

**[Begin George Kobayashi CD 1]**

**Interviewer:**

It is May 13, 2004. My name is Ron Ikejiri and I will be interviewing George Kobayashi today as part of the South Bay Oral History Project. The audio equipment recording this interview is being monitored by Ed Mitoma and the catalog person is Ike Hatchimonji. 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 other format, shall belong to the South Bay Chapter of the JACL. 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 JACL. This is the first CD of the interview of George Kobayashi, being recorded on this date. Let's begin the interview. Are you ready, George?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Thank you for letting us come by your house today. I would like to know what---when were you born and what day was that?

**Kobayashi:**

Torrance 1924.

**Interviewer:**

What day in the...?

**Kobayashi:**

February 20, 1924.

**Interviewer:**

Okay; and were you born in a hospital, born in home?

**Kobayashi:**

I was in a hospital.

**Interviewer:**

Which hospital?

**Kobayashi:**

Torrance.

**Interviewer:**

In Torrance?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Were you living on a farm then, or...?

**Kobayashi:**

We were living on a farm; right.

**Interviewer:**

Where was that located?

**Kobayashi:**

Torrance... 174th and Crenshaw.

**Interviewer:**

One seventy fourth and Crenshaw; I think Mr. Mike Yasutake was at Artesian and Crenshaw; so you probably were fairly close.

**Kobayashi:**

We were almost cattycornered.

**Interviewer:**

Oh kitty cornered.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Were you farmers---were your parents...?

**Kobayashi:**

We were all farmers there.

**Interviewer:**

Okay; where did you go to elementary school?

**Kobayashi:**

Moneta Grammar School.

**Interviewer:**

Okay; was that sort off of 166th or 162nd Street then?

**Kobayashi:**

A hundred... Gardena Boulevard and 161st; that's where the...  
across the street from the Japanese Community Center.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, the JCI?

**Kobayashi:**

Right; JCI.

**Interviewer:**

And what years did you go there?

**Kobayashi:**

I don't know. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:**

[Laughs] Okay; and then you went to... I assume you went to high  
school at Gardena High?

**Kobayashi:**

No; I went to Perry Junior High School---that used to be Gardena  
High.

**Interviewer:**

Right; but at that time it was Gardena High?

**Kobayashi:**

Right.

**Interviewer:**

When you went there... then you graduated from Gardena High?

**Kobayashi:**

No; the war started. As soon as the war started, my senior year,  
I moved to Colorado... finished in Platteville High School in  
Platteville, Colorado.

**Interviewer:**

Were there---what made you or what caused you to move to  
Colorado? Did you have relatives there, or...?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; my cousin was there. So we moved there voluntarily.

**Interviewer:**

Did your whole family move?

**Kobayashi:**

The whole family.

**Interviewer:**

Okay; when the---when you say the whole family, how many people are in your family?

**Kobayashi:**

We had six kids. So my brother and I, we stayed behind, and we sent the whole family to Colorado first. And we had a pick-up, we bought a pick-up, and then we got a truck and drove our belongings into Colorado.

**Interviewer:**

How long did it take you to get to Colorado?

0:03:27.7

**Kobayashi:**

It took us about... oh let's see; we went from here to Colorado--the border---Colorado one day; stayed there over night; next day went into Platteville, Fort Lupton, Colorado.

**Interviewer:**

Before you were---before evacuation, what was life like in the 20s or 30s and 40s in that area?

**Kobayashi:**

Just like any other place---no problem.

**Interviewer:**

Did you have---you must have had a lot of Japanese friends?

**Kobayashi:**

Not a doubt; in fact when I went to Gardena High School, two-thirds, well at least over the half was school was Japanese. That's why everybody joined the Japanese Club and then once a month we'd have a Japanese Club dance and they'd have to close the school down. So once a month, we get to go home at noon. We all belonged to the Japanese Club, but nobody went to the dance; we just went home.

**Interviewer:**

When---at that time then, did you feel any overt or covert kinds of discrimination or...?

