

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Children's Village at Manzanar Oral History Project

An Oral History with CELESTE TEODOR

Interviewed

By

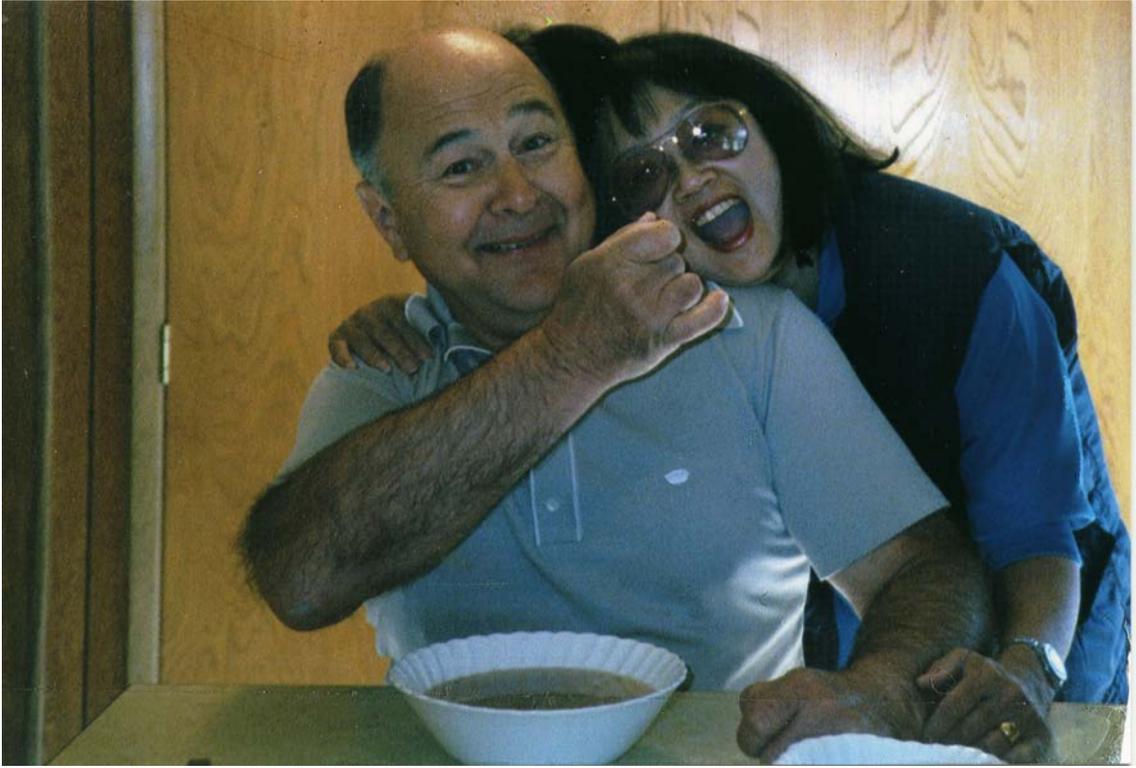
Cathy Irwin

On August 9, 2007

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Celeste Teodor with her husband, Peter.

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

NARRATOR: CELESTE TEODOR  
INTERVIEWER: Cathy Irwin  
DATE: August 9, 2007  
LOCATION: Claremont, California / Las Vegas, Nevada  
PROJECT: Children's Village at Manzanar

CI: It's August 9, 2007 at approximately 1:10 in the afternoon. This is a phone interview, so I am in Claremont, California, and Mrs. Teodor, you're in Las Vegas, Nevada.

CT: Las Vegas, Nevada, right.

CI: Las Vegas, Nevada. The interview is with Mrs. Celeste Teodor, a former orphan at Children's Village at Manzanar historic site. We will be discussing her experiences there during World War II. This interview is being conducted for the oral history program at the Center for Oral and Public History at Cal State Fullerton, and it will be archived there at the site library. Mrs. Teodor, may I have your permission to record this interview?

CT: Yes.

CI: Okay, thank you.

CT: You have it!

CI: Okay, thank you. How are you today?

CT: Oh, pretty good.

CI: Well, I'm going to begin with some very basic questions, so I wanted to know, where were you born?

CT: According to my birth certificate, I was born in Los Angeles, California.

CI: When is your birthday?

CT: June 24, 1936.

CI: Were your parents from Los Angeles as well?

CT: I think so. I never knew them.

CI: Oh, you never knew them.

CT: No. I never knew my father, and I met my mother when I was ten years old.

CI: When you were ten?

CT: Right.

CI: So, who brought you up in Los Angeles?

CT: Well, probably the orphanage. See, you must remember, I was only five when I went to Manzanar. So, I don't remember much before that except I was told I was in the orphanage in Los Angeles, and we were all transferred to Manzanar by rail. I remember that I was in an orphanage, but I don't know the name of it. I think it was S-h-a-e-i-n or something like that.

CI: Oh, the Shonien?

CT: Yeah, I believe that's where I was.

CI: Did you have any other siblings when you were there?

CT: No.

CI: So, it was just you?

CT: Just me.

CI: And you don't remember your parents either?

CT: Not at all. I met her when I was ten years old just for a few minutes, and I didn't like her so I told her to get out of my life. And that was it.

CI: Wow. Where did you meet your mother?

