

0H00M00S

[Begin]

INTERVIEWER:

It is 12:15 p.m., September 22, 2003. My name is Midori Kamei, and I will be interviewing Mrs. Bruce Kaji, better known as Fran Kaji, as part of the South Bay Oral History Project. The audio equipment recording this interview is being monitored by Ernest Tsujimoto and the interview is being cataloged by Jean Tsujimoto. All copyrights, titles, and any other rights arising out this interview whether in its entirety, part, or derivative form, or whether in audio, written, or any other format shall belong to the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. Copying of this interview recording whether in its entirety or part is strictly prohibited without a written authorization from the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. This is the first interview---I'm sorry, this is the first CD on the interview of Fran Kaji, being recorded on this date. So shall we begin? Fran, can you tell us where and when you were born?

KAJI:

Yes; I was born April 30, 1928 in Los Angeles at what was then a Japanese hospital on Turner Street.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh gosh.

KAJI:

In the industrial part of L.A.

INTERVIEWER:

I remember that.

KAJI:

And I don't think that place exists anymore either.

INTERVIEWER:

No; you know what? That hospital is still there yet. The building, I believe, is still there yet. It's changed you know; but the building is still there yet...uh-huh.

KAJI:

Oh sure.

INTERVIEWER:

And can you tell what your parents' names were?

KAJI:

My father's name was Kikuo Tashiro. My mother's name was Moto Mori Tashiro.

INTERVIEWER:

And where did they come from in Japan?

KAJI:

My father was from Kumamoto.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh.

KAJI:

I think it was called Karamimachi.

INTERVIEWER:

Uh-hm.

KAJI:

And my mother was from Nagasaki Yukinoura. That was a village.

OH02M04S

INTERVIEWER:

In Nagasaki.

KAJI:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, she came from Nagasaki then?

KAJI:

Uh-hm.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh, beautiful city.

KAJI:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

Now did they ever tell you where they first settled when they came to America?

KAJI:

Well, before they came---immigrated, my father's parents were farming in San Gabriel.

INTERVIEWER:

Really?

KAJI:

Temple City---that area; I guess it used to be open farm country.

INTERVIEWER:

Is that right? Yes, yes.

KAJI:

And my grandfather, Tashiro; his name was Saburo, he and his wife were farming there and I don't know how they came to be there.

INTERVIEWER:

Really?

KAJI:

But with what little money he made from farming he used to send home to my father in Kumamoto to continue his schooling...

INTERVIEWER:

Really?

KAJI:

... because he was... my grandfather Saburo was a veterinarian, but he wanted my father to go onto medical school. So he was sending him money to go to medical school in, I think in Fukuoka. And---oh gosh knows what year that was; I don't have a clue. But that's where my father completed his education.

INTERVIEWER:

Well that's so interesting because you know when I was growing up, your father, Doctor Tashiro was one of the best known doctors in all of Southern California. And I swear, everyone went to Doctor Tashiro. And so how did he become a physician and a physician- surgeon?

KAJI:

I haven't any idea. It's by hearsay he immigrated in---as far as I know it was 1922, I think, to California at---with his

parents, I guess, in calling him over. And he settled in San Gabriel with my grandparents. And my mother---in the meanwhile, he had met my mother in Fukuoka. She was working as a nanny for a Japanese family and they met over there. And my dad liked the way she looked so he asked to marry her.

OH04M26S

INTERVIEWER:
Oh, how nice.

KAJI:
Yes; so she's one of the few that I know of who wasn't a picture bride.

INTERVIEWER:
Right; you're so right.

KAJI:
And so before my dad left Japan to immigrate, I guess my mother was pregnant with my sister, Aki; so she remained in Japan and didn't immigrate until my sister was 10 months old, and then they came to the States.

INTERVIEWER:
Did your father have to practice medicine here in the United States?

KAJI:
Oh, well that's another story. I guess in Japan way back then, medical schools were conducted in German.

INTERVIEWER:
That's right.

KAJI:
So first he had to learn German. So he was quite proficient reading and writing.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
And he was quite proud that he knew that language. But when he came to California, he couldn't take the State Board without passing a Board in English. So he had to kind of teach himself English.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
And, of course, they didn't have ESL classes; there was nobody here to help him. So somehow or another he took the exam and passed, and got his State Board. And I don't know how---these things we never talked about. We kind of had to piece together.

INTERVIEWER:
Really? Didn't you once tell me that you and your little girlfriend, you used to drive around with your dad when he went to see some of his patients?

0H05M58S

KAJI:
Oh yeah; in Nihongo you call it Oshin.

INTERVIEWER:
Yes.

KAJI:
We would go home calls.

INTERVIEWER:
Yes.

KAJI:
And for whatever reason---it might have been after my younger brother died, but to get me out of the house, my mother used to have me go with my father on these home calls, and it was usually way out---way out.

INTERVIEWER:
In the country [laughs]?

KAJI:
Yeah; Gardena was country so I didn't know distance or time or anything, but I would tag along with my father. And I'd sit in the backseat and wait until he completed his visit.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh really?

KAJI:

And in the meanwhile, the mother of this farm, or the mother of the house would come out to the car with candy for me.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh how sweet.

KAJI:
A bribe or whatever.

INTERVIEWER:
Really; awe.

KAJI:
So anyhow, I used to tag along with my dad. And this was... and I would stay in the car because every farmhouse had a dog, a non-breed dog [laughter]. I don't know what they were, but they were always barking. So you know you'd stay in the car or otherwise you'd get bitten, so....

INTERVIEWER:
Oh my, my. Okay so now you can tell something about your siblings?

KAJI:
Oh sure. I have a sister Aki, your classmate I think from Gardena High School. I have a sister Sachi. She's three years older than I. And then I have a younger sister, Cookie, whose given name was Kaoru Arbutus, which is unusual. And she was named after my father's sister who had---was deceased. But, that was it, except in between my younger sister and myself there was a brother.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh I didn't realize that.

