

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Japanese American Oral History Project

An Oral History with KATSUMI KUNITSUGU

Interviewed

By

Karen Yamemoto

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NARRATOR: KATSUMI KUNITSUGU

INTERVIEWER: Karen Yamemoto

DATE: November 29, 1995

LOCATION: Los Angeles, California

PROJECT: Japanese American

KY: Okay, well, just for the record, would you mind stating your first and last name?

KK: Okay, my name is Katsumi Kunitsugu. Katsumi is a boy's name, but in Japanese is written with a kanji character that shows that it's a girl's name.

KY: Oh, okay.

KK: I guess my father wanted a boy—I'm the oldest—but since he got a girl, then he had to compromise. (laughs) But, everybody calls me Kats, and I don't mind. They don't have to spell both Katsumi and Kunitsugu, which I usually have to do. Kunitsugu is rather a rare last name, I think. Although there is another family—in fact, Claire Kunitsugu was the Nisei queen in 1965, I believe, but she was no relation.

KY: No relation.

KK: No direct relation, although her folks originally came from the prefecture of Yamaguchi, and my husband's family are also from that prefecture.

KY: Oh, really?

KK: My parents are from Hiroshima-ken, which is right next door.

KY: Would you consider yourself Nisei, Issei, Sansei, or Yonsei?

KK: I'm Nisei. My parents came here, and my father, in fact, came I think probably about the early part of the century, about 1904 or thereabouts. And he used to tell me that he snuck in, he really swam across the Rio Grande to come in.

KY: Really?

KK: Uh-huh. But, his older brother, my uncle, was already here. And in 1906 they had that San Francisco earthquake so that a lot of people then claimed that their immigration papers were lost in the earthquake because a lot of people landed in San Francisco. That was the port of entry. And so, when my father made some money later on, and he decided to go to Japan. He got a passport legitimately and everything, which legitimized his stay here and everything.

KY: Do you know what year that your father came to the United States?

KK: I think it probably was about 1904 or thereabouts, although, he claims it was 1906 because it would coincide with the San Francisco earthquake. And my mother did not come until 1924, I believe, because of the Japanese Exclusion Act. And so, my father, he had already married once, and his first wife and child died in childbirth. So, my mother is the second wife. He married her in 1924; I was born in 1925. We went to Japan in 1933. My sister was one-year-old—younger sister—at that time. And then, my mother and younger sister and I, we stayed for four years in Japan, which is where I learned most of my background in Japanese. Of course, I went to school and everything, so I learned to read Japanese, and I kept it up because I like to read. I just read everything I can lay my hands on in Japanese, so I'm perfectly fluent in Japanese. In a sense, I guess, you can call me a Kibei, which is a Nisei born here and went to Japan for usually a longer stay. Most Kibei were sent to Japan either because their parents could not take care of them—they were both working and they couldn't take care of them—or they were sent to Japan for education purposes. They stayed there until they reached eighteen, and then the boys would be eligible for military service in Japan. They usually had double citizenship, dual citizenship. But, in order to escape that they came back to the States—and these were the Kibei, so most true Kibei speak Japanese as their first language.

KY: What would you consider your first language?

KK: Oh, it's English. I think in English. It comes much easier for me. But, I get by in Japanese. And, as I said, I read just about everything in Japanese, except the classics because I didn't go to the higher education there. I only went to the sixth grade in Japan.

KY: So, what year did you come back to the United States?

KK: We came back in 1937 when I was twelve, and, when we first went to Japan in '33, I was in the third grade. I had skipped, I think, half a grade or something, and I was in grade three. In Japan, they put me back to the second grade because I didn't speak Japanese that well. At any rate, just enough daily conversation to get by. And I was going to Japanese school here, but, of course, my main language is English. So, it took me about two years to really acclimate myself to the culture and the way things are done in Japan, and quit being such a rebel about everything. And, by the time, we came back in 1937—of course, I had intended to stay in Japan all my life, so I felt a resistance to coming back to the United States. But, in 1937, Japan had invaded

China, and the war cause was getting really strong in Japan. My mom thought that it didn't look too good and she wanted the family together, so we came back to the States. Fortunately. (laughs) Who knows, I might have been in Hiroshima, otherwise.

KY: Oh, yeah.