CT: Well, I met her at one of the foster homes I was placed in after World War II. At first she told me her name was Mrs. Young, and then she divulged—I guess I did see her more than once. Oh, she told me she was Mrs. Young. I was at Wilma Stuart's<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilma Stuart, O.H. 2488, Center for Oral and Public History.

home, with Annie Sakamoto<sup>2</sup>, my friend, Annie Sakamoto. And, at that time, she had taken us out to the Ostrich farm, Annie and me, and she was known to us as Mrs. Young. I didn't even know that she was my mother until I was moved to another foster home called Aunt Jessie Bloom. That was a very good foster home, but I wasn't any good. So, I was kicked out of there. Anyway, she met me there, and she revealed to me that she was my real mother. Well, by this time, I had noticed she had been drinking alcohol, and I didn't like her behavior. So, the first time I knew that she was my mother, I told her to get out of my life and never return again because she wasn't good for me. And I was the age ten or eleven.

CI: So, you were pretty spunky at that age?

CT: Oh, yeah. You have to survive. You have to since I'm on my own. You have no one else to think for you. You have to—

CI: Were you living at Aunt Jessie Bloom's at that time?

CT: Yes. When I told my mother to get out of my life, yes. Now, before that time, we had several visits, but I didn't know her as my mother. I knew her as Mrs. Young.

CI: Y-o-u-n-g?

CT: Yeah.

CI: And how did you know Wilma Stuart and Annie Sakamoto?

CT: All right, Wilma Stuart, Annie Sakamoto. Annie Sakamoto and I left Manzanar together, and we were put into Wilma Stuart's home together. Annie and I were very close to each other. But, Wilma thought I was a bad influence on her because of my spunkiness, as you say, (laughs) so I was put in Aunt Jessie's house, which was much better. Wilma's home was very dysfunctional, as far as I was concerned. Annie might not feel that way. Annie was there all her life, the rest of her life.

CI: Were there other—

CT: Were there other kids?

CI: Yes.

CT: Yeah, there was other kids there. But, Annie was the only Japanese American there. And my ancestry is Japanese and Chinese and American, of course.

CI: Were you able to keep in touch with Annie even though you were separated?

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<sup>2</sup> Annie Sakamoto, O.H. 2486, Center for Oral and Public History.

CT: Off and on, yes, I was, as teenagers, but I couldn't do very much with her because Wilma would forbid me \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible).

CI: What were your feelings as you moved from foster home? Like you moved from Wilma Stuart's to Aunt Jessie Bloom's home, what was it like? What were your experiences?

CT: Well, by that time, I was detached. I did not bond to anybody. After Aunt Jessie, I went to a Japanese home. Aunt Jessie was not Japanese. She was Caucasian, had a very nice home. She was very good to us. There was about seven kids there, Caucasians, one Hispanic, and me. And well, I just did not behave myself. I was too wild, running the streets and everything like that, but to me that was a very, very good home. So then, the state of California and its welfare system decided to put me out in the country with this Japanese family. Well, the foster mother was sixty years old, and I was only thirteen. She didn't speak my language, and I didn't speak her language. So, that's the kind of home I went to. It was okay, but when you're a teenager, nothing satisfies you. But, at the end, I was very happy because I was able to make friends with her children who were ten years older than me. And, to this very day, they always invite me to all of the reunions and births and deaths, everything, you know?

CI: What were their names?

CT: Nitaki. So, I became very good friends with the Nitaki family afterwards.

CI: And where were you in the country? What was the name—

CT: Baldwin Park.

CI: Oh, okay, that was the country?

CT: That was out in the country at that time. (laughs)

CI: Oh, that's funny. (laughs) And where were Wilma Stuart and Jessie Bloom's home?

CT: Wilma was near Highland Park area. It's on Monterey Road in the Highland Park area. As a matter of fact, my friend Annie still lives in the same house. Wilma had a lot of property, and she built several houses. Annie is the owner of one of those homes. She rents one out, and she lives in one.

[00:10:01]

CI: Did you know Mr. and Mrs. Matsumoto<sup>3</sup> when you were at the Shonien, or did you meet them when you were at the Children's Village?

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<sup>3</sup> Lillian Matsumoto and Taeko Nagayama, O.H. 2492, Center for Oral and Public History.

CT: Well, you don't know who you met when you were five years old. I didn't even know I knew them until after the fact when I was told they were the superintendent or assistant superintendent for the orphanage. So, I really didn't know them well, but I knew their staff. One that is very vivid in my mind is Ruth Takamune.

CI: Can you tell me any memorable experience with Ruth that you can share?

CT: Oh, yeah, she was a very loving mother figure. Whenever we got hurt outside, she was there. She taught me a lot. She taught me religion. Believe it or not, they allowed religion in those days. I had run of the camp, really. I mean, as far as *I'm* concerned, I'm not sure what the other children [thought], but I was able to go freely in and out of the camp. I attended the Catholic Church, attended the Protestant Church. I attended every function there. I attended every function there. They had movies. I walked to the movies. I had complete freedom. I have no idea if this was allowed or not, but I had complete freedom of the camp.

CI: Did Ruth Takamune go with you to the church or the movies with you? Or did you get to just wander around?

CT: Oh, I can just wander around. Ruth Takamune was very busy with the other children, so she never left the grounds with me anyway. She might have left the grounds with her co-workers or with the other children or a group activity.

CI: She lived at Children's Village with you?

CT: I don't know whether they had quarters there—you would have to get this information from Lillian—

CI: Yeah, I'll have to ask her.

CT: —to get the exact areas and, if they had a little quarters from them and separately from us. I have no idea whether they lived with us or not. All I know is that they were there all the time.

CI: And so, you were five years old when you went into Children's Village?

CT: Yes, five. I probably just turned six.