KAJI:
Yeah; he died when he was, I think, five or six.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh what a shame.

KAJI:
And I remember his funeral because it was at the---I don't know, the Nishi Honganji.

0H08M05S

INTERVIEWER:

Possibly if your parents are Buddhists.

KAJI:

At that time; yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah.

KAJI:

And then they---we went over to Evergreen to the crematorium, and the thing opened up and his casket went down, and that was the end. And I remember that step-by-step almost. It was quite traumatic.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah; I had a baby brother who died the same way.

KAJI:

Oh is that right?

INTERVIEWER:

And I remember the way he was---you know the crematorium also.

KAJI:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Can you tell us about Gardena when you were growing up? What type of a place was it? You know, I was so envious of you city folks, Fran, because I lived out in the country, and my father was a teacher in Japan, but a very poor dirt farmer.

KAJI:

Oh yes.

INTERVIEWER:

So tell me about your life in Gardena.

KAJI:

Well, I lived at 749 Gardena Boulevard from the time I was probably three or four. And it was a big rambling two-story wood frame house. My father had an office---sort of well what we called an office built to this side of the house, which had a waiting room, a bathroom, a treatment room, and an office. And those days, I guess the doctors dispensed their own medicine.

So there was an area in the back that had one of those apothecary scales.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh really?

KAJI:
And you'd put a little weight on one side and dispense aspirin or whatever on the other side until it---the level thing met. But patients would come there from morning, wait in the waiting room, and then my father would see the patients one-by-one. There was no system like there is now... no; where you go through all these insurance forms and everything. And later on, much later on, we found a little book---a little tiny book, the kind that Sumitomo Bank used to give away for address book. And in it my dad had made a notation, Mrs. So and So, and he'd give the diagnosis and then the fee that he charged, but rarely collected, you know like \$4.

OH10M25S

INTERVIEWER:
Oh really?

KAJI:
Six dollars; yeah. I think he gave it to the museum.

INTERVIEWER:
How interesting.

KAJI:
But... and he didn't keep files or records as far as I know. I mean... anyhow, that was the system then. And whenever there was an epidemic of something going on, I remember he used to line up us kids and we'd get shots you know inoculations--- chicken pox or whatever it was, and measles. Because usually whatever the patients brought in, we caught. So we've---I've had Scarlet Fever, Mumps, Measles; yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
You did have your share of childhood diseases.

KAJI:
Oh yeah; I was a catchall.

INTERVIEWER:

And you're such a... Fran, I want to share this with you because you know my girlfriend, Fuki Kuido...

KAJI:
Oh yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
... lived on the street.

KAJI:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
So I would walk past your house, and I'd see that big house. And then you were the only Japanese family that I knew---that we knew of that had a full-time maid.

KAJI:
Oh a housekeeper?

INTERVIEWER:
Yeah; a housekeeper see, and that's something so unusual you know in those days.

KAJI:
Well my mother needed a housekeeper because of us kids. And then my father always had these doctors... I guess back then in the early '30s, the Nisei doctors couldn't intern just at any hospital.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
They graduated medical school, and then they didn't get any further training.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh how disgusting.

KAJI:
And so I didn't know that, but my father would more or less hire them, and they would live with us and get room and board in a small stipend. I don't know how much it was. But those days, doctors used to get at the most, I think, \$25 a month from a hospital.

0H12M15S

INTERVIEWER:
Really; uh-huh.

KAJI:
Because post-war I heard it was up to about \$50 a month. And... which was barely enough to feed yourself.

INTERVIEWER:
Certainly.

KAJI:
But we... so we always had different doctors living with us--- young ones. Like there was a Doctor Lee Watanabe, he was a graduate of Stanford, but he came to live with us. And he would make---do the office rounds with my dad in the morning, and in the afternoon they would drive into L.A. to Boyle Heights to the Japanese Hospital and make hospital rounds. And then from there they would go to First Street---First and San Pedro where my dad's office was and see patients until the last one would leave late afternoon, and then back to the hospital for rounds. And then come home.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
And so to feed and do the laundry for all these people, my mother needed outside help. So she always had these young, at that time Nisei girls...

INTERVIEWER:
Yes.

KAJI:
... I guess out of high school, who would work for her. And they lived in also. But I mean, when you think about it now, it's---it sounds good having a housekeeper, but the poor ladies, they had to do all the washing, the cooking, cleaning, and chasing after us kids. I mean, I'm sure it was tough.

INTERVIEWER:
Wasn't your father one of the founders of the Japanese Hospital--the first Japanese Hospital?

KAJI:

The one on...

INTERVIEWER:
On First Street?

KAJI:
First street.

INTERVIEWER:
Uh-hm.

KAJI:
Yeah; well that was a... if I had known that I would have bought... it was a test case with the State of California because Issei weren't allowed to own land with that alien land law.

INTERVIEWER:
Of course.

0H14M02S

KAJI:
So my father together with I think four or five other Issei doctors formed some kind of corporation and sold stock to build a hospital. And, but first he had to fight the State of California. So they hired an attorney named Marion Wright, and he took the case and, in fact, his daughter came to the opening of the museum. She looked me up somehow. And she said she remembers going with her father by train to Washington, DC to the Supreme Court where he took the case. You can---you'd have to get the details from Bruce. It's in a law textbook.

INTERVIEWER:
Fascinating though, Fran; I'm so glad you're sharing this.

KAJI:
Yeah; well we didn't know this until after my father was dead. Bruce was going to Loyola Law School the year we got married. He just went one year. And he came across this case and he says, "Look what your dad did." I said, "I didn't know." None of us knew.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
But it's in the textbooks.

INTERVIEWER:
So they won the case then?

