

CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

Children's Village at Manzanar Oral History Project

An Oral History with RONALD KAWAMOTO

Interviewed

By

Cathy Irwin

On February 4, 2007

OH 3591

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NARRATOR: RONALD KAWAMOTO
INTERVIEWER: Cathy Irwin
DATE: February 4, 2007
LOCATION: San Diego, California
PROJECT: Children's Village at Manzanar

CI: My name is Cathy Irwin. It is approximately 1:30 in the afternoon on Sunday, February 4, 2007. We are in the dining room of Ronald Kawamoto's home on Andasol Street in San Diego, CA. It's a beautiful day down here in San Diego. This interview is with Ronald James Kawamoto, a former orphan who lived in Children's Village at Manzanar Internment Camp during WWII. The interview is being conducted for the California Oral and Public History Library at California State Fullerton. Good afternoon, Mr. Kawamoto.

RK: Good afternoon.

CI: Do I have permission to record this interview?

RK: Yes.

CI: Thank You. I will be asking you general questions first, and then we'll—

RK: Okay.

CI: What is your birthday?

RK: June 17, 1942.

CI: And you were born in—

RK: Santa Anita, CA.

CI: Santa Anita, California. Were both of your parents from Japan?

RK: No, actually my mother was from Albuquerque, New Mexico, and my father was born here in the United States. He was what they called a Nisei/Kibei.

CI: Oh, he was a student?

RK: Hm-hm.

CI: Wow, so he was born here and then went back to Japan?

RK: He went back to Japan for—he didn't stay there very long. From what I understand, he just didn't like it and he wanted to come back to the United States.

CI: Yes, so did his parent send him to Japan?

RK: Yes.

CI: So his parents were from Japan?

RK: Yes.

CI: Do you know where in Japan?

RK: One was from Tokyo; my grandfather was from Tokyo. And my grandmother, from what I understand, was from Hiroshima. Basically, this is just a sworn affidavit.

CI: So, I'm looking at an affidavit that talks about the Kawamoto family that was from the state of California, the county of San Diego. And so your grandparents are from Japan. Do you know why they came to the States?

RK: I have no knowledge of why they came other than, like most Japanese that came, to seek out a better life, a richer life, and the United States was the land of opportunity and most people from all different countries, that's what they do. They come here because that's what they want to do. They want to make a better life for themselves and their family.

CI: Yes. Do you know where they first entered? What state or what port your grandparents—

RK: The only thing I can think of would be either the port of entry of Los Angeles. Or there's a—I thought I had—

CI: So, they ended up in California

RK: Yeah, they started out in CA and ended up in CA.

CI: Did they start out in San Diego? Do you know?

RK: As far as I know, yes.

CI: Wow.

RK: They started out in San Diego and stayed here. My grandfather had businesses and one of them was the Frisco Café down at Fifth Avenue.

CI: Oh, really. Oh, goodness.

RK: And he had other things, but I'm not really sure what else he had. My dad was a cook for my grandfather.

CI: And he was sent back during—do you know when?

RK: Well, he was twelve

CI: Oh, my goodness.

RK: He was twelve years old when he sent them back because that's (being) a staunch Japanese tradition, you did that. You go back and then you learn. But, like I said, he didn't like it, so he came back. He didn't stay very long in Japan, maybe a year at the most. So he really didn't do much education in Japan. I think he was with family. But I'm not 100 percent sure on that one. And then he came back and at that point he went to college and got his degree as far as being an accountant. My dad was an accountant to start out with. He did all the accounting for the Frisco Café as well as doing the cooking for the Frisco Café. (laughs)

CI: Wow, do you know where he went to school?

RK: UC San Diego.

CI: Wow, and your mother is from Albuquerque, New Mexico?

RK: Right.

CI: But she's not of Japanese...

RK: No, she's Castilian Spanish and Mexican.

CI: Really? Okay. So her parents were probably here in the nineteenth century?

RK: No, her parents—my grandmother on my mother's side came from.... what was that town?

GK: [Gloria Kawamoto, wife of Ronald Kawamoto] Chihuahua, Mexico.

RK: Chihuahua, Mexico, and then they went to Albuquerque, New Mexico. Um, there is a whole lot of confusion and mix up because everybody that is supposed to

- know is dead or not talking. And we're not one hundred percent sure what happened.
- CI: How they ended up in Albuquerque?
- RW: How they ended up in Albuquerque and the name that they had was changed in Albuquerque. And my grandmother married and became a Rael.
- CI: A Rael.
- RK: And then my grandmother came to Los Angeles and she was working in Los Angeles. Since she was the oldest of the seven sisters, she kind of like was the groundbreaker. She'd go out. She'd look and get jobs, and then she'd write to her sisters to come. Well, they didn't come to Los Angeles. My grandmother came down to San Diego because the canneries, the fishing canneries, were the biggest thing going here. And my grandmother said, "Hey, we're going to go down here, and we're going to make money with the canneries." So, the sisters all came from Albuquerque all to San Diego.
- CI: Including your mother.
- RK: Including my mother and everybody else.
- CI: Wow. So, is that how your dad and mother met, your father and mother met, here in San Diego?
- RK: Kind of not, kind of yes. (both laugh) Like I said, there's a lot of broken ties. My grandmother and my mother never really got along, and my mother was kind of out on her own. And she happened to be walking by the Frisco Café. She went in there to get a glass of water, from what I understand, and asked if they had a job opening for a waitress. So, at that point, my mother was doing waitress work for my father in the Frisco Café.
- CI: Uh-huh.
- RK: Little sidetrack: my father was married prior to that. An arranged marriages like all Japanese were at that time.
- CI: Yes.
- RK: And I think he was divorced. Lillian and he had divorced because she didn't want to get married to my father., but because it was a prearranged marriage between the two families, she had to meet her obligation and she had my sister—Hanako, my half-sister—and that satisfied the contract, okay? So, that was it. That was the end of the relationship between my father and Lillian. At that point, given the timeline, I'm not sure of the timeline, my father and mother got together and then,

- of course, my sister was born in 1940, which I thought was '41! I always thought we were just a year apart! (laughs)
- CI: So, you have one sister?
- RK: Yes, one sister, one half-sister, and one half-brother.
- CI: Okay. What are their names? I'm sorry—
- RK: Sylvia Elizabeth.
- CI: Is your sister?
- RK: Is my sister.
- CI: And then, your half-sister is named?
- RK: Hanako Lillian. Okay? You can write it down. And my brother is Robert Cary
- CI: C-a-r—
- RK: C-a-r-e-y or C-a-r-y? I'm not 100 percent sure.
- GK: I'm not either.
- CI: Hanako.
- RK: Hm-hm.
- [00:10:00]
- CI: And one of them was born in 1940. Sylvia? Do you know what the ages are of your half-brother and half-sister?
- RK: Hanako says she is three years older than me. So Hanako would have been born in 1939. I'm thinking a little more than that. I'm thinking Hanako was born in '38, '37. And Bobby approximately the same.
- CI: Okay, '37 or '38?
- RK: Thereabouts, yes.
- CI: Okay. And what do they do for a living? Do you know?
- RK: Hanako is retired. She used to work for UPS. My sister Sylvia is retired. She used to be a teacher's aide in El Cajon, in the Grossmont area. My brother is retired. (laughs)

- CI: You're all retired! That's great. Congratulations. (both laugh)
- RK: He used to be... he was a barber and then in his later years he became a postal worker.
- CI: Okay. And you're retired, too.
- RK: Hm-hm.
- CI: And what was your former occupation? What did you do?
- RK: Electrical contractor and electrician.
- CI: Oh, wow. And you all resided and stayed down in San Diego basically?
- RK: No.
- CI: No. You moved around?
- RK: I moved way up! (laughs)
- CI: You moved way up there!
- RK: I went north. I went all the way up to Portland, Oregon.
- CI: Okay, you can talk about that.
- RK: After college, I worked for a medical electronic organization, Coulter Electronics, an engineer with them. And oh, we just kinda had a falling out with them because I was also young. (laughs) So left, and I decided I wanted to come back up north. I liked it. I liked the Portland area, regardless of the rain and the sleet (laughs), the coldness. I liked it. And I spent 1972 to 2002. So I spent approximately—for thirty years, I was up there.
- CI: Wow. And do you have any children?
- RK: I have a daughter, but I don't know where she's at.
- CI: Oh, okay.
- RK: I haven't seen my daughter since she was a year-and-a-half-old.
- CI: Wow.
- RK: And I've tried that legal aid too to try to find her. And they're just...because of her name and how it was changed—

CI: Oh, your daughter changed her name?