CI: So, you started school, basically, at Children's Village?

CT: Oh, yeah.

CI: Do you remember school or going to school?

CT: I do at the other orphanage, before camp.

CI: Oh, really?

CT: Yeah.

CI: What was that like?

CT: Oh, well, we were in kindergarten at that time. I remember that this school gave me a farewell—they said I was going to camp. And I said, “Okay.” They gave me a farewell party, and they gave me a rubber doll. I was so happy with that rubber doll because I could bath her and get her wet and didn’t have to worry because, in those days, they had nothing but plaster dolls or wooden dolls. You couldn’t bath them or anything because you would peel the paint off. These things I’m remembering, okay?

CI: Yeah. (laughs) So, you remember when it was time to leave to go to Children’s Village?

CT: Yeah.

CI: Do you have any memories of bringing anything with you? Did you get to take your doll? Did you have any belongings?

CT: I believe I got to take my doll. Yeah, I got to take my doll. That’s all I remember, is taking the doll and the clothes on my back. They probably packed everything to take up there with them. Being five years old, you didn’t do anything, but I do remember the ride to Manzanar.

CI: What was that like? What was your feelings?

CT: Oh, I was happy because what did I have to know? I was not political in those days. (chuckles)

CI: (laughs) So, it was just like taking a bus ride somewhere?

CT: Well, they said we were going to our new home. I’m not sure if it was a bus drive or truck drive. All I remember is that—now Lillian said that it was a bus drive, but I don’t remember a bus. I remember a truck because I looked at the bottom of the truck and there was a hole on the floor and I saw the truck. Of course, that could have been the bus, too. But, it was nice. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed every minute of my stay at Manzanar.

CI: Do you remember singing songs on the way to Manzanar?

CT: Oh, yeah. I probably sang a lot of songs, childhood songs.

CI: What do you remember when you got to Manzanar? Do you remember your first impression of Manzanar?

CT: No. The most important thing to a kid of five years old are other children. It's not the place or anything like that. That's not what's important; it's if you had friends to play with. That's the most important thing. It's not the castle you're about to enter or something like that. (laughs) So, that was the most important thing, oh, good, we can go out and run. Play with our friends, go to the bathroom, do this, do that. I had never had the experience of camp life and what these private families had experienced, like *Farewell to Manzanar* and some other books that I have read. That was very good. As a matter of a fact, I read the last story of \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible).

CI: Yes.

CT: I forgot his name. But, that was very interesting. They had different views than I did because they were taken away from their businesses. They were taken away from their farms. They were taken away from their home that they had all their lives. These are adults that I'm talking about. And then, they were thrown into this place of Manzanar where they had to stuff their own mattress with straw, which I never experienced any of that because I was only five and everything was done for us. But, I don't really remember no straw mattress, at all. I don't remember things like that. I remember we had little cots. We had our own little space they fixed with a box to put our personal things in that box. It might have been orange crates for all I know, you know, standing up like a closet. But, we all had our private space, with our private things. And everybody kind of respected each other's things; they didn't touch it.

CI: So, there was a lot of other children with you. Who did you hang out with? Was Annie Sakamoto there with you?

CT: Yeah, Annie was there, but she was much younger. Annie and I are about three or four years different. So, when I was six, she might have been three, so you don't hang out with three year olds. You hung out with someone your age or older.

CI: Who did you hang out with? Do you remember?

CT: I don't know.

CI: You just played. What did you play? What did you do when you got there? What was your daily life like?

CT: Well, ate breakfast at the orphanage mess hall. We never had to stand in line or nothing like the other people did. They served us, I guess, three meals. But, if we didn't like something, we had to eat it anyway. Sometimes I'd stay there till midnight, but I wouldn't eat it. I would not eat some of the food because I didn't like it. But, I guess, these old ladies they were from the Depression Era, and you just didn't waste any food. I just remember a few times when I sat there until midnight because I wouldn't eat something I didn't like. But other than that—but I think that was the mentality in those days, even in private families. It was not only the institution. It was private families, too, because a lot of my girlfriends, later on, they

told me that they couldn't leave the table without finishing their plate because their parents were raised in the Depression Era.

[00:20:46]

CI: What games did you play after eating?

CT: We usually went outside and ran around and played. Now they did have something like a playhouse—I remember this—and it was made of logs and stuff. So, it was like a playhouse for the children on the grounds. And I remember lots of grass and a little hill of grass. We would roll down the hill. And they had a couple pear trees there. As a matter of fact, a lot of the private families, they wanted to come in to play with us because we were the only ones that had facilities.

CI: At Children's Village, yeah.

CT: At Children's Village, maybe we had swings or what have you. And we had the playhouse. We had lots of room to run on the grass. I remember lots of grass, but I have no idea how big that grass was. You know, as was a five-year-old, it could be just probably an acre. I don't know. I have no idea how large the grass was. But, we had lots of things to do and lots of children to play with. And some of the private families—as far as my case is concerned, they never made fun of orphans because they wanted to be friends with us in order to come in, be invited in.

CI: Were they able to play with you?

CT: Yeah, they came in, if I let them in. I let them in, maybe you're not supposed to, but I let them in and we all got to play together. There weren't that many caregivers. I thought they said there was about eighty kids there, sixty to eighty kids there. So, we always had lots of friends to play with. And then, we were taken out on a little field trip, believe it or not, out of the camp. I remember it so vividly, and maybe that's where I remember we were in trucks. At the base of the mountain, was a beautiful brook, so we got to play along the brook. I don't know how they let us out, what legal means that they had to let us out, but I do remember we were able to go out of the camp just to visit the base of the mountain.