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

Then did you join a lot of organized sports and activities? Did they have a Japanese Language School? Did they have a Japanese sports program?

**Kobayashi:**

Oh yeah; during the---before high school or even... yeah; during grammar school, stuff like that, I went to---everybody almost... I'd say almost everybody went to Japanese School. And on---we went to high school---or no, school---on the way home, we went to Japanese School and went home.

**Interviewer:**

Now from Fort Lupton or Platteville, from that area, how long were you there and did you go into the service then or how---what...?

**Kobayashi:**

Well we farmed... no, actually we worked on a farm in Platteville and then we went to Hudson, and we did our own farming. When---from there I went into the Army.

**Interviewer:**

From the time you got into the Army, what units were you assigned to? Where did you do your basic training?

**Kobayashi:**

My basic training---Fort Meade, Maryland... no, no, Florida---Camp Blanding, Florida, and then from there we went to---I went to MIS School and went to Japan---Military Intelligence.

**Interviewer:**

When you went to Military Intelligence, was that at Camp Savage or Fort Snelling?

**Kobayashi:**

Fort Snelling.

**Interviewer:**

Fort Snelling; so you were at the---toward the latter part of the war then you went to MIS School?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; by the time we were shipped over, the war finished.

**Interviewer:**

Were you---did you ever make it to Japan?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; we was on a boat when it finished.

**Interviewer:**

I see.

**Kobayashi:**

So we---they didn't know what to do with us. We just went into--  
-just Intelligence was war documents and stuff like that---  
translation.

**Interviewer:**

This is in Japan then---in Tokyo or...?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; Japan.

**Interviewer:**

You know when you shipped out; did you ship out from Pittsburgh,  
California or that area?

**Kobayashi:**

No; we shipped out from Portland, Oregon.

**Interviewer:**

Oh from Oregon; okay. When---after you were in Japan, how long  
were you in Japan in the service?

**Kobayashi:**

Let's see; about a year, I guess.

0:07:10.7

**Interviewer:**

And then after that did you stay in Japan, or...?

**Kobayashi:**

No; I came home.

**Interviewer:**

Where is home?

**Kobayashi:**

No; rather I was in Japan---I was in order of battle and then I transferred into... I forgot what it was, but anyway from there I left and we came home to San Francisco and went back to Fort Lupton.

**Interviewer:**

Oh you went back to Fort Lupton?

**Kobayashi:**

And then as soon as we went back, we bought a truck and came back---back to Torrance.

**Interviewer:**

Did you have somewhere to stay in Torrance?

**Kobayashi:**

Oh we knew Ray Takeyama he had a little house and we stayed in there for a while.

**Interviewer:**

When---after the war then what year was that---'46-'45; it must have been '46 or so?

**Kobayashi:**

Forty-six.

**Interviewer:**

Then I know that you had started an appliance store, but before that what did you do?

**Kobayashi:**

No; I went to school. I was... before---when we came back, I started gardening---a gardening route.

**Interviewer:**

In the South Bay area or in...?

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

I guess there were no homes to cut in the South Bay area.  
[Laughs]

**Kobayashi:**

L.A.---the Los Angeles area.

**Interviewer:**

Did you have a helper?

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

When you---after you gardened, you said you went to school.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

What kind of school did you go to?

**Kobayashi:**

I went to the National School of Electronics.

**Interviewer:**

Electronics?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Did you learn about...? I guess at that time, television was starting to come out?

**Kobayashi:**

Well it was just before television; the television was brand new then---radio and electronics.

**Interviewer:**

After you... what year did you graduate from your National School?

**Kobayashi:**

I don't know; '47-'48 I guess.

**Interviewer:**

Then did you come back to Torrance or Gardena and then...?