RK: Well, my ex-wife, when I was going through college, Eileen Crouch, we got married, but we got an annulment. We had a child. My daughter—one, I never got to see her. So, when we divorced, at the annulment, she asked if the gentlemen she was with—he wanted to adopt my daughter and so I said, “Well, okay. Go ahead and do it.” And that was the last of it. So, I never heard from her. So, I really don’t know what happened to her or where she’s at.

CI: Do you know what your daughter’s name is?

RK: Katherine Michelle Stewart.

CI: Okay. Are any or did any of your siblings get married as well?

RK: My sister was married, and she has five kids. My brother is married, and he has three children. Lillian never married.

CI: This is Hanako?

RK: Yes, Hanako. Lill was more or less—she took care of my grandmother and took care of Konie, who was my uncle. It was kind of like, since she was taking care of my grandmother and Konie, she just never did get to marry. She just stayed a single woman.

CI: Wow.

RK: Still is and is still going to be that way.

CI: Wow. So Sylvia got married and had five children.

RK: Hm-hm.

CI: Do you know their names?

RK: Yes. Michael, Yolanda, Mark, Tony, and Roselyn.

CI: And then your brother also has three kids.

RK: Right. Anita, Danielle, and then the other one, I don’t know. You see, when I went up to Oregon, I left the family. I left the family completely.

CI: Wow.

RK: I just didn't have any contact with my family. There's a lot of bad blood—I guess basically on my part—and I just didn't want to stay with the family. I decided. I decided.

CI: So, you left when you were fairly young for Oregon?

RK: Yes. Well, thirty.

CI: Okay, we can talk about that, too.

RK: Okay.

CI: I first want to go back to before.

RK: Okay.

CI: So your parents resided here in San Diego because they were both working at the Frisco Café.

RW: Right.

CI: Was your family around Japanese Americans at the time or around Mexican Americans?

RK: Well, my mother was, of course, with her family because her family is big. All the aunts and cousins were all basically of Spanish descent and Filipino. That was one of the biggest things. I don't know back then why the Spanish intermingled with the Filipinos, but they did. And a lot of them—I think all my aunts had Filipino husbands at one time. (laughs)

CI: And they were all here in San Diego because they moved over here?

RK: Yes.

CI: Okay. Were there a lot of Japanese Americans in the area? You're not sure?

RK: Like I said, I didn't become familiar with the Japanese culture until I moved up to Oregon. That was the first real effect I had or indications of Japanese people—other than of course my uncle and half-sister Hanako and my grandmother. My other Uncle Nobe, he was in the military, too, with my father, and he stayed in. I know he's got two kids, but I don't know much about that side of the family. And like I said, with my dad, since he was a fisherman, they're gone almost six months out of the year! (laughs) They gotta fish and keep going when the fishing is good! (both laugh) So that's what he did and when he'd come into port, that's when we'd see him.

CI: Yeah. What language was spoken in the household?

RK: Just English. Basic English. My father never spoke Japanese other than when he went to my grandmother's house. Of course, he did speak the Japanese language.

CI: So, he knew it because he had been a Kibei.

RK: Well, not only that but it was kind of almost mandatory that you learned your own second language which would be—well, first it would be the Japanese language, and then second it would be the English language, of course. With my mother, of course, Spanish was the language, the primary language, and then English was the secondary language. But, she never spoke Spanish other than when she got with her family, so it was kind of hard trying to—you know, (laughs) here I got two great cultures, and I'm trying to learn both of them. It's kind of hard.

CI: Yeah.

RK: It was kind of hard.

CI: Yeah, do you think there were cultural miscommunications between family members as a result of the language and the cultural difference?

RK: Between the Japanese and the Mexicans?

CI: Yeah, and your family?

RK: There was never no closeness. I mean, as far as the Japanese family and the Spanish family, there were two different groups. That was basically it.

CI: Wow.

RK: The Japanese was when I went to see my father. The Spanish was because I was with my mother, and that was it. The Japanese and the Mexicans never mixed in that point with my family, so any family functions we had were basically on the Mexican side.

CI: Really? Wow.

RK: So, all of it was done that way.

CI: Hm-hm. Were you raised in a religion as well? Or not really?

RK: I was raised with the Catholic religion.

CI: Yeah, I assume your mother was Catholic.

RK: Yes.

- CI: Did you attend church regularly? Was that part of the functions, celebrating mass?
- RK: I was an altar boy for seven years! (laughs)
- CI: Oh, were you? (laughs) I guess that's pretty intense! Do you remember which church?
- [00:20:00]
- GK: Here in San Diego.
- CI: Do you remember which church?
- RK: Yes, St. Anne's. I attended Logan Elementary School for the first three years., and then I went to Kimball, where I met my wife
- CI: Really?
- GK: Where we met? In elementary school.
- CI: You met in elementary school. I was going to ask that question much later. (laughs) It's good to know that you met in elementary school. And then did you reunite later?
- RK: Much later! (laughs)
- GK: Our high school reunion.
- CI: You're kidding?
- RK: Much, much later.
- CI: Oh, my goodness.
- GK: I was a widow.
- RK: I was divorced.
- CI: So, Kimball?
- RK: And then from Kimball, I went to Farragut, which I don't even think exists anymore.
- CI: This is a high school?

RK: No, it was an elementary school. And then from Farragut, I went to Saint Mary's for a year. And then after that, I went to Memorial Junior High School for a big couple of months. My step-dad was in the Navy.

CI: I see.

RK: When my mother remarried and, of course, we traveled around a lot here in San Diego, seemed like. I went to Memorial. I went to Horace Mann Junior High and then ended up in National City. We ended up in National City in military housing project on 29th Street, and that's where I finished junior high and then high school, National City Junior High School and Sweetwater Union High.

CI: Okay. I want to talk about that more in depth later but that's fascinating. So, you did all of your elementary school and high school here in San Diego. And college?

RK: No, college I did at the University of Heidelberg in Germany.

CI: Oh, you went to Germany?

RK: Yes, I spend two or two-and-a-half years in Germany. Also, I spend time at Monterey Peninsula Junior College where I received one of my associate's degrees and then San Mateo City College. And then, finally, I ended up at San Francisco State and received my engineering degree.

CI: Oh, great! So you've been up and down California, too! I'm like San Mateo, San Francisco—

RK: Yes! (laughs)

CI: San Mateo, San Francisco, and then you spent some time in Germany. How did you end up in Germany? Did you just apply?

RK: No, I hitchhiked.

CI: Really? Wow.

RK: I decided when I got out of school that I wanted to go do something.

CI: To Europe?