CI: What was the weather like? Do you remember being cold or ever really hot?

CT: In the wintertime, it was cold, and in the summertime it was nice, I thought. Of course, when I went out to the pilgrimage in April, my god, I thought I was going to die of the heat.

CI: Yeah, it's really hot there. (laughs)

CY: Yeah, did you ever go there in April on the pilgrimage?

CI: I didn't go on the pilgrimage, but I've been there in late March. And I've been there in January, when it's freezing.

CT: It snowed during the winter. It's a beautiful place, but in April when they had the pilgrimage, I thought that—I mean, there were several people who had heat exhaustion. I had to help some during that time. I said, "My god, in April, they're having heat exhaustion?" Because I'm a nurse, I could tell that they needed something to drink.

CI: Yeah, it does get hot there in the springtime.

CT: Yeah.

CI: So, you had many years where you were in camp?

CT: Well, from June '42 to August of '45.

CI: So, you were there basically the whole time?

CT: Oh, yeah. The only time they let the older folks go is if they had a job or if they went east or something like that, according to my history of it.

CI: So, you started probably first, kindergarten, or first grade till third or fourth grade at—

CT: No, I was in third grade because when I got out of camp I was in fourth grade.

CI: What was the school like at camp?

CT: Well, I thought that the teachers were discriminating against the orphans because they would never call on us, and we always had our hands up to answer questions because we wanted to get in the superior class. But, they never called on us, so we were just left in the average class.

CI: Were they Caucasian teachers?

CT: All the questions that they asked, these students that went to superior class—you see, they had three individual classes. They had the low, average, and the intelligent. We wanted those courses. I could answer, but they never called on us. So, I thought it was not because I was dumber. I thought it was because we were from the orphanage. They never called on any of the orphans. They called on everybody else that had a private family, but they never called on any of us. That's what I remember in my class.

CI: Were they Caucasian teachers?

CT: Yeah, they were Caucasian.

CI: And so, you were kept in the regular class, the lower class?

CT: Just average class, the normal class.

CI: Was it adequate? Were you bored? Because it seems that you could have gone to the superior class.

CT: I suppose so, yeah. I was not the least bit interested in school anyway. I was into recess more than anything, but I've been like that all my life.

CT: Did you have any impressions of a particular person or event? Does a particular person or event stand out in your mind when you think of Children's Village?

CT: Just Ruth Takamune. She's the only one

CI: Ruth Takamune. Did you stay in touch with her after you left?

CT: Yes, I did. After the 1991 reunion—I think Tak is the one who organized it. See, I was in Turkey so I couldn't make the reunion of the orphanage, the Children's Village, and I regret that very much. But, after he had and Annie had got all this information, and that's when I saw Ruth's name there. So, I wrote—(coughs) excuse me.

CI: Are you okay?

CT: Yeah, I just need a drink of water. So I wrote to Ruth, and we started corresponding. I corresponded with her entire family, lovely family. She had married this Chinese man. And I would say Ruth was—I don't know, I guess she was fifteen years older than me. She was in her twenties. She did fine until a few years ago. She developed Alzheimer's, so she had been living with Alzheimer's for ten years, knew nobody. But, her husband kept up on it.

CI: Where does she live?

CT: Well, she's dead now. She and her husband, they used to spend a half a year in France, and half a year in Mexico. Their home is in New York.

[00:30:08]

CI: I see. Wow. And so, she taught you some religion when you were young?

CT: Well, she taught all of us kids how important, you know, Jesus Christ, Mary, and Joseph, that kind of thing.

- CI: As a child in the camp, as you got older, like when you were seven or eight, did you ever have chores to do? Did they ever make you do some chores?
- CT: Not that I remember. I don't remember on any of that. I remember just playing mostly. The only thing I had to do, we had to make our bed and keep our little cubicle clean. That's all. That was our only responsibility. That's what I remember.
- CI: Did you ever get sick as a young girl? Did you ever have to go into the camp hospital?
- CT: No, but apparently, I had had a touch of polio. That's what I'm told now. And I did have physiotherapy with my ankles because they were very weak. So, I would go to the hospital to have physiotherapy, I would say maybe once or twice a week.
- CI: But, you don't remember that?
- CT: I remember going to the hospital and having that, but I didn't know why.
- CI: Were the doctors Nisei doctors when you went to the hospital? Do you remember?
- CT: No, I don't know. I have no idea.
- CI: So, you were in the camp until you were in the third grade, so you were about seven, eight?
- CT: Eight years old, yeah. I have a picture of the orphanage.
- CI: Oh, yeah, there's a picture of you there?
- CT: Yeah, well, I have the group picture of all the orphans. You have that, don't you?
- CI: Oh, yeah, the Easter picture.
- CT: Easter, yeah.
- CI: Yeah, I have that.
- CT: Nineteen forty-four, yeah. Want to know which I am?
- CI: Which one are you?
- CT: Are you looking at it?
- CI: I'm not looking at it, but I can go find it right when—

