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"Japanese American Farmers in the San Fernando Valley before and  
After WWII Oral History Project"

**HAROLD MURAOKA**

Oral History Interview

San Fernando Valley

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**Mr. HAROLD MURAOKA**

**ORAL HISTORY INTERVIEW INTRODUCTION**

**Narrator: MR. HAROLD MUROKA**

**Length of Interview: 39 minutes**

**Place: Mr. MURAOKA'S Residence**

**Subject: Japanese American Farmers in the San Fernando Valley before and after  
WW2**

**Interviewee:** Mr. HAROLD MURAOKA (HM)

**Subject:** Japanese American Farmers in the San Fernando Valley before and after WW2

**Interview:**

[00] IN: We are going to start the interview. I would like to get a sense of what the San Fernando Valley was like when you were growing up here.

[00:08] HM: When I was growing up in San Fernando, actually I came from the Redondo Beach area; I grew up in the Bay area. During the summertime I was allowed to come into San Fernando to help my grandmother's farm. She had a farm right here in the San Fernando Valley, North Hollywood. I would come here every summer, I remember two summers and would work on the farm. Basically that's all I remember. There were a lot of open spaces. She had a real big farm; I was able to help on the farm.

[00:49] IN: Can you tell me what it was like and how it has changed?

[00:53] HM: Back in those days, especially where my grandparents farmed, it was strictly farmland. There were very few residential developments as there are today. Today you are fortunate if you can find a large parcel property. In fact a lot of farmers in the San Fernando Valley when I was growing up are no longer here. Most of the farmers remained if they have large businesses; their land is elsewhere like in Simi Valley or down south in Riverside. Here in San Fernando Valley you are just going to see places like home gardens but nothing like what we had prior to the War.

[1:40] IN: Were there other Japanese American families living in your area?

[1:45] HM: Where I grew up in the Bay area there was a lot of Japanese families. The reason I know is because my father's occupation; he was a produce haul man. His job was to go around to all the Japanese farms, pick up their vegetables and take them to the market. I was fortunate to be allowed to go with him when I was a young kid. We visited all the farms where he had to work. During the weekends when my mother worked on the farm, generally her kids would go along to help out.

[2:27] IN: Was there other Asian groups like Chinese, Filipino, Korean living in your area?

[2:34] HM: Yes, I remember in fact the Filipinos I know happened right after the bombing of Pearl Harbor. Where we lived in the Torrance area, there were murders committed by Filipinos against Japanese families. Fortunately nothing ever happened to us.

[2:59] IN: What occupations did they have?

[3:01] HM: Most of the Japanese I know were involved in the farming business. My mother worked as field hand on the farms every chance she could get. My dad was a produce haul man. His job was to go pick up the vegetables in the afternoon. By midnight he was at the wholesale produce market in LA.

[3:30] IN: How about in your neighborhood?

[3:31] HM: Back in those days, it's not like it's today where you have close houses. My closest neighbor was a good half mile away.

[3:41] IN: Did you know what they did?

[3:43] HM: Most of them were in the farming business.

[3:46] IN: For your parents, how did they end up in the San Fernando Valley?

[3:52] HM: The reason we wound up in the San Fernando Valley was when the war broke out if we had remained in the Bay area, we would have been completely separated from all our relatives, meaning uncles, aunts and grandparents. When the war broke out and we were told that we would be put in to camps, they first moved us to LA so that we would be moved to the same place as my grandparents. We only lived in LA for a few days because we had found out that even in LA we would still be separated from our relatives. We moved in with our grandparents, uncles and aunts for two days, until we had to leave for camps which was Manzanar.

[4:49] IN: When did they move here? To the San Fernando Valley?

[4:55] HM: We moved prior to going into camp. We went in to camp in April 1942. We were in the San Fernando Valley for March and the early part of April.

[5:09] IN: What area did your family live in the San Fernando Valley?

[5:18] HM: We lived in the Torrance/Gardena area. But my grandparents lived in the San Fernando Valley in North Hollywood. They farmed most of the acreage on Vanowen Boulevard and Whitsett. During the summertime when I was allowed to come here, I used to go into the fields, pick whatever vegetables I wanted. Load it up in my cart, and sell vegetables right there on Vanowen Boulevard.

[5:48] IN: Can you describe to me your farm?

[5:51] HM: My grandparents had a big farm. They were getting started in a big manner. Just before the war broke out, they invested heavily into new machinery, new trucks and tractors. This was done around August or September in 1941. They were just getting a foothold into becoming a big family business in farming. Of course WW2 changed all that.