KK: We were living, I would say about fifty, sixty miles from Hiroshima, the city of Hiroshima. And I lost several relatives in the atomic bombing. My father's oldest sister was married to a man who ran a hotel in Hiroshima. And although the women were evacuated, all the men folk were in the center of the city so they were all gone. Then, on my mother's side, one of my uncles—one of her older brothers—died not in the bombing itself, but he was one of those who went to help the very next day. I guess he got the illness from being exposed to the bomb effects and everything, and so he passed away from the—

KY: So, what was it like when you came back to the United States?

KK: In those days, in 1937, we didn't have any English as a Second Language or any of these programs to make it easier for immigrant children to adjust. And so, what happened was, I was in the sixth grade in Japan, but they put me back to the fourth grade to re-learn my English because I had completely forgotten my English. [I] never used it in Japan. The only thing I was strong in was math because Japan is very strong in math. And, of course, being put back to the fourth grade, I was miles ahead of my classmates in math. So, during the math classes, the teachers used to let me draw or do whatever I wanted, and gradually, I caught up in a year. But, I did graduate from high school when I was nineteen, and that high school was Heart Mountain, Wyoming, in the relocation center. So, that in 1941, when Pearl Harbor happened—'42, we were evacuated in May. I went to Pomona Assembly Center and then to Heart Mountain Relocation Center, stayed there two years, graduated from high school there. And they had various people encouraging students to go out to college in the Midwest and East. So, I wrote letters, and I wanted to go into journalism.

KY: Oh, you did?

KK: Uh-huh. So, I wrote to Syracuse, Marquette, Wisconsin, Michigan, Stephens College, University of Missouri—oh, I think I wrote to about ten or twelve colleges, and I think two accepted me. Wisconsin was one of them. They had a good reputation for journalism, and I went there and worked my way through as a housegirl. (laughs)

[00:10:26]

KY: So, your major was in journalism?

KK: Yes, uh-huh. And I came back in 1948—that's when I graduated. I tried to find a job in Wisconsin, but nobody was employing—women had a hard time to begin with, and then I was a Japanese American so, with that kind of handicap, I could not find a job out there. So, I came back to Los Angeles, and I was helping my uncle in his grocery store. I think I must have worked for him one week, and this fellow came by and said, "Would you like to be a reporter for my new newspaper." I said, "Oh, yeah," without even asking how much he was paying or anything. (laughs) And it turned out to be starvation wages, but still, it was all right. So, I went to work for—it's no longer here—but an English weekly called *Crossroads*.

KY: *Crossroads*.

KK: Um-hm.

KY: It was published for quite a while. I left it in 1950 because I got married and started having kids, and I couldn't work fulltime. And, actually, I worked in Little Tokyo from 1948—but at that time, about a year—and then I had my first child. And so, most of the next ten years, we lived in the Crenshaw area.

KY: Crenshaw?

KK: Uh-huh. Oh, we used to come into Little Tokyo frequently, but I wasn't working here. Until about 1960—maybe '63 or there about, I started writing a column for *Kashu Mainichi*. That was a weekly column. Eventually, got more frequent and then the publisher asked me if I wanted to work there, more or less fulltime, not put in eight hours but still come back at two o'clock, so that I was home by the time the kids got home from school. So, I started working at the paper, more or less, fulltime. And I was the English section editor of *Kashu Mainichi* until 1973. I got into an argument with the publisher. I had written something—it had something to do with politics. I don't even remember what it was all about. But, he—what I had written had gotten somebody all riled up and he threatened to sue the paper. And so, I asked the publisher, Robert Takasuwi, whether what I had written was libel. And he said, "Well, was it the truth?" And I said, "Yes." "Well," he said, "it's not liable." So, I told the publisher. Well, he still didn't want to be sued, so he apologized in my name. And so, I got angry and I resigned, and I went to work for Horikawa the restaurant over here.

KY: Uh-huh.

KK: So, I was there for about a year-and-a-half as Mike Horiwaka's secretary working as a secretary. And, during that time, I got interested in the business association and Nisei Week because Horikawa was very actively participating in Nisei Week, and the fund drive for the culture center was beginning. My husband was the first project manager for the redevelopment of Little Tokyo and that started in 1969, so we were sort of involved while all of that was going on in Little Tokyo at that time.

KY: Can you tell me a little bit about the redevelopment program?