RK: Hm-hm. So, I caught a troop transport and ended up in Bremerhaven, and the people were just fantastic in Germany. I mean, here I was just a little kid, and they sent me to Heidelberg. I went to school and worked at the post-commissary there at U.S. Army Headquarters in Heidelberg. And then after my two-and-a-half years, I had to come back. One of the biggest reasons why I had to come back was because I didn't register for the draft, and I was in violation.

CI: Oh, I see. So you had to come back because of the draft.

RK: Well, I could have registered there, but I didn't know that. I didn't know that you could go to any military establishment and register for the draft. What do I know? I didn't know anything. (laughs) So, I came back and had my draft notice, and I had to go see the draft board and either do time in the military or do time in Leavenworth. (laughs) That was your option back then. That was basically what the options were. If you didn't register for the draft, that was jail time.

CI: Yes.

RK: Of course, I took the military. (laughs)

CI: So growing up, were you taught anything about your Japanese or Mexican culture, the language? Do you remember?

RK: No, not really, my mother, I don't know, she just never involved us kids in the Spanish—other than we knew our whole family was Spanish, and they talked the Spanish language. But, the kids, my cousins, we all talked English together. We didn't speak anything other than English. And I don't think hardly any of my cousins know how to speak the Spanish language because it wasn't taught to them at that time. I think a lot of the time, they wanted to be Americans.

CI: Yes.

RK: And they didn't want to speak other languages because of reprisal, possibly, so they spoke the English language. And as far as, like my Dad, since he was gone fishing all the time, my only contact with my Japanese side is when he would in come in off of fishing and he would pick us up and go to his mom's house. Of course, I couldn't understand a word that she ever said, (laughs) and that was basically what she talked, was just Japanese. Hanako and Konie and my father knew the language.

CI: Oh, they did?

RK: So, that's the only connection we had.

CI: So, on the census forms, or when you had to check mark your ethnicity, the boxes for jobs or schools, what did you put? Japanese and Spanish descent?

RK: Hm-hm.

CI: You put both all the time?

RK: Hm-hm. Put both.

CI: That's great. Because some people had to figure out what—I have to checkmark one? Why? Should I put other? What do I put?

RK: Well, at one time, some of the applications would have white, black and Mongolian. So, of course, that's where I landed, because I wasn't white, wasn't black. The Mongolian sector of the world, that's what we were. Spanish, the Latins were put in that sector. As well as some of the Latins were also considered White! The Spanish were considered white.

CI: Exactly. So what do you put?

RK: So, where do I fit?

CI: Yeah.

RK: I could put one here and one there, but I just checked the Mongolian sector. That's where I put my checkmark. Afterwards, it became where they were splitting it up, it became Japanese—actually, it was Asian Pacific, and then it became Latin, Mexican American. So, it was kind of hard because there was Japanese American, Asian American, Spanish American, Mexican American. Whoa, I could fill all these columns! (laughs)

CI: Yes, people have had a hard time filling out those boxes.

RK: Very much so.

CI: So we've talked a little bit about your parents. Did they ever talk about Pearl Harbor? Did they ever mention what they remembered? Do you remember them ever bringing it up?

RK: Not a bit.

CI: No. And you were born after Pearl Harbor so you don't remember them being searched by the FBI or—

RK: Well, like I said, with my grandfather belonging to that organization...

CI: The Black Orchards?

RK: Yes, that was part of the—I don't think my grandfather and my father had enough time to sell the Frisco Café. I don't really know. I don't know that much about that side...what actually transpired. But, from what I understand, it was like they had to get in and get out. So, I really don't really know that much what happened there.

CI: Yeah, did they have to sell their café quickly?

RK: I think that's what it was. They had to sell really fast. Like a lot of the families did, I mean, they had to sell things for pennies on the dollar because they were leaving. That's essentially what it was. As far as them searching the house and taking, I don't know.

CI: You don't know that part.

RK: I really don't. Course being that I was born in camp—that's the biggest part.

CI: Yes. Did they ever talk about the Executive Order, that they were going to be assembled?

RK: I just think they just started rounding them up!

CI: You don't know how they heard about it.

RK: I really don't, other than my father. I think my father would be the one because of the Frisco Café.

CI: Yes.

RK: The Kawamoto family. As far as my mother, my mother really didn't have to go in because she was Mexican. So, her decision to go in was on her own, to go, of course, with her husband. I mean, that's natural. And my sister Sylvia is Japanese, I mean she's half-Japanese. Well, she *had* to go. So, my mother isn't going to leave my father *and* my sister. And then, I was born in Santa Anita. So, that was basically the reason.

[00:30:17]

CI: So, did your mother ever talk to you about how it felt or her choice? Do you remember her ever mentioning it? What it must have felt for her to think, Oh my goodness, I'm going to this assembly center...

RK: No, she really didn't say much other than the fact that I was born in a stable of one of the famous race horses.

CI: Really? So you were born at Santa Anita Assembly Center?

RK: It was a race track, yes.

CI: Oh my goodness, in one of—they were basically housed in those horse stables.

RK: That's where they were. And, like you said, they used the straw for their beds and whatever they could cover with, but she said it smelled of the horse. There was quite a few families housed in one stall, and the shower facilities and the bathrooms were not the best things in the world. And you take your time—that

stuff I learned not from my mother, but from a lot of people who had been in camp. So, my mother just did not want to—she just never talked about it. I've tried to ask her questions about camp, about internment, about what happened, and she just never said anything. She just—that was it.

My father, like I said, he became a fisherman, because, after he got back from the war, the service I should say, I think he was a little bit, not ashamed, but about what happened, he was upset. And I think he figured the best thing for him would be to go out and go fishing. Plus fishing at the time was a lucrative business, very lucrative, and we really didn't have anything to come back to. I mean, the Frisco Café was gone. I'm not really too sure if the house on Island St. was taken from him, I'm not really sure. So, he really didn't have anything that he could come back to, I guess. From what I understand from Hanako, the little that she has talked about, because we've talked to her several times, they weren't in camp long.

CI: They weren't in Poston long?

RK: They weren't in Poston very long, and they got back. They came back.

CI: To California?

RK: To San Diego, yes.

CI: Wow.

RK: She doesn't know anything—I know more about the camps than she does! And I was born there. And she was three or four years old at the time. So, I don't know if she's buried a lot of that herself. My other sister, Sylvia...she thinks she knows everything about it, but she doesn't. I mean, she was only one or two years old at the time. What is she going to know? And as far as me knowing, I didn't know nothing.

CI: Yeah, you were born in the assembly center.

RK: I mean, the biggest thing I could have done to anybody was to wet on them!
(laughs)

CI: Oh, my goodness. (laughs) So, your parents never talked about how they even got to the racetrack, Santa Anita.

RK: No, just that the whole family went. The thing that I've been trying to figure out is, since I had a grandparent, and I had a half-sister and an uncle, why didn't I go with them? Why did I go to Manzanar?

CI: Children's Village.

RK: Right, to the Children's Village as an orphan?

CI: Yes.

RK: See, this is what's so crazy about this whole thing is that first my mom didn't have to be in there. Secondly, we go, and then we get split up. Why a baby gets taken away from their mother for whatever reason—I have no knowledge of why when I have grandparents that could have taken me. Why that didn't happen—I think it's been the biggest stumbling block in my life is trying to find out why this happened. Why did it happen to me? I'm probably not the only child that had this, but why? It's crazy to me.

CI: Were your grandparents also sent to Santa Anita and then Poston?

RK: Yes.

CI: Wow.

