western defense zone. Any enemy alien or Japanese that lived in that area, camera, short wave radio, guns are all considered contraband. Even knives. So, in spite of that, he wanted to go to Manzanar. So, after he got into the camp, he told me, he said, "You know, as a photographer I have a responsibility. This camp life is going to be real important, and it should never be forgotten. So therefore, I'm going to somehow make a camera and take pictures." He found a carpenter, and he found a mechanic. This mechanic is a friend from—he used to help my father. My father used to have him repair the cars. He was very good with making things with metal. So, those two: the carpenter made the box to specifications, and then this mechanic had to figure out a way of focusing the image. For doing that, you have to move the lens in and out, so his friend thought of using pipe thread, drain pipe about that big and about that long. And he soldered that lens mount onto the pipe and then he screwed the lens onto that. By, turning the whole pipe back and forth, you could focus.

KY: Wow, amazing.

AM: But, what are you going to be about the film? He didn't have any. Then he found out there's a salesman from a wholesale hardware company in Little Tokyo. It's called California Hardware. It's in El Monte now. My father used to do work for him, for this hardware company, taking pictures of the product or whatever they are selling. I recall he took a picture of the building; it's a big five, six-story building. He took a picture of that. And it was a good relation going on between my father and the company. After he got into camp, he found out that this California Hardware salesman that he knew was coming into camp, taking orders from the camp, like garbage cans and all those other things. So, he went up and says, "Hey, listen, I want you to do something. Would you do it? Buy film for me." "Sure."

KY: Wow. Oh, good. (laughs)

AM: So, once a month he would come. Before he comes up, my father tells him that he needs this or that. And so he comes up, tells my father when he is coming up. What he did was really interesting. This man says, "I'm going to hang my jacket in the coat hanger in the hallway"—in this place where he comes and takes the order. So, he hangs it there, and my father asked one of the policeman, "There's a jacket hanging in this hallway." I guess he described to him. "In the pocket, there's some things for me, so I want you to get it for me." So, this policeman would go over there and get it and give it to my father.

[01:30:26]

KY: The film was wrapped up somehow, right?

AM: Well, I don't know if it was—maybe it was wrapped-up or something. All the policemen are internees. (laughs)

KY: Oh, I see. Okay.

AM: These police are friends that my father knew from before.

KY: I see.

AM: So, that's how he took some of the pictures. But, after a while when the studio opened up, he couldn't be bothered with that type of camera [because] it takes too long to take the picture. Anyway, until he was able to open the studio in camp, he was doing it that way. So, he couldn't take that many, because first of all, if he was taking pictures, people—if somebody finds-out that he has a camera, he might get reported. So, he used to take pictures early in the morning or something, without too many people around. That's why, in some of the pictures, you don't see that many people. And then, after he opened the studio then, you know—

KY: He was allowed to.

AM: Yeah.

KY: How was he able to open up the studio?

AM: Well, there, again, the head of the camp, his name was Ralph Merritt. This Mr. Merritt happened to know a man named Edward Weston; he's a famous photographer. Well, when Edward Weston, in his younger days, he used to live in Glendale, and he was a struggling photographer. And my father was struggling, too. He would take pictures and have the exhibit and try to sell it, but in the Caucasian community, leaves it up for two, three weeks. Not much sale. My father saw his work, and my father thought it was really nice work. He told the Japanese Camera

Club people, “There’s these nice photographs that this guy has. He’s always trying to sell it. Why don’t we have an exhibit for him in Little Tokyo?” And he had it, and, in about three weeks time, most of the pictures were sold. Now, it’s all written in this Edward Weston diary. He made a two-volume book about that thick, and he writes about this Japanese Camera Club. One of them was that his pictures just sold like anything. He said—in the diary it says, “There’s a man—he even went to borrow money,” to buy his photographs. He was very grateful to the Japanese. And my father and him became very good friends from then on.

