

TORU NAITO

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is October 27, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to interview Mr. Toru Naito at the Fresno County Public Library. Mr. Naito's present address is 30168 Avenue Seven, Madera, California, 93637.

Before we get into the interview proper, please give your full name, your place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MR. NAITO: My name is Toru Naito, and I was born in Madera on August 23, 1920, and I have lived longest in Madera. I was six years old when I went back to Japan with my parents where they both died in the influenza epidemic at that time. I have two sisters, and when my parents died suddenly, we could not come back to the United States. So, I lived with my father's parents. My older sister went to live with my mother's family while my younger sister, who was still a baby was adopted by my father's sister who had no children.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you recall hearing when your father came to this country?

MR. NAITO: He came in 1906, and I think he worked in different places like Athlone, Winton (on the north side of Merced), Reedley, Parlier, Hanford, and Fresno. At one time, my father Kametaro Naito and his brother Eisaku Naito and their good friend Mr. Hideo Mochizuki, who came from the same place in Japan, worked at the Hughes Hotel in Fresno as janitors and porters. That was before 1918.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of work did the men do when they worked at all those other places?

MR. NAITO: They were migrant farm laborers and worked at places like the Kirkman Nursery in Merced and Madera grafting peach trees. They also did carpenter work for their Japanese friends.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did your father come to Madera?

MR. NAITO: I don't know the exact date, but I do know that it was before 1918 when my older sister was born.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did he buy the land?

MR. NAITO: Yes, in partnership with my uncle and was one of Madera's first settlers.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where was this property located?

MR. NAITO: About three miles southeast of Madera. That was where my sisters and I were born.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many acres were there?

MR. NAITO: There were 60 acres of grapevines (muscat grapes).

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did your parents decide to return to Japan in 1926?

MR. NAITO: I think they just wanted to visit their folks who were getting old. They had planned to be gone three weeks.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did you return to the United States?

MR. NAITO: I returned to Madera in 1936 to my uncle's place. I had planned to go on to Nevada where my father's friend had a laundry. In fact, he was the one who paid my passage over. But, when I got here, my uncle asked me to stay and help him farm together. I paid my father's friend for my ticket and remained here in Madera. I lived with my uncle until I went to the Fresno Assembly Center in 1942 and to relocation center in Jerome and Rohwer camp in Arkansas during the war. A year or two after, I returned to Madera. After that I leased a 40-acre farm in Chowchilla on a sharecrop basis. It was a 65/35-percent deal where I furnished the labor and the expenses, and the landowner furnished the land. The land was not suited to grapes there in Chowchilla, and so I had a hard time making ends meet. After about seven years of working that farm, Mr. K. Okano, an old-timer in Madera, gave me a chance to lease another place. He bought a farm, so he gave me the lease he had on a 40-acre place in Madera. It was much more productive than the Chowchilla vineyard. In 1960 I bought 30-acres near this farm. In 1971 the landowner asked me to return the sharecropped land to him since his son wanted to farm the land. Since my 30 acres did not have a house on the property, I looked around and bought another 50 acres with a house. I am still paying for the place, but now I own 80 acres of grapes. There is mostly Thompson seedless on the farm, and I make raisins with half and send the other half to the winery.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Whatever happened to your sisters?

MR. NAITO: One of my sisters came back to live in Los Angeles, but the other remained in Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old were you when you went to Japan?

MR. NAITO: I was about six years old and had just begun grammar school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old were you when you returned to the United States?

MR. NAITO: I was 16 years old, and I went to grammar school and started from the first grade. I was so much older than the others, that I was very uncomfortable. The second year, they advanced me to the fourth grade, and then the teacher said I was too old for grammar school, so I was put into high school. My English was so bad, that I had a very hard time. I tried to learn for two years, but I finally gave up.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was that the Madera High School?

MR. NAITO: Yes. I was about 20 years old! I lived with my uncle's family until then.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is your uncle still living?

MR. NAITO: No, he passed away on November 4, 1968, and his children are carrying on with the farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In what part of Japan did you live?

MR. NAITO: My father's home was in Shizuoka-ken where Mount Fuji is located; a very beautiful place. I was able to see Mount Fuji every day.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are your recollections of Madera when you first came back?

MR. NAITO: I remember when I was five or six years old, my father and I would go to visit Mr. Mochizuki at "Jap Corner," now known as Ripperdan Corner. Mr. Mochizuki was my father's very good friend. My father and uncle were carpenters in Japan before they came to America, so they had helped build the general merchandise store for Mr. Mochizuki.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you recall when Mr. Mochizuki built his store?

MR. NAITO: I think it was 1923 or 1924.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where was the store located?

MR. NAITO: It was eight miles south of Madera close to the San Joaquin River of the southeast corner of Madera and Avenue Seven (also known as Ripperdan Avenue, as Mr. Ripperdan was a pioneer). There were a few Japanese farmers living in that area. Because it was the only merchandise store around there, it was a popular place for everyone in the neighborhood, Japanese and other nationalities. The corner was simply known as Jap Corner, and there was no stigma attached to it. We did not take it as a derogatory term.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You mentioned Mr. Mochizuki had a dream. What was his dream? Would you like to elaborate on it?

MR. NAITO: His dream was to make a little settlement or town and name it. He had heard that, by law, if there were so many houses and stores in the neighborhood, a town could be established or incorporated. Across from his store, he built a gas station and put in a public scale for the farmers to use. Then he built 40 or 50 rentals behind the service station. Quite a few businesses were attracted to the settlement, and there was a barbershop, a blacksmith, a cotton gin, a hardware store, another grocery, and a lumber yard that sold vineyard stakes and end posts, and such things that were needed by farmers. And, there was even a restaurant!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did his dream materialize?