KAJI:
Yes; because this way the Issei could buy shares or they sold shares in the hospital, and were able to build the hospital and operate, I don't know, as a non-profit, I'm sure. But that's where he took his young interns for their training. Because back then, this was the early '30s or late '20s, I guess the red line was fairly common, and Issei weren't allowed to go to just any hospital to operate. So that's hard for a lot of the Sansei to picture.

OH16M00S

INTERVIEWER:
To even appreciate what they had to go through, Fran.

KAJI:
Right.

INTERVIEWER:
Yeah. Do you remember the City of Gardena? How was Gardena, the little City of Gardena while you were growing up?

KAJI:
Well it was little all right... because I remember, I used to sit on the front steps and watch the street cleaner go by.

INTERVIEWER:
Uh-hm.

KAJI:
And it wasn't a machine like it is now with those big sweepers you know. It--the street sweeper was a man pushing a... do you remember **?Cats and Jammer Kids??**

INTERVIEWER:
Oh yes; yes.

KAJI:
Well there used to be [laughter] a guy with a push broom with a sort of a galvanized...

INTERVIEWER:
Cart; yes. Uh-hm.

KAJI:
... cart; yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
It's a cart.

KAJI:
And it would pick up the horse [whatchamacallit]. We used to have horses on Gardena Boulevard. And so this man would go buy with a push broom and clean the street. And I'd sit there on the front step and watch. And it was normal you know. And we would watch these things; it was every day.

And then we lived in the city strip, which was between Vermont and Figueroa. And so we didn't---we weren't covered by the L.A. City for fire. So when there was a fire anywhere within the city strip, the volunteer fire truck would have to be manned by volunteers, and it... I don't know where they had the truck parked, but the mechanic across the street at **?Arkenbergs?**, he was one of the volunteers and I think the man who ran the Texaco gas station and Joe Chris at the Mobile gas station, they would all drop their work and go chasing after this old truck. And it didn't have... well for then, I guess it was state-of-the-art, but they'd have to pump the water and try to put out the fire. And the meanwhile, you're waiting for L.A. City to send down the engine. By then the fire is done with and things were down to the ground.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
Because remember there was a Japanese store called, Kameya?

0018M03S

INTERVIEWER:
Oh yes; yes.

KAJI:
Well that placed burned down about twice, I think.

INTERVIEWER:

Really?

KAJI:

Yeah; once it was Sunday morning because I remember before we got ready for church it was burning.

INTERVIEWER:

Really?

KAJI:

But that was a volunteer fire department.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh; that's so fascinating. Thank you for sharing. Now, Fran, do you remember any discrimination growing up in Gardena at that time?

KAJI:

Oh I---the only time I did was I remember... well all my girlfriends were in the Bluebirds, and that was sort of like the Junior Girl Scouts only it was called Bluebirds and they wore blue uniforms. And I wanted to be in it because these were my pals. And so my mother not knowing Eigo well enough to speak, and the leader of the Bluebirds was a lady in charge of a cafeteria at our grammar school. So she asked Mrs. Pat Kobayashi to speak to this lady to see if I could join the Bluebirds. And this woman turned me down flat, "No."

INTERVIEWER:

Isn't that disgusting?

KAJI:

I still remember that. So every time I see Bluebirds, my heart goes, "Urrr."

INTERVIEWER:

Of course; we don't remember... we don't forget those slights.

KAJI:

Oh yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Can you describe your school years now from elementary, junior high school, high school?

KAJI:

Oh; well I went to Gardena Elementary which is half a block away. In fact, a lot of times when I hear the school bell, I leave the house and run over because it's so close. And it was mainly... well there weren't that many Mexicans then, and a few Japanese---very few. And I didn't know those were difficult times, but I remember one-fourth of the kids used to come to school bare-footed. And they wouldn't have shoes on. I thought, "Gee, I wish I could walk around bare-footed," you know. So one summer, I tried and I found out how hot the sidewalk could be. So that was the end of that. But I didn't know it was because of the Depression.

OH20M15S

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
I didn't know about that until later---much later. And then from there, nothing exciting ever happened. It was just plain old small town Gardena. [Phone ringing.] Anyhow, we... other than that, not much happened. Oh I know, once a year we would... I don't know how it happened, but our mothers would have to dress us up in kimonos, and we would serve ocha and little sembei. Why I don't know; I don't even know what the event was called. But once a year we did that.

INTERVIEWER:
Now this is elementary school?

KAJI:
Yeah; and you know if you don't wear kimonos every day it's hard to manage. So I was glad it was only once a year. And school was uneventful. You got up and went to school and came home, and after school we had to go Nihongo gakko.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh did you?

KAJI:
Yeah; the Gardena Gakuen, which was way out there in the oil fields. It was a good plus mile and a half away from... I don't know how far it was---the other side of Figueroa I think. So that took up the afternoon. And going to there, we walked and I had a girlfriend, Miyako Tachibana I could walk with. But coming home, I had to come home alone. And you know in the late afternoon when it's getting dark, it was kind of spooky, but

nothing ever happened. And then after sixth grade, I went to Gardena Junior/Senior High School. And so I managed to go seventh, eight grade, and then I think when I was going to be nine, the war started.

0H22M20S

INTERVIEWER:
Oh really?

KAJI:
So that was the end of that. But it was more or less uneventful. I didn't feel any prejudice over there because we knew everybody from childhood.

INTERVIEWER:
Did you have Japanese American friends, as well as Caucasian friends at that time in Junior High School?

KAJI:
Yeah; well mainly my Caucasian friends weren't... well, of course by then, seventh grade all of the sudden Hakujuin friends were boy crazy. So I thought, "Darn," you know; I couldn't stand boys. So they could off that route [laughter]. And so I guess at that time, all of us Nisei weren't interested in guys so I kind of clung to them. But oh that was back in the late '30s I guess or early '40s.

INTERVIEWER:
Now can you tell us, what happened on December 7th? Do you remember that day?

