

SHIGEO UOTA

MRS. YAKUMO: Today is March 7, 1980. I, Kazuko Yakumo, am privileged to interview Mr. Shigeo Uota in his home on 32801 Road 188, Visalia, California, 93277.

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

MR. UOTA: My name is Shigeo Uota. I was born on March 23, 1906 in Kikaha, -Kauai, in Hawaii, and my place of longest residence is Visalia.

MRS. YAKUMO: When did you return to Japan?

MR. UOTA: When I was a sickly child, I was brought by my parents back to Japan and did not leave there until I was 14 years of age.

MRS. YAKUMO: Where in Japan were you brought?

MR. UOTA: It was to an area know as Itsukaichi-city in Hiroshima-ken.

MRS. YAKUMO: What was the circumstance of your arrival here in the United States?

MR. UOTA: When I was 14 years of age, I was brought to the United States by my uncle. We landed in Seattle then came to Fresno. In Fresno I went to school for four or five years and graduated from Caruthers Union High School. I had planned to continue my schooling, but I became ill and, therefore, I returned to Japan to visit my grandmother in August 1929. While there, I stayed at the home of my uncle.

MRS. YAKUMO: When did you first come to the United States?

MR. UOTA: It was in 1920. After I returned to Japan, I was urged by my relatives that since I had taken the trouble of returning to Japan, that I should get married.

MRS. YAKUMO: And the person you met was your present wife, was she not?

MR. UOTA: Yes. That is the way it seems (laughter). I was 24 years of age and my wife was 18 years old.

MRS. YAKUMO: Both of you were very young, were you not?

MR. UOTA: Well, when we were married it was 1930, so that made me 24. The we went to Raisin City near the city of Fresno, and we were there until 1932 or 1933.

MRS. YAKUMO: What were you doing there?

MR. UOTA: We were farming.

MRS. YAKUMO: Were you primarily raising raisins?

MR. UOTA: Yes, we were. At that time I was farming by myself, and my older brother was farming here in Visalia. Since he didn't have enough help, he asked me to assist him and then since my brother needed more help, I rented out my property in Raisin City and came to this area.

In 1936 my brother was killed in a truck accident and, therefore, I succeeded him on the farm here. At that time, my younger brother Mitsuyuki was still going to school.

MRS. YAKUMO: Did you grow oranges from the very beginning?

MR. UOTA: No, in the beginning we grew vegetables. Before the war we concentrated on raising vegetables, although we did grow a few oranges. However, when the evacuation was put into effect, we were evacuated to Poston in the state of Arizona where we were for three years. After three years, we returned here, although the war was still going on. After our return to Visalia, we decided to change directions and gradually we phased out vegetables and increased the number of acres that we had in oranges and grapes, and didn't grow any vegetables at all. We concentrated on oranges, grapes, olives, and other deciduous trees.

MRS. YAKUMO: Do you grow any peaches?

MR. UOTA: We don't grow peaches, but we do grow nectarines. There was a time when we grew peaches, but we no longer do.

MRS. YAKUMO: What about tomatoes?

MR. UOTA: There was a time when we grew tomatoes, too, but we have phased it out.

MRS. YAKUMO: Mr. Uota, you now concentrate on growing oranges and particularly Japanese tangerines. Were you the first person to grow tangerines in the United States?

MR. UOTA: No, that is not true. The history of Japanese tangerines is quite long. It is at least 60 years since they were introduced to the United States. I believe they were introduced from the area of Kyushu in Japan. For this reason, they are popularly known as Satsuma Mandarin. Satsuma is another name of the southern area of Kyushu.

MRS. YAKUMO: Were they brought in for commercial purposes?

MR. UOTA: No, it seems that it was imported just for consumption by individuals at first. They were brought to the University of California, Riverside where it was determined that these tangerines had a disease. After further study, they eliminated the disease and made the tangerine disease-free and, therefore, they became commercially feasible. I received the budwood from the result of this study at the University. That was the beginning of my growing Japanese tangerines.

MRS. YAKUMO: Can you give me the names of other people who had grown Japanese tangerines commercially?

MR. UOTA: There are many other growers, particularly Japanese growers; however in this area I was the first.

MRS. YAKUMO: You also have the reputation of being the best!

MR. UOTA: We also grew lots of seedling and made many grafts. At one time, centered around Lindsay and Porterville, there were around 2,000

acres on which Japanese tangerines were grown. But, because of lack of sales, this has been reduced to about 1,000 acres. Although for the past four or five years Japanese tangerines have been selling very well. I believe that gradually the amount of acreage that will be devoted to tangerines will increase.