**Kobayashi:**

No; I was still living in Torrance. Well what happened is this guy named Leske, soon as we got to Torrance, said, "Let's build a home here right on my property." He had a five-acre property. So my brother and I, we built a home there. And then after we built the home, the guy said, "Do you want to buy my property?" He said he was going to give us this property; "Yeah; we give you the property where you built it, but how are you going to get into it? You put it in the middle of the five acres. There is no way to get in or get out so you've got to buy the property---either lose the house." So we said, "Okay." And he had the property---five acres for sale for \$1,000 an acre. So that was \$5,000; but he wanted \$2,000 an acre from us." So, my brother and I we, bought five acres for \$10,000 then. And then we stayed there and then after a while we said, "We've got to figure this out." He said, "We borrow the money from the bank." I said, "We don't pay for it; just pay the interest on it and we'll stay here for five years and then we'll dump it." And after---we just paid the interest. Five years later, a guy came and offered us money for it. "So how much you want," he said. "I don't know." I said, "We've only got four and a half acres because we gave my kid brother a half-acre to build a home there. He built a home." So the four and a half acres---\$125,000. We only paid \$10,000. "Oh my gosh," we said; "We haven't paid the bank yet." So... we paid the bank and we'll give you \$125,000. We just sold it right there.

**Interviewer:**

So he was happy?

0:11:07.5

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Okay; then after you sold it, did you move---where did you move to?

**Kobayashi:**

After we sold it... where did we go? We moved to... we bought a home. But I wonder---where did we first move to? We were still in Torrance. And we from there... oh we moved to Emerald Street. That was close anyway. Oh no; we---after we---that was after we sold this; it was pretty long. It was late by then. I graduated school and everything else by then.

**Interviewer:**

You know in pre-World War II, how big was your farm in---over there off of 174th and Crenshaw?

**Kobayashi:**

It was, I think, we was farming 10 acres, but there was about 15 acres. It's about---oh about 12 acres, we---12 or 13 acres we didn't farm. We were just getting ready to farm there.

**Interviewer:**

What did you grow on those farms?

**Kobayashi:**

We grew everything---onions, beans, spinach, everything---a bunch.

**Interviewer:**

There's---how many Japanese farmers were around? Were they all Japanese farmers?

**Kobayashi:**

They were all Japanese farmers. There was nothing---was all farmers around there.

**Interviewer:**

Then with your things that you grew on the farm, did you truck farm it or did you have a stand?

**Kobayashi:**

No; see in them days, all of us the same way. There was a trucker; all he did was pick up the stuff. And then he took it into Market. And then he drops it off all at the Market, and then he brings us the receipt, and just charged us for the hauling and then he does all that. So none of us trucked it in.

**Interviewer:**

I see; so you---it was a truck farm, but you didn't have to truck it in physically. You used a different company.

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

Did you... when I asked someone earlier, who lived---one of your neighbors, Mr. Yasutake, he said there were no stores around that area at the time.

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

So did---how did---what---did you grow everything you ate or did you go to downtown?

**Kobayashi:**

Well the Japanese food guy used to come around, you know a peddler---not a peddler, but he used to come take orders--- Japanese food and then he just sends it out, and American food, well we just went to grocery stores.

**Interviewer:**

After World War II, did anyone go back to do farming in the Torrance area?

**Kobayashi:**

Not that I know of.

**Interviewer:**

Not your neighbors anyway?

**Kobayashi:**

No; besides there is no farmland left there.

**Interviewer:**

Okay; if after you finished up and returned you know from the National School, what did you do then?

**Kobayashi:**

I opened a store; started a service shop on 13th and San Pedro.

**Interviewer:**

Thirteenth and San Pedro; okay that's near---not far from the Staples Center then?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; well it was just blank there.

**Interviewer:**

And what made you pick that area?

**Kobayashi:**

Well there was a guy that had an appliance store, and then behind the appliance store, I started---he didn't know nothing about repair; so I started a repair shop behind there for about a year.

**Interviewer:**

Then after that time, you eventually came back to the South Bay area; what year was that?

**Kobayashi:**

I don't know; I don't remember years.

**Interviewer:**

Did you open up your---did you relocate your store or...?