RK: But there is no number. There's no record of them being in there cause Konie and my grandmother and Hanako, they're not in there. Their names are not on the rosters and that doesn't make sense. It shows the Kawamotos—just my father, my mother, my sister, and myself and that's it. And there's too many holes, too many secrets that someone is not telling. And why? And if there was another Kawamoto family, which there was quite a few, why isn't my grandmother and uncle and half-sister on the roster? And they're not.

CI: That's fascinating. And you mentioned that your grandfather was part of the—do you think it had to do with that organization, the Black Orchards?

RK: I don't know. I don't really know because he went to Chicago and, like I said, in Chicago, they said that he died of a heart attack. I agree with that or believe that. That's what they say.

CI: So he was sent to Santa Anita racetrack with you, Santa Anita Assembly Center, and then he was questioned?

RK: I don't think he was sent to Santa Anita. I don't think really think he was sent there. Period. I think he went straight to Chicago.

CI: Straight to Chicago.

RK: Because of him being in that organization.

CI: In the Black Orchards.

RK: Being a member of it.

CI: And the Black Orchards was a Japanese organization, it sounds like. Nisei?

RK: From what I understand, it was an organization of Japanese citizens in the United States that were profitable. They would send money back to Japan, to people in Japan, and the money was supposed to go for the people in Japan, from what I understand, except it went into warfare. Therefore, it became a criminal organization at that point to the Americans. So, that's the only thing that I know about that. There's no documentation. There is no proof. And there is no existence of this organization. Seriously, there really is not. If you talk to a lot of the Japanese that may have done the same, you probably will not get any answers from them.

CI: So, there was no paper trail, nothing.

RK: I don't think there was. And the United States government is not opening up about it. That's something that is buried. They did something, and I think that's where it stands.

CI: Wow. So you don't know what happened to their property or anything.

RK: No. I just know it was sold. As far as, like I said, their house on Island St., they still lived on Island Street.

CI: After the war?

RK: After the war. But, I don't know if it was a new one or the same one. I don't know. I have no knowledge of that.

CI: So, you and your siblings, were you ever separated in the process of going to Poston or were you separated after? You were talking about how there were no records—or you're not sure if you were even sent to Poston?

RK: Well, according to the papers, I have no records of my mother and myself *being* at Poston, according to the United States Department of the Interior, (shows documents) it shows July 27, 1942 the Kawamotos originally misspelled in their Poston registry is Kawamoti, and it has down there, handwritten correction the Kawamoto family: Yoshio, Teresa, Roselyn, Sylvia and Ronald were transferred to Poston. At Poston, according to the National Archives, the only matching searches of numbers show Yos at 4259A, Sylvia 4259C.

CI: That's the family number?

RK: That's the family number. And according to this, it says neither Teresa Rose nor Ronald are listed with this family number. It's assumed that we would be 4259B and 4259C, which would be wrong on the C part there. It should be 4259B, since Sylvia was the C.

CI: Yes. So, at some point, you probably were separated from some family members?

RK: Oh, we were separated from my grandmother, Hanako my half-sister, and Konie my uncle at Poston because Hanako remembers being at Poston. But, she remembers not being there long.

[00:40:07]

CI: Wow.

RK: They let them go from what she says, and that I don't understand because I thought they all had to stay in camp until 1944-45 or when they let them go. But, she said that she wasn't in camp that long at Poston, so I don't really know anything about that.

CI: And she doesn't remember living anywhere else besides California during that time?

RK: No.

CI: She recalls coming back to California.

RK: She just basically, like she said, she doesn't remember a lot. I think a lot of it, too, is like most Japanese, they prefer to put it in the back of their mind and lose it and keep it back there and not want to bring it forward. It's quite predominant with the Japanese culture that they keep and hide things that they don't to be embarrassed about or that they don't want to have things known.

CI: You were just a baby, you were just born, so you probably don't remember any part of being at Santa Anita or Poston.

RK: Unh-uh.

CI: Do you remember Children's Village at all?

RK: No.

CI: You don't remember. Do you know how long you were in Children's Village or Manzanar?

RK: From '43 to '45.

CI: Wow, two years. So, when you left, you were about two years old.

RK: Two going on three.

CI: Do you know what the process was to leave Manzanar because you were just a baby! Do you know if you were reunited immediately with—

GK: He's got a letter.

RK: No, I got a letter here from Manzanar. (looks for letter)

GK: It's underneath, Ronald. On the backside.

RK: Oh, right here. This one here is a copy dated January 25, 1945 from Manzanar War Relocation Project, Manzanar, California. Got down "Mr." Rose Kawamoto. (laughs) *Dear Mr. Kawamoto, We wish to advise you that Ronald is ready to be...ready to leave Manzanar. Will you please let us know immediately if you wish to come and get him? If so, it is necessary for us to have a time of your arrival in order to make arrangements at the gate for your admittance. If you cannot come, we would like to know at your earliest convenience, so that we can send him to San Diego. Please advise us of the actions you wish to take. And this is from Ralph Merritt, Project Director.*

CI: Oh, yes.

GK: Is he still alive?

CI: I don't think he's alive anymore. This is dated January 25, 1945, and it's from Ralph Merritt. And there's an address. This is your mother?

RK: Yes.

CI: So it was supposed to be Mrs. Rose Kawamoto. So, your mother was already in San Diego, living on Eight Street at the time.

RK: As far as I know, okay, when she got in trouble at Poston for taking me out—

CI: So, what happened? Do you know any of the circumstances?

RK: Other than what the Manzanar Park Ranger Kirk (Peterson) said, she was taking me—she had a pass to leave. I guess it was an overnight pass or weekend pass, and she was taking me with her. Well, I had no pass evidently. And from what I understand and from what transpired in some of this workings and letters that she got in trouble.

CI: For leaving?

RK: For leaving. But that is at Poston and some of this information comes that I went strictly from Santa Anita straight to Manzanar, when that's not the truth because I was in Poston because I do have a Poston number, *except* it's not registered. Again, if you go back to these papers, my mother and myself are not registered as far as my sister and Yosh are. They have a number: 4259. I don't.

CI: Wow.

RK: At some point, like I said, either they took me away from my mother, my mother gave me up, or whatever. I don't know what happened, what transpired. That's all—like I said, my mother didn't talk about it, my father, he was in the service at that point.

CI: So, at some point, your family got dispersed.

RK: Well, like I said, when my father signed up for the service—

CI: This was in Poston.

RK: Right. And took his basic in Utah, then they went to Fort Shelby, Mississippi, and my mother followed him and my sister.

CI: And your sister. But not you.

RK: Not me. At that point or prior to that point, I think I was shipped down to Manzanar. This is where everything gets really hairy and really confusing is the fact of why—I'm a baby—why I didn't stay with my mom and why I didn't go with my mother. And the only thing I can come up with, the only conclusion I can come up with is, in some of the papers kind of almost testify to it, that I was orphaned.

CI: And you've talked about a nun?

RK: Yes, the Mary Sister Knolls.

CI: Sister Mary Knolls? She was prevalent in your life some point? Or was it the Sisters of Maryknoll?

RK: I don't know who the sisters were. Yes, it was like an order, a Catholic Order.

CI: So, the Sisters of Maryknoll.

RK: Right, they had dealings with the hospital, and I almost certainly had some with the orphanage center. And I learned this when I up in Portland because the Sisters of Maryknoll were up there, and I tried to seek information from them about it. And they had no records or anything. They said the best thing to do would be to contact National Archives or Manzanar or whatever. So, I really don't know what happened at that point.

CI: So, you're not sure how you were sent to Children's Village.

RK: No.

CI: And when.

RK: When I was sent (reads from document)—*February 4, 1943, Ronald was transferred to Manzanar Children's Center.*

CI: Hm. I wonder if you went with other orphans or were you sent by yourself from Poston.

