

TORA RENGE

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is February 11, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to interview Mrs. Tora Renge at her home on 1055 South Fowler Avenue; Fowler, California.

How long have you lived in this country, Mrs. Renge?

MRS. RENGE: Well, I came to the United States in 1917.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then it's about 63 years.

MRS. RENGE: Yes, that's right. Almost 63 years, I think.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It's a long time, isn't it?

MRS. RENGE: We bought the land where I am now residing in 1936. But my husband Kainchi Renge had leased the farm in 1927 prior to purchase of the farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old were you when you came to America?

MRS. RENGE: Well, let me see. I know I was very young. Well I was born in 1895, and I came to America in 1917, so I was about 22 years old.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In what part of Japan were you born?

MRS. RENGE: I was born in Hiroshima-Kn, Hiroshima-Shi, Kabe-machi, Aza Kami-Machi. Today this is part of Hiroshima City.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you attend school in Japan?

MRS. RENGE: Well, I have only an elementary school education. We had to walk a long way to school back in those days. When I had time, I attended night school and supplementary classes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did the young ladies in Japan work in those days?

MRS. RENGE: Well, my folks being a farmer, we helped out in the fields.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did your folks plant?

MRS. RENGE: Mostly rice, I think. And we raised enough vegetables for our family; and tea, too.

MRS.1 HASEGAWA: I guess living in the country there must have been many tasks, right? When were you married to Mr. Renge?

MRS. RENGE: It was in October, 1916.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did you come to America?

MRS. RENGE: Well, I got married, so that's why I came to this country.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was Mr. Renge in the United States before you came?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, he was here before. My husband came to Hawaii in 1902, and to American in 1907. He worked on a Caucasian's farm for nine years

in Fowler.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Does that family still live in Fowler?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, they still live in Fowler. Their name is Feaver. After nine years, he came to Japan to get me. So I came here in 1917.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of work did Mr. Renge do for the Feavers?

MRS. RENGE: He worked in the vineyard and in the orchard.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was there a house here when you came?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, this house was here. We contracted this place for seven years, then we bought the place. So, we actually came here to this place in 1929.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Mrs. Renge, when you first arrived, were you homesick for Japan?

MRS. RENGE: Well, I longed for Japan. I just couldn't forget about it. I wanted to go back, but having children one after another, I couldn't go back. In those days, the women in America were not allowed to work in the fields. My husband worked very hard, and I wanted to help him but I was not able to help. So, I worked in the back field where I was not visible. There was no price for the crop and we could not hire workers, so I helped as much as I could. With so many children, it wasn't an easy life.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many children do you have, Mrs. Renge?

MRS. RENGE: I had seven children; four boys and three girls. One passed away, the rest of them are fine. This was before the World War II. We encouraged our children to get a good education so they could better themselves.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What do you children do for a living?

MRS. RENGE: Are you talking about careers? Our oldest son is a lawyer; the second son is a pharmacist; and I encouraged our third son to become a pharmacist also, but because of the war he was not able to continue his education as a pharmacist. He was interned during evacuation and was in the service during the war. So when he came back from camp I encouraged him to get some help from the government and finish school. He said he would rather be a farmer than a pharmacist. I encouraged him again and again, but he said he liked being a farmer. So, I let him have his way. My fourth son is also a farmer.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then you have a lawyer, a pharmacist, two farmers, two daughters, and a deceased daughter.

MRS. RENGE: Well, the baby girl died. My daughter Yaeko is married to the Ogawas in Sanger. When she was young, I wanted her to learn how to sew, so she lived with Mrs. Imada in Fresno and took sewing lessons from her.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What about your second daughter?

MRS. RENGE: We sent her to junior college in Reedley. When she decided to enroll in a certain class, the teacher discouraged her saying that there was no future in it for a Japanese. But she persisted. There was so much prejudice. After she left Jerome Relocation Camp, she enrolled and graduated from William Jewell College in Missouri.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did she study?

MRS. RENGE: She took a secretary's course. Even today I can't forget about her being discriminated against by that instructor.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was that before the war?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, it was before the war. She did get a secretary's job when she went to camp.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How about elementary school, did your children encounter prejudice during that time?

MRS. RENGE: No, not when they were small. They all went to Iowa Grammar School, and the teacher Mrs. Glide was very kind to the Japanese. I was happy that she treated our children well.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you go to PTA meetings, Mrs. Renge?

MRS. RENGE: No, I did not attend. My children were treated well in both grammar school and high school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Besides helping your husband in the fields and taking care of your children at home, was there anything you enjoyed doing?

MRS. RENGE: When I lost my baby, I became very devoted to the church. My husband was a Christian, so I became a Christian, too. And since that time, I attend church regularly.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was your religion in Japan?

MRS. RENGE: Buddhist. I was a strong and devoted Buddhist. When I came to this country, I thought it would be better to believe in the American religion, so I became a Christian.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What church did you join?

MRS. RENGE: Back in those days I belonged to the Fresno Kumi-Ai-Kyo-Kai, Congregational Church.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It's the same church you belong to today, is it not?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, that's right. The minister then was Reverend Fukushima.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What year was that?