**Kobayashi:**

No, no; I came back home... we were still in the same place, where we bought the place. See, we sold it later, but then we stayed where we built the home for a long time. And then I quit there and came here, and then I started my store here in Gardena---opened a store.

**Interviewer:**

Where was the first store at?

**Kobayashi:**

Western Avenue.

**Interviewer:**

You mean by the---where the Kyoto Sukiyaki is located.

**Kobayashi:**

No, no.

**Interviewer:**

Location right?

**Kobayashi:**

It was closer to Redondo Beach Boulevard, and then we stayed there---I stayed there... rather, I started the shop and I got my brother in and my other brother in. So it was the three of us, but then we were renting the place and.... Rather, yeah; the Bank of Tokyo came in there, too, the same place. It was an

**Eagle Cafe** there, right across the street from the Gardena Club and we were right there.

**Interviewer:**

Oh your---that location now is the Gardena Honda?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah, yeah, yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Right there; okay.

**Kobayashi:**

Then I bought on the corner of Gardena Boulevard and Western; we was going to build an appliance store there. Well then the Bank of Tokyo wanted to build there because they were the same place we were. And we---I sold them that property and bought a property at South Gate. And then we find out later the freeway went through and took part of our property and a gas station went up. They didn't know it was our property. We bought it actually for \$1,200; it was open land. And so now we asked the gas station, "What are you going to do; you're on our property?" So he said, "Well we want to buy it." We said, "Well we don't want to sell it." So we rented it for \$1,000 a month. And well I had it four or five years, I guess; and then I took a vacation to Hawaii and sold it to my friend for the same place---\$1,200 and you get \$1,000 a month rent. [Laughs] Anyway so we stayed there pretty long.

**Interviewer:**

From the community---the Japanese-American community after the war, and you opened up your appliance store and repair shop, were most of your customers from the Japanese-American community or...?

**Kobayashi:**

Ninety-nine percent.

0:18:15.7

**Interviewer:**

Ninety-nine percent; how did they know to come to you? Were you active in the church or Kiwanis or service clubs, or...?

**Kobayashi:**

No; well actually when I first started and naturally there's no--not much customers, you know Dale Miyabi, his dad had a big nursery. He said, "Hey George, you don't have too much business; come to my place and...." Dale was in the Army then; so I helped in the nursery. So I'd just go horse around for half day and he used to give me \$100 every day. I'd eat lunch and come back. Well in them days, \$100 is like getting \$1,000. And he helped me out. And then ABC Nursery, Frank Yonemura was a big shot at church; he got all the church members to come to my store. So I had--I had good business.

**Interviewer:**

I think a lot of people in Gardena recall the 50s and 60s you having a cigar in your mouth trying to fix a TV whether it was at their home or in your shop. Your shop probably had more seating places for people to sit around and talk rather than show spaces to sell products?

**Kobayashi:**

Well on top of that, I had two pinball machines in the back room.

**Interviewer:**

A what machine?

**Kobayashi:**

A pinball machine.

**Interviewer:**

Oh pinball machine.

**Kobayashi:**

That was illegal then. I made more money on that pinball machine. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:**

The---tell me about or share with us what you think about the Japanese-American community after they came back from the war and what you saw whether it was in Torrance or Gardena, how they were able to adjust to their life after the war---after being in internment camp or after coming back from the Army or just their whole resettlement process.

**Kobayashi:**

I think they did pretty good; everyone... see, especially in Gardena-Torrance area, mostly all Japanese. So no matter what

they did, they did---I'd say they did good. I did good; everybody else---we all started just about the same time. They all---I think all the people that started anything did good.

**Interviewer:**

You know there is... we had a chance to talk to Mr. Komae, and I think he started in about 1949.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; I started I think in '48.

**Interviewer:**

And he said Sam Minami was very instrumental in having him come to Gardena and then Doctor Kobayashi was very instrumental in sending him business. And so at that time do you feel that there was probably a strong camaraderie or mutual helping each other within the Japanese-American community?