RK: I was sent by myself because I'm the only one that is registered under the Kawamoto family on *this* Kawamoto family with the number 6010 or 60110. There's a big hassle there.

CI: Hm-hm. So, none of your siblings went with you?

RK: No.

CI: Wow, and you don't remember—I mean, there's a picture of you here.

RK: Yes.

CI: With other babies.

RK: Right.

CI: So that's what's fascinating. And then you weren't sure when—I mean, obviously, the letter from Ralph Merritt to your mother suggests that at some point you were reunited with your mother. Do you remember being reunited at age three?

RK: No, I don't, because I don't remember anything until probably I was four or five years old that I have any real recognition of my parents. And at that point, it was just basically my mother and my sister. I don't remember anything prior to that.

CI: So, around age four or five, what do you remember?

RK: I just remember that—

CI: You were in San Diego—

RK: Mission Beach, up on Midway, they had—I guess it would be military housing or government housing.

CI: Okay, so you were in government housing.

RK: Government housing on Midway and there on Mission Beach. I remember that. From then on, I remember. Prior to that I don't remember anything.

CI: So, what you do remember? Do you remember other Asian American or Japanese Americans around you growing up after camp?

RK: Basically San Diego, or National City, primarily, where I grew up, there wasn't very many Asian families. Like in high school, there was the Tanakas, the Nakamuras, Nakanos,

GK: The Fujis.

RK: The Fujis. We were about the only four Japanese families or children that were in school at that age.

CI: Yes. So, when you left the camp, you weren't yet of school age. So, you didn't have to worry about catching up or—

RK: No, but I think I stayed behind.

CI: Oh, you stayed behind.

RK: I think so. I think there was a problem. I don't know. For some reason, there seems to be some discrepancies. I don't really know.

CI: But, you do remember the schools you attended, you remember elementary school?

RK: Hm-hm.

CI: Where did you attend? You mentioned it earlier.

RK: Logan Elementary School in Logan Heights.

CI: In San Diego?

RK: Hm-hm.

CI: Wow. And you mentioned that there were few Asians, a couple. Were there a lot of—

[00:50:00]

RK: In Logan, to be honest with you, I don't remember any Asians.

CI: Mostly Caucasians?

RK: No. Well, a lot of Caucasians and Spanish and colored, of course.

CI: Were there Filipinos?

RK: You know, I didn't really notice them.

CI: They probably looked like Spanish. They could probably mix or—

RK: Very easily. I was mostly with—my friends were two Spanish kids. That's who I hung around with and then, at home, we lived on Franklin Street, which is down in the Logan area. That was a predominantly colored area, close to Imperial Avenue. Imperial, at that time, was considered an all-colored area. Logan Heights was all Spanish. Now it's the barrio. Franklin was kind of in the middle, between Imperial and Logan at that point. Since I had an uncle who lived in Imperial and my brother lived in Logan, I could kind of go in different directions! (laughs) Cause it was kind of club-orientated at that point, so I could go either down to Imperial without getting into any trouble or getting hassled. I can go up to Logan and not get into any trouble or get hassled. (laughs) So, it was kind of nice at that point.

CI: Were most of the teachers Caucasians at the time?

RK: Yes, all of them.

CI: How did they treat you? How did they treat students at the time? I'm just wondering—I'm fascinated by this! (laughs)

RK: Well, let's put it this way. When I was in kindergarten, I got a whuppin' for hitting the teacher.

CI: Really?

RK: You know when you're five and you're in kindergarten, and you gotta bring your little chair to the circle?

CI: Yes.

RK: I was bringing my chair in the circle. And the reason why I remember it so well is because Marcus—he was mulatto, half and half—him and I used to get into hassles all the time. Evidently, he did something to me, while I was bringing my chair in or something, and, of course, I let him have it. And then, the teacher grabbed me. That's when I hit her. And at that point the principal was walking by and seeing it happen, I got a whuppin' for that one! (laughs)

CI: Wow! (laughs)

RK: As far as being treated by—

CI: Did you ever feel like you were treated differently?

- RK: Yes, more in high school than in actually elementary or junior high school. Some in junior high school—it was mostly with the ladies that I went out with, as far as trying to date and stuff. They could *see* me, and since I don't look Japanese, I was fine. As soon as I mentioned my name and they asked me what nationality was—I told them I was Japanese-Spanish—then I no longer was going steady with this girl. So, their parents were very against, you know, dating Japanese.
- CI: Interracial dating of any kind.
- RK: Well, Japanese because of the war. And don't forget also you also had the Korean conflict that was coming up at that time, too. So, Asian was kind of taboo.
- CI: So, this was in the late 50s, early 60s.
- RK: Right. Well, no, early fifties. I graduated in '61. So, '59, '60, '61 is high school. And then '58, '57, '56 is junior high school. So, '56 through '58, there was a lot of problems with the parents of the daughters that I was going out with.
- GK: And they were mainly white.
- RK: White girls.
- CI: What high school?
- RK: This was National City Junior High School.
- GK: And Sweetwater.
- RK: Well, Sweetwater, there was no problem as far as—I didn't have that many problems as far as my nationality then. I think the conflict came within myself. Mostly I didn't want to be Japanese because of it. The conflict came because, you know, you get tired of people calling you this name, that name, you dirty this, you dirty that. I just got tired of it. It just became kind of like a stigma and I just—I knew I could fall back and say, "I'm Spanish," and I didn't have a problem.
- CI: Did you experience that when you were in kindergarten or in your elementary school years?
- RK: Not that I can recall. I really don't remember that too much.
- CI: But in high school—
- RK: In junior high school and high school, there was a basis. At Horace Mann, there was no problem.
- CI: Horace Mann Junior High?

- RK: I only went there for a week though. (laughs) There wasn't really too much time to—well, I got into scuffles, but that was with a Filipino kid! (laughs)
- CI: So, there were a lot of different ethnicities in junior high and high school? Or not really?
- RK: Not that much difference. Like I said, most of the Memorial was predominantly colored and Spanish. That was the predominance there, even though there was white.
- CI: Was their tension? Was it really segregated?
- RK: In a way there was. The Spanish and the colored kind of stayed together. Even though they segregated, but they would. Everyone else was kind of like on the outside. I don't remember at Memorial other than one Filipino gentleman, but like I said, all my friends were all Spanish or Mexican race. And junior high, when I went to Horace Mann, of course, being there only a week, I didn't really get to know anybody. And then, going to National City—Mary! Mary was Chinese.
- GK: Mary who?
- RK: I can't remember Mary's last name.
- GK: There was a few Asians then at National City Junior High.
- RK: There was a few, but not a lot.
- GK: It was like maybe three or four.
- RK: Yeah, there weren't too many of us. And then, me not looking Asian, I fit right in as being Spanish or the Mexican race, so it was no problem. I didn't associate or I didn't do much with the Spanish people. I was mostly with the Caucasian people. That was basically who my friends were. After junior high at Sweetwater, that would be '59 through '61, again, there was only about five Asians: myself, Tanaka, Nakano, Fuji, and Turlahi.
- GK: Turlahi. That's about it. Isn't Turlahi Filipino?
- RK: Turlahi is Filipino, but he's still part of the Asian group.
- GK: Hm-hm. There was only, I think, about five.
- RK: And then, colored weren't, in terms of population, also that big. Maybe half a dozen colored.
- GK: Not even that many.