KAJI:
Oh clearly; of course most of us do. My sisters and I were walking home from church and it was not quite Noon time, I guess, because church was from nine... I don't know; I had no sense of time then. And as we were walking home on Gardena Boulevard, which was bare---no traffic, no cars.

INTERVIEWER:
It was Sunday---because it was Sunday?

0H23M56S

KAJI:
Yeah; I mean it was a one-horse town for sure. And as we were coming home about a block and a half away we could hear our radio from our living room echoing down Gardena Boulevard. And

my father had turned it on full blast. In those days you only had one radio in the house and it was one of those big things with a dial up here. Anyhow, he had it on to what station, and it was talking about Pearl Harbor... the Japs bombing and all that. And not being all that up on geography, I didn't know where Pearl Harbor was; I don't think many of us did. And it... but my father told us what was happening, and even then it was hard to comprehend. And he had that radio on all day---all night. But it's kind of blurry now, but that was about it.

INTERVIEWER:

Now what happened to your family when we were all forced to evacuate?

KAJI:

Well prior to that, my father who had always been sick with TB had to have major surgery done on his lungs or chest. And he was at Good Samaritan Hospital... I don't know when it was. But the orders came what---in April?

INTERVIEWER:

April.

KAJI:

Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah; here---those of us in Gardena. Yes; I remember.

KAJI:

Right.

INTERVIEWER:

April 17th, 1942.

KAJI:

Right.

INTERVIEWER:

The day of infamy as far as I'm concerned.

KAJI:

Absolutely yeah; that's why Bruce is a Republican... aside. Anyhow, my father was hospitalized, but he somehow or another told my mother, "Pack up the family and move to Fresno," because at that time Fresno was a free-zone.

INTERVIEWER:
That's right.

0H25M48S

KAJI:
So he... well by then, my sister, Aki had started her---I think her third year at Santa Barbara State because she had done two years to Compton Junior College.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh; I didn't know that.

KAJI:
And she wanted to continue on. And anyhow, she was at Santa Barbara State, but because she was an alien... in those days you couldn't get any citizenship, she had to quit her schooling at Santa Barbara and come pack up and come home. So I guess my dad told Aki to make arrangements to move to Fresno because one of our Gardena friends, Eto family... they used to have a farm supply place just a short half a block from us... they had moved there and had found housing; that we should come because it's a free-zone. We won't have to go to camp. Because at that time, I think the assembly centers were open.

So we somehow or another, my sister got a hold of Beacon's Van and Storage and I remember the van being parked in front of our house and they were loading it up with our beds and fridge and sofa and everything else. And within a couple of days, we moved up to Fresno. And after we got there, we stayed with the Eto's for a short time. And then meanwhile, some friends helped us find a house. And the house was... well it was barely held together because you could look through the crack in the floor and see the dirt underneath you know.

INTERVIEWER:
[Laughter.] Oh dear.

KAJI:
But we managed. At least we were still together. So we lived there from April until---or end of April until almost July when the orders changed again and we had to leave California.

INTERVIEWER:
Yes.

KAJI:

So that was our adventure in Fresno. And I went to Roosevelt High School there for a couple of weeks. And then we were frozen out of going to Roosevelt High School because that was in a "B" Zone or whatever it was.

INTERVIEWER:
Yes; uh-hm.

0H28M18S

KAJI:
And so my sister, Sachi and I... I don't know how we did it; we found a way to go to Sanger Union High. And so we got... I don't know how we got there, but we rode to Sanger Union High for not quite a week when we found out we'd get full credit for that part of the semester. So we didn't have to attend high school or junior high. And then we had to get ready to go to camp. And so we got our shots, and we were told to report to the---an area called Pinedale, right in the outskirts of Fresno. And so again, we had to pack up our stuff. I guess we put everything in storage; I don't know. And moved to---we went to Poston.

INTERVIEWER:
So you never really went to an assembly center did you?

KAJI:
No.

INTERVIEWER:
You went directly to the relocation camp?

KAJI:
Right; from Fresno.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you tell us about Poston?

KAJI:
Oh; that's a... well I'm sure others have told you the same, but we knew we were---well kind of knew where we were going, but until you get there you really don't know.

INTERVIEWER:
That's right.

KAJI:

And we---well we rode on the train. I remember you had to pull the blinds down every time you passed another a little town. And the seats were full of sawdust or something. It had a real hard feel to it. And they had I think some water spigots at each of the train, but with the heat and all they ran out of water. They gave us lunch, but it was two slices of white bread with a piece of cheese between them. That I remember because it smelled.

OH30M10S

INTERVIEWER:
Can you imagine?

KAJI:
And then an orange; that was it. But you know, everyone got the same thing so no class distinction for darn sure. But we went to---we stopped a lot because the troop trains were going by every so often. That's why we had to pull down the shades. And then of course, the windows were open because there was no air conditioning, and the soot from the engine would come into the windows. I mean, it was raw, grubby, and grimy.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:
And then I don't recall how the toilets were, but I'm sure they must have been primitive, too. I blotted that out of my memory. But then we finally arrived at a place called Parker, at least that's what we were told, and we got off and had to clamber on these trucks and somehow my family stayed together. And we were with a group from Sanger, **Dinuba?** whatever... they weren't all Fresno people. So we were trucked over to Camp II and our first barrack was 227.

So we were given... well since there were my sisters---there were four of us girls, my mom and then we had a family friend, Fuyoko Taniguchi, she was distantly related to my dad. And she came right before the war from Kumamoto and lived with us and worked for my dad as... I think in Japan she was not quite a nurse, but mid-wife. And so she had some medical training, but she... so we were there as a family unit. And my dad was still out here at Maryknoll Sanitarium recuperating. So our family was split like so many.