[6:21] IN: How was your house?

[6:24] HM: At that times we couldn't own houses and we didn't have our own house in Torrance area. We were living in a rental house.

[6:32] IN: How did your parents become farmers?

[6:34] HM: There was no other job for my mother. She was busy raising children when we went into Manzanar in 1942. At that time she already had six children. I was the oldest at 11 and the rest of my brothers and sisters were all about a year and half apart. The mother was busy working on the fields when she can and my dad had no other place to go other than be in the vegetable business so he chose to be a produce haul man.

[7:14] IN: What kind of crop did they grow? Your grandparents?

[7:18] HM: Mostly vegetables. I remember those growing carrots, turnip, beets, green onions, cabbage and cauliflower.

[7:31] IN: How big was it?

[7:35] HM: Somewhere between 6-8 acres.

[7:41] IN: What was your father's daily routine?

[7:50] HM: That was easy because he would get up about 2 in the afternoon. By 3 he would leave the house. He would go around to all the farms, to pick up the vegetables and done by 9 – 10 at night. Then he would take the vegetables to the market in LA where he would deliver them to the distributors at the wholesale market. They would end around midnight. He would sleep overnight in the hotel there or he would come back home. When he came home, he would sleep most of the day because the kids were off to school from 7 in the morning. We rarely saw our dad other than on weekends.

[8:47] IN: What about your mother?

[8:49] HM: My mother worked out a s a field hand. If she wasn't busy taking care of children, whatever time she had she went on the fields and worked. She bunched the vegetables, depending on which farm she went to.

[9:09] IN: Who was responsible for the household duties in taking care of your brothers and sisters?

[9:13] HM: Of course my mother, and then I being the oldest had to look after my younger brothers and sisters.

[9:23] IN: Did your parents hire anyone to work on the farm?

[9:25] HM: No, not at that time. My mother worked for someone else at that time.

[9:32] IN: Was there anyone else living on the farm?

[9:35] HM: It would be different families on the farm. On my grandparents' farm it was mostly family involvement. When they had crops to be picked up mostly it was all her sons and daughters that worked on the farm.

[9:57] IN: Who made key decisions in your house?

[10:03] HM: Well, my parents were totally Americanized. My dad was from Hawaii and my mother was born in the United States. We were a real Americanized family. They both had a hand in decision making.

[10:24] IN: Did you or your parents ever participate in any kind of strike?

[10:30] HM: No, we weren't involved at that time.

[10:36] IN: Did they face any discrimination from the society?

[10:41] HM: Back in those days, prior to the war, we didn't really face any sort of discrimination like what we had faced after WW2. Prior to WW2, where we lived, I went to school with mostly Caucasians, there were few Japanese there. Growing up I recall very little discrimination.

[11:07] IN: IS there one memory of your parents that you would like to share with us?

[11:11] HM: The memories I have of my parents were basically that I saw little of them because o the type of work they did. Even the loss of family life, we really had no family life because of the situation we had. It continued into my adulthood.

[11:33] IN: For yourself, can you tell how it was like to grow up on farm and when did you start to work on the farm?

[11:43] HM: I started to work as soon as I could get myself around. I used to go with my mom. When my mom used to work in the fields, she had to bring along the kids because she couldn't afford babysitters. We would go out and play in the fields and I actually didn't start earning money until I was probably 10-11 years old.

[12:14] IN: What was your daily routine?

[12:19] HM: going to school because I was still so young.

[12:23] IN: Do you have any responsibilities for the house, like inside the house?

[12:31] HM: The responsibilities I had inside the house was helping to maintain the household while my parents were gone and looking after my younger sisters and brothers.

[12:41] IN: Did you feel like your brothers and sisters were treated equally by your parents?

[12:51] HM: Well, I would probably have to say the parents favored the older ones because in Japanese culture the oldest ones tend to be favored more than the younger ones. I felt that I got treated better than my young brother and sisters because I am the oldest.

[13:11] IN: DID your family want you to grow up and take over the farm?

[13:16] HM: NO, because were never really involved with being owners of a farm.

[13:22] IN: Was farming life different for the Japanese Americans than for others living in the area?

[13:31] HM: I am pretty sure it was, as I said, for me when I was a teenager, I worked on the farms. I really didn't find it difficult to work there, although I wished there was another profession I could get into. I didn't get into another profession until later on when I found out I could. Then again, it was strictly related to agriculture.

[14:04] IN: Can't hear.