- CT: All right, I'm in the second row, left to right, I'm the fourth child in. One, two, three, four.
- CI: The fourth child to the right?
- CT: Left to right, one, two, three, four.
- CI: Oh, okay, fourth child on the right. Well, I'll have to see that. Thanks.
- CT: It's in front of a beautiful mountain. You know who took that photo? The famous photographer, Toyo Miataki.
- CI: Oh, yes.
- CT: He took that photo, and he—you know, he wasn't permitted to have a camera in camp. I think he made this homemade. It was a homemade camera, and it's a beautiful photograph.
- CI: Do you remember taking that picture?
- CT: No.
- CI: So, what is your best memory when you were there? Do you have any vivid, good memory or really vivid bad memory of Children's Village?
- CT: I have no bad memories in Children's Village that I can think of. I have absolutely, no—I loved it there. The bad memory I had was when we had to leave. We all cried our eyes out.
- CI: What was that like, leaving camp and having to a foster home?
- CT: Horrible, scary, very scary. I was very close to a teenage girl called Nadine Kadoma [Kodani].
- CI: Kadoma?
- CT: Um-hm.
- CI: Very close to her. And you know what? After we left camp, we were not put into Wilma Stuart's home. We were put into this kind of Catholic school, Catholic high school. It was a boarding school.
- CI: In California?
- CT: Yeah. And I have no idea where it was. And we were put there temporary. I didn't like it at all. I remember I got in trouble, and the headmistress gave me a good

- spanking in front of everybody. (chuckles) In front of the whole dormitory, and I felt that was so humiliating. That was worse than the spanking itself.
- CI: What did you do? Do you remember doing anything wrong?
- CT: Oh, you know, when you're a kid, you do everything wrong.
- CI: (laughs)
- CT: Anyway, so I was all \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible). I remember Nadine, she comforted me. She was a teenager, and I was only eight. So, she comforted me. I tried to find her to no avail, couldn't find her. I tried to find her because I did have her address from the 1991 or '90—I forget which year—reunion. I couldn't find her, never. I remember Nadine, I remember Annie only because we went to a home together. Otherwise, I wouldn't have remembered Annie and then Ruth Takamune. Those are the only three people that come very clearly in my mind of who I knew over there. And I remember when I was giving my tearful tribute to Ruth Takamune at the—when we all met with Lillian—
- CI: *Lillian!* At the Japanese American Museum—
- CT: At the Japanese Museum. Then one of the guys there, he's in the picture; he's in the picture that was taken for the newspaper, *Rafu Shimpō*.
- CI: Yes.
- CT: Okay, you know that picture. Well, he was in that picture. He told me, he says, "Celeste—" I didn't know him from Adam, but he was an orphan with me. And he says, "I'm sure glad that you gave a nice tribute to Ruth because we all thought of her as our mother." That's how wonderful she was. She was just wonderful to all of us kids. He's five years older than me, so he would remember a lot more.
- CI: Oh, was it Dennis Bambauer<sup>4</sup>?
- CT: No, it was not Dennis. It was another guy. It was not Dennis though. I didn't know Dennis. I didn't know him at all because he is much older, so I didn't know him. I didn't know all of the older kids, I didn't know them by name. In fact, I didn't know anybody by name. I'll put it this way, I can't remember anybody by name, except Nadine and Ruth Takamune.
- CI: Oh, is this Nadine Kodani?
- CT: Kodama.

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<sup>4</sup> Dennis Tojo Baumbauer, O.H. 2335, Center for Oral and Public History.

CI: Kodama, okay. Was her first name Nakako? Do you remember Nakako Kodani?

CT: No. Well, I remember one girl—she's dead now. Her name was Florence. She was eleven, and I was six at the time. And we were all given a shoebox full of candy and nuts during Christmas. And, by the way, that Santa Claus was a female, and I told her, I says, "Santa Claus is not a female. Santa Claus is male."

CI: And what did she say? (laughs)

CT: She says, "Well, I'm his helper." And I said, "Well, you're not Santa Claus." So, anyway, they gave us a box of goodies, candy, and that Florence stole mine from me. And so I told her—I think I was about six or seven. I told her, I says, "Okay, Florence, I know you took my box of goodies." And she's eleven so she could beat me up if she wanted to, but she didn't. "I know you took that, and so you're going to have nothing but bad luck for the rest of your life." I told her that when I was six. And she did. The poor thing, she died early, I heard.

[00:40:03]

CI: Oh, my goodness.

CT: Yeah, I heard she died early. I said, "God, I hope I didn't put my curse on her." (chuckles) So, that was one incident that I remember.

CI: And so, you left camp, and it was a miserable experience. Was your first foster home with Wilma Stuart?

CT: Yeah, after we left the Catholic School—it was a school for girls, some kind of school for girls. And I hated it there. I have no idea how long—

CI: But Annie Sakamoto—

CT: Annie Sakamoto and I both ended up at Wilma's. And why the state of California would put us in a home like that is just beyond me. I mean, my god, here they put us in a home with a woman who has never been married and never had any kids.

CI: Oh, really? There was seven of you?

CT: And a religious fanatic at that.

CI: And there was seven of you?

CT: I think there was. You would have to get this figure from Annie. She would know better than me.

CI: So, she was alone with seven children?