Well, this Edward Weston heard that the Japanese were being evacuated and put into camps. So, he wrote Ralph Merritt who was the head of the camp and asked him if there was a Toyo Miyatake in camp. And then, he wrote back and said, “Yeah.” So, Edward Weston wrote to Merritt, “You know this Toyo helped me a lot”—when he was struggling, “So I want you to help him as much as you can for me because he really—” And, by that time, Edward Weston was a well-known photographer. And so, when my father proposed to open a studio, Ralph Merritt said, “Well, you know, you’re living in the western defense zone. I’d like to have you open the studio, but under the condition that you have a Caucasian photographer to shadow you.” So, my father said, “Okay.” He was able to open a studio, but there was no equipment. So, my father told this Caucasian guy to go into L.A., and go to where he used to buy things, “See what you can get.” So, he made a list of things for him to get, [and] he came back with things. But, by that time, the war was on. There wasn’t enough equipment you can buy because it was under priority. The Army Signal Corps took all they could.

KY: Oh, I see.

AM: So, he just bought whatever he can and came back. It was just enough to get started. So, he started the thing. Then this Caucasian guy—I remember one incident, my father took a groups picture. And this guy, he thought the work was finished. He took the lens off the camera, which—[recording paused] He wasn’t too happy. Both the Caucasian guy wasn’t too happy, nor my father, because my father has to set-up all the light for taking portraits. _____ (inaudible) then he has to click it. It doesn’t work out, so this guy finally quit after a few months. So, my father went to Merritt, and Merritt says, “Well, I’ll tell you what. I’ll let you take the pictures, provided that I could have a Caucasian lady to sit at the office—” one of the wives of the workers, Caucasian workers. So, he went through about five, six of those ladies. They got bored, sit there knitting, crocheting. Then the last one, Merritt told him, “Heck, you go take all the pictures you want.” He made a pass for him, certifying him as official camp photographer.

KY: Really? Wow.

AM: So, it was all because of Edward Weston.

KY: Well, your father kept a good rapport with the people that he met.

AM: And so, you never know what can happen to you in your lifetime. If you're good to people, it comes back to you. I sure learned a lot when I saw all that happening. Don't ever make enemies with people, you have to be friendly with people, and someday it's going to help you. So, after that, he took all the pictures he wanted.

KY: So, he was commissioned?

AM: Well, yeah. At the very beginning, when he first told me, before he even made the camera, he said, "This thing that is happening to the Japanese right now is something that should never be forgotten. And therefore," he says, "I have to record this thing. It's my responsibility as a photographer." So, he was going to take pictures of the camp life somehow. And, as it turned out, it is something that's very important part of the Japanese American history.

KY: Right.

AM: So, the thing that he left behind is something—I guess I never thought it would be like this, but it's turning out that way because, you know, even now, they're saying, sure there's discrimination and things like that. It could still happen. Same thing that happened when the Iran incident came up. They were almost going to intern some of those Iranians. People who decide to make a living here and stay here, even those people would have been rounded up and put into internment camps. But then, it didn't go through. You have to be on alert. But anyway, going back to Little Tokyo. What was the question again? (laughs)

KY: (laughs) My question was two parts. One: what is something that your dad taught you or instilled in you that you still carry today? And secondly, if you were to give advice or share a little piece of advice—

AM: What was the first part?

KY: Oh, oh, oh. Something that your dad taught you or instilled in you that you still carry with you today? Like maybe just being kind to people.

AM: *Oh, yeah.* Well, that's part of it, yeah. And, of course, learning the business from my father, his style of photographing and things like that. See, he wanted to be an oil painter first.

[01:40:05]

KY: Oh, he did?

AM: Yeah, but his mother, who came from an artistic family, discouraged him of it. So, he was working at my grandfather's store—my uncle was there, too. My father's older brother was actually boss of the place, so my father was working for him. There is a

photograph of him with a soda jerker outfit on. They had a soda fountain, as well as candy and things like that. They used to make manju and things.

KY: Oh, yummy. (laughs)

AM: And so, he was doing that kind of thing. Then one day, somebody gave my father a camera, and he started taking pictures with it. As friends saw those pictures, “Hey,” he said, “there’s a photography class in one of the hotels in Little Tokyo. Why don’t you go enroll over there?” So, my father went. He enrolled in it, and he was in that photography class for three months or four months. And this teacher decided to quit teaching and move to Chicago, but he learned what he can from him. Basically, that’s about the only teaching that he got from anybody for photography. All the rest he read the books and things like that. That’s why there’s a whole stack of books at home where I live. Anyway, my father’s education probably went up to junior high because when he got here—I forgot what age he was—but he was in his teens. Whichever class he went, he was the oldest one in the class. Eventually, he decided to quit and start to work. Anyway, that’s about the extent of his education. This teacher who went to Chicago, his name was Harry Shigeta. Now, he became an internationally famous photographer himself.