MRS. RENGE: I think it was around 1925.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was Mr. Renge a Christian before he came for you in Japan? Did he come from a Christian family?

MRS. RENGE: No, Buddhist.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did he become a Christian?

MRS. RENGE: When my husband came to this country in 1907. There were so many single men in Fowler from Japan. He went to Cho-Ko-Kyo-Kai (Presbyterian Church) to learn English and he was influenced by the Christian friends. He was baptized in the Presbyterian Church.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you first came here, Mrs. Renge, how many Japanese families were there in the area around Fowler?

MRS. RENGE: There was quite a number. When my husband came to Fowler, there were the beginnings of a Japanese town. All the Japanese lived in the area near the Buddhist Church. The Fowler Do-Shin-Kai was the second or third house from the south corner by the Buddhist Church. I think the members of the Do-Shin-Kai built that hall. I don't know when they built it, but many activities were held there. Since there were so many people from Hiroshima-Ken, the people from Hiro-ShimaKen started a club. I have a good picture of 30 to 40 people who were members of the Hiroshima Kenjin Kai.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was that Do-Shin-Kai changed to Hiro-Shima-Ken-Jin-Kai?

MRS. RENGE: Later, when most of the single men were married by the picture bride system or otherwise, and many children were born, the organization was changed to Japanese Language School.

MRS. HASEGAWA: About how many students were there at that time?

MRS. RENGE: Well, let's see. There were quite a few. Anyway, my oldest daughter and oldest son went.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Would there have been 50 or more?

MRS. RENGE: I think about 50 students, but the number increased.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was there a Christian church in Fowler?

MRS. RENGE: Not a Japanese Christian Church. We belonged to the Ku-Mi-Ai-Kyo-Kai (Congregational Church), and Mr. Oda and Mr. Matsura were Christian, too. Reverend Fukuahima wanted to have a church built here, so the Japanese in Fowler were divided into two groups. Until then, Christian and Buddhist met together, even though our beliefs were different. That's how we were divided, though. Too bad.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there a Japanese Christian Church here at the present time?

MRS. RENGE: No. Until we were evacuated during the war, the Christian church was very active.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did all of your family attend this church before evacuation?

MRS. RENGE: Yes. We all went very regularly. The minister from the Christian church came and preached to us. The members of the Free

Methodist Church also attended until evacuation. Japanese Language School was also held in the church building. We were able to purchase the old Fowler High School building at a very reasonable price to use for our church.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What happened to the Buddhist people?

MRS. RENGE: Buddhist people had their own language school at their present place.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What happened to the Christian property after the war?

MRS. RENGE: Well, it was sold. If we had retained that land, it would have been worth a fortune today. We had to sell the property and distribute the money among the members.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Since then, there has been no Christian church, so everyone goes to Fresno. Is that right?

MRS. RENGE: No more church, and no language school. So the Buddhists and Christians were scattered and began to lose track of each other. If we could have kept the property, we could have continued to have a church in Fowler.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When the war between Japan and the United States began, what were your feelings?

MRS. RENGE: Well, I don't know how to express my feelings. When Japan attacked Pearl Harbor, I was shopping in Fresno in Chinatown after church. Suddenly, I heard a loudspeaker on a passing car shouting, "Japan attacks Pearl Harbor!" I was so shocked at the terrible news.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were you frightened?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, I was. We returned home immediately.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Which relocation camp did you go to?

MRS. RENGE: We went to the Fresno Assembly Center and stayed there for four or five months. Then we were sent to Jerome Center in Arkansas.

MRS. HASEGAWA: While you were in camp, what did you do?

MRS. RENGE: Well, there was all kinds of work inside the camp. My second daughter got a job as a secretary because she had some business school. Yaeko went to sewing school, so she did sewing. Howard was a lawyer, so he taught school. Nob had not graduated from pharmacy school, but he did get a job in that line. Jitsuo and the youngest son went to cut wood and learned to become carpenters.

MRS. HASEGAWA: And what did you do, Mrs. Renge?

MRS. RENGE: All of my family worked outside, so I had lots of washing and ironing to do, and it kept me busy.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I am sure you were busy. Many women learned various handicrafts during those years. Did you?

MRS. RENGE: I did quite a bit of knitting. Some people studied English, but I didn't have the desire to learn it. I was so busy I didn't have time to study. I thought it would have been nice to learn English, but I didn't go.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did Mr. Renge do during camp?

MRS. RENGE: It was so cold there that winter that he and some other men went to chop down firewood and haul it to the camp. After they cut down the trees, they pulled them out from the forest and delivered the firewood by horse throughout the blocks.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you first began farming here, what kind of grapes or fruit did you raise?

MRS. RENGE: We had lots of muscats, but after we returned from camp, my husband pulled out the muscats just before he died. Those muscats were so big and so much trouble to dry so he replaced them with Thompsons.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who takes care of the vineyards now?