KK: It started out—actually in early 1960s. At that time, city hall was expanding. Parker Center, where the police headquarters is now, that whole lot was part of Little Tokyo. There was a big hotel there called Olympic Hotel. And there were stores along North San Pedro Street on the west side and, of course, on the north side of First Street. It was all a very active part of Little Tokyo, and the city bought up all that because they wanted to expand and set up the police headquarters there. And then, they were beginning to buy more land north of First Street, between San Pedro and Central, so people in Little Tokyo got alarmed because—although Little Tokyo, during the war, was called Bronzeville because there was no Japanese there during the war. The black people who were coming in from the South to get the jobs in the shipbuilding and airplane manufacturing during the war, they came in for a living here. They had nightclubs here [and] everything. But, when the relocation centers closed, the Japanese came back. Gradually, it became Little Tokyo again, and although only very few Japanese actually owned the buildings, they wanted to set up their businesses again here. It was a familiar place. It was in the center of town. It had a history as Little Tokyo, the center of Japanese community ever since the beginning of the century. So, I think the first Japanese to come back after the war and start a store here was Mr. Wuda. I remember telling you that Sato Wuda, who was the president of the Anti-Crime Association, here now, is his son. And Mr. Wuda started his department store. He purchased the building on the corner of First and San Pedro, the 312 Building, and he also had several other properties in Little Tokyo. And soon, a lot of other people came back and started the businesses again. So, in 1948, when I was working with *Crossroads*, we had our offices up on the top floor of the old 312 building. It was called the tall building in those days.

At that time, there was still mixture of a drug store—or liquor store was owned by a black person or being run by a black owner; then there were other stores. So, the black community and the Japanese community got along. There were no incidences of any kind. In those days, Little Tokyo—Los Angeles in general had a much better—maybe because we had fewer people in those days. But, I remembered going to Roosevelt High School, before the war, in Boyle Heights, that there was a good mixture of different kinds of people. You had Jewish kids. You had a sprinkling of blacks—not too many—a lot of Latinos, of course. Traditionally, Boyle Heights has been Latino and a lot of Japanese, some Chinese, and a lot of white kids, too, just a mixture. Everybody sort of took it for granted that you were different. It wasn't made such a big thing. And we got along. Same thing with Little Tokyo after the war. I think black business people [and] Japanese business people got along. And eventually they realized it was traditionally—historically—Japanesetown, and so gradually the blacks moved out and more Japanese came in until it became, again, Japanesetown. And that went on. And we used to write editorials in the *Crossroads* about what's the future for a place like Little Tokyo? Not too many people coming here after the war were from Japan, even though there were refugee laws that allowed a lot of people to come here, but not in as great a number as before the war.

KY: Why do you think that is?

[00:20:01]

KK: Well, I think simply because during the aftermath of the war, people were really upset in Japan. They weren't thinking in terms—I guess, they were withdrawing more into themselves and not thinking of going overseas because what—did it get them going over to Manchuria or China? It just got them nowhere and took the energy of everybody they came in contact with. So, I don't think they were thinking in terms of expanding overseas so much as trying to keep their country together. And, of course, there were a lot of needy families, many of them who had relatives here managed to come here. But, there wasn't a wave of immigrants to help refuel Japantown like it was with the Chinatown and later on Koreatown. It was just wave after wave of immigrants that kept refueling the vitality of the town and the necessity for having that kind of ethnic center. So, that by 1960, there were—of course, physically this part of town is very old.

Actually, Los Angeles started in Olvera Street, in that area. This part of town is very old. The buildings were over fifty years old and many of them didn't have earthquake safety features at all. So, when the city hall started to expand and the people got alarmed about—city hall was beginning to gobble-up parts of Little Tokyo and pretty soon there won't be any more Little Tokyo. A group of people got together and they formed a redevelopment association, Little Tokyo Redevelopment Association. They tried to stem the tide so to speak and make presentations at the city council and tried to develop new buildings on their own. The 321 Building on Second Street was one of them, but that was about the extent of redevelopment on their own. It is a complicated process that what you need is the power of eminent domain that when you have a redevelopment project that is the power of the government to forcibly get land and to put it together into a parcel that can be developed into something else. And, of course, it brings hardship on the people who have to give up their land. For instance, *Rafu Shimpō* used to be right around here, in front here.