MR. NAITO: Unfortunately, it was not incorporated, but most of these businesses and rentals are still standing and operating.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was Mr. Mochizuki's store the only Japanese store?

MR. NAITO: Yes, the other businesses came in after the merchandise store was established. Enclosed are photos of the original store and current settlement. Mr. Mochizuki owned the store and the properties on both sides of Madera Avenue near that corner, about 10 or 15 acres in all. He was a businessman and also an educated man who served as interpreter and translator when the occasion arose.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you do other work besides your uncle's farmwork?

MR. NAITO: Yes, I worked at the nearby Libby ranch, which was a big ranch owned by Libby, McNeil, and Libby Canning Company, where lots of fruits were grown for canning. The foreman was Mr. Kazuo Nikaido, and there were always about 10 to 15 Japanese laborers on the place. During harvest many young Nisei from the area would come to work there.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you learn about Pearl Harbor and the attack by the Japanese Air Force?

MR. NAITO: I heard the news while I was working with my uncle. I couldn't believe my ears! I was afraid that discrimination and prejudice against the Japanese people in the United States would become intense.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where were you relocated?

MR. NAITO: First we were sent to the Fresno Assembly Center, then we were sent to Jerome, Arkansas. When Jerome was closed, we ended up in Rowher relocation camp in Arkansas. When they released the Japanese and gave us permission to return to California, I was under suspicion since I was a Kibei and was not allowed to return to California immediately. I went to Colorado where some of my relatives from Terminal Island were working on a farm. They worked in the sugar beet fields. During the winter, when it became cold, there was no farmwork, so I worked at the Brown Palace, a large hotel in Denver, as a dishwasher and janitor.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What year did you come back to California?

MR. NAITO: I think it was in 1946. I came back and stayed with my uncle until I moved to Chowchilla.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are you married, Mr. Naito?

MR. NAITO: Yes, I was married in 1951. My wife is formerly from Santa Maria. Her name is Hisaye, and her maiden name is Fujinami. She was born in Colorado and was sent to Japan when she was a little girl. Her mother and father sent all of their children to Japan to their parents' home to be educated while they both worked. That was a common thing to do at that time. My wife was a seamstress before we married. I met her through my second cousin. Mr. Mochizuki was our baishakunin for the purpose of formality only.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you have children?

MR. NAITO: Yes, I have three daughters and one son.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are their names and where do they live?

MR. NAITO: All but our oldest daughter lives at home. Jeanne Noriko lives in Modesto and works at Hunt-Wesson tomato cannery as a quality control supervisor. She is married to a Caucasian boy by the name of Willie Gore. His father works at the Sanger Post Office, and his mother's ancestors were pioneers who came to the West on a covered wagon.

MRS. HASEGAWA: My goodness!

MR. NAITO: Our second daughter is Susan Kumiko, and then there is Sally Sachiko, and our son Jeffrey Toru. Susan works at the IRS, Sally is

attending Fresno State, and Jeffrey is in high school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Earlier you were telling me that you sent your grapes to a winery. Which winery do you send to?

MR. NAITO: I am a member of the Guild Co-op. They are the ones who bought the old Roma Winery.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you plan to farm a while longer?

MR. NAITO: Yes, but my health is not good, so I do not work so hard any longer. My wife helps me, and my son helps on weekends and after school. I have had one kidney removed and had heart trouble last year.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you think your son will go into farming?

MR. NAITO: Yes, I think so. He likes to farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: To what organizations do you belong?

MR. NAITO: We belong to the Congregational Church in Fresno and to the Madera Japanese American Community Club.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are the activities of that organization?

MR. NAITO: Mostly social. We try to help each other out in times of need, such as when there is a death in the family or illness. When the Mochizuki store burned down one summer, all the Japanese in the community went over to help clean up the place. Although we call it the Family Food Center, it now belongs to the Aoki family. They bought it from the Mochizukis some time ago. After the fire, the Aokis rebuilt the store.

MRS. HASEGAWA: During your lifetime, do you feel that you have received a lot of discrimination?

MR. NAITO: Yes and no; when I went back to Japan, and when my parents died, my grandfather took me to enroll in school. At that time, I was refused admission to the Japanese school since I was not a Japanese citizen. My citizenship was in America. But my grandfather became very angry declaring that he was a taxpayer and since I was his grandson, I had a right to be educated in the Japanese school system. I was enrolled. In this country I have not been directly confronted with discrimination. I can feel the prejudice in some individuals.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you still feel that way?

MR. NAITO: No, not so much after the war. I don't feel too badly about being discriminated against, because when I was in Denver, I found that the whites discriminate among themselves. They gave the Jews a hard time!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you observe any Japanese traditional customs now?

MR. NAITO: Only about food, I think. I do go to Shigin classes where I practice Shigin, the chanting of Japanese and Chinese poetry.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there something else that you would like to add to

this interview?

MR. NAITO: I feel that the United States is my country and the best country. I visited Japan in 1977 and stayed for three weeks, and found out that we have the freedom to choose our destinies here. If we really want to and strive for it anyone can reach the top!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Don't you think that you would have the same opportunities in Japan?

MR. NAITO: No, I think it would be very difficult for an average person to get to the top in Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you, Mr. Naito, for this interview.