

Frank,
Let me know if there are any errors
on an information level. Grammatical
errors should be taken care of in the
final form if I quote any part(s)
of this. Your name will not be
identified.
Thanks,
Yasuko

Notes from the interview with Frank Abe

Interviewee: Frank Abe
Date: Jan 27, 1988, Time: 8:00pm-10:00pm
Place: Frank's house
Issue: the Day of Remembrance in Seattle

(about Frank)

Name: Frank Toshio Abe
Birthdate: Oct. 29, 1951 Birthplace: Cleveland, Ohio
Generation: Mother-Kibei, Father-Issei 1973-77 - AFTER MOTHER WORKER
Job: 1977---79 seaman in Seattle.
1979--- newsreporter in Kiro
Organizations involved in: Asian American Journalist Association (national board member), Governor's Alliance against Drugs,

The reason I was born in Ohio is that my father had a job in an air-conditioning factory, after Hart Mountain. Both of my parents were from San Jose. We moved back to California when I was 10. I was really an outsider in the community. No one else was from Ohio in San Jose. We lived in a white suburb of San Jose. I was only one of three or four Asian Americans in my high school(which had 2000 students). So my group identification was white. My friends were white. It was after I graduated from college (Univ. of California, Santa Cruse, majoring in theater arts) (immediately after the graduation, I went to the Asian American workshop) that I discovered that I was an Asian American. I met Frank then.

I read in Hokubei Mainichi a clipping about the American Conservatory Theater offering scholarships to a new Asian American workshop. I had never considered the fact that I was Asian. But if it provided the opportunity, I was going to use it. I didn't think that I had a problem getting a cast in plays or working because I was not white. I just didn't think about it. But, I went to the workshop and worked with Frank, and I discovered that there is the problem that if you are Asian, you only cast certain kinds of parts. So we worked and created the Asian American theater.

(Frank acted in the movie called a Farewell to Manzanar. He played an inu.)
I got trained two years in San Fransisco as professional actor. I was in SF until 1977, ~~when~~ I moved up to Seattle. Frank Chin came to Seattle in 1977, too. He came to direct this play, and he told me about it, and I came up, too.

(about Hayakawa's statement)

His argument was that the camps were good for us because they gave us opportunities that we wouldn't otherwise have. We didn't need the tragedy to have something good happen to us.

Hayakawa's other argument was that the redress was the movement of a small group of radical Sansei that was influenced by the Black civil rights movement. I don't find it true. I was a Sansei, it was a kind of tail end of the civil rights movement. Sansei were so assimilated that they were not aware of the camp experience. They were more involved in the immediate social issue, Vietnam. It was the Nisei who first raised the issue. It was in fact an Issei named Shosuke Sasaki. (cf. his original appeal for action)

(the early history of redress)

In the middle of 1970s, they issued an appeal for action. Shosuke Sasaki, Henry Miyatake, Chuck Kato were among the first people who started the redress. Joe Kurihara, who was a W.W. I. veteran, wrote a letter which called for reparations. Adison(sp?) Uno, Nisei in SF, was among the first voices.

JACL convention around 1974 or 1972 started passing the resolutions. But nobody did anything about it, it was just an idea. During that decade, some people still believed it was not injustice, some people believed it was justified. You had to really argue to make the case wrong. They had to go through that first.

I was contacted by the redress committee in 1978. I had been considering volunteering my efforts toward this vague redress idea. There was no organized campaign. I was that time an actor, I thought I should do an one-man show, and donate the proceeds to the redress. That time, I was trying to create a distinct Asian American theater, to create new works based on Asian experiences.

There are two versions of its history. The first version is that Nisei contacted me to be a help out. The real truth is a Chinese American playwright, named Frank Chin. A lot of the ideas for the redress campaign came from Frank Chin. We got from Frank some technical help, some spirit, some energy, some creative imagination that helped get things off the ground. People didn't want to do anything. ... He had a lot of ideas, and ideas were what we needed.