Anyhow from there we stayed in Camp II for a while, and I can't imagine how---what---how the mail service was, but my dad had

found out that if we moved to Camp I to an area where there was a lot of people from Coachella Valley, he had a lot of former patients who would take care of us. Because to be in camp without a male head of household, you know you've got to make your own chairs and tables. I mean, you know how primitive it was. So he wrote my mom while we were in Camp II and said, "Put in an application to move to Camp I to where the people from Coachella are, and they will help you settle in. So I don't know how---what time went by, but we in time---about a week or so, moved into Camp I and then we were among strangers again because I didn't know these people.

0H33M24S

INTERVIEWER:

And Fran, how old were you at that time? Do you remember when you went into the relocation camp? Do you remember what age would you be?

KAJI:

Was I 14?

INTERVIEWER:

You were 14 years of age, good. Okay.

KAJI:

I don't know. Maybe I was going on 15; I'm terrible with numbers.

INTERVIEWER:

Oh no; you're doing very well. Thank you; I appreciate all the memories.

KAJI:

Yeah; whatever in '28... I don't know.

INTERVIEWER:

Yeah; so then how long were you in Poston?

KAJI:

We were there 10 months because then again, my father wrote mom and said, "It's best for you to go on the outside. Find a way to leave camp." Well the only way you could leave camp was to have a job on the outside, and you signed a contract saying you wouldn't become a burden to wherever you're going---no welfare, nada. So somehow or another... the only way you could get out was to have a job on the outside. So through some former farmer

friends, my mom and my oldest sister, Aki, signed a sugar beet contract. You could leave camp if you had a job on the outside.

INTERVIEWER:
Picking sugar beets?

KAJI:
I don't know... picking or weeding. So we... and my father thought we would be better off on the outside. Well little did he know [laughter], this camp---farm that we went to, they had an outhouse. You had to go pump the water outside you know; and no bathroom, nada.

INTERVIEWER:
Can you imagine?

KAJI:
Oh; and kerosene lamp.

INTERVIEWER:
What state was this; do you remember?

KAJI:
Colorado

0H35M10S

INTERVIEWER:
Oh you went to Colorado?

KAJI:
Yeah.

INTERVIEWER:
Oh okay.

KAJI:
And my dad, little did he know, that we were supposed to be better off---or well off [laughter]. It was worse. And then you know out there, well with the irrigation ditches, there was these clouds of gnats and they were getting into ears and eyes; and oh it was horrible.

INTERVIEWER:
Really?

KAJI:

I mean, such misery. I never did tell my father what we went through [laughter].

INTERVIEWER:

[Laughter.] Dad, how about it, Dad.

KAJI:

Yeah right. So anyhow, we were there... did you run out of tape?

INTERVIEWER:

Do you need a break? Shall we take a little break?

KAJI:

Oh I don't know.

INTERVIEWER:

I could take a break, Fran.

KAJI:

Oh okay.

INTERVIEWER:

Thank you; you're doing a....

[Parties take a break.]

[Parties return from break.]

0H36M03S

INTERVIEWER:

It is 1:15 on September 22, 2003. This is a continuation and the second CD of the interview of Fran Kaji on the same day being conducted by me, Midori Kamei, for the South Bay Oral History Project. The audio and catalog persons remain the same. All copyrights, title, and any other rights arising out of this interview whether in its entirety, part, or derivative form, and whether in audio, written, or any other format shall belong to the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. Copying of this interview recording whether in its entirety or part is strictly prohibited without written authorization from the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. So let's continue the interview. Now Fran, can you tell me what happened to you people after you worked in the sugar beets field for a while?

KAJI:

[Laughter.] Well our mother insisted that we go to this farm and help weed whatever was the crop. We worked for Mr. and Mrs. Koga who used to be our gardener in Gardena. [Cough]; excuse me. And she made sure we were out there because she said, "If the WRA finds out that we weren't working legitimately, they may throw us back in camp." It was the Issei mentality.

So every day we got up and went to the farm to help weed... I think it was zucchini, tomatoes, onion. And that's when... I mean you'd see this long row ahead of you that you're supposed to weed, and first you'd start off you know in pretty good posture. And then before you know it, towards the middle of the day you're on your butt dragging along. And I never did see the end of the row. It was really over the horizon.

But we had to do that---mother's orders. And we would break for lunch, but lunch we had to go help prepare. And then we'd go back out in the field to finish the row. And then we had to break to come back in and start the ofuro, the bath for the other hired help, and then help start dinner. You know it was usually rice with... we ate so much zucchini, tomato, and onions; I can still taste it [laughter].

But we kept this up from, I guess it was May, June, July, and probably August, and then for me, I had to go back to school. I went to Brighton High School from... well I went when we first got out of camp, but then again from September to sometime in mid-October, I don't know how it came about, but my mother together with my oldest sister had been driving into Denver to buy a house... first to rent, but they couldn't find it so they bought a house at---on the north side at 4125 Vallejo Street.

And so we moved in there in time, and I attended North High School from October---I guess it was '43 until August '45. We lived in north---on the north side for that long until we came back right before the war ended. But it was a mixed neighborhood---a lot of Italians, a lot of white people. I think there was one Japanese family a couple blocks away, but it was... you know I guess mainly Italians. I didn't realize that the---I didn't know the... up to then I hadn't met any Italian kids. And they were Nisei like we are. So it was... I guess at home they spoke their dialect, but I made some good friends at North High School and enjoyed my short time there.

OH40M32S

INTERVIEWER:

Did you face any discrimination? Was there any differences that you felt there?

KAJI:

No; they were curious about me wondering what I was. And I thought, "Well I can pick anything I want because these people don't know." [Laughter.] So I was thinking... I told one girl, "Oh I'm Eskimo." And then, I mean you know, pick your choice [laughter]. Anyhow, all I know is all of the sudden like Yom Kippur, all the Jewish kids would be out of school and all of the Italian kids would ditch school, too, because teachers didn't know the difference. And I thought, "Well where is everyone?" It was like you know, it was deserted. It was a fun time for me. And they were very kind considering it was wartime. But I don't recall any particular problems.

