

ARAJIRO WATARI

MRS. IWASAKI: Today is May 8, 1980. I, Ann Iwasaki, have the privilege to be in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Watari at 9572 South Smith, Reedley, California, 93654.

Before we get into the interview proper, I would like to have you give us your full name, place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MR. WATARI: My name is Arajiro Watari. I was born in Fukuokaken, Kasuya-gun, Koga-machi, Oyamada, Japan. My birthdate is Meiji 21, March 26, 1888, and I have lived in Reedley the longest.

MRS. IWASAKI: What recollections do you have of your childhood days?

MR. WATARI: I was born into a middle-class farm family in Fukuoka, Japan. My parents owned their own land, so we did not move around. I came from a family who were honest, hard-working, and blessed with longevity.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did you attend school in Japan?

MR. WATARI: Yes. I went to junior high school and attended two years of high school. I remember the school was a wooden building, and I walked to school. I was good in sports, especially in gymnastics and liked sumo (wrestling). I also remember a good boyhood friend, Iiwo Teta, with whom I enjoyed many sports.

MRS. IWASAKI: What was your religion at the time?

MR. WATARI: My family was Buddhist, but we did not attend church regularly.

MRS. IWASAKI: Please tell us about your family?

MR. WATARI: I was the youngest in a family of three sisters and a brother. We had a good relationship. As the youngest child, I was given lots of attention and loved to visit my maternal grandmother. I recall my mother's strong love for me.

MRS. IWASAKI: Were you involved with the military service in Japan?

MR. WATARI: No. I did not serve in any branch of the military service. A person had to be 21 years of age before serving in the Army. I came to the United States at age 19.

MRS. IWASAKI: When did you arrive in the United States?

MR. WATARI: I arrived in 1907.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did you come directly to Reedley?

MR. WATARI: Yes.

MRS. IWASAKI: What was it like when you first arrived in Reedley?

MR. WATARI: There was nothing but hot, dry hay fields all the way up to

Modesto. In the summer the temperature rose to 107° and 1100, especially after the hay had been cut. Now with modern irrigation, Central California has become the nation's top agriculture producing area.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did Mrs. Watari come with you from Japan?

MR. WATARI: No. My wife came much later. I came to Reedley in 1907 and worked for about three years. Then I went to Sacramento and to the Los Angeles area as a farm laborer for about 10 years. I returned to Reedley about 1920. I went to Japan to marry and to bring my wife back. I was married on January 7, 1922.

MRS. IWASAKI: Was your marriage a baishaku kekkon (arranged marriage)?

MR. WATARI: Yes.

MRS. IWASAKI: Then you returned to Reedley with your wife?

MR. WATARI: Yes. After we came to Reedley we worked hard for four years. And then in 1926 our home burned and we lost everything. Our child was just about to be born, and my problems had just begun. But, fortunately, I was hired by a big rancher and packinghouse owner named Hamilton who trusted me, so I was able to support my family.

MRS. IWASAKI: How many children do you have?

MR. WATARI: We had seven children; four boys and three girls. But one died last year at age 52. My second and fourth sons are married, but the third is not. Two daughters are married, and one is not. I have 12 grandchildren, but no great-grandchild yet.

MRS. IWASAKI: Are all your children married to Japanese spouses?

MR. WATARI: Only the fourth son is married to a Caucasian.

MRS. IWASAKI: Where do your children live, and what do they do for a living?

MR. WATARI: Two of our children live with us. The names of the children are--Hisaye Korematsu (spouse Joe), who resides in Castro Valley and is a housewife. Hanaye Renge (spouse Kiyoshi) lives in Selma and is also a housewife. Kiyoshi Watari (spouse Jeanne) lives in Fremont and is a truck driver. Yuriko Watari (no spouse) lives in Reedley and is a teacher. Roy Susumu (no spouse) lives in Reedley and is a service station owner. Fred Watari (spouse Betty) lives in Bellevue, California. They are all doing well.

MRS. IWASAKI: At the time of evacuation, to which relocation center did you go?

MR. WATARI: We were sent to Poston III in Arizona.

MRS. IWASAKI: How long were you in camp?

MR. WATARI: About three years.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did you return to Reedley immediately after release from there?

MR. WATARI: Yes. After our home burned down in 1926, I worked almost 20 years for Mr. Hamilton. He involved me with representative from Davis and other agricultural colleges when there were new farming methods to be learned. I protested saying that I did not understand English, but he insisted on my participation. There was another man in the neighborhood by the name of John Harris who consulted me about farming methods. We became good friends.