- RK: Yes, there was. We had the twin sisters, remember?
- CI: Was there any ever mention of the camps?
- RK: No.
- RK: It just becomes that every December seventh, I got tired of that date. Every December seventh, I thought it was just like, why did they have to keep bringing it up? Why do they have to keep throwing it in our face? Yes, it's a terrible thing that did happen, but war is war.
- CI: Did you ever notice anybody saying anything mean or bad to anybody of Japanese American descent whenever December seventh came around?
- RK: No.
- CI: Okay. Did you like school? Was it enjoyable?
- RK: Yes, I liked school. I participated in sports.
- CI: Which sports?
- RK: Track, football, cross Country.
- CI: Oh, okay. Did you feel like you were able to bond with other students because of sports as well?
- RK: Oh, yeah. One of my best friends was colored, and one of the people I looked up to in cross country was Spanish. He was a very good cross country guy. Plus, I had the—of course, white people were there. We got along! It didn't seem like—there was really never the problem between the boys I would say. It was just basically the girlfriends and *their* family, their *parents*. They just didn't want them to go out with Japs.
- CI: So, there was a lot of segregation in terms of dating, especially, with people of Japanese descent or probably other Asians as well.
- RK: Well, it was kind of hard because being one of four Japanese or one of the four Asians, and there was only one Asian girl. (laughs) And Janice wasn't the best looking lady in the world. I'm sorry! So, none of the Japanese boys really had a choice of who they wanted to go out with. I mean, you either go out with white or you go out with Mexican. And that was basically about what it was. (laughs)
[01:00:26]
- CI: What about in college? Did you feel like college was different? Because you went to Germany, you went to—

RK: College was—of course, higher education is always different. People, I think, get rid of...they get rid of their parents, so they don't have that influence on their back anymore and they don't have people talking about it. A lot of them during the time, especially in political science, they talked about the difference things that happened at Pearl Harbor. And, you know, at that point, they would ask questions, and I would tell them what happened. And they were totally surprised. They didn't have any knowledge of the relocation camps and what had happened to a lot of the Japanese Americans citizens. I mean, like anything else, they were oblivious to it. And the ones who did know about it, they were either helping the Japanese that were going into camp, or they just turned a blind eye, you know, or a deaf ear. The usual. But, no college was fine. There was no problem. The name itself had a lot of problems. I could go into an interview with anybody and there could be a white, me and anybody else and I guarantee you I wasn't going to get the job even though I was more qualified, simply because of the name.

CI: Wow.

RK: It was quite hard. A lot of times I thought about changing my name.

CI: Really?

RK: Yes, I figured I could pick up my mom's name—her maiden name.

CI: What was your mom's maiden name ?

RK: Rael.

CI: Rael. That's right. Do you think your experience at Manzanar have an impact on you growing up? Did it have an impact on you emotionally or psychologically?

RK: I don't think so because I don't know anything about it. I mean, I don't know what happened to me. I mean, for the first two, three years of my life, I don't even know where I was at. I was like a displaced child. I have records of where I was, but I have no knowledge of what transpired at these places. If you take a look at the pictures, I wasn't neglected. It doesn't look like I was treated mean! Because the Japanese ladies took very good care of us. The staff there just, you know, from what it seemed like and from what I've heard took good care of the orphans.

CI: Yeah, and it sounds like your name, just because it's of Japanese descent—that seems to have had a big impact, it sounds like.

RK: Yes.

CI: Did it have an impact on your choice of career or where you lived or—

RK: No. Of course in high school, you take placement exams and, at that point, you either score high in this area, this area, and this area. Well, mathematics, which was more or less a scientific field, that's what I scored high in so engineering would be one of my choices. So, I kind of, at that point, was pushing towards that direction because of the mathematics that I had. So, that was probably the only choice I had there. Other than that, that was about it.

CI: Right. But you said that, at some interviews, you realized that the name might have—

RK: The association of the name of a Japanese still had its stigma at that point. I know a lot of times going into the interview—like I said, I'd walk in, they're looking for a Japanese and in walks a Mexican, you know? (both laugh) First of all, that throws them way off, too! They are just way off base. They don't know what to think right now. Then I tell them who I am and they kind of look at me in awe like I should have slanted eyes or high cheekbones and I should be Japanese. Well, sorry, I took after my mom! (laughs)

CI: Do they ever ask you what your background is?

RK: Most of them in an interview will look at your application and, of course, you put down in there either Islander Pacific or Mongolian at that point or Japanese American. Since I had a choice of all of the above, I could do either one I wanted to go to. They would ask and I would say, "My father is Japanese, and my mother is Spanish." Or Japanese American and Spanish American.

CI: And then, you went to Germany for part of your education. Was there anything different?

RK: No, matter of fact. In Germany, Heidelberg is like a melting pot. You got all ethnicities that go to school there, from Africa, from China, from all over the world going there because the university is a very prestigious university. I had no problem. No problem at all.

CI: And then you came back because of the draft?

RK: Well, I just came back basically for the draft. I came back—because, you know, it was about time.

CI: Yeah, yeah. And then you were drafted in—

RK: Sixty-two.

CI: Sixty-two. And did you serve?

RK: Yes.

CI: How long were you in—Army?

RK: Yes, I was in the Army for two years. Ended up in Danang.

CI: Oh, Vietnam?

RK: Yes, I was in the Grand Conflict, 82nd Airborne Division.

CI: Wow. And did that affect you in any way that you were—

RK: Yes, we basically—a lot of the Asians that had Asian names, we would cover them. Don't forget, you still have rednecks, okay? I'm sorry to say it on tape that way, but you do have people that still believe that the South is going to rise again, right?

CI: Right.

RK: And Asians or other-than-white are not classified, and you have a lot of problems. So, you make sure that you cover your name, so it doesn't become—we didn't really tape it. We just kind of dirtied it out. At that point, see I could have went in with the Hawaiian division that was at Fort Ord at the same time, except I went in into the regular division instead of the Hawaiian-Japanese division.

CI: Oh, wow.

RK: So, no, I didn't have any problems in the service. I didn't really. No, maybe I did. Advancement wasn't all that great.

CI: Hm, it was hard to advance?

RK: I stayed a PFC for quite some time.

CI: Really? Do you think it had to do with—

RK: I don't know. I can't say. If I were to say that it did, it could be my own prejudism. I don't know. But it just seemed like—well, there was one time, when I was just when I was going to get out of the service, we had to take aptitude—not aptitude but proficiency examinations, and out of the three or four hundred people, there was three of us that passed. I was one of them. And I went up for promotion to get my stripes back, and they wouldn't give it to me.

CI: Really?

RK: Yeah, at that point.

CI: Fascinating. And you're not sure what—

RK: Hm, I think it had to do something with it. I know that another person who was relatively in my mind as Staff Sergeant Freddie Footmen; he was in the 101st Screaming Eagles, and, of course, there's always the conflict between each paratrooper organization. And being in the 82nd, it's like they don't like each other. (laughs) Even though they do, they don't like each other! But Freddie, he was colored, and I lost a stripe because of him.

CI: Oh.

RK: Under Article 15.

CI: What's an Article 15?

RK: That's like a slap on the wrist.

CI: Oh, I see.

RK: What they call an Article 15, so under an Article 15, I lost a stripe. I was a sergeant. I came out a corporal. And I think he was prejudiced not only because of being in a different Airborne, but I think it had maybe something to do with because I was Japanese.

CI: And then you got out and then you went to college after—

RK: I went back to school. I knew that this was the place for me. I knew the military was not the place. (laughs) I didn't want to stay in there, I'm sorry. (laughs)

CI: And then you came back to California?