INTERVIEWER:

Now then when you were still there when the war ended?

0H41M35S

KAJI:

No; I had just completed summer school at East High, and I had wanted to remain in Denver, perhaps with a distant relative because my going back several generations, my paternal grandfather was born an Ito, but he went yoshi to a Tashiro family that had three girls. And that's how my father came about being a Tashiro. I wanted to remain in Denver and complete my senior year. But my father says, "No; you're coming home with us to L.A." So we had to pack up and we came back around... I guess it was late July, early August---right before VJ Day we came to L.A.

And prior to the war, my father had either loaned or given some money to some gardeners in---on west L.A. on---near Sawtelle Boulevard so that they could buy what was then a boarding house. And this was right before the war ended there was a housing shortage. And so we had no place to live. Though in the meanwhile, don't ask me how, my father had bought a house on--- at 446 South Boyle in Boyle Heights because our---the house that we thought we owned in Gardena was bought in the name of a Nisei family friend. And so before the war ended, my parents thought, "Oh we better get rid of that home before the government finds out it wasn't really ours; it was this other...", anyhow there was all this thing about alien land law. So our house in Gardena was no longer ours. So these are things as a child

you're not aware of. But my parents had bought this house in Boyle Heights.

But in the meanwhile, coming back from Denver to L.A. we needed a place to stay. So we stayed at this boarding house on Beloit Street, which is where the San Diego Freeway is now because that street, I think, is gone. And we lived in this rooming house with a bunch of strangers. We were all Japanese---all out of camp. One family was Mary Honda; she and her sister Rosie, they were---they became good friends because I had to share a bedroom with them. And we, if you can believe it, I slept in the same twin bed as Mary Honda for I don't know how many weeks until our house was vacated. And at that time I thought, "Well when we move into our home on Boyle Heights, I'll have my own room and all that." But that's another story because of the housing shortage post-war. No one had a place to come home to. And so even after we got our house in Boyle Heights, we always had people staying with us who just had left camp or had returned from back east where they had resettled. We always had others staying with us, and we don't even have that many relatives. But they were all staying with us.

0H45M22S

INTERVIEWER:

Your family was very generous.

KAJI:

Well I guess you had to be---you really had to be because the government sent you out of the camps with nothing. And it certainly wouldn't have paid rent for anyplace. That's when all those hostels were open---Evergreen Hostile and wherever else. I think the temples were open for anybody to put down their sleeping bags. I... it was quite a turmoil, but as a kid you're not all that aware of it. It's just that you're just not a family. You know you're with people constantly.

Well that was 1945 August, so when VJ Day came, we were in L.A. and we were---my parents were worried about being on the street you know as Japs. You better be careful. So we stayed put in west L.A. And we could hear all the celebration going on all over town. But we stayed in West L.A. All I remember about L.A.... well we came back, Little Tokyo was still called Brownsville. It was full of colored people from the south who had come to California for defense jobs. And they took over Little Tokyo completely. Because we drove down First Street a couple of times, and you'd see all these colored ladies hanging

out over the fire escapes and yelling at each other across the way. And you know how relaxed they are? And on First and San Pedro there were nightclubs on every corner and all kinds of loud music, the kind that our parents couldn't stand, but we thought was great. And we had---at that time the street cars were still running. And I guess we didn't ride on them even though we used to pre-war. It was an interesting time in my life because everything was noisy and... well at that time, racial things weren't all that in the forefront. So that was what I recall of post-war.

OH47M53

INTERVIEWER:

Now can you tell us; where did you meet your husband, Bruce Kaji?

KAJI:

Oh this was years later at All People's Church at Washington and San Pedro... no what is it? Yeah; I think Washington and San Pedro in... well that's a grungy part of town now, but at that time the church was open to I guess to anybody who had left camp. And they used to have record dances and people would bring their own records and... it was almost like camp being in the mess hall only this was in a church basement and with the guys on one side and the girls on the other side, and you hoped somebody would ask you to dance. It didn't always happen [laughter], but it was a fun time. Oh, and the way we got there was on the street car. And so naturally, we had to get home you know at a good time. So I don't know how long those dances lasted, but we always had to ride home on the street car. And that's another thing, if you ever had a date it was via street car, and... which was fine because everybody else was on the street car. So those were good times. And then he had just been discharged from the Army, and as I recall, most of the guys were pretty trim then---not like now.

INTERVIEWER:

Now then can you tell us something about your marriage?

OH49M40

KAJI:

Oh wow; well we just celebrated our 49th anniversary by taking our three children, their spouses, and their children to Hawaii for eight days, which was wonderful because I told Bruce, I said, "So many people are dying. We better hurry up and

celebrate before the 50th." So that was that. But, we got married... well I'm not sure of the year now, but whatever 49 years ago was. It was after my father died. And actually I didn't want to get married because I thought, "Who's going to take me down the isle?" I mean, you're so used to seeing the father marching down proudly, I hope, down the isle of some church. But my father died early on so in the meanwhile, I was dating Bruce and he wanted to get married, but I did not.

And so eventually, my mother said, mo hayaku kekkon shinasai [Japanese], and iihito desho?[Japanese]. I said, "Oh yeah; he could be." But anyhow I said, "Well one thing I want to be engaged for a year," so he could court me a year. At least one year he'll open doors for me because... and that was a good move because he hasn't opened the door for me since [laughter]. But that's my one monku, which I still grumble about, but anyhow. So we... at that time, I think he had graduated from SC and was working towards getting his CPA as an accountant. And---but in case he couldn't qualify for that CPA designation, he from SC had applied for or had worked towards a teaching certificate so that he could at least have a job while he established himself.