KY: Really?

KK: But, they had just moved from North Los Angeles Street to over here; they were here for maybe five or six years. And then, along comes the culture and community center, and they want to develop their culture and community center here. So, *Rafu Shimpō* has to move; they have to sell their land, of course, at what is considered a fair price, market price. But, they have to move, and that involves moving the printing plant and everything else. It's upsetting and I don't think—Michael Kuma is the publisher now—but I don't think his father ever forgave us. (laughs) It does involve a lot of hardship from a lot of people, redevelopment. But, what was accomplished, mainly, I think—and I think my husband had a lot to do with it—was the fact that in 1971 we had the Sylmar Earthquake. And what happened was this Third Street right over here used to be a lot of old buildings, old hotels, old brick buildings with no reinforcement. And with that earthquake, most of the buildings on Third Street became uninhabitable. Part of the walls were broken and fallen down on

the street. Of course, you couldn't live in the hotels anymore. They had closed them down because they were too dangerous.

And what happened then was Mr. Nixon was in the White House, and fortunately working for Mr. Nixon was Bill Morimoto. And he arranged it so that we could see Secretary of HUD [Housing and Urban Development] who was George Romney at that time. My husband and about eight to twelve local people paid their own way, took a redeye flight to Washington, and met with Secretary Romney. They asked him if HUD could advance \$3 million dollars as an emergency fund so that all the old buildings here could be torn down and the property bought by the redevelopment agency so that the redevelopment, here, is ahead of schedule. But, because of the earthquake, something had to be done.

KY: Yeah.

KK: And he understood. And so, we got the funds. That's how, actually, Little Tokyo Towers, _____ (inaudible), and Union Church were able to build because the land was made available. And because they are non-profit groups, they paid only a fraction of the cost to acquire the land. So, did we. Fortunately, they had an old church they could sell. At least they had some money to start with. And something like Little Tokyo Tower, which is senior citizen housing, you had a lot of federal money that you could tap because it's for senior citizens. It's subsidized housing. So, there was Title IV, title this, and title that. You could apply for this funding.

Japanese Culture and Community Center, we started out with zero because it was a completely new concept. We had to find our own funding from whatever way we could. And, actually, we got a lot of help from the CRA, Community Redevelopment Agency. We got a lot of help from the local community because having a community center, a cultural center, was a longtime dream of the community. And you know the scholarship fund that the chamber of commerce has? Every year they give scholarships to outstanding Japanese American students from high school.

KY: _____ (inaudible).

KK: Yeah. That fund was actually the first attempt to raise funds for the community center, and that was in 1960. And that was the centennial, the one hundredth year, marking the centennial of Treaty of Friendship. You know? Trade and friendship between Japan and the United States. Well, they managed to raise \$100,000, but that wouldn't even begin to buy the land, let alone building, so they sort of gave up and applied the money to the scholarship fund.

So, ten years later, finally—no, no, twenty years later, finally, the time was right. We got local funding. We got money from CRA, some money from Japan for the theater, which came a little bit later. And even then, it was very difficult because now there is machinery where you apply _____ (inaudible), and they come and they look at you and they say okay or not. Then they tell everyone that belongs to _____ (inaudible), "Okay, you give so much. You give so much." They applied the ratio to the different associations—there's an automobile association. There's an electronic

manufacturing association. There's an insurance association, and all these associations have members, companies that belong to them. And they have this ratio of giving. Actually, the museum had a fairly easy time of raising \$10 million. But, we came before that and this kind of set-up was not there. But, fortunately for us, we had Ambassador Hodgson who was in Japan and Ambassador Ushiba who was in Washington, and they, sort of, took us under their wings and introduced us to _____ (inaudible) and introduced us to the key people in Japan. And Mr. Magida and Mr. Doizaki went over there many times to ask for funding and explain what we were doing here. And, finally, we got altogether four million dollars from Japan, and they helped build the [Aratani] Theatre. So, it was quite an effort.

KY: Kind of neat to be part of that.

KK: *Oh, it is!* In fact, I still can't believe that we have this facility here. It's worth fourteen million. It's all mortgage free; it belongs to the community. And we have programs going on every year, so it's a big asset of the community.

[00:30:02]

KY: I think that people in my generation, we take this for granted.