[01:10:00]

RK: Yes, well, that's where I went into. I went into basic at Fort Ord, so basically what they do is they discharge you at the same place that where you enlisted in. So, I came back to Fort Ord and served my last few months in Fort Ord/Hunter Lake area, and I went to Monterey Peninsula Junior College at that point. I didn't want to go to permanent college because I still needed to get myself clear, so I figured a junior college would be the best place to go at that point, get lower divisions courses out of the way, and then I went to San Francisco State.

CI: Okay, and you went to San Francisco State. And when did you move to Oregon?

RK: In 1972.

CI: Okay, so after college you decided to move up there.

RK: Yes.

CI: And you were there for thirty years.

RK: About that long, yes.

CI: And that's where you started your career as an electrician?

RK: Hm-hm.

CI: And that's where you married also?

RK: Right.

CI: Okay.

RK: Basically, that's where I didn't live amongst the white influence. I lived among the Asian influence at that point. Everything, all my friends were Asian, Japanese, Chinese, Filipino. Everything that I'd done was basically with the Japanese organization. I belonged to the Nisei bowling, Nisei golf, Nisei Veterans Association, and Chinese Golf Association. I worked on the Nisei Archives up there in Portland, Oregon on Second Avenue. I'd do a lot electrical work for them there. Belonged to the Committee of the Ninkai-Jinkai. I was vice commander for two years with the Nisei Veterans. So, everything I did was predominantly around the Japanese organizations.

CI: You were really active.

RK: Right, I got into the tea ceremony, which I have my certificate for tea.

CI: Really?

RK: Other than that, I took calligraphy, Japanese calligraphy at that point. I was trying to learn the Japanese language because I was with the Japanese people. That was basically everything that we did was all Japanese.

CI: Yeah. How did you get in? Was there some feeling like you wanted to understand your ethnicity at the time? Did you start thinking about your ethnicity when you were at SF State? Because at that time, there was a huge movement for Asian American Studies and SF State was the mother of it all.

RK: Yes, Doctor Yamamoto was the head of it at the time.

CI: Yes.

RK: That's where they had the big controversies about the love-in and sit-ins.

CI: Exactly.

RK: It was in my era! (laughs)

CI: So, did you get involved with the Asian American Studies movement in college?

RK: No, I sure didn't.

CI: Okay, so you didn't really develop or you didn't really start thinking about your ethnicity until after—

RK: Until I went up to Portland, Oregon. Actually, the way I got involved with the Asians up there was one gentleman up there, Japanese, and he was part of a bowling association up there. And I could bowl. So, he asked if I wanted to join his team which were Ross Yamasaki and myself and two other Japanese, Dick Koma, and who else was there? I can't remember the other. So Ross, who was younger than I, he says, "Why don't you come and join the Nisei bowling? And I says, "Okay, I might as well, you know? I like to bowl, and I'll get to meet people." So, I went and started bowling with the Nisei Bowling League. Basically, they were all Japanese. Japanese or Chinese or Japanese married to Chinese, you know. And we'd go to the main bowling tournament, which is held every year, and you have to be at least one-quarter Japanese or married to [a Japanese] even to bowl in it. So I kind of, like I said, everything that I lived, I lived around the Japanese community.

CI: And this was in Portland.

RK: And I changed my religion. I became Buddhist, so I've even done that.

CI: Wow, so there was a Buddhist church you joined.

RK: Oh, yes.

CI: Wow. Were you part of a community center because there are a lot of JA Community Centers that do martial arts and basketball?

RK: Yes, I did that. I did Aikido. Matter of fact, my sensei, he's white, speaks *perfect* Japanese, can read it and write it. He was also my calligraphy teacher.

CI: Oh, my goodness.

RK: And he was also a Buddhist priest.

CI: Oh, really? What was his name?

RK: Allen Beebe. He studied martial arts, the same martial arts at _____ (inaudible).

CI: So you really got into it.

- RK: I first started out in martial arts in Kendo, and that was fine. And actually, with the other one, Allen, he was building a dojo, so I was doing the wiring. I liked how he was doing it because they did a lot of meditation as well as doing the Aikido. We did ken and jo, which is the staff fighting and sword fighting, and that was good. Unlike Kendo, which is done with the bamboo, we did actual staff fighting and sword fighting. So, I got interested and involved in that pretty heavily. And with the meditation.
- CI: And you didn't really have a sense of thinking about, gosh, I wonder where I was at the time, when you were in Portland, and about researching—
- RK: I did. My ex-wife's uncle was involved in the Redress.
- CI: Yes, uh-huh. Were you involved?
- RK: No, I wasn't involved other than the fact that, since my name was in the National Archives, I received the gratuity just like everybody else did because of it. My mother had to fight for it.
- CI: Oh, really?
- RK: Because she wasn't going to get it. They said that she didn't *have* to go in. And she went voluntarily, and therefore she wasn't eligible for it. But, she got with Senator Inouye from Hawaii and, of course, he wrote letters and stuff on her behalf. She did the nomination and got her money at that point.
- CI: That's great.
- RK: But, no, I wasn't really involved in it, but because of my ex-wife's uncle and him being involved, I asked him. I told him the story, and he was completely awed and amazed that they would separate a child from their mother at such an early age and for no reason. So, he searched out, and he couldn't find anything. I've asked people through the Ninkai-Jinkai and also the Japanese Benevolent Society in Portland and same thing, nobody's ever heard of it. They just said that they couldn't find any information. If it wasn't for the Ranger Kirk, I'd still be looking.
- CI: Yes, this is fascinating. And do you feel the government's letter of apology and the little money that they did give people, do you think that made up for everything that a lot of the Japanese had to go through?
- RK: I would say not because you figure a lot of your Japanese, they lost a lot of stuff. They lost valuables, their homes, their businesses. Some were fortunate enough to have friends take it over for them and get back. But the ones that didn't. It played a hard part on them. I think, like with my father, I think he felt that, since he went in with the service, and one of my uncles went in the service, that his family shouldn't have been placed in the centers. And that's where I think

Hanako, my grandmother, and Konie may have gotten out because of it. Like I said, she said they didn't spend that much time in Poston, and she doesn't remember after that, other than coming back to Island Street. And, like I said, my mother, my sister went with my dad not to Utah, but to Fort Shelby, Mississippi. And when he shipped out, or the battalion shipped out, then she came back to San Diego. And, other than that, there's hearsay that what happened, but I really don't know. Like I said, my mother never really talked about it. My father never, *never* said anything. And I never really questioned either of them about it, other than my mother later in life. I questioned her, and I got a lot of, "What do you want to know for?" and "It's water under the bridge." Well, no, it's not. It's my life. Something happened. I want to know what happened. Was I given up for adoption? Because I ended up in Manzanar. Why all the circumstances?

[01:21:14]

CI: And no one is saying anything?

RK: No one is saying anything. Of course, my mom, she's dead now. She can't. And my father, he's passed on as well. He can't. My grandmother passed on, but she couldn't speak the English language. Hanako, my half-sister, really doesn't know anything. My other sister, Sylvia, she thinks she knows but she's not telling. There's a lot of controversy between my sister and myself right now in this regards because I'm trying to find out, and she doesn't want me to find out. And, to me, I'm saying, it's my heritage. It's my life. It's something that happened to me. You're oblivious to what happened because you were with my mother, and I wasn't. I was left alone in the care of Japanese people. I'd like to find out who took care of me. I'd love to tell them thank you!

CI: I wonder who this nurse is in the picture? [looks at Ansel Adams photo with Ronald Kawamoto]

GK: It's a lady. That's her, right there.

RK: I don't know.

GK: Looks like, she took care of the babies.

CI: It does, but I'm not sure who that is.

RK: I don't know who it is either.

CI: It would be interesting to find out from Lillian [Matsumoto].¹

RK: Lillian would know. I've been trying to get a hold of Lillian to find out.