- CT: Well, she had her mother living with her. Her mother was more reasonable. She knew how to talk to kids. I got along with her mother fine, but I didn't get along with Wilma. She was a religious fanatic, and I just didn't like her.
- CI: And then, from there you went to a Caucasian family, Aunt Jessie Bloom's home.
- CT: Yeah, Jessie M. Bloom.
- CI: And that was fine?
- CT: Oh, yeah, that was wonderful. All these kids had something physically wrong with them. And I was hard to handle so they put me in that home, too. I was incorrigible. (chuckles)
- CI: And how old were you then?
- CT: Eleven.
- CI: Oh, my goodness. So, you were almost junior high by then.
- CT: Yeah, well, I went there in sixth grade, sixth grade.
- CI: And how long did you stay there?
- CY: I stayed there until eight grade; two years.
- CI: And then, you went to the Nitaki family?
- CT: Yeah, I went to the Nitakis.
- CI: Do you have any vivid memories about your experiences any of these foster homes?
- CT: Well, I did not become emotionally attached to them because once you're torn from a loving environment, such as the orphanage—and everybody is so surprised when I say it's a lovely environment. Well, to me it was. Maybe to other people it wasn't. I'm just giving you my impression—then you become emotionally detached, and so I didn't become close to anybody. But, I did like Aunt Jessie Bloom's. I mean, in retrospect, when I look back, Aunt Jessie Bloom, I felt, was extremely fair, and she did everything she could to make our lives happy. She did do that, yeah.
- CI: How many other children were living there?
- CT: Oh, gosh, I would say about six or seven.
- CI: Oh, my goodness, so that's another large family.

CT: Yeah.

CI: Wow. And then, you stayed with the Nitakis basically all through high school?

CT: All through high school, yeah. When I got stable in high school, I didn't get in trouble. I didn't make the best grades in high school. I was an average student because I didn't work for it. All I cared about was my peers at that time—that's what you care about—and social life there. I was extremely popular in Baldwin Park High School. I was a cheerleader. I was vice president in my class, and the GAA president.

CI: The GAA, what's that?

CT: Girls Athletic Association president.

CI: Did you play sports?

CT: Yeah, I did play sports.

CI: Which sports?

CT: Well, I liked basketball and soccer, you know, baseball. I played them all. But, I really enjoyed my high school years. You don't care whether you enjoy your home or not. Your high school and your peers are the things that are important to you.

CI: Was it a diverse high school? Was there a lot of other Japanese Americans?

CT: Actually, no. There was only one, in my high school, and just a handful of Mexicans and only one black family. Only one black family. The rest were all white. It was a wonderful high school. In fact, I went to my fiftieth reunion not too long ago.

CI: Oh, you're kidding? Oh, wow. Did you ever experience any racism or discrimination?

CT: *No!* I did when I got out of camp because I remember my girlfriend, Annie, and I—now she won't remember cause she was too young. We were walking on the street and someone came over and says, "Are you a Jap?" And to protect Annie, I says, "Yes, I am." And he threw a brick at my head.

CI: Oh, my goodness.

CT: But, that's the only time, and it was soon after that there was absolutely no prejudice about us being Japanese. However, in the fourth grade—I guess I was nine years old—I had a girlfriend from the grammar school. She said to me, she said, "You know, Celeste, I would love to invite you to my birthday party, but I can't because my parents don't want any Japanese people there."

CI: Wow.

CT: Oh, that hurt. But, I got over that; what the hell. But, that's the only time I ever had any prejudice thrown at me. It was just the two incidences. And then, I started getting popular in junior high school. And then, in high school I was popular. I think that's what saved me. *That saved my life there* because I felt like at last I belong somewhere. And the most important thing was my teenage friends. Nobody else counted.

CI: Do you still keep in touch with your friends?

CT: My best friend, yes, I do. We were best of friends. We had lost track of each other for years, because, you know, you get married, you have your life, they have their life. We get together after the kids are grown up and out of the house. And then, everybody is retired, so we devote time to each other now. It's one big circle. And then, after—I don't know how much of this you want to know.

CI: Oh, it's fine. This is great.

CT: So, basically, I had a very happy childhood. I was in an orphanage, and these are your formative years. So, in those years, from one to six, if they're happy, everything else can be crap. You know what I mean?

CI: Yeah. I know what you mean, yeah.

CT: I was never molested. I was never sexually molested, never beaten, nothing like that throughout all these homes. People were pretty good to me, now that I look back. Of course, when you're that age, you think they all suck, but, in retrospect, you appreciate what they all tried to do for you. And I became close to the Nitaki family after I graduated from nursing school.

[00:50:06]

CI: Did you go straight to nursing school after high school?

CT: No, after high school—it was funny—after high school, I had to work three years to raise the money to go to nursing school. And it was going to cost—now listen to this, for cheap education—\$300 for three years, room, board, and books.

CI: You're kidding? (laughs)

CT: No.

CI: Wow. This was in California?

- CT: Yeah, in Santa Barbara. Santa Barbara, the Knapp College of Nursing is the only school I applied to because in those days I was extremely optimistic with over confidence or stupid. You can take your pick! Anyway, my grades were not the greatest grades in high school because all I cared was about to have fun, which I did. And ah, so I applied at this one school, the Knapp College of Nursing in Santa Barbara. Well, I was told this years later, after I graduated, that there was six instructors who rejected my application. But, the only one who overruled them was the director nursing and the director of nursing of education. She had both positions. And her name was Ms. Huisman, Martel Huisman.
- CI: How do you spell that?
- CY: H-u-i-s-m-a-n, her last name. Her first name, M-a-r-t-e-l. Anyway, she says, "I don't care what you all think; I am having this child in this school." (laughs) I didn't know this until much later when we were at our reunion. One of the instructors told me this. I said, "Oh, my god, really?" So, I started writing to Ms. Huisman every year at Christmastime. But, I did write a special letter thanking her because I says, *Without you, Ms. Huisman, you made such a difference in my life.* Otherwise, I don't know where I would have gone. So anyway, after I did graduate with average grades, but at least I passed from that college of nursing—
- CI: What was it called again? How do you spell—
- CT: Knapp, K-n-a-p-p, College of Nursing. And so, I graduated in 196, and then I came to Las Vegas because some friends of mine lived here. I got a job at Sunrise Hospital, and they made me charge nurse immediately because they liked the idea of what they call the diploma school. We have very good training, so they made me head nurse. But, that was for a gross of about \$250 a month. The Nevada Test Site offered me more money, so I went out there because I had friends out there who had some pull. And that's where I met my future husband.
- CI: Where did you meet him?
- CT: Nevada Test Site.
- CI: Oh, you went to the Nevada Test Site.
- CT: Yeah, in Mercury, Nevada, because they offered more money for nurses. And, as far as I'm concerned, we taxpayers just waste our money on some governmental jobs. They hired ten nurses to do nothing! So, they hired my husband because he was a doctor in Romania, but he didn't have a license yet. He didn't have his citizen yet. So, they hired him to give the nurses some classes. He was here getting a divorce from his wife, and he was only married to her for two weeks. So, he came to Nevada. His lawyer in Ohio told him, "You come to Nevada. They'll give you a quickie divorce." It took him a whole year to get the quickie divorce. But, in the meantime, he was teaching, out there in the Nevada Test Site, classes. They forced us nurses to