[14:07] HM: I didn't have that much to do with. When my dad was involved he worked with a company in which he delivered the vegetables to the markets. From my involvement going with my dad, he had a pretty good relationship; he had a good time working over there. I know he enjoyed that type of work.

[14:34] IN: Can't hear.

[14:37] HM: Very little time. Even up to the time I became an adult. They were so busy with their own lives and because there were so many of us in the family, prior to Manzanar there were six and then after there were two more, so there were eight in the family.

[14:56] IN: Which parent tended to be strict?

[14:59] HM: My mother tended to be more strict than my dad because my dad was away most of the time. I didn't see him too much.

[15:07] IN: Were there other people living in your house other than your brothers and sisters?

[15:17] HM: No, generally those were the people residing in the household.

[15:20] IN: DID your parents try to instill traditional Japanese customs and values inside the house?

[15:30] HM: Well, certain Japanese characteristics of trying to obey your elders and so forth. As I said, being more Americanized, they were more liberal than strict Japanese families that I know of.

[15:50] IN: How did you react to that?

[15:53] HM: Just like any other kid. Some things I accepted and some things I would fight with my dad. I wouldn't say it's the typical family life.

[16:05] IN: DO you remember getting sick or anyone of your family getting sick?

[16:13] HM: Not really. When I was eight, my younger brother took a hatchet and hit me over the head with it. That was the biggest excitement we had in a long time because my mother was shocked at what had happened. He put a hatchet on my head but fortunately it didn't break through the skull.

[16:39] IN: your mom took care of you. How was the medical care?

[16:45] HM: it wasn't too bad. If we needed severe medical attention we had to travel quite a distance. Back in those days, they weren't that close. We lived too far out in the country.

[17:01] IN: Did you recall your mom giving birth? Did someone help her or did she go to the hospital?

[17:10] HM: I remember when I was small and when my sister was being born. When my mother was ready to deliver my mother would tell me to go to the neighbor and tell them that your mom is sick. I would never realize that mom is getting ready to deliver a baby. My mom had a midwife. That's about the only emergency medical problem I can recall.

[17:48] IN: Who helped take care of her and the baby after birth?

[17:53] HM: Generally she would. I cannot recall any special help coming to the house to help take care of the babies.

[18:04] IN: How soon did she go back to work?

[18:07] HM: As soon as she could. Our economic position almost made it impossible for her to take off any time. She would literally go back to work as soon as she was able to.

[18:23] IN: When your parents didn't work, what kind of activities did you do as a family?

[18:28] HM: We had very little family life. I try to look back on my childhood life and there was nothing much we did with our parents. Everything was done with my brothers and sisters, that's the only thing we had. During the weekdays my mother was gone, so the only ones left would be my brothers and sisters.

[18:56] IN: What kind of occasions or holidays did your family celebrate?

[19:00] HM: We always used to celebrate New Year's Day. That was probably the biggest celebration. I don't recall birthday parties or anything like that. New Year's was a special day for my grandparents and our family.

[19:18] IN: DID you have any family vacations?

[19:22] HM: No. Very rare.

[19:25] IN: For your social relationship, can you tell me about your school experience?

[19:34] HM: This was prior to the war. I went to school known as Carson Street School. All of my classmates were mostly Caucasians. There were no Japanese in my class. There was a half Japanese, half Caucasian and that was the closest that I came to having an Asian classmate. Then all of that changed when the War broke out and we got put into a camp. Then I was with my own people. I was involved with people my own age. Prior to the War, there was very little intermingling with kids like myself.

[20:18] IN: There were not many Japanese Americans in your school?

[20:24] HM: Not at that time.

[20:26] IN: Who were your friends?

[20:29] HM: I had a Caucasian friend and very close Caucasian friends. One of my closest friends, his family was breeders of rabbits and I was interested in rabbits at that time. When WW2 broke out, my Caucasian friend, one day as we were walking home said, don't feel bad, you didn't have anything to do with it. I didn't know what he meant by that. Then I realized afterwards, what he meant was, because the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor even though I was Japanese I had physically nothing to do with it. That's what he meant by that.

[21:10] IN: Did people treat you differently because you were Japanese?

[21:15] HM: Well, the early part when the War broke out, but prior to the War, no. After the war, yes. For quite a number of years after the war too. Today in my adult life, as I worked for a living I didn't find much discrimination although I did have some.

[21:42] IN: Did you attend Japanese American school while growing up?