**Kobayashi:**

Well I'll put it this way; when I started business everybody---all the Japanese would come to my store and never argued about the price. They never said---you know trying to knock down anything... just, "I want this; I want that." Years later when the Sansei's started coming around, they want, "I can get it \$5 cheaper over there," you know. So... or, "Can you meet this price?" And there was no sense haggling in them days; we just you know... And then when something went wrong, I was there fixing the stuff and stuff; now I go, "If you don't---didn't buy it from me, why should I go fix it," because there is price haggling. There was no such... the Japanese... in other words, they trusted you. Everybody believed everybody else. Today it is dog eat dog.

**Interviewer:**

From a general standpoint then, how important was the Buddhist church in your life or any other church in terms of helping you out, not necessarily in your business, but just in daily life?

**Kobayashi:**

Well we used to go to Buddhist---I used to go to church. I never was a member at church, but I used to go there---whenever they'd call me up or anything. And then when... in fact, I'm the guy that started the Obon-odori in Gardena. And when the Reverend Nagatomi got sick and had to quit, that's when I took him to San Francisco and everything else. So we were close with the church and I got married in church. And I think... in fact, we used to

have a poker club every week at the church---a poker game.  
[Laughs]

0:23:07.3

**Interviewer:**

I think if you talk to people that are now in their 50s and if they think of you at the church, they always think of you taking care of the PA system for the carnival and Obon.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; well I ran the sound system and the electrical all that time.

**Interviewer:**

Do you see since... were you a member of the Buddhist church before the war?

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

Or was the family part of the church before the war?

**Kobayashi:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

Then what brought you to go to the Buddhist church? Is it your friends...?

**Kobayashi:**

It was the only place to go. In fact, when I first came out, we used to have a baseball team---a Buddhist church baseball team. It was the only team around. We... of course, we had a Moneta Japanese School team and then we used to have basketball and stuff, but I used to help the basketball team. Everything was sponsored through the Buddhist church. So sports and everything was from the Buddhist church. In fact, when we started a veteran---a VFW, that's where we started, the Buddhist church.

**Interviewer:**

You know over the years you've been very active in maintaining the VFW's presence in the community, as well as keeping it going as your members get older. Tell us more about your activities in the Nisei VFW.

**Kobayashi:**

Well Sugino and I started the thing and the reason we started it, we tried to... actually started to join the American Legion, this and that... they kind of didn't want us. Said, "Oh the hell with it; we'll start our own club."

**Interviewer:**

Why do you think they didn't want you?

**Kobayashi:**

We're Japs, you know; and so we started... I think Sacramento is the one that started the first all Nisei club, and finally they end up with ours. And we had to have 62 members. So Seiji got all his relatives and I got all my friends, and we got 62 people and we started a Buddhist church and then we moved to JCI.

**Interviewer:**

You know what's the history behind the forming of the VFW hall in Gardena?

**Kobayashi:**

Well we was... it started after... it was just small then, and we were thinking about having a building and this and that and we said... so before we did anything, five of us took Ernie Primm and the card club bosses out for dinner at 1st Street in Little Tokyo. We made sure they didn't serve no drinks so it wouldn't cost us so much money. And then they asked us, "What do you want?" And we said, "We don't want nothing," you know. He says, "Why are you taking us out for dinner?" Well you know, "It's amazing," he says, "The card club runs a Pony League, they run the Little League, they take the kids to Disney Land---the Gardena City kids, but look nobody appreciates you... but there is somebody who will really appreciate it." "Who is that?" "The VFW, you know a Nisei VFW, they appreciate it; that's why we're giving you a thank you dinner." Now he says, "Nobody took us out for you know a dinner like this." We said, "Well we're taking you out." And then they said, "Well let's go for a drink." So we went ....there was a club downstairs from Kawafuku... what the hell was the name? Anyway, went there and then... so I told this other guy, "I think we got to put up some more money." Of course they had a floor show and everything. We went to see a floor show. When that thing was over, I asked for the bill and then Ernie Primm later, he said, "Let's build a building." No money; so we went to Jack Sakauye He was a gardener but he used to do architect, too.