KY: Really?

AM: Yeah. He was in the field of advertising photography. So, even prior to World War II, he was in partnership with a guy named George Wright, and they were lifelong friends until they both retired. This Mr. Wright was his business manager. He would go out and get business for him, and Harry Shigeta would do all the photographing. His work became so well known that he used to give lectures for photography conventions. And he was a wizard at getting what they call etching knife—this is all black and white days. He used to do beautiful work by fixing the negatives with his etching knife. That wasn’t his only strong point. His strong points are, naturally, how to take nice pictures. So, he used to give lectures. Now, this man is Issei from Nagano-ken, and if you listened to him without looking at him, you’d think he’s from England or something. He had a really nice Oxford accent. And I heard him talk when he came to L.A. after he retired. He was a little man, but boy, was he a powerful man. Now, my father had a good chance to learn things from him. My father eventually learned the business from him, and then he developed his own technique. And then, I tried to learn as much as I can from my father, what he did. What did my son learn from me, I don’t know, but they are carrying on. One is in Gardena; one is here.

KY: Oh! I think your son took my graduation picture, maybe about three years ago.

AM: He did?

KY: My picture.

AM: Oh, you did?

KY: Yeah, I came here for my graduation pictures.

AM: Oh, oh! (laughs) Well, anyway, as far as—about life, I guess the main thing is you got to be good to people.

KY: Yeah. And what have you learned over the years? And what would you like to pass on?

AM: I think the same kind of thinking that I learned from my father. You're only here—or the only reason that you can keep your business going is because people are nice to you, so you got to be nice to them.

KY: Is that the key to your success?

AM: Yeah, and then try to do as much as you can for the community.

KY: Wow.

AM: So, even though I'm not in Little Tokyo, I still belong to the Little Tokyo Business Association, which I'm the vice president.

KY: Wow.

AM: They tried to get me to be president, but I told them, "Well, that's one thing I don't think I can do, especially, if I'm way out here." It's hard to keep in contact. I go to all the meetings. And then, also the chamber of commerce, I belong to them, but I don't get to go to their meetings much. But, I think you have to put back as much as you can into the community, instead of just taking things.

KY: Oh, yeah.

AM: You have to think in terms of giving more than—

KY: What you get back, what you receive. That's wonderful. (laughs)

AM: I wish I could do more, but I can't do very much. I feel guilty about that. (laughs)

KY: Oh, no, you've done so much. You really have. Do you talk to a lot of people often? Different students or community?

AM: Hm, I'm beginning to more and more nowadays, I guess. Not that much though, really.

KY: Really?

AM: No.

KY: I thought you were swamped. That's why I called you a month-and-a-half in advance. I thought your schedule was swamped.

AM: Well, I get calls from Japanese television. They come to make documentaries over here of certain people. Right now, in particular, there's one—this man named Fred Wada, he had a lot influence in the Olympics, bringing Olympics into L.A. This last one? He had a lot to do with that.

KY: Oh.

AM: And this man name Michio Ito, who is a dancer who was here in the 1920s, my father became really good friends with him. I guess he saw my father, the way he took pictures, which was really completely different from the way these photographers were taking of dancers of those days. I wish I could show it to you, but I don't have it here. I have most everything at my home.

KY: You know, can I meet with you another time? Or do you have time to meet again?

AM: Oh, okay, sure. These photographs of the dancers were something really unique. Well, he worked as an apprentice to a stage lighting technician. My father told me that he learned a lot about lighting from this man.

KY: Wow.