[21:49] HM: No, I went to regular public school. One year when we came out of camp, we were in camp almost four years. My dad was fearful of discrimination against the Japanese. When we left camp and were put in a trailer camp in Burbank, he knew Burbank was considered a White area. Because he was fearful for all his kids, he had us go to a parochial Catholic school. Because he knew that kids that go to parochial school are a lot better behaved than kids in the public school. My 10<sup>th</sup> grade, I did go to a parochial school. There was no discrimination there because the nuns made it a point to tell the classes about the Japanese and what had happened to them. In the following year, during my 11<sup>th</sup> year I was transferred to Burbank High School which was until the Japanese from the trailer camp started attending, it was literally an all white school. There we encountered some form of discrimination. Then in my senior year, because Burbank was not in our school district I was forced to go to San Fernando High and that's where I graduated from.

[23:28] IN: What did you do for fun?

[23:33] HM: Mostly run around with other guys getting into trouble, having fun with guys my own age. After the war came out, we were put into Camp, I was associated with gangs. I was in with a bunch of guys my own age. We used to hang out in my trailer, I was fortunate to have a trailer of my own, me and my second brother. We had our own place to live which was a trailer. It was considered a hangout. That happened until I graduated high school.

[24:12] IN: DID you involve in any community activities?

[24:16] HM: Not at that time. I really didn't get involved with the community until after I came out the service and got married. UP until then, I was enjoying single life.

[24:31] IN: Did anyone in your family date or marry outside your ethnicity?

[24:36] HM: I come from a truly international family. The first four boys grew strictly among Japanese. Then the fifth person was my sister. She and below, there was one more brother and two more sisters. They started attending the parochial school and became more associated with Caucasians. My oldest sister married a Hawaiian Japanese. The second sister, being that she grew up with Caucasian friends, married a German fellow. Then my youngest brother who grew up in parochial school, married an Italian girl. Then my youngest sister married an Irish guy. The first four boys- my third brother passed away before he got married but had he gotten married it would have been Japanese. The four oldest married Japanese. The next three did not.

[26:00] IN: Can you tell me how you met your spouse?

[26:06] HM: We started out as teenagers. After the war broke out, where I was in Manzanar, because we had no place to go, the government put us at the Burbank trailer camp. My wife, whose family, had come from Arkansas. They had no place to go and they were also put into the Burbank trailer camp. That's where we first met.

[26:35] IN: How was your wedding? Can you describe it?

[26:41] HM: At the time I got married the biggest thing then was to hold the little reception at the chop suey joint in Little Tokyo. That's where we had the reception. I got married at the Forest Lawn Cemetery in Glendale.

[27:06] IN: What kind of job were you able to take before the War?

[27:14] HM: Whatever job you could find, mostly working in the fields because there wasn't anything we could get into. My girlfriend at that time, my wife's father in law who was from Japan, he had a Mechanical Engineering degree and he couldn't get a job before or after the War. After the war even those with profession skills went into the gardening field. Then of course there were few discriminations going into the produce so a lot of Japanese went into produce.

[28:03] IN: For the internment, can you describe the time immediately before Executive Order 9066?

[28:11] HM: I was going to school and the war broke out in December on the 7<sup>th</sup>. I didn't think anything about it and when the executive order was signed we realized that something is going to happen to us. Of course we were one of the first families that were evacuated. We were living in Torrance at that time. We had to sell whatever we could because we were only allowed to take what we could carry with us. MY dad, after struggling for years, bought a brand new Plymouth. When the war broke out, he sold it only for 150\$ and he paid close to 900\$ for it. Since we couldn't our furniture a friend said they would hold it for us. The rest we sold or gave away. We literally could only take what we could carry which was mostly our clothes. Because we would have been separated from our families, that's why from Torrance we moved to LA and then to North Hollywood. We were there with family in North Hollywood and we all left for the camps at the same time on a bus.

[29:43] IN: Do you remember Pearl Harbor and how did you and your family react to the news?

[29:51] HM: Myself, being 11 years old, didn't think much about it. To me Japan was country far away. TO me, I didn't realize that Japan was a part of my ancestral background. I didn't think on in those terms. My mother who was born in the United States and my dad was born in Hawaii, we didn't give it much thought. We started thinking about it when the Executive Order 9066 came out. That's when we realized our lives will be changed.

[30:30] IN: Was there anything that you wanted to take but couldn't?