**Interviewer:**

Construction yeah.

**Kobayashi:**

We took the drawing and went to the Bank, the Bank of Tokyo, and said, "We've got \$5,000. We made box lunch social and everything to raise the money and we got \$5,000; can we build this building?" We figured it was going to cost \$50,000. The Bank of Tokyo said, "No way; even if the five of you sign it, we won't give you that. You've got to have at least \$10,000 down." So we come back and said, "Gee, where can we get the \$5,000?" He said, "I know what, Ernie Primm " he says, "He'll give us anything we want---five years ago. I wonder if he still remembers that." He said, "Let's go over there and find out." So we called him up and we brought lunch. So we went to his place to have lunch and told him, "Remember a long time ago, you promised that you'd give us anything we wanted?" "Yeah," he says, "But keep it low because I just built this new---you know that club." So he said, "I'm cash strapped." But he said, "I still remember you taking us out and I don't remember any other people ever taking us out." He said, "What do you want?" We said, "Well...;" then he said, "You ask;" he was scared to ask. We was going to ask for \$5,000 you know a donation. So the others said, "Why don't you ask?" I said, "Okay." It comes to my mind at that time, if I ask for \$5,000 he'll give me \$4,000 we'd be at square one yet. So I says, "Ernie, we're building this building and we've got \$5,000; we need \$45,000---what about \$45,000?" He said, "Is that all," and in them days \$45,000 was \$4,000,000. That was 30 years ago-- -33 years ago. And he went and says, "You got it." And everybody was like, "What happened you know?" Pretty soon, the accountant comes over and says, "You know Ernie told me to give you \$45,000." He said, "No way... taxes and everything. You got to start the building; so what about give you \$2,500 a month you know. We'll pay you off." And Ken Nakaoka says, "Can you give us a promissory note on that?" I said, "Fine enough." Five minutes later he had a promissory note; here it is. And we took the promissory note to the Bank of Tokyo and said, "What's this worth?" She said, "Fifty thousand dollars or forty-five thousand." So then we call up Tsuji and Sons, and he said he'd build it for \$45,000 anyway. Said, "Build the thing for \$45,000; we've got the cash." So he built it. Five years after we built it, we wanted to put and extension. We found out it wasn't big enough; so we---the other extension, we got a bid almost \$45,000---almost as much as that damn building.

0:30:30.3

**Interviewer:**

The original?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; so we said, "Well let's build it anyway." So we got Jimmy Uyeda to build it for time and material. And he did it for about \$39,000; it was cheap. So we had a party. We called Ernie Primm, you know; "See the beautiful extension we put on?" And Ernie tells me, "How much is it costing you?" "Well Ernie it's like this; it's costing us \$500 a month for the next five years," you know. Ernie says, "I'll tell you what; I'll make you another promissory note." I said, "What's that?" "I'll give you \$650---no \$750 a month---or \$650 a month (one or the other) for the next seven years," you know. But like a dummy I said, "Yeah; but we only need to go five years." He said, "You don't know it, but five years from now you've got to tar and roof it, and that's going to cost you another \$10,000 to redo that." I said, "Okay." So we got that. We paid it off and the last two years the payment was \$1,600---we put it in the bank, a CD. We forgot about it for 30 years, you know. That turned out to be \$55,000 and we didn't have it in the VFW name. It was Ken Nakaoka and my name, and Ken Nakaoka died anyway. So we says, "What are we going to do now," you know. Well we turned the building you know last year to JCI. I said, "What are we going to do with the \$50,000?" "You don't know it, but I'm going to give the money back." So what we did was, five of us had to put up \$500 a piece to build that building and everybody is dead except for myself. So I said, "I'll give back the money back with interest. We'll get \$1,000 a piece," because that \$500 is worth more than \$1,000 today. You know the only one that remembered that **was** Kimi chan (Ken Nakaoka's wife). She said, "Yeah; I remember that." But everybody must have took it out of their... well Minami got Minami Nursery and Lloyd Sato from the poultry company; everybody had something going. Like myself, I took it out of my appliance store so nobody knows about it. So I gave them \$1,000 a piece---\$50,000 donated to the JCI, and the VFW says, "How can you donate it; it's not your money?" I told them---told the guys, "I'd like to see one of you guys went to the bank and change that CD into your checking account." You know I turned that thing---my checking account---wrote my check to them because it was in your name. And he says, "Besides this building---this VFW building is not in your name. It's not the VFW building." "Go look on the outside of the building; it says 'Gardena Nisei Memorial Hall.'" When we built the thing, there