I'd known him in San Fransisco at the Asian American theater workshop. He directed Nisei ??? play, I came up to be on that. He started investigating Japanese American history. He was rejected by the Chinese community because he used the word "Chinaman" in his play. He used the word with pride and ethnic identity. In Japanese American history, he saw a real injustice. He saw a very clear break in our history where our cultural ethnic identity was broken. Among his theories are that the camps were used for

sociology experiments by the J-A evacuation and relocation study, a group of sociologist at Berkeley. A woman wrote a paper on how the fieldworkers lied to her and did a lot of damage to the people in the camps in the name of science. They were not just doing research for academic purposes but for social control purposes...

Frank Chin has pitched me and said, "There would be no Japanese American art if we don't say about Japanese American history. If we lose the redress, we lose history. If these people in Seattle fail to win some kind of recognition for the injustice in the camps and to get some token payment for it as a symbol of the recognition that it was wrong, then the myth that camps were justified, that Nisei willingly cooperated with them, would stand. Then no artist can create plays, books or stories from the truth, because no one would believe them.

Then, I thought "Gees!" "This is much bigger than me. I have to devote my entire soul to this." For two years I did.

(Chin's mobilizing the people)

He gave some ideas around Oct. 1978.

Their idea was to have any event Feb. 19. He said, "No. Do it right now." to mobilize them right away. Besides, during Thanks Giving, there is no news, then more attention would be paid for this.

They hit on the program of the pilgrimage. We would recreate the evacuation, (which they had never thought about.) go through the process of bringing families down there only with a suitcase. We'll give you a replicate of a name tag, army buses on the fairground, and program. (See the poster)

(how this event influenced other J communities)

I was sent down to Portland as an organizer. They wanted our help. We basically did the same thing over there. One of the challenges was to overcome the resistance to the JACL. We discovered that a lot of people in the Japanese community who disliked JACL. They feel that they(JACL) sold them out 40 years ago. They were not going to trust them again.

(ask Shoshuke about the resentment to the JACL)

(**ASK FRANK**, whether he was talking about the Seattle community or the Portland's)

The challenge here was to organize a cross section in the community. You don't see the JACL here (in the poster) at all. We organized through (all big

ones, including the Buddhist church) churches, and through community groups, such as Nikkeijinkai and kenjinkai. Basically we created a community coalition group.

(the first reactions from the community)

There was a certain group of people who were excited and eager to pitch in. They were the silent majority.

The second group felt a little threatened by it.

We had to fight for the language here. "Concentration camp" was controversial. And the word, "redress."

There were people who didn't want to bring back the memories. They didn't want to jeopardize the level of acceptance they have gained. They had fought for it over the last forty years. They didn't want to jeopardize that by once again presenting themselves as "Japs" to their coworkers. They had worked too hard to put that behind them, to risk that for assumingly(?) the "impossible goal", the redress. That was the dangerous word. But we kept it in. We kept it in by persuading people that it meant historical justice, didn't necessarily mean reparation.

(the central theme)

All of us together as a group.... we are going to remember the concentration camps.

(the text of the poster)

We are patriotic, raising the flag. We are remembering the years of the hardships, acknowledging the years of the hardship we endured to make this our home. There is nothing radical about this. It was calculated to be a healing process, a non-threatening, soothing to bring the people into the tent. "It's OK now. Come out! It's been 40 years now. Pearl Harbor was over" People were hiding.

("for your convenience, carry the following in a satchel or tote bag: blanket, pillow or cushion, small tarp or groundcloth." See the poster)

This tried to trick them in bringing suitcases and baskets, so that it would look like the evacuation.

(ABC network shot a film. Because Mineta did not introduce the bill, it did not become a story. But it was picked by wire services.)

(the reaction of the greater community)

Supportive. The press was friendly. I don't recall any hostility. We were afraid of white backlash, but it didn't surface.]

(Frank was showing me his book of newspaper clippings, diaries, etc. Certainly there was a lot of publicity.)

We had included Nisei Vets. They were the one who were most reluctant to the redress, because they had fought for America toward our acceptance. They were very weary. They didn't want to see any radicalism, anything too much outside the mainstream.

(some individuals who were little archives of the history)
eg: Jack Yamaguchi (slide shows), etc.