MRS. RENGE: I divided the land among our boys. Kiyoshi bought his second brother's shares, and he has 20 acres; and Howard bought Jim's share, so he, too, has 20 acres.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Does Howard take care of his own?

MRS. RENGE: Yes. And Kiyoshi takes care of the 20 acres here.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It's nice that you have someone to take care of the place, isn't it?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, it's nice, because they took over the vineyard after their father died.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did Mr. Renge pass away?

MRS. RENGE: After the war, on August 10, 1970. He was 81 years old.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you lived by yourself since then?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, I lived alone.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How do you get to church on Sundays?

MRS. RENGE: Kiyoshi takes me to church. He lives in Selma and is my neighbor. Kiyoshi comes to take care of the 20 acres, so I see him often. He is good company. I used to visit Howard's place, walking through vineyards, but I am physically unable to walk over there any longer.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are you a member of the Kumi-Ai-Kyo-Kai since the church was built?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, I have been a member ever since Reverend Fukushima's time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I heard you pray and sign for us at the church last

Sunday, Mrs. Renge. You sang so beautifully.

MRS. RENGE: Yes, that song was commemorating 100 years. I had attended the Centennial Japanese Christian Church Conference and I memorized that 100 years commemoration song. Since Mr. Mori was 100 years old, it seemed appropriate to sing it for his celebration.

MRS. HASEGAWA: While raising your children, did you teach or observe any Japanese values or customs?

MRS. RENGE: Well, let me see. When my children were going to school, I used to tell them to listen carefully to the teacher and to study hard. I didn't know any English at all, so I encouraged them to study hard. About sports, now I didn't like baseball at all because I had heard that if they were hit on the head with a baseball, they could die. But I allowed the boys to play basketball.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you observe Boys Day in May or Girls Day in March, in your home?

MRS. RENGE: I remembered that in Japan. For boys in May, we made o-dan-go, so I did the same for my boys for their birthdays. And in March for Girls' Day I made a Japanese picnic lunch and we enjoyed it outdoors when the children were small.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What about the Japanese New Year's Day?

MRS. RENGE: On New Year's Day we made omochi. And we also celebrated Christmas. On New Year's Day I made lots of o-osushi and other Japanese dishes just as we did in Japan, because I wanted my children to have a Japanese New Year.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have ozoni (special soup with rice cakes)?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, ozoni, too. Hiroshima's ozoni is simple compared to ozoni from other places. I don't know why but Hiroshima's ozoni includes salted fish called buri (yellowtail) and greens called mizuna. In the prepared soup stock the omochi (pounded rice cake), buri, and mizuna and a few oysters were added. For eye appeal, some people add red and green kamaboko (fish cake). Some people are very fond of ozoni and will eat many bowlsful, but some people do not care for it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you celebrate your children's birthdays?

MRS. RENGE: Every child was different, so I made whatever the child liked on their birthday for their special treat.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What changes have you seen in the nearly 63 years that you have lived in America?

MRS. RENGE: When I came to this country, we had lamps and no electricity. I thought the food was better than Japan. We had pumps, and we burned firewood in the kitchen because in the winter there were no heaters to keep us warm. Now we have electricity and running water. When we get old we can receive Social Security so there is no anxiety for the older people. In Buddhism, they call this paradise--no more worries when you get old.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Yes, it's very good, isn't it?

MRS. RENGE: Yes. I am very fortunate to have a good life.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Mrs. Renge, you said the food in America was better than in Japan when you first came to this country. Why did you think that?

MRS. RENGE: I always lived in the country in Japan so I rarely ate meat. There were fish peddlers who came around so we ate fish. But very few people ate meat in those days where I lived. So, I thought that American food was better.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I am told that even in those days, tofu was available in Fowler and also canned Japanese food.

MRS. RENGE: Yes, there was a tofu maker who peddled his soy cakes, so it was convenient for us.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Since you didn't have friends, you must have been lonesome when you first came to Fowler.

MRS. RENGE: Yes, I was so lonely. After working here for the same boss for seven years, he asked us to go to his Bowles ranch, so we moved there to feed the horses. We stayed there for two years before returning here. While there, the coyotes used to howl and when my husband was gone, and I was alone with the children in the house, I felt so lonesome and afraid. Our neighbors were far apart, so I just locked up the house and stayed close together with my children.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you get to town in those days?

MRS. RENGE: When we lived here, there was an automobile, but when in Bowles we used the horse and buggy. Our boss had 80 acres in Bowles.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who was your boss there, still Mr. Feaver?

MRS. RENGE: Yes, the same boss, Mr. Feaver.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I think you must have had a hard time.

MRS. RENGE: You know my husband loved sports, so he became involved with many of the youth in the Fowler Choro-Kyo-Kai. That was how he was led to Christianity.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of sports did he enjoy?

MRS. RENGE: He loved baseball. Even when he worked on Sunday, he was coaching the Fowler youth.

MRS. HASEGAWA: This has been so interesting, Mrs. Renge. Is there anything you would like to add to this interview?

MRS. RENGE: No, I don't think so.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you for sharing your life story with us, Mrs. Renge.