- take these classes on different diagnosis. Well, I just got out of nursing school, and I was sick and tired of school. I was never crazy about school to begin with. So, I parked myself way in the back and fell asleep. So, he spotted me. Now this is a man who was a former professor of infectious diseases for his medical school at the University of Romania in Bucharest. He told me, “No one has ever slept in my classes before.” (laughs) And the next thing you know, he asked me out for a date, and the rest is history.
- CI: That’s a sweet story. (laughs)
- CT: And we’ve been married for forty years, legally, and five years, illegally.
- CI: Oh, my goodness! Did you have children?
- CT: No, no. We didn’t want any because we wanted to concentrate on our careers. And I didn’t want any seeds from my mother. That’s the reason why I didn’t have any. And I don’t regret it. I don’t regret it because a lot of my friends, my gosh, they have so much trouble with their kids. It’s unbelievable. And then, I have some friends who have some lovely kids. They have wonderful kids. That’s when I wish I had kids. Of course, the last fifteen years of my nursing career—I worked all forty years, last fifteen years I spent in mental health.
- CI: Really?
- CT: Yeah, mental health as a psychiatric nurse. And then, I discovered how glad I was never to have kids.
- CI: A lot of kids probably passed through you as a nurse.
- CT: I felt so sorry for the parents and the kids. I says, “Oh, I didn’t know that children could get so messed-up like that.” Most of them are drug related and child abuse and sexual abuse. I’m an advocate for the elderly and an advocate for children. You hurt either one of these groups, I get mad.
- CI: Wow. So, you’ve been living in Las Vegas, Nevada, all these years.
- CT: Well, actually not. We were in Nevada when we met. And he loved the desert, I loved the desert, but the state of Nevada had a ban against all foreign graduates. Even though he had his internship here, his internal medicine residency in the United States, they still wouldn’t let a foreigner take the examination. And he had a lot of bigwigs pulling for him, too. So, anyway, so we left because he had a job waiting for him in Florida. We lived in Florida for about twenty years. And he couldn’t get his license until he was a citizen, so he had to work at the county hospital. He could work as a doctor under another doctor. As soon as he got his citizenship, then he was able to take his test, and they were able to give him a license to practice. Even though he had passed all these other tests—he passed testing in Virginia and State of

Washington and all these places, but they wouldn't let him have a license because he wasn't a citizen. But, that's okay, too. Then he went into private practice, and then, he decided after the private practice—because private practice is very boring. You make a lot of money, but it's boring. So, I told him that I thought my brain was dying. So, he decided to join the Air Force. That was a very good experience because he got to practice emergency medicine. He loved it. And, at the same time, when we were transferred out to California, Edward Air Force Base, I was able to get my license going into psychiatry, psychiatric nursing. It was a great experience and that's why I kept—I worked ten years for the state here in Nevada. Oh, and then we decided to come to Nevada to retire.

[01:00:40]

CI: I see.

CT: Because my husband, he had cancer of the bladder. This was over twenty years ago now. But, apparently, they got it all out, so then we decided to go back to work in Nevada since we were both well and doing good. And he went back to the Nevada Test Site—he got a job there—and I went to the psychiatric hospital, here, for the state of Nevada. That's where I ended my career after ten years.

CI: That's great.

CT: So, it was a good career.

CI: Yeah, that sounds wonderful.

CT: Had a good time.

CI: While you were practicing nursing, did you get politically involved in attaining redress?

CT: No, I didn't know anything about it. I had no idea what that was because I'm not in the Japanese community, per se. But, my friends, the Nitakis—they've all been terrific brother and sister figure for me. So, he wrote to me, "Celeste, did you get your \$20,000?" And I said, "What \$20,000?" And so he gave me the address and the archives to write to stating when I was over there in Manzanar I was a child and all that, just to register, which I did. The next thing you know, they sent me \$20,000.

CI: What did you do with the money? Do you remember?

CT: Yeah, I invested it. You put it in stock and bonds. That's how the Japanese do; they invest their money.

CI: So, now you're retired?

CT: Yeah, I'm retired after ten years. Well, I'm seventy-one.

CI: Oh, my goodness.