Pat Morita told some jokes.

People at the event came mostly from Puget Sound.

(about the introduction of the bill)

Mineta and Matsui were supposed to introduce the bill, and they went down to Washington, DC and California, and they were told "not right now."

Henry felt that Mineta was afraid. He would cost his next election.

We had some bitter times then. We felt that Nikkei congressmen were our biggest enemies, because they were not move on this bill. They felt more comfortable having this study commission. I testified against the study commission. I told the study commission that they were wasting time.

Once we hit the barrier, I fled away. I couldn't say anything I could do(?).

Mike Lowry came to the Puyallup event and at the start of the pilgrimage he vowed to introduce the bill. We appreciated him, because he was willing to introduce the bill when Mineta wasn't.

(California)

In 1979, they had smaller programs in California.

We had the idea (of the D of R) and they immediately caught it.

(why it started here in Seattle)

Because the Nisei were here. Henry Miyatake was here; Shosuke Sasaki was here. The reason it was so successful was that they got the technical help.

We didn't mention Frank Chin in any of the publicity, because it didn't look good to have this Chinese American advising Japanese Americans.

The important thing was the Nisei had the message. they had the agenda. It was their story.

(about the timing, 1978)

There are a number of theories. One theory is that Nisei had been reaching the age where their kids had grown up. It was the time for them to look back and assess their lives.

(the generations)

That was almost totally a Nisei event. Even today. It's still hard to get Sansei involved in this.

(Frank's motivation)

I wanted to do something about it. This was the way I could make things right in my world.

(the first time Frank heard about the camps)

around 1975, 76 in San Fransisco. I read Pacific Citizens. My imaginations went to those camp years. I was already thinking about it.

(Frank's parents)

My father was in Hart(?) Mountain. My mother was a Kibei, who was making "zeros" airplanes in Fukuoka. They couldn't talk about this. I was very pleased when, long after I got involved in this, my father started making donations.

(Frank didn't talk about it with other Sansei. He didn't have Sansei friends any way.)

Frank Chin gave me the opportunity.

(in the following years)

In 1979 we had an open letter to Hayakawa, raising money for a full page ad for Washington Post. We started that in Portland. It took us from Feb. to May.

I also went down to Los Angeles to help them.

In 1980 we had this conference.

We were already collecting personal histories. That's why I was so disappointed by the commission.

Frank Chin's idea was to present what he thought the real flaws in the Japanese American case for redress. We needed to confront these issues

now before the whites did. He thought that the big problem is we cooperated with the evacuation. If we cooperated, how on earth we ask compensation now. His goal was to have JACL acknowledge that it did wrong. Of course JACL didn't, and they still don't believe they did wrong. So he started hitting hard on JACL and that turned off a lot of people, including Jimmy Sakamoto's widow. They took it very personally. That hurt Frank's credibility in the community, unfairly. That, too, contributed to my withdrawal from the movement. I got tired of fighting JACL. They wanted me to move slowly, carefully. I was more accustomed to lightening fast. I resigned from JACL, and eventually withdrew altogether from any kind of activist role. And a lot of it was personal, too.

Only now I'm getting back on my feet again, starting to be more active again.

(the reason he became active again)

I got married in 1980, so I started looking on more my personal lives. We had a child. Now I'm single now to pursue my own interest.

(the D of R)

The name came to be attached to Feb. 19. To me it meant the pilgrimage at the fairground. It was a dramatic event.

(the plan for October 13, 1979)

Our next idea (after the pilgrimage to Puyallup) was a pilgrimage to Minidoka, which was the real concentration camp.

What we wanted was a liberation ceremony. We would build a guard tower and burn it. Take off our name tag. Burn the guard tower, burn our memories.

But the people who live in the community got scared. They saw us outside troublemakers who would come in and make a bill splash and leave. They had to be the ones who stayed to answer all Hankujin farmers there. They (Nikkei in Minidoka) killed it. They wrote letters to JACL, wrote letters to ABC 20/20, saying "we don't want your producer to come in." So we cancelled it.