[30:34] HM: A lot of my toys. Of course we couldn't take guns, cameras or knives. The government said we had to get rid of them. My dad was an American citizen. Rather than dispose of these, he gave them to him to hold because he was an American citizen. He can hold on these guns, cameras and knives. I remember we had room full of guns, cameras and swords of all kinds of description. The day before we were to leave for La, we had the police department come out and they confiscated everything saying it wasn't safe and we could reclaim it after war. After the war, my dad tried to reclaim it but they had no such record. Someone in the police department pulled a fast one and then confiscated all that on their own.

[31:44] IN: Which internment location did your family go to?

[31:48] HM: Manzanar. It's about three and a half hour drive from LA and we travelled by bus.

[31:58] IN: Do you remember any Japanese Americans that didn't have to go to camp?

[32:03] HM: most of the farmer people we knew, if they didn't want to go to camp, the only way they can avoid it is, if they were wealthy enough they moved to the Midwest. Those on the west coast had to be put into camps or relocated somewhere else. There were no Japanese allowed on the west coast.

[32:24] IN: For the post internment, was any of your family members released before it was over?

[32:33] HM: Yeah. Even the loss of family life continued while we were in camp. When they started releasing American citizens, to go seek work, because there was shortage of workers, my dad left the camps to go either to Utah or Oregon to work on a farm. My dad was out for a long time during the four years we were in camp. I was left with my mom taking care of the younger brothers and sisters.

[33:06] IN: where did you and your family go after the internment?

[33:10] HM: we had no place to go. The house that we rented was no longer there. That was one of the reasons that we were one of the last families to leave Manzanar. We had no place to go. By waiting we found out that the government had leased some grounds in Burbank and that we were allowed to go there. We bought the trailers from the government. That's where we lived for a while in a trailer camp across from Lockheed Air Terminal.

[33:48] IN: Did you return back to your farm?

[33:50] HM: No, my grandparents had lost their farm, they lost everything. Everything that they had bought prior to the war breaking out, they lost everything. They did not get to reclaim the money they had invested. They lost everything.

[34:08] IN: What did your parents do for work after internment?

[34:14] HM: My mother went to work wherever she could and that was working on the farms. My dad found work in LA repairing wooden crates and boxes. That was the only work they could find after war. After a few years he was able to get into a job as a produce worker. He was a produce worker until his retirement.

[34:40] IN: How about yourself?

[34:42] HM: When I came out of camp, I was still going to school. When I graduated high school in 1948 I also worked on the farms because that was the only job that was available for me because I couldn't go to college I had to help the family earn money. I went to work on the farms. I worked for a couple of years. I was able to get a job in the produce market and I worked in a produce market for two years until I enlisted to go into Service.

[35:13] IN: DID you face any discrimination?

[35:15] HM: No, not in the markets. In the military I didn't face any discrimination. Even when I was employed with the city, I found very little discrimination. I felt I was pretty fortunate.

[35:57] IN: For the conclusion, is there any memory of growing up in the San Fernando Valley that is most important to you?

[35:46] HM: Growing up in the San Fernando Valley. I would have to stop and think how my life would have been different if our forefathers had not thought of this Community Center. This has helped a lot of Japanese families. This Community Center, fortunately a lot of our forefathers had the foresight to know there would be discrimination against the Japanese. If you had athletic Japanese boys, they weren't allowed to play in the high school teams. They got together and built this Community Center for this idea of letting kids come together, play together where they won't face discrimination. I got involved in the Community Center in 1960 and I have been with them ever since. Now I am considered one of their advisors since I have been here so long. I have felt this most important contribution made to the Japanese Community.

[36:54] IN: Is there anything you want to talk about that we haven't covered yet?

[37:00] HM: No, you have covered just everything. Of course my report of the interview has to do with what I remember and at that time I was just a kid growing up, my memories are a lot different than other people you have interviewed. I know you have interviewed a lot of people that I used to work for. You have interviewed people who have lost a lot because four years were taken out from their lives. They could have been to college, had a real career going but all of that was disrupted because of the war. I would think in a way prior to the war, the Japanese were considered second class citizens. After the war, the way the Japanese had proven themselves in the War, slowly but surely as the Japanese got involved with working outside

attitudes changed. When I went to work with the city in 1960, I was the first Japanese in this particular section that I worked in. I didn't realize that this particular section had discriminated against Asians. The reason I know that, when I was driving the city truck I went in to get it filled and the gas attendant asked why I was working for the department, they thought they didn't hire Asians. I considered myself very fortunate as the first Japanese being to work for them. If you go there today, the same agency has got 50-60% Asians working for them.

[38:43] IN: THANK YOU.

[38:45] HM: Thank you very much. It's been pleasure talking to you people.

**END OF INTERVIEW.**