[01:50:00]

AM: The lighting, even from those days way back, thirties and things, his lighting was quite different from other studios. I just got a phone call a couple days ago from—what was it? Massachusetts or something. This is a Japanese American professor writing an article about this one lady that came from Hawaii; this lady eventually got a doctor's degree in 1935 or '36. There was a portrait taken by my father, and the daughter who lives in Hawaii, still, said that the only photograph that she had of this lady was wiped out in the storm, hurricane or something. So, he called, and asked me if I still had a negative from 1936. I said, "Gee, I hardly think so, but I'll look for it." He said it was such a different kind of picture that this sister remembered so vividly that she described what it was like. So, she said, "I wish you have it." So, I've been looking. And then another picture, recently—it's not Japanese. It's a Caucasian or something. This lady had a portrait taken by my father after World War II. This lady passed away, and there is no kin left. So, saw the name on there, saw our studio name. "Here, I brought you this picture. There's nobody left so I saw this name, so I brought it to you." And I looked at it. I remember the type of _____ (inaudible) that we used to use; I even know the name of it. So, I accepted. I said, "Thank you for remembering us." So, now and then, people like that pop up and ask. But anyway, this Michio Ito—oh, there's an artist name, Taki Seiichi. He's a famous painter form

- Japan. He was here in 1932 and '33. And, in fact, his paintings are so well known that there is a club called Seiichi Club.
- KY: Oh, my god.
- AM: His name is Taki Seiichi.
- KY: Uh-huh.
- AM: Well, he lived in L.A. for one year. He was poor, no money. He used to stop and see my father almost every day while he was here. You could tell that he was struggling.
- KY: Wow.
- AM: Well, they tried—see, this was right after the Depression. He was trying to sell his paintings, but not too many people in Los Angeles could afford to buy them. So, what some of the friends did over in L.A., he took him to farmers: Oxnard, Guadalupe, and San Jose, that way. Those farmers had money, so they bought it from him. One of them is this guy name Aratani, George Aratani. I don't know if you've heard of him.
- KY: I've heard his name. I don't know why I have.
- AM: Anyway, he had this Kenwood stereo equipment company and this dishware that he manufactures. He gets it made in Japan, and he sells it. I can't think of the name. My wife would know. Anyway, they lived in Hollywood Hills in a very nice home. He's on the board of directors of the bank, _____ (inaudible) Bank or _____ (inaudible) and all that, very influential man. And so, he has a couple of his paintings. My father happened to have one, too. Of course, my father didn't buy it. There was a friend of my father—friends with Taki Seiichi. Seiichi and this guy got in a big fight.
- KY: Oh, no.
- AM: And so, this man told my father, "I don't want this painting. You could have it." My father said, "Oh, sure," and took it. (laughs) It happened to be one of the very few rare oil paintings that this man did. Anyway, so they are coming to make a documentary on him, too.
- KY: Oh.
- AM: I wish my father was still living. I don't have to go through all of this. (laughs) So anyway, it seems like I'm going off track all the time.
- KY: Oh, no, not at all.
- AM: So, want to go eat lunch?

KY: Why don't you guys go ahead—Hi. (lady's voice appears in the background)

[recording paused]

AM: I remember there was one in East L.A., but it was the only group of Japanese kids that played together. Even though they belonged to the YMCA, they more or less stuck within their own group. Of course, now it's changed. People are able to join the athletic club and members of the Rivera Country club. Things have changed a bit after the war. I think this American—Japanese American that served in the arm force—442nd/100th Battalion—I'm sure that has a lot to do with it.

KY: Definitely.

AM: In spite of going through the evacuation and things, you know? The Japanese still served their country like that. I think it is a big plus. I'm sure that has a lot to do with it. Not only that, I think compared to other ethnic groups—well, I think the Latin Americans are very family oriented, too. The Japanese, especially, are very family oriented. Also, they stress the fact that you have to get an education. A lot went out to the university and became professional or go into politics and things like that, which is a big help, too. I think more and more, the Sansei and Yonsei should get involved with politics and things like that. The Nisei paved the way, so the Sansei, Yonsei got to follow through with it. Norman Mineta¹, he's retiring. Well, there's Matsui who is pretty active. So, there should be more and more Sansei, Yonsei taking part in that. It's going to be hard though. It's not going to be easy.

KY: Oh, yeah.

AM: I think that if we keep going the way we are, everything should be all right.

KY: I think so, too.

AM: I'm optimistic. (chuckles)

KY: That's wonderful—²

END OF INTERVIEW

¹ Norman Mineta, O.H. 1328, Center for Oral and Public History.

² Oral history ends abruptly.