KK: Sure, sure. Uh-huh. For us who had to kind of struggle—I remember my husband and I—and Tosh Terasawa _____ (inaudible), who died recently, he was president for a longtime. We used to go out every night. Go to Venice, go to Orange County to talk to different JACL groups. Mr. Doizaki was the first president; he was the one who really went out. He was the president of American Fish Company. But anyway, half the time he wasn't there at his business. He was trying to raise money for culture center. And he would go out to Orange County, Ventura County, and talk to the rich farmers and tell them to give money to culture center. They were the ones who raised the first really difficult \$3 and \$4 million dollars for the community. Until we raised that, the CRA won't even look at us. You have to show us that you really want this community center. So, that's what we did. It was raised, \$1,000 here, \$2,000 there. Mr. Sakioka who's dinner is going to be held tonight, richest man—Japanese American—he gave \$20,000, which in those days was huge, huge, huge. And even he, Mr. Doizaki, went there several times to ask him to donate. And so many, many people—[recording paused]

—started, officially, as part of the Committee Redevelopment Agency as a project when the community at Little Tokyo asked to become part of CRA [Community Redevelopment Agency]. And you have to have engineers check all the buildings to make sure that at least 60 percent were below standards and all that. And after that, the people have to show that they want the redevelopment. And all that finally went through in 1969, and Little Tokyo became an official project of the CRA. CRA has other projects, the biggest being Downtown Los Angeles itself. And they have Pico Union, they have Hoover District, and various districts all through Los Angeles that they are redeveloping at the same time, so you're always competing for funds. My husband was project manager for five years in the beginning, and it was

very difficult to do the master planning, to get the people together, to decide what's our priority? What does Little Tokyo need most of all? And that's where the citizens committee got together, and they decided the first priority was Little Tokyo Towers, a home for senior citizens.

KY: Right.

KK: Second, was the hotel because when Mr. Kajima built his Kajima building, the only really decent hotel—that used to be the Miyako Hotel—in that corner, was gone, and you need a hotel to kind of anchor the place. So, in contrary to a lot of thinking—especially among the young people—that the Japanese companies were eager and waiting to come in to Little Tokyo and grab everything for themselves, the CRA had a hard time convincing the Japanese companies to invest in Little Tokyo. They thought it was a slum, and they were looking more toward Downtown Los Angeles. They could care less about Little Tokyo, so that, actually, we had talk Japan Airlines and Kajima and the rest of the people into getting together and forming this investment company to develop the New Otani. And [it's a] good thing because the New Otani is an anchor for Little Tokyo now. It's a first rate hotel, and it's well run and does Little Tokyo a lot of good. Many people don't realize how much it means to have a hotel like the New Otani right here in Little Tokyo.

And then, after that, shopping centers needed to be developed. It takes a long time for people to get into the development mode. Especially, old time people in Little Tokyo were used to going into old buildings, not putting in too much money to improve it—just renting it out—and getting as much money as they can and selling the property and moving on. So, investing money into a piece of property, then building something new, and then looking for future profits is something they had a very hard time imagining. And so, the first shopping center, which is what's now Japanese Village Plaza [JVP], had a hard time getting off the ground because we wanted local development. And the first group of local people who tried to develop just couldn't get it. And the interest, of course, was very high, so they had a hard time borrowing the capital to start something like that.

KY: Were people coming in?

KK: Well, Little Tokyo was a very active commercial entity in those days, so, actually, they had no trouble finding tenants then. It was just they weren't used to thinking in terms of long-term investment, putting in money now and waiting until maybe ten, fifteen years to see the first profit, and so the first one went down. The second one was David Hume and he got of investors with him to develop JVP.

KY: What's JVP? *Oh!* Japanese Village Plaza. (laughs)

KK: I think David did a very good job developing Japanese Village Plaza. He was always ahead of the times, of the people around him, because he was always thinking in terms of having events and things to draw people there, to advertise and he had the mentality of looking ahead. But, people still could only see a tunnel vision of two

feet ahead, and unless something made money right then and now, they weren't going to put any money in. So, they really resisted the idea, I guess, of shopping merchants association where they put money in for advertising altogether and stuff like that. I know David had a hard time, but I think he did a very good job with the Japanese Village Plaza. Of course, he's sold it now, because he's retired, but he did a very good job. And, in the meantime, times were good, and the Japanese companies, then, began to buy land right and left. Same thing, price of land sky high. I mean, it was way beyond what we imagined it would be, and they were talking about putting thirty story condominiums, million dollar condominiums and everything before the bubble burst.