was a guy named Dudley Gray, he's still living; he said, "Don't put it under VFW because if something goes wrong, the VFW will take over the building." So we started another club, the Gardena Nisei Memorial Club. That's the name of the building. So they said, "Beside you owe me a dollar a year for rent; you guys owe me 30 bucks." Anyway, so when we gave the building over to the JCI, one thing I requested was the name, Gardena Nisei Memorial Hall, would always be there; so they can't take it off. And I said, "I want one room for my poker room." So they gave us that Issei room. They fixed it all up. So that's where we play poker every Thursday night.

**Interviewer:**

You know in the years past, you were the Treasurer's in Gardena.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

0:34:29.7

**Interviewer:**

Was that an elected position or appointed?

**Kobayashi:**

Elected.

**Interviewer:**

Elected; what year was that? What got you involved in politics in the first place in Gardena?

**Kobayashi:**

Well number one, when Ken Nakaoka and I one day we were in a bar at Kyoto Sukiyaki "Hey what do you think of me running for Council?" There was no Japanese in this Continental United States that ever became a Councilman or any official see. So I says, "You've got to be crazy," you know. And he says, "I'm thinking of running." I said, "Well you ain't got a Chinaman's chance to win." And after a few more drinks he said, "You know who my manager is going to be?" I said, "Who?" "You." [Laughs] I said, "You're really crazy now." And after a few more drinks, he says, "Will you be my manager?" I said, "Under one condition." I knew UCLA had a football---it was Michigan at that time... they won you know.

**Interviewer:**

Rose Bowl?

**Kobayashi:**

Rose Bowl... I knew he had two tickets, and I would---I didn't think he would get rid of the tickets. I'll tell you what, "I'll be your manager under one condition; you give me those two tickets right now." "Here's your tickets." That's how it began. And then I ran for---ran his campaign. It looked like we were going to lose, and finally I says-Kaz Minami and he says, "You know anyone in Hawaii?" And he says, "How much would a it cost??" "I can get it for nothing," he said. So I want 10,000 vanda orchids then. So we got 10,000; and then it was just before Easter, I think. So we got all the high school kids and went to every---door to door; we don't care if he's registered or not. We said, "Happy Easter from my candidate, Ken Nakaoka, you know. [Laughs] And then on the campaign I think it says, "Vote for three; don't get gypped ," you know. And then we put two guys that are not going to win anyway, plus Ken's name. So, "Vote for three; don't get gypped." Everybody said, "Vote for me; vote for me." But on Ken's it said, "Vote for three," and he won.

**Interviewer:**

What was the non-Japanese vote going for? Do you think because you got the Japanese vote or because you got votes from every other area, too?

**Kobayashi:**

No; every other area. See the thing is....

**Interviewer:**

What year was this?

**Kobayashi:**

I don't know. My wife got all the records. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:**

Sixty-four maybe?

**Kobayashi:**

I'll have to ask my wife.

**Interviewer:**

That's okay. You're connected to the mic; it's okay.

0:37:03.3

**Kobayashi:**

Oh yeah; anyway we checked to see how we won, you know.

**Interviewer:**

By precincts; did you check the maps?

Yeah; we checked the maps, too, but we asked the individuals, "Why did you vote for Ken?" He says, "We got orchids from Ken." One thing is you know---one little thing.