So his counselor tried to talk him out of teaching because at that time Nisei weren't teaching. But he said, "No," this is where a stubborn streak kicked in. And he said, "No; this is what I need and this is what I want." So like so many other times, he got his way and taught business... what is it, Business Ed---for several years, both at the high school and junior college level until---so that he had a small paycheck to depend on. He did it part-time; in the meanwhile he worked... oh; those were the days when the what is it, the big five or whoever they are, those big accountants, the CPA firms weren't hiring Nisei.

And so he went to apply several places and got turn down after turn down. He finally found a Jewish accountant who would hire him. And so you have to put in so many hours to qualify. So he worked towards that and to this day he's grateful to this gentleman for allowing him to work for him. And soon after he qualified and got his... I didn't know it was such a big deal, but at that time it was. And he set up an office with Kio Moriyama his first partner on First and San Pedro, above Toyo Miyatake and his building. And the two of them opened up and that first year of so-called practice, he says, "I think we made \$75, which he split in two. That was their profit. I mean it was that, you know hand-to-mouth kind of existence. So in the meanwhile, his teaching job at East L.A. College and I think he

was teaching off and on at like Jefferson High School and L.A. High School, but that's what kept him working or working at it until he built up somewhat of a practice. But you know it was hand-to-mouth like so many other people... he made it.

0H54M25S

INTERVIEWER:

Now can you tell something about your family now; right?

KAJI:

Oh; that's when I get the bragging rights. We've got three children. Oh by the way, my first two kids were born at Japanese Hospital, and thanks to the foresight of my parents having bought stock in that little hospital, my first born was delivered... he has the birth certificate and I think the receipt that I got from the hospital it---I was in the hospital maybe a week or 10 days... this was back in the old days, and I didn't bother---I didn't plan on coming home too soon because they fed me Nihonshoku to all of us; you know. And it was wonderful; for breakfast misoshiru and shioyaki sakana of some sort and rice. And it was tasty, and that in the old wives tale is supposed to bring in the milk for your new baby, which it seemed to do. And so I got my---I had the delivery of our first son at a discount as a stockholder. I forgot what it cost, but it was a nominal amount.

INTERVIEWER:

And that was John?

KAJI:

Yes.

INTERVIEWER:

John was your first son?

KAJI:

Yes; my bargain kid. And then my second one, this was before the pill, so I got pregnant the second time without knowing. And so they are only 16 months apart. So I had the second one at the same bargain rate, I think; I don't remember. By the time the third one arrived, he was like four or five years later. That was Troy. So he---we had to pay full amount for at little company.

But now John... well and then my kids got married in reverse. The youngest got married first. And he, in fact, he got

married... I thought he was too young. He was only 24 or; I don't remember. Oh; he was just going into intern so maybe 26. And I thought, "Oh my baby is getting married. That's terrible. But it happened." And he married Margie ?Faw?, whom he had met at Yale. And the two of them now have five children---girls from the age of 12 on down to 2. And then my second child, a daughter, Miki Angela, she was... I don't know; I'm terrible with numbers. But anyhow I don't---I forgot when she was born, but she was only 16 months after John, so whatever she is. She married Brad Hamill who is from Colorado, and they've been married, oh gosh, maybe 15 years. And they have one son, Josiah Alexander, and that's our only grandson. And then our---the third one to get married, which was the latest one, was my son Jonathon with a middle name, Taro, which was after my father-in-law, who's name was Munetaro. And so to this day I guess I'm the only one who calls him Taro. It's easier to yell out the door you know when the kids are running around. But he married Lisa Hayakawa and she's from Torrance. And I believe her family might be members with your Chapter?

0H58M23S

INTERVIEWER:
That's right.

KAJI:
And they have two girls, Austin... oh boy, these ages. They have to correct me all the time there's so many of them. And the baby will be one next month. But they've got two girls. So there's seven granddaughters and one grandson, I think. Yeah. And they're... I never knew being a grandparent could be so much fun. It's such a reward. And so we're very grateful for them and especially when we took them on this trip and everyone got along so well. And we had every meal together. And we swam together. We toured together. We did everything together. It was wonderful; nobody got sick or lost or hurt. It was ideal.

INTERVIEWER:
Now when did you move back to Gardena then, Fran?

KAJI:
Oh that was soon after John was born. My father died let's see in '50... well the year before we were married whatever that was---'53 maybe? Yeah; my mom and dad had just completed a first-time trip to Japan. They hadn't gone at all like so many of our parents. And my parents... I don't know how many months they were gone, but they were gone a long time, and visited all

their hometowns, as well as relatives. And then I think he---well my father stopped at the Nagasaki Medical School. I don't know if he had any connection there, but we have relatives who attended that school. And then later I think he went to Fukuoka to that medical school to meet with some of his former professors. And then came home via Hawaii where we had distant relatives from my paternal grandfather's side, the Ito's. There is a clan of them in Hilo and Maui. But---and that's when we first found about yoshi. We didn't know such a custom existed. And you know how come, ojichan's name is Ito, but it's Tashihiro. I takes a while to figure that out. We find it interesting.

1H01M10S

INTERVIEWER:

You know recently I was very pleased to hear that you and Bruce have been honored as the leading citizens of Gardena, and your name is on the Wall of Fame. Can you tell us about that? You must have been very involved in civic organizations in Gardena also?

KAJI:

I guess so; well most everyone knows about Bruce being involved and going way back to 1960 when he ran for City Treasurer of Gardena, and he---at that time, I guess Nisei weren't sticking their necks out for much of anything, but he found out how simple a job it was. So he thought, "By golly I can do that." And we didn't know what was going on because I was pregnant with number three. So he said he was going to run for Treasurer. And it didn't affect me; so fine; you know.

And---so I think he's, compared to now, I think he raised all of \$150 for his campaign and it was mostly by postcards. We wrote postcards to friends to support him. So it was a real economical campaign. And I think the most he got was \$50 from my mother [laughs]. So you know things can be done.