MRS. YAKUMO: What would you attribute to the decline of sales or acceptance of the Japanese tangerines which resulted in the decrease from the 2,000 to 1,000 acres.

MR. UOTA: One reason is that for a while Japanese tangerines of inferior qualities were sent out to the markets and I am convinced that this was the reason that the buyers were not happy. Another reason is that the fruits were sent out before they were really mature, and this was another reason people did not buy in as great a quantity as before. But it seems we are now shipping Japanese tangerines of good quality and, therefore, the market seems to be building up again.

MRS. YAKUMO: When did you receive your first seedling from the University of California to start your orchard?

MR. UOTA: I am not exactly sure, but it must be about 23 years ago. I have it written somewhere; but cannot recall at this moment.

MRS. YAKUMO: Mr. Uota, your tangerines are well-known in Japan, but where is your market here in the United States?

MR. UOTA: I ship primarily to Canada. I also ship to Seattle.

MRS. YAKUMO: Do you sell many to the California markets?

MR. UOTA: Not too much. I suppose because of the prevalence of oranges in California. And, yet, when non-Japanese eat the Japanese tangerines, they soon acquire a liking for it and come back again to buy them. The problem is to introduce them to the Japanese tangerines in the first place. However, in the case of Canada and Seattle, these fruits have been introduced a long time ago. This is the reason I am able to sell so much there.

MRS. YAKUMO: What is known as Satsuma Mandarins sold quite frequently in the United States but that variety seems to be a little different from the tangerines that you grow. Can you account for the difference?

MR. UOTA: Actually the tangerines that I grow started from a new sprout which I discovered and cultivated as an individual variety which is unique. Our variety ripens a little earlier than the Satsuma Mandarin and the skin on my tangerine is thinner than the Satsuma variety. The sugar content is also higher, so it is a sweeter fruit.

MRS. YAKUMO: The brand under which you ship to Canada and Seattle is known as Uota Brothers. Have you used this trade name since the time your brother was active here in this area?

MR. UOTA: We started out by just using the name Uota, and it was much later that we used the brand name Uota Brothers. And, as a matter of fact, this was after the war that we used this name.

MRS. YAKUMO: Your reputation is known even in Japan, and many

agricultural specialists and scholars are interested in your work. What is their impression, do you think?

MR. UOTA: When we first shipped to Canada, about 15 or 16 years ago, the climatic condition was just perfect for growing Japanese tangerines and, therefore we produced a very good crop. At the same time that our fruit arrived in Canada, a shipment had also been imported from Japan. Our tangerines were found to be superior to the ones from Japan. Representatives from the Japanese Fruit Growers Cooperative and a representative from the Kanagawa Prefectural Agricultural Society arrived just as our tangerines and the ones from Japan were put on sale in Canada and Seattle. When these representatives saw the tangerines which had been grown in California, they became very excited, and they bought four or five boxes and shipped them by air to Japan. Various agricultural specialists in Japan examined them. The result was that they decided that our fruit was far superior to theirs in appearance and in flavor. This was the first time that the Japanese growers became aware of the high quality of products grown in Central California. As a result, the two representatives from Japan came here to make a survey of the Uota Farms. They arrived about two days before Christmas. It just so happened that I was away attending a wedding in Corona. We had planned to stay in Corona until after Christmas but we received a message from home saying that these men wanted to speak to me, so we returned. That was when we met Mr. Hayashi, the representative from the Japan Fruit Growers Cooperative Association, and Mr. Kushida of the Kanagawa Prefectural Agricultural Society. Both these men asked questions pertaining to agricultural practices here. They also expressed the desire to visit other farms in the area, so we took them around to some of the farms where tangerines were grown. Since that time, hundreds of people from Japan come yearly to see our farm and to observe our farm methods.

MRS. YAKUMO: So it was in 1964 that all this took place?

MR. UOTA: We had sent the tangerines to Seattle area markets where we had originally sent our vegetables. We had no intentions of sending the fruit to Canada, but someone from Canada bought several hundred boxes of the tangerines and taken them back to Canada. That was the beginning of our relations with the Canadian markets. And that was where Mr. Hayashi and Mr. Kushida came in contact with our Japanese tangerines.

MRS. YAKUMO: Was it after that that you became known in Japan for your tangerines?

MR. UOTA: Yes, that was the beginning of my relationship with Japan.