CT: Yeah, I'm seventy-one now. So, my husband said to me—we were fortunate that we were able to six week vacation and go and travel all over the world. We traveled to Magnolia, to China, to Africa, to Egypt, everywhere. And thank god we did this in our youth. And so, my husband said to me, when I was sixty—and I still did not want to retire because I loved my job. And he says, “Well, how many good years do you think we have left? I'm seventy, and you're sixty. How many good years do you think we have left?” And I got to thinking, and then he made me think fast and hard. “You know? You're absolutely correct.” And I resigned my job, and I have never regretted it since. Now I've been retired eleven years and still having fun.

CI: What do you enjoy doing these days? What have you been doing in your retirement?

CT: Well, hiking; we are hikers. We would travel to the National Parks and everything like that, until my husband became disabled physically, so we don't go anywhere now. But, I have a lot of friends here, a lot of my hiking friends, my nursing friends. When I retired from my job, the nurses said, why don't we get together once a month for dinner? And we've been doing that for ten years. See, I was the supervisor of most of these nurses, and so, I guess they like me so they wanted to keep in touch. So, that's how we keep in touch. We're called the M&M girls. You know what that means?

CI: No, M&M, what does that mean?

CT: Those between menopause and Medicare.

CI: (laughs)

CT: So, that's our little group. And then, four of my classmates moved to Las Vegas, from nursing school, so we get together once a month for lunch. And my hiking groups gets together; all individual friends who run around. And my husband feels good about this. He says as long as I don't impose it on him—because he's too physically disabled to get around and can't hear. He can't hear anything, so it's miserable for someone. So, I told him, “Well, as long as you're happy, that's all I care about.”

CI: That's good.

CT: And he's not the type of husband that says, “If I have to stay home, you have to stay home.” Well, I don't live like that. I'm sorry! I've been rebellious all my life, and I'm not about to stop. But, he was never that kind of husband; he was always good. , I know some of my girlfriends whose husbands were like that. If he got disabled, she had to stay home. Not me.

CI: Wow. Well, it sound like you've had very amazing life.

CT: I have. I've had a very happy life. I'm very optimistic about everything. I've always been optimistic. Otherwise, I wouldn't have applied at one school. I mean, there was no question I wouldn't get in. Someone said, Weren't you afraid you weren't going to get in? I said, "Absolutely not, that wasn't even on my mind that I wouldn't get into that school." That would be the first time that I would have a disappointment. But it's just didn't enter my mind. Now that I look back, geez, how did you do it?

CI: (laughs) That's amazing. Are there any other memories or experiences that you wanted to add that I might have forgotten? Is there anything else that you wanted to add?

CT: You mean in the homes and all that?

CI: Yeah, or just in your life in general because you've had an amazing life. I might have missed something.

CT: No. Well, you want me to forward you my nursing biography?

CI: Oh, my goodness! That would be great. (laughs)

CT: Well, we had to write one, we had to write—it's just a couple pages. We had to write one because my nursing school is having a reunion in Portland, Oregon, in September, so they asked us to write our nursing biography. I could forward you that.

CI: Oh, that would be great.

CT: Do you have an email?

CI: Sure, yeah, send it to my email address. Thank you so much!

CT: You're very welcome. I had just written that, so I says, well, I might as well give you a little bit of my nursing life, biography. (chuckles)

CI: That would be great.

CT: Because it will have some of the stuff I told you about my husband in it.

CI: That would be great.

CT: I'm sorry I didn't get to meet you, Cathy.

CI: I know, I wish I had. I was only in Las Vegas for two days, so I understood that you had to take your husband to the hospital. That's much, much more important but maybe in the future. Maybe one day we'll be able to meet.

CT: Okay. Is there anything else you need to know?

CI: I think that's it. Thank you so much. What I'll do is, let's see, Mr. Matsuno<sup>5</sup> gave me your—Tak gave me your address. I will send you a copy of this interview, and you can go over it. And, if you want to, if there's anything you want to edit or correct, you can do that. Just write it down, and I'll correct it.

CT: You can send it to my email. I have an email.

CI: Oh, that's true, huh? Yeah, what's your email? I will send you a disk of the interview and then you can go over it.

CT: Okay.

CI: That will be much easier.

CT: Yeah, it will be easier. I'll send you this biography. I'll send it now. Thank you, Cathy.

CI: Okay. Thank you so much.

CT: Yeah. You're welcome. Maybe next time you come we can meet.

CI: Absolutely. (chuckles)

CT: Have you interviewed Annie, yet? Are you going to interview Annie?

CI: There's actually a tape. Someone already interviewed her.

CT: Oh, they did?

CI: Yeah. So, I'm going to listen to the tape, and, if they're any more questions, I'll give her a call.

[01:10:00]

CT: If it makes you feel better, my interview with you was much fuller than the one I gave to \_\_\_\_\_ (inaudible).

CI: Oh, good.

CT: Much more extensive because I think she talked to me like five minutes or something like that.

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<sup>5</sup> Takatow Matsuno, O.H. 2339, Center for Oral and Public History.

CI: Oh, really?

CT: Yeah, not vey long, not very long. And I have no idea what the interview consisted of because I think a good interviewer will get the inter—what am I? The interviewee?

CI: The interviewee, yeah.

CT: Interviewee to do most of the talking. And I thought you were very good.

CI: Oh, well, you're great. I didn't even have to ask a lot of questions, so you were prepared.

CT: Well, it's off the top my head.

CI: It was great. Thank you so much.

CT: All right, Cathy, you're welcome. I will enclose my biography to you.

CI: Okay, thank you so much.

CT: Okay, Cathy.

CI: Okay, bye-bye.

CT: Thank you, bye-bye.

END OF INTERVIEW