After returning from Poston Relocation Center, Mr. Hamilton wanted me to work for him and told me that he would hire as many hands as I had available. But since three of my sons were out of school and each doing a man's work, we decided to sharecrop the Joe Harris land. We worked there from 1946 to 1953. During that time my ambition was to be able to own and retire on my own property. About that time one of my acquaintances, out of his own experience, advised me to buy land. So, in 1954, I purchased this property and have fulfilled my ambition.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did you encounter racial discrimination before the war?

MR. WATARI: Yes. During the pre-war days we were not allowed to become citizens, so all we could do was to work for others.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did you encounter discrimination after your returned to Reedley?

MR. WATARI: By law we were discriminated, but individually, we were trusted and received good treatment from our community friends. We never had to worry about getting work. The Japanese aliens, at that time, were forbidden to buy land, so many people bought or leased land using their infant children's names. During the war, the Nisei volunteered for the United States Army, and because of their valor on the battlefields in Italy and Germany, and because they proved to the American public that the Japanese in America were trustworthy and loyal to the United States, the Issei were allowed to apply for citizenship in 1953. Many of us were worried about taking the citizenship examination, but they allowed us to take the test in Japanese, so most Issei in Reedley applied, passed the examination, and became citizens of the United States.

MRS. IWASAKI: Did you receive your citizenship at that time?

MR. WATARI: Yes. I returned to my home in Japan for the first time since I left at the age of 19. I went to Japan at the end of the year in 1953, and after I returned I became a United States citizen the following year in 1954.

MRS. IWASAKI: Do you belong to any organizations?

MR. WATARI: Earlier I belonged to the Salvation Army in Fresno, but since the Methodist Fellowship Church of Reedley was organized in 1954, I became a member and I attend church regularly. I am also a member of the Kyogikai, the Reedley Japanese Community organization.

MRS. IWASAKI: Now that you are retired, what are some of the things that you enjoy?

MR. WATARI: I like most food, especially sweets such as mochi and sembei. I also enjoy Japanese music, shigin, and writing senryu poetry.

On television I like to keep up on the news and enjoy western and mystery stories. Working with my hands and creative woodwork is another one of my hobbies.

MRS. IWASAKI: What were some of your memorable travels?

MR. WATARI: I have traveled to Japan in 1953; to Washington D.C. and New York in 1953; to Yellowstone National Park in 1965; and to Carlsbad Caverns, New Mexico in 1973. Also visited Grand Canyon in Arizona; Seattle, Washington; and Vancouver, British Columbia.

MRS. IWASAKI: What are some of the historic events that have taken place in your lifetime?

MR. WATARI: I have lived through World War I and II, the Korean and Vietnam Wars, survived the Great Depression of the 1930's, and in 1939 saw the World's Fair at Treasure Island.

MRS. IWASAKI: What changes have you seen during your life?

MR. WATARI: On the farm, plowing the land is now by tractor and not by horses. Electricity has replaced kerosene lamps; horse and buggy gave way to gasoline-powered automobiles; and travel by train and ships is now being done much more quickly by jet planes. Better highways and freeways replaced narrow roads.

MRS. IWASAKI: Do you still observe some traditional Japanese customs?

MR. WATARI: Yes. In observing birthdates and some of the traditional celebrations of Japan such as New Year, girls' and boy's days, we try to keep alive the culture.

MRS. IWASAKI: Recently you received an honorary medal from the Japanese government. What was it called?

MR. WATARI: It is called the Bokuhakuju Tyukosho. This honor is given to an Issei who has contributed to the welfare of the United States-Japan relationship through agri- culture and community services.

MRS. IWASAKI: What are some of your happier memories?

MR. WATARI: There were many happy occasions . I am 92 years old and have been married for 58 years. I have been blessed with good health. My happiness is that my children are all well and making a good living. That my grandchildren, too are healthy and do well in school. I am also grateful that the nikkei have become prominent in American society and have representatives in state and federal government offices. In comparison to other minority groups, the Japanese have come a long way in a very short time. It is a great honor. I feel that the nikkei have nothing to be ashamed of; that the sacrifices of the Issei to educate their children and the willingness of the Nisei to put forth their best efforts has resulted in the success of the Japanese in the United States.

MRS. IWASAKI: Thank you, Mr. Watari.