MRS. YAKUMO: I see that you have received many letters of appreciation from Japan. The first is dated November 27, 1964. Since you say that you first met these Japanese representatives in December, it seems that you had some sort of relationship with the Japanese before that time.

MR. UOTA: That particular letter of appreciation was for my accepting students who had come earlier to learn about farming techniques in America and had nothing to do with the tangerines. I have worked with the students from Japan since 1959.

MRS. YAKUMO: Since you did return to this area before the war had ended, you must have experienced a great deal of anti-Japanese

sentiment.

MR. UOTA: Yes, I did. On the road between Ivanhoe and Woodlake, the entire roadside was covered with signs and posters telling us that we were not wanted here. Yet, this is the story that I frequently tell. There is an old Caucasian man who lived in Ivanhoe. He came and visited us not too long after we returned to Visalia from Relocation Camp. I can't remember his name at the moment, but he told me that although he had lived in Ivanhoe for a long time, this was the first time that he had learned we were farming in this area. And this old man asked me to get on the phone and call him immediately if anyone came by and disturbed us. He said that he would come over with his gun and chase them off. There were people like that even in those days.

MRS. YAKUMO: Did anything like that actually happen to you?

MR. UOTA: No. As a matter of fact, I didn't experience any discrimination directed at me. The one reason for that may be that because our farm is so far from the road, in order to do anything one would have to come a long ways to get to us. Perhaps that was the reason we were protected. I have heard of cases where shots have been fired into Japanese homes. We went to Visalia on business during those times, and we were not directly attacked. I remember Mr. Komoto in Fresno saying that no wholesale dealers would come to call on him, so he had a hard time stocking and supplying his store. So I drove him to Los Angeles and San Francisco to the warehouses so that he could purchase merchandise for his store. We made a trip two or three times a month. Gasoline was rationed, but we did not experience any particular difficulties in purchasing gasoline for our trips. Nor did we experience undue discriminations. At least we were not aware of it, even when we went in to eat at restaurants.

MRS. YAKUMO: Then you would say that you did not experience prejudice before or after the war?

MR. UOTA: I personally don't consider that I was subjected to anything particularly unpleasant.

MRS. YAKUMO: Did you have any problems with the Alien Land Law?

MR. UOTA: No, because I was a citizen of the United States I didn't have any of the problems that the Issei people had regarding purchasing land. About two or three years after I arrived in the United States, I had my name removed from my family registration renouncing my Japanese citizenship. Until that time all persons of Japanese ancestry, even though they were born in the United States, were considered to have dual citizenship, because of the laws of both the United States and Japan. In Japan you were considered to be a Japanese citizen provided your parents were Japanese, and they were registered with the Japanese Government. Whereas in the United States, you were automatically a citizen if you were born on American soil.

When I first came back to the United States, I had planned to return to Japan immediately. But for various family reasons, I was not able to do so. Therefore, I decided to live here permanently. After I made that decision, I figured it would be easier for me to get around if I were to pledge my allegiance to this country by becoming an American citizen, without ties to Japan. The fact that I renounced my citizenship to Japan

was not of any concern as long as I was here in the United States. I felt that as long as I was here, it didn't make any difference whether I was a Japanese citizen or not.

When I returned to visit Japan in 1930, the Japanese Army was conducting practice maneuver in Kyushu. I had read in the newspaper that the Emperor's brother Chichibu-No-Miya would pass along a certain road at a certain time. Therefore, I thought this would be an excellent time for me to take his picture, if I could. I put my camera on a tripod on a nearby pile of wood in the lumberyard that was there, and waited for the royal procession. As I waited, several military police came by on their motorcycle and pulled me down from my perch and began to question me. In the course of the interrogation, I told them that I was an American citizen, and that I did not know that it was against the law to take pictures of the royal family. I showed them my passport and was released. However, for two months after that, no matter where I went, I found that I was trailed by a detective. Even when I went to Hiroshima or visited a friend, I was always followed by someone. It was a terrible experience! Japan was not an easy place to be.

MRS. YAKUMO: Wasn't there some problem when your wife came to the States?