CI: Yeah.

¹ Lillian Matsumoto, O.H. 2492, Center for Oral and Public History

- RK: Or help me out.
- CI: Or someone from the Ansel Adams Archives knows and wrote down everyone in the picture.
- RK: It's a possibility. But it seemed like, everything was so hush-hush. Everything is so either locked up and they don't want to tell anybody. I don't know if they're fearful of reprisal? And I don't what—to myself, you're just trying to find out. Maybe I'm just trying to find out too much. Maybe I'm going too far. That might be a question that I don't need to know.
- CI: That's interesting how the War Relocation, the National Archives, doesn't know either.
- GK: (shows document) Yes, what happened, it says, he came from a foster home. How did that happen?
- RK: See the thing is, I want to know for my own self-gratification where I came from. My parents being of both mixed race, my mother of one, my father of another, that this happened, I want to find out. I'm curious. I've been curious since I was up in Portland living amongst the Japanese all that time. I really want to know. Everybody has roots. Everybody has a connection. I'm kind of out there on my own.
- CI: It sounds like you were welcomed into the JA community up there.
- RK: It was because of the name. It was because of the name. It was acceptable because I carried a Japanese name. Had I been—well, for instance, Leonard Morales, a good friend of mine, he's Chinese-Filipino, and he looks Asian. I'm a Kawamoto. I look Filipino. We'd go to a bowling tournament, and [people] would always turn to him and say, Kawamoto and to me, Morales. I'd say, "No. This way!" (both laugh) He was Asian. I looked Mexican and they'd say Morales vs. Kawamoto. That was the basic thing. That was what it was all about. That was funny.
- CI: Are you still active down here in?
- RK: No, I'm not. Since I came down here and moved to Southern California—
- CI: When did you come down here?
- RK: In 2002. I've been thinking about it, been thinking about getting back in with the Nisei golf, because I like to golf, and try to get with the Nisei. But, I don't know. I never looked at my Spanish heritage either. I've never really been involved in my Spanish heritage. So now, maybe it's time I looked at my Spanish heritage. I mean, here I'm sixty-four years old, and I'm saying, "*Now I'm looking into this!*"

(laughs) Kind of strange there, but that's the truth, that's what it is. They're both great cultures. One side, you got what they've done, and on the other side, what they've done. I mean, you just take a look at your Spanish. Spanish are very outgoing, very loud, and they've learned how to have fun. The Japanese are more quiet.

CI: Yeah.

RK: They've always been that way. They're reserved, they keep inside themselves. They don't want to lose face. They don't want to show face. Growing up in Oregon, cause I played baseball with the Nisei baseball team up there. We played against white teams. Here you got all these little Japanese five foot nothing guys that can hit, run, and knew how to play baseball. And they were beating these guys that are six foot, and bigger and husky. How can this little Japanese, little Japs, come over and beat us? Well, because we know how to play baseball. It's like in anything, in any sport, the Japanese—not sneaky—they just played the game. They learned the game. And they know how to play it right. They know how to play to win without making a big noise. That's exactly what it amounts to. So now I want to learn my other side, I want to learn the Spanish side, and all that goes with it. And my wife, Gloria, she—

CI: And you guys met at your fortieth elementary school reunion? What was that?

RK: No, high school reunion.

CI: Oh, high school reunion. Oh, my goodness.

GK: I know!

CI: Did you guys remember each other?

RK: I remembered her.

GK: I didn't recognize him.

RK: She hadn't changed, other than the fact that she'd older, yes. But Gloria has always had a lot of hair and a big smile with all her teeth and skinny as a rail. And when I met her that night, it was like she hadn't changed, other than she'd become a woman, that's all.

CI: And this was recent? When you came back?

RK: [In] 2001.

CI: Oh, my goodness. This is amazing.

GK: I know!

RK: I had only come down for the reunion in 2001. I had never been to any of them. She had been to all of the reunions, and I had never been to any of them. I just, I never really thought about it that much. I guess a lot of coercion and prodding and stuff—the committees said, You know, this is the fortieth, we've got to make it the best reunion. We want everybody to be there. So, I did. I came down. I'm glad now. (laughs) I met Gloria again. We clicked, so that worked out.

CI: If you had to give advice to young people who are exploring their ethnicity or someone who is trying to figure out their heritage, what advice would you give them?

RK: Don't give up. Keep on going. Find out everything. Learn everything you can. You only got one time around. If you don't learn who you are, and you just let it go, then you may be missing a lot. Like I said, with both heritages that I have, at birth and up to high school, I really didn't have anything to do with either one of them. I was more or less on my own, and it didn't bother me too much. It wasn't until I went up to Portland and went into the Japanese community. I mean, there's a very big Japanese community up there. And Chinese. And they're pretty well mixed with each other. And I learned that side, something that I will cherish for a long time because this is good. I know I was Spanish, and it didn't bother me. But it wasn't prevalent at the time. At the time, I was Japanese. I was living amongst the Japanese or the Japanese community and doing everything with the Japanese community. That's what I was. I was Japanese. Whether I looked it or not, I was Japanese, and I still am. Coming down here and meeting my wife, now I'm into the Spanish. I'm not giving up my Japanese side; it's still prevalent as you can see. I'm still trying to find out things, but I've got a new culture, a culture I need to explore as well. And like I said, with anybody, whether they're Asian, white, colored, whoever, keep looking. It's only going to serve you to a better end to know where you came from, what you've done.

[01:31:00]

CI: I have students who have Sansei, and they don't know anything about their grandparents.

RK: Yes, that's very bad. That's what I found up in Oregon. Unless you're in a community, like the Asian community or the African community or whatever community you are going to be in, if you don't take time to learn, you're not going to find out. And with the Japanese community up there in Portland—and it's probably the same down here and everywhere there's a community of Japanese or any ethnicity—you need to find out because when the older people die off, who is to carry on? Who's to bring all this culture down to other groups, other children, your family, my kids, my grandkids, their kids, etc? Up there, they believe in that. They believe really highly in that. That's one of the things that the grandparents teach the kids, their kids *and* their grandkids, and then their grandkids are the ones that are actually doing more than their children. It's really

- quite amazing. Up there, I think one of the biggest things is, they do is the Obon fest.
- CI: Yes, Obon.
- RK: Very big up there. Very, very big. And not only do the Japanese get out there and dance, it's also the white people, and they wear the full kimono. And they're keeping it going. The young kids, the grandparents or the grandkids—you got the grandparents that are dancing—you got the kids and the grandkids.
- CI: That's great. Wow.
- RK: And they keep this tradition going. And that's how it's going to keep going. If not, like I said, it's gonna die out. You're gonna lose it. There's so much intermarriage with other ethnicities—white, black, other, and we're gonna lose what we've got. And this is the only way that we can get it and keep it going is to teach.
- CI: Have you ever thought about teaching? You said that you had a certificate in tea ceremony and other Japanese arts.
- RK: (laughs) Well, it just takes a lot. You're on your knees all the time. And right about now, my knees are not the best in the world. (laughter)
- CI: (laughs) Is there anything else that you would like to add to this interview? Or say? Is there anything that I left out that you wanted to bring up?
- RK: Not really. I think that everything was pretty well covered. Like I told you before, you've done terrific research on this already. What I'm adding is probably nothing in comparison to what you've already got down. I'm just one isolated situation that may be or may be not common.
- CI: Well, it's really important that we get this down though because you are one of the whole. So, thank you so much for taking this time on Super Bowl Day for this interview.
- RK: No problem. (laughs)
- CI: I really appreciate it.

END OF INTERVIEW