KY: Were there outside investors from Japan?

KK: Um-hm. Things got a little bit out of hand.

KY: How did that affect the local owners, small shop owners that were local residents of Los Angeles?

KK: Well, in the first place, I think the nature of Little Tokyo changed. And it was inevitable because when you redevelop, naturally, the nature of the place is going to change. I think that goes with the territory because when you have old, familiar buildings with low rent, people are pretty much free to do what they want. And we had some wonderful, wonderful little stores in the old days, you know? In the sixties and seventies.

KY: Um-hm.

KK: There were some really cute stores and—like Carol _____ (inaudible) had her ceramics place here. Actually, it wasn't zoned for having an oven, but she had one there and she used to make her beautiful Raku ware. It was all for sale right there. And—Little Tokyo was a very interesting place. But, that same atmosphere is hard to manage in a new high-rise building where I think the owners—because I think they want to realize their profits than go for the tenants that are more reliable. And who are the tenants? They're banks. (laughs) And, you know, when you have banks on the main floor they close it. In those days, they used to close at three o'clock, and then there was no more traffic around that area.

[00:40:06]

KY: Oh.

KK: Because banks closed, you know? So, gradually, I think—well, quickly, maybe, the character of the floor level of Little Tokyo changed. You didn't find these interesting little stores anymore. Maybe a lot of the restaurants still survived, you know, the mom and pop restaurants, but some of the really interesting store went by the wayside, unfortunately.

KY: Interesting.

KK: In that sense, I think maybe there was not enough planning, perhaps, for Little Tokyo as a whole to say that we want this kind of business, or that kind of business, to kind of keep the character of Little Tokyo. It is difficult to tell people why don't you open this kind of clothing store here when people don't even know where that clothing store is going to go or not, and pretty much what opens is what people are willing to take a chance on. It is sort of hit and miss and times change, and it's very difficult to get everything all together. I think with the bubble bursting for—a lot of unfortunate things happening in combination like the '92 riots and then the Gulf War and the depression that followed that still hasn't given-up and the tendency of Washington for smaller and smaller government. Oh, and the Cold War ending. So, that the air—what do you call it? The airplane industry suddenly went down, and a lot factors come in to play that what you thought might be going on forever doesn't. So, it's very difficult for a town to try to find its character, its identity, and to carry it forward.

KY: Talking about the sixties and the reconstruction period, with the redevelopment, were they trying to target a business community? Or were they trying to maintain a cultural climate?

KK: I think both, because you can't just have a commercial center. People come to a center—Japantown—for different reasons. I think that what still draws people here are the churches, the funerals, weddings, organizations like the prefectural associations, and non-profit groups in the community. And things like the cultural center putting on Kabuki, and stuff from Japan and people come here to see that sort of thing. In the old days, of course, people came here because this was the only place that you could buy Japanese food. This was the only place that shopping can be done in Japanese.

KY: This was pre-World War?

KK: Well, even after the war, up until the mid-sixties, and then there were so many people coming over from Japan that it made sense for the _____ (inaudible) to open. It made sense for a lot of small, tiny versions of Little Tokyo to open in Gardena, Orange County, and here and there. So, you didn't have to come all the way to Little Tokyo to buy tofu or eat Japanese food. Sashimi restaurants were popping all over Japanese restaurants.

KY: Do you know what the community was like before the war? Even though I know you were living in Wyoming or Wisconsin.

KK: That was during the war—before the war, actually, where we lived were ghettos, and Little Tokyo was one ghetto. And the people that had businesses here actually lived here. They lived in little upstairs rooms with their growing children, and the children actually played in the streets. And their parents, while keeping the store, also kept an eye on their children because they were playing on the sidewalks there. And then you