**Interviewer:**

How was---was the campaign tough?

0:37:32.2

**Kobayashi:**

Huh?

**Interviewer:**

Was the campaign tough?

**Kobayashi:**

Oh it was tough all right, and we had... another good thing is truthfully, the card club backed us up. Money was no object.

**Interviewer:**

Then there was no limits were there?

**Kobayashi:**

No; there was no limits. So we had a pretty good deal. And if it... there wasn't that many Japanese then, too. So we couldn't you know go for the Japanese; we had to go for the whole... we had to do something different. And I think that last brochure with the orchid did it, and we didn't say, "Vote for Ken." We said, "Vote for three; don't get gypped"

**Interviewer:**

Then after Mr. Nakaoka got onto the City Council then he ran for Mayor, but at that time, were you on---did you decide to run?

**Kobayashi:**

No; I never run until after Ken died.

**Interviewer:**

So that was after 1980?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; and then Ken died, and then right after that the City Treasurer died. And so....

**Interviewer:**

Who was that?

**Kobayashi:**

A guy named Vince Bell?

**Interviewer:**

Oh Vince, uh-huh.

**Kobayashi:**

He died; and so then the Council had to pick somebody and about 30 people applied. I never applied, but then Dr. Hata was a Councilman and Fukai was a Councilman, and there was... I was... a Hakujuin, I back him; I was his manager, too.

**Interviewer:**

It wasn't Ed Russ was it?

**Kobayashi:**

Huh? It wasn't Ed; Ed was against me. Yeah; he was against... he used to live right here. Anyway he's not around. Those three guys called me up, "Hey; what about you being the City Treasurer?" I said, "I don't want to be a City Treasurer---what the hell." Oh so they argued about it and then they get to pick. So it was three to two, they picked for everyone else, but all three guys voted for me so... and I didn't even apply, and that's to become a City Treasurer for two years. Then they shamed me into running again because you know I was City Treasurer. So I ran and that's how I became---been the City Treasurer for 15 years.

0:40:14.3

**Interviewer:**

Did you... at that time, during that 15-year period, did other people run for elective office in the Japanese American community?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; well Paul ran after that.

**Interviewer:**

**Tsukahara**

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; and I guess that's the only Japanese that ran.

**Interviewer:**

Other than Nakaoka.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

At one time, Bruce Kaji was....

**Kobayashi:**

Bruce **Kaji** was the City Treasurer before me.

**Interviewer:**

Was---that was---he was appointed or...?

**Kobayashi:**

No; he... I think he ran. Anyway, he was before Vince Bell. And then Vince took over and he died. So then I was appointed.

**Interviewer:**

From the---your perspective of the Japanese-American community, what changes do you see dramatic from pre-war to post-war to today?

**Kobayashi:**

Pre-war I'd say it was all Japanese, and then after the war was I'd say it's still the Japanese control Gardena because your--- all your big businesses and everything is run by Japanese---big money in the Japanese. But now they're fading out because of Sanseis you know. The Sanseis are now taking this and all the nurseries are folding and everything---even my kid. My youngest boy is out of electronics. So after he got his degree, I said, "Bruce, are you going to take over my place?" He said, "Dad, you couldn't pay me enough." So now he's 17. And all the... I notice all the Sanseis; they never want to own---very few nurseries.

**Interviewer:**

Gardener?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; well hardly any Japanese are following.

**Interviewer:**

When---what did you like most about being Treasurer because at that time you received a lot of---people would know that you're the Treasurer and do you think you were able to make some changes in the City of Gardena?

**Kobayashi:**

Oh we made a lot of change.

**Interviewer:**

For example?

**Kobayashi:**

For example, when Prop 13 they came through, they're going to fire---they will have to redo Gardena. I said, "Ah, baloney." I said, "If you listen to me you know, we don't have to do anything. I want an audit of the whole city," and we found out this gardener just running, talking about gardener every time, (not being able to do his job) this and that. Buy a new machine, you know---five minutes. Fire these guys that don't do anything