We were printing out T-shirts (with the symbol). we got Issei women involved in silk-screening to raise money for this. We had a TV story on this. See all generations were involved in this. It was a great story.

(Frank read an article from newspaper in Idaho)

These people in Idaho were not interned, so they had no interest.

(the redress in Seattle and the Gordon Hirabayashi case)

The Gordon Hirabayashi case would not be reopened if there wasn't the redress. Aiko Herziz(SP?) was a researcher for the commission of wartime relocation and internment. She found this General Dewitt's report, which was long unknown that it existed. ... I see the formation of this commission as being the political response to the pressure we put on with all these event and the open letter to Hayakawa. The only compromise was to set the commission.

..... So the Gordon Hirabayashi case was the result of the Day of Remembrance.

(what the redress means to Nisei and Sansei)

It's always been for Nisei a healing process. They were so terribly traumatized(sp?) by the betrayal. It still means that they can fill the hole again.

I don't know (what it means to Sansei)

Who are Sansei?

(what it means to Issei)

It is the question of when we are going to get the money, how do we apply. For them it is not the question of "Be careful. Hakujuin would....."

(about some cultural barriers)

It scares me to think if it(the existence of cultural barriers against the redress) is true, maybe I've been too hard on a lot of Nisei. I hadn't taken the time to understand them, and some of the problems they may have been dealing with this. Because I don't feel any of that at all.

we, in formulating all the answers to the redress, (wrote down) "It's an American principle. When you have been wrong, you repay in money. It's American applepie"

I guess it's easier to be a Sansei and pursue the issue with^{out} the burden of the cultural barrier. That might be the evidence of my assimilation to the American society.

(about his ethnic identity)

It(the involvement in the activities) has given me the opportunity to give and take with the community. I've been fortunate to have such a big impact on the Seattle Nisei community. They welcome me.

I was very interested by Frank Chin's aaaiieeeee. In that book, he defines the identity, that is not Asian, not American, but Asian American. Once I started it, the concept, my ethnic identity just moved over. Before I was an

Asian American actor, then I became an Asian American political activist. I was operating within the Japanese American context, always trying to establish... ??? If a participant in a radio talk show, (if a person)calls and says, "What about Pearl Harbor? You Japs bombed Pearl Harbor," then I say, "I am not Japanese in Japan, I'm Japanese American." Over and over again, you are repeating it. You get a clear sense of ethnic identity. It only meant stronger and clearer.

(his ethnic identity when associating with Frank Chin and acting as an Asian American actor)

It was more Asian American, because I was associating with a lot of Chinese Americans. I was married to a Chinese American woman. More of my friends were Chinese Americans than Japanese Americans. But I felt more affinity with Japanese Americans, because I can use Japanese words for references...

(If somebody asked him that time who he was,)

The Asian American identity came first. I really did believe that Filipinos, Chinese and Japanese, we are just one group. We were forging a new identity, creating a new system, and a new community. Our parent's generation did not mix. We mix. We intermarried. I know more couples with Japanese American men and Chinese American wives than I know of any other mixtures. Or maybe Japanese American wives and Chinese American men.

I don't know why. Frank Chin's explanation about the intermarriage was self-contempt. With Chinese Americans it was Christian missionaries who taught Chinese to hate themselves. For Japanese Americans, it was the camps that had taught us to hate ourselves. Because we hate ourselves, we couldn't look at our group as marriage partners. People in my generation were caught in the political dilemma. We were proud of who we were, but we still hated ourselves some way. Maybe this intermarriage... a Chinese American, she is not a Japanese American, but she is still an Asian.

(about his ethnic identity again. Whether he now more identifies himself as Japanese American rather than Asian American)

I see my transition. Now I'm single again. I have more time to devote. This invitation to be the master of the ceremony comes in a good time for me, in transition.

Yes, I suppose that a lot of my work are now more Japanese American, than strictly Asian.

Before that was Asian American, maybe now more Japanese American.

I think that I have(?) become more identified with Japanese American simply because my work is going to take me onto my family history, and

they are Japanese. And this redress thing is strictly Japanese American experience.