- had other ghettos where Japanese kind of congregated together. One was uptown, what is now Koreatown. In a smaller version was another, kind of—
- KY: Residential?
- KK: Residential area. It was called uptown. And then, Gardena, before the war, was also a center for Japanese in what Japanese used to call *Sainganku* that was Southwest L.A. And then, after the war, it busted out into this Crenshaw area—Japanese, you know? It rivaled Little Tokyo because there was so many Japanese living in the Crenshaw area. So, all along Jefferson and Crenshaw, that intersection was really Japanese. Up and down Jefferson from about Western up and down Crenshaw; from Crenshaw Square to maybe Exposition or somewhere. Even down to Olympic you had Japanese stores here and there, Japanese movie houses, but then, all of a sudden—and this is the part I think Little Tokyo is strongest—perhaps, it has the permanence that other Japanese centers don't—is that Little Tokyo is not dependent on the resident, whereas Crenshaw area was entirely dependent on the people who lived there. And when the housing patterns changed, all of a sudden, people were moving out of Crenshaw. They were moving to Monterey Park. They were moving to Hollywood Park. They were moving to Gardena and Torrance, Palos Verdes. And as they went upscale, they were moving to other areas of town. And Crenshaw just shrunk. And it was no more.
- KY: Little Tokyo, on the other hand, what was the resident population like pre-World War II, do you know, and then after [war]?
- KK: I think right after the war, there might have been something of maybe not more than five thousand I would think. But, there were people living in old hotels and all that. But, now the only people living in Little Tokyo are those that live in Little Tokyo Towers and Miyako Gardens; that's a hundred units. Three hundred units in Little Tokyo towers. And then Tokyo Villa, which is a market rate condominium housing, that's, I think, 140 units. I don't think even that much.
- KY: Where do you think most of the people are coming from today? Or who is the target?
- KK: They live all over L.A., and they just come here to work. They have businesses here, or they have profession lives here. Otherwise, they don't live here. Maybe a few do live in Tokyo Villa because those condominiums are expensive, more expensive than some of the houses people live in. But, most of the people that work here live elsewhere. Now, in Little Tokyo—and then the firm building, which was rehabilitated and it has, I think, about seventy residents now.
- KY: When you walk out in Little Tokyo, are most of the people, would you say, tourists, or they work here in Little Tokyo, or they're the Sanseis and Yonseis that come here for cultural reasons?

KK: It depends on the time of the day and what day of the week it is. Say most of the time around noon, the people you see are people from city hall in Downtown Los Angeles that are eating lunch here. There's a big lunch crowd that comes to Little Tokyo to eat. And on weekends, you'll find a lot of Asians, non-Japanese but they're Asian—Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese—and they come here for shopping and Yaohan or shopping anywhere and sort of hang out—the young people, especially—and they just like the atmosphere, I guess.

KY: There are mostly businesses in Little Tokyo right now?

KK: Um-hm.

[00:50:01]

KY: What are the things that Little Tokyo is trying to do to maintain the Japanese culture?

KK: Well, I think that we and the Japanese American National Museum, of course, are two of the—what we call—destinations that people come to Little Tokyo for. And we are trying very hard to have events here that would draw people to Little Tokyo, and for that purpose, we are trying to use the theatre as much as possible, trying to sponsor family oriented events. We have community programs department here that puts on the children's day, the Oshogatsu for New Year's, and especially child oriented—we have workshops for children that teach them how to make kimonos and make kites and origami and how to write their name in Japanese, and things like that.

And we have the Children's Day in May. We have what we call Chibi-K—*Chibi* is Japanese for little kids—a kilometer run where they run up and down San Pedro. It's not really a race because everybody wins. Nobody is number one or two. Everybody gets a goody bag. Everybody gets a free breakfast from the Japanese American Optimists. Everybody has fun. And they bring a new toy, unwrapped, so we can gather all those together and give it to places like Para Los Niños and slum kids. And so, it's different programs we are trying to keep up there so that people will regard as place where people can come for Japanese experience.

KY: You were talking about how the nature of Little Tokyo had change from the sixties to the present day. Are you familiar with or do you think it changed at all prior to World War II?