But he... that was one of the plus things early on that he did. And then because of him, later on I was able to help with Sister City and, of course, there was always... well he was helping with JA---JCI and the building program after their first building was burned down. He helped with that fundraiser and the building. And then I don't know what all he's been involved in, but he's always found... if there was a need, he wanted to be there to help. And with what little he could afford because his practice wasn't all that lucrative, but you know he figured a dollar here, a dollar there would help anybody. And he was

kind enough to put up with our hosting Sister City kids from Mexico from Huatabampo, as well as Ichikawa Japan. So we've housed at least two students at a time to stay at our house. This was after our children had left home. So as empty nesters, we hosted a lot... I've never totaled up the children that we've hosted, but a number of them.

1H04M02A

INTERVIEWER:

Well that's commendable.

KAJI:

Yeah; well it's fun. It's educational for us, too, to shift gears and practice a little Spanish and Nihongo, of course. So it's... because of that, I guess they honored us with this Wall of Fame.

INTERVIEWER:

Fran, do you think it's important that we preserve these stories for future generations?

KAJI:

Oh of course; not just my story, but a number of people. And if we're lucky enough to find any older people who are still--well even if they're not clear in their thinking or saying, you could always editorialize or you know improve what their thoughts may be because it's... well some people don't like to look back. But I think it's fun to look back because I remember this area oh years ago... I mean there used to be a Japanese school over here near Ishibashi's farm. I think that's where it was. Because I was... one day in particular--I don't know what day it was, but this gentleman who used to drive for my father... his name, I think was Kozan. Whether that's his given name or nickname, I don't know. But he was a burly truck driver. And he took a carload of us to this San Pedro Gakuen or whatever it was called. And I was a little toddler. And they used to have these things called buranko you know swing set. And they're... it wasn't a set; it was something that the parents had put up. And as a little toddler, I went walking across where these things were swinging and I got conked in the head. And Mr. Kozan came and picked me up and put cold water on me. I guess I must have been semi-conscious; I don't know.

1H06M10S

INTERVIEWER:

Oh.

KAJI:

But I survived and I still remember him because of that. But that was the extent of our outdoor activity. But that's when the hills were bare and not covered with homes like now.

INTERVIEWER:

Certainly. I'd like to just ask one question because I know that you people have been associated with the formation of the Japanese American National Museum.

KAJI:

Uh-hm.

INTERVIEWER:

Could you tell us something about your involvement with the National Museum?

KAJI:

Well this goes back I don't know how many years. When Bruce used to be in the savings and loan business, we used to go occasionally---I would go with him on these conferences. And one was in San Francisco. And at that time at the Holiday Inn right near Chinatown they were having an exhibit. And our Chinese friends told us, "Be sure and go see it."

So since it was within walking distance of where we were, we went over and it was on the second level, I think, of the Holiday Inn because it was sort of a v-shaped building. And we took a tour of that and it was mainly photos and some objects of the early Chinese Americans in San Francisco or the Northern Cal area. And I hadn't realized that, like our parents, they had been involved in farming, fishing, and not just restaurant and laundry, and they were quite entrepreneurs.

And so we thought that was interesting, but Bruce and I as we were looking at the exhibit and walking through we said, "We could do better. We could do better," you know. Anyhow, so it wasn't a real idea that was planned, but we thought, "This is what we need. That was then; it's been some years. But we were... well I've always believed that our Issei parents were never given credit for what they should have received---you know things we could be proud of. And so we'd talk about it all the time.

And when he used to have his office at---on First Street, we... Weller Street where OtaniHotel is now used to be full of these rickety old hotels where a lot of people lived and it was their housing. And there used to be demonstrations for they were going to tear it down, not tear it down, things like that. And at one time, Bruce thought---had an image of, "Oh we should have a torii like Chinatown. And we thought, "Oh yes," because one of his friend's family owned quite a few of those building; it's like playing a Monopoly and knowing which blocks you had you know, which properties you had. But this particular family owned a lot. And he was trying to talk his friend into doing something constructive like that, but this guy was more on the timid side, and to this day he hasn't done anything with it. Well of course, now it's gone.

But we thought, "There should be something to attract the general public to Little Tokyo." See that's the problem they're having now also. But so I don't know where it started, but first of all, Bruce knew they had to have this---what is it, the 401K or something to make it legitimate. So he went scrambling for that and then in the meanwhile we had met Art Torres who was the State Senator from the east side of L.A., and we met with him in Sacramento, and lobbied for him to put a bill through to help us kick off this museum idea.

And at that time he said, "Oh sure; we could pass a bill." This is when the California budget was pretty tight I guess. But he said, "Yeah; we'll put it through for a million dollars," and then somewhere or another he said, "Oh no; we better make it for \$750,000." We said, "Okay; that's better---half an apple is better than none." So he passed the bill and we were up there lobbying with Ralph Dills and... I forgot who else; I know Art Torres for sure.

And then at that time, Bruce was active in the Boy Scout Council of L.A., and he knew some heavy hitters from that group and one happened to be the CEO of [REDACTED]. And so he asked all these people to write letters. That was the first time in my life I found out that someone actually reads those letters because we met with this legislator... oh I forgot what his title was, and he had this packet of letters with him and he was saying, "Oh who is this and who is this," and Bruce responded. The man was impressed so I thought---well I was impressed that someone actually read the letters. So if someone says, "Please write a letter," go to it.

1H11M59S

INTERVIEWER:

Well thank you so much, Fran. You know this---that information about the beginning of the Japanese American Museum is unknown to many of us. Thank you so much for your sharing.

KAJI:

Oh you're welcome.

INTERVIEWER:

It's been very, very informative and very rewarding.

KAJI:

Well I'm glad to be of some help.

[End]