MR. UOTA: What happened was, that I took my wife to the American Consulate to obtain a visa for her. There I was asked if she had a sponsor in the United States. Since she had no relatives or friends and since she was going to be my wife, I asked if I could be her sponsor even though I was not on American soil at that time. I was told that the American government would not recognize a marriage performed in Japan. So I asked what I should do to have a marriage that would be recognized. The Consul General told me that he had the authority to marry us in the American Consulate building. As it happened, there were two Japanese employees there who offered to become witness to our wedding, and so the marriage was performed by the American Consul Mr. Bruce. He signed the marriage certificate. My wife's sister married about the same time, and because I had problems in getting a visa for my wife, I advised my brother-in-law to marry his wife at the American Consulate to make it easier for his wife to get a visa. My brother-in-law laughed at me and said it was ridiculous. As it turned out, he and his wife were stopped at the Immigration Office in San Francisco and prevented from entering the United States, because in the eyes of the American government, they were not married. My brother-in-law was embarrassed to have to call us to come verify the authenticity of their marriage and to sponsor them. That is one example of how strict the American Government was about the Japanese immigration.

MRS. YAKUMO: To backtrack, can you recall some of the difficulties you encountered when you first began raising oranges here on your farm?

MR. UOTA: I didn't know much about growing oranges in the beginning, so I relied a great deal on the advice given by the University of California, Farm Advisors. Whenever the University held a meeting regarding citrus culture, I would always attend. In fact, I never missed a meeting. The professors at the University were particularly kind and gave me great assistance.

MRS. YAKUMO: Is the soil of this area well-suited for growing oranges?

MR. UOTA: Yes. The soil in this area is well-suited for growing citrus fruits, rather than for deciduous fruits.

MRS. YAKUMO: Still it must have been hard to cultivate the land at first.

MR. UOTA: Yes, it was. We didn't have many mechanical tools nor funds to purchase such equipment, so the labor was all done by manpower. Therefore, it was very time-consuming and involved a lot of hard labor. However, the cost of labor was cheap, and I would hire people to help me cultivate the land at a much lower rate than would be possible today. In 1931 or '32 we dug the entire irrigation system on this mountain by hand. This was very difficult to do on this hilly terrain. Whenever we came across large rocks or boulders we used dynamite to blast the ground. I became an expert in the use of dynamite, since I had to use it so much. There were many days when I handled 10, 20 dynamite sticks in one day.

MRS. YAKUMO: Was it easy to purchase dynamite in those days? Could you buy it anywhere?

MR. UOTA: Yes, it was very easy to buy, which is contrary to today.

MRS. YAKUMO: Wasn't it risky? You had to risk your life when you handled the dynamite?

MR. UOTA: Yes, that is true. Still that was the only way that we could get rid of the rocks that were in our way. We had to dig ditches for irrigation on the hillside.

MRS. YAKUMO: It must have taken you a very long time to lay all the irrigation canals that were required?

MR. UOTA: Yes, it was a year's undertaking. Whenever I would find any time between cultivation and my crops, I would use the time to create these irrigation ditches and channels. Whenever I bought more land, I had to lay another irrigation system.

MRS. YAKUMO: It must have been difficult to plant the orange seedlings?

MR. UOTA: At that time, we didn't grow any citrus. We were concentrating on vegetables. So that wasn't a problem, oranges came later. By the time we decided to plant citrus, the irrigation system was completed, and we had pipelines laid wherever they were required to irrigate our land.

MRS. YAKUMO: About how many boxes of oranges would you estimate that you produce in a year?

MR. UOTA: That is something I cannot answer right now. You will have to ask our son Hiroshi. He is in charge of the production.

MRS. YAKUMO: Does that mean you are now retired?

MR. UOTA: I am not retired. I just help out, but my son is in charge of sales; and, therefore, he keeps track of how much we produce. I help out where I can. Recently, there have been farmers who have asked to ship tangerines under our brand name, so I help those in that area. One year,

the broker that ships our oranges to various markets asked if it would be possible for them to package our tangerines under their label. I agreed, but when the packer tried to sell these oranges to the people they have selling to in the past, the prospective customers refused to buy. They wanted our Uota brand. Therefore, we took all the oranges out of the shipper's boxes and transferred them to our cartons. It was exactly the same oranges, but because the purchaser wanted to have the Uota Brothers brand, we just had to market it that way.

MRS. YAKUMO: Will you please tell us something about your family?

MR. UOTA: Here is an article about our family which was published by the Visalia Times on April 28, 1980 that you may refer to. Excerpts from the newspaper:

Fiftieth wedding anniversary celebrated. Uota and Haruyo Terao were married on February 8th, 1930 in Hiroshima, Japan. Both were born in Hawaii and moved to Japan at an early age. Both are members of the Visalia Buddhist Church and served various leadership roles. He is a member of the Associated Farmers of Tulare County, Tulare County Japanese Citizens League, and California Farm Bureau. The Uotas have hosted several farm trainees from Japan. Hosts were the couples' children and their spouses: June and John Yamano of Corona; Yoko and Tats Sumida of San Francisco; Hiroshi, Nancy, and Gayle all of Visalia; and Fumiko and Okabayashi of Phoenix, Arizona. They also have 11 grandchildren.

MRS. YAKUMO: Is there anything that you would like to say in closing?

MR. UOTA: Not particularly. There is nothing I can think of that is particularly unusual in my life aside from the incident in Japan where I had this person trailing me for two months. I think that is something that never happened to the average person. However, other than that, I can't think of anything that would be different from anyone else's life.

MRS. YAKUMO: You are a Nisei; but your lifestyle is very Japanese, isn't it?

MR. UOTA: Yes. I would say I live more like a Japanese than an American.

MRS. YAKUMO: You even have a Japanese-style bathtub, don't you?

MR. UOTA: Yes, plus many other things like that.

MRS. YAKUMO: There was a time when you had many workers living here on this ranch, wasn't there?

MR. UOTA: Yes, we have had 20 or 30 people at a time. And as many as 12 or 13 kibe-nisei formed a club and were engaged in all kinds of activities. The Issei laborers we had were very much like migrant workers (Mexican) that are employed by farmers all over California today. As far as entertainment for the Issei laborers, there was a gambling den here in Visalia that was operated by a Japanese. Much of the money earned by the Japanese migrant workers was lost in that gambling den. To keep these gambler from losing money, my Sunday job was to go to this gambling den and bring the men back to our farm.

MRS. YAKUMO: Did you take them to the gambling place?

MR. UOTA: No. I don't know how they did it, but they found their own way to the gambling den. All I did was to gather them up and bring them back to the farm. Whenever the laborers would run out of money, they would call me and ask me to come down and pick them up. But it was a very difficult job to get them to come back even when they had called for me to pick them up. As soon as I got there, they would say that they had just run out of money and ask if I could advance their next paycheck. Or they would ask if I could wait just a little longer until they got their money back. Because the gamblers were so engrossed in their gambling, they thought nothing of having me wait for their luck to change. Therefore, my main job on Saturdays and Sundays were to pick these men up and get them back to the farm. Some of the men went to Fresno to gamble, and would lose all their money and not have bus fare to get back. They were known to walk back to Visalia by following the railroad tracks. During the night, they would sleep by the side of the road. Most of these people are gone now.

MRS. YAKUMO: Are there any Issei like that still living?

MR. UOTA: No. I would say the majority of such people now have passed away. I would say one or two died in the hospital here in Visalia. One died in a hospital in Fresno. Also among the laborers who worked for me, one decided to return to Japan just before the outbreak of World War II. He died of food poisoning on board the ship taking him back to Japan! Another man went back to Hiroshima and died of radiation from the atomic bombing. Not too long ago, an elderly man who had worked for me long ago came wanting a place to stay, but I was unable to help him. I would say the majority of Issei laborers who gambled destroyed their future with their zeal of gambling. For a while the gambling den in Visalia prospered and attracted many from the area.

MRS. YAKUMO: All this gambling activity took place before the war, didn't it?

MR. UOTA: Yes. It was entirely before World War II.

MRS. YAKUMO: Did anything like this start up again after the war?

MR. UOTA: No. Primarily because not as many Japanese returned to this area and also because the property and other things owned by Japanese were lost in one way or another. There were cases where the Japanese who returned to Japan and had placed their land in the care of Caucasians and had been sold without their permission. There was only one laborer who died on my place. I took him to a hospital in Los Angeles, but he finally passed away. This man had a son who was attending medical school in Japan, and the man killed himself by overwork in trying to provide his son with school expenses and living expenses. He was an earnest, hardworking man.

Issei men in those days lived an interesting carefree life. Many of the men had wives in Japan, but they only thought of their immediate and temporary pleasures and ended their lives in the same way. Another case was a Nisei who was badly burned when he fell asleep after too much drinking. He set fire to his place when he fell asleep while smoking in bed. There are many unmarked graves of Issei who had no family nor

relatives. These were men who just lived from day to day. The Japanese are much better off today.

MRS. YAKUMO: During World War II, when the Uota family was evacuated to the Poston Relocation Center, their farmhouse was burned down. According to the authorities the cause of fire was an electrical shortage. But it is rather strange that this could have happened, since all the electrical power had been turned off when they evacuated! Therefore, the cause of the fire was suspicious, but there was nothing that could be conclusively perceived as to the cause.