KK: Well, for a long time, of course, it was strictly Japanese. Enough Issei who spoke Japanese, and the Nisei whose very ties were with the Japanese community in a real way, but, with the Sansei—now we are into the Yonsei, actually, because they are the ones that are going into the job market. And with the Sansei generation, we're already finding that a lot of them are marrying out of the Japanese groups so they have partners who are non-Japanese. Their interests are not concentrated in Japanese or Japantown. They have wider interests. And their kids may be sometimes going to judo, kendo, whatever, but they are also going into a lot of other stuff and probably more into pep club in school, bands, athletics, and so on so that there isn't that sense

- of close community anymore. It's reflected in Little Tokyo itself, in that you don't find generations in the same business. In other words, the two confectionery stores, Mikawaya and Fugetsu-Do, they are about the only ones that—now the Nisei and Sansei are running it. Maybe a few others, _____ (inaudible) Place, Tokyo Place, a few others, but most of the other stores you see here, restaurants included, are all run by what we call new Issei, Shin Issei, who came here after the war, or people who wandered over from Japan as young students and wanted to stay here because they like it, the freedom and everything. And they found it very easy to find work. And also you're finding, especially in ownership, more—in fact, some of the major—for instance, the Japanese Village Plaza is now owned by Taiwanese-Chinese.
- KY: Interesting.
- KK: Uh-huh. And this big gray building that was re-vamped is called Brunswick Square that is owned by a Singapore financial interest. And, I think Korean interests recently bought the 312 Building from Sakaru so the ownership is not Japanese.
- KY: Interesting.
- KK: And eventually, probably, what you're going to find is that this won't be Japantown, Asiatown maybe.
- KY: How interesting. You think so?
- KK: Uh-huh. But, I doubt it will be strictly Japanese. In the first place, there's not that many Japanese Americans. We're a drop in the bucket when it comes to minorities.
- KY: How interesting.
- KK: Toward the beginning of the century, the Japanese were increasing at the fastest speed, and they were the most—they weren't the most numerous but they were the most noticeable. They were sort of conquering the agricultural industry, and the produce industry, the fishing industry. They were really making amazing progress in many of the major industries in California before the war. Then suddenly, the immigration was stopped, and you could only wait until the second generation came of age and then the third generation. We are not increasing at a rapid rate, so, as a minority, we are getting smaller and smaller, rather than larger and larger.
- KY: Can you give more insight about what you personally see or through your interaction with other people in the organization, what do you see of the future—
- KK: I think it's the more seat of Japan's feeling and observation—I've been coming to Little Tokyo every day for more than twenty years, and some of the changes are gradual. Others, you wake up one day and say, "What's going on here?" Like the non-Japanese ownership of major buildings is one thing, too. That happened overnight.

KY: What do you see in the future of Little Tokyo?

KK: Well, I don't know. It's hard to say. I can't see the economy changing so much that we are going to get suddenly a wave of Japanese immigration. And unless we do, the Japanese American influence is going to be smaller and smaller simply because we are assimilating in the best way possible with this intermarriage and that consciousness and identity as a separate type of racial make-up is simply not there. And you sort of have to artificially implant the idea—like my grandchildren are both—I have five. They are from two of my kids. Both of my kids, my son and my daughter are married to Caucasians, and so the children are half-and-half. And they are not very Japanese half-and-half. They are more Caucasian half-and-half. (laughs) Oh, sometimes they express a little bit of interest in—sometimes when they are here—during Nisei week, I'll take them to dancing and buy the girls an outfit, but it's like buying it for a *hakujin* friend or something. (laughs) They're not Japanese in that sense. Well, what Nisei is Japanese? Already from the Nisei generation, you're not very Japanese anyway.

KY: And you would identify yourself as Japanese, Japanese American, Asian American? How would you—

KK: Oh, I still consider myself very much Japanese American whereas I think my daughter would—she knows she's Japanese American, but she's not all that aggressive about it. And it doesn't bother her one bit. She's just Claire Fant (laughs) doing her own thing, mother and stay-at-home artist is what she is, rather than being Japanese this or Japanese that. Although she does express some interest in the books about Japan, about Japanese art. Things like that because she has interest in art. And, on that score, she's—what I send her, she appreciates it. She's not into family roots or anything like that.

KY: I hear your stomach growling so I don't want to keep you any longer. (laughs) I'm going to stop the tape now.

[recording paused]

KK: Sato _____ (inaudible), he has an office in what used to be his building. And Brian Kito, he's the other confectioner. He's been interviewed so much that—

KY: Gets tired?

KK: He loves it. (laughs)

KY: Do you get interviewed a lot?

KK: Oh, yeah. A lot of students—because I just happened to have hung around Little Tokyo so long. Osmosis, I guess. (laughs)

KY: Well, I do appreciate your time.

KK: Oh, not at all.

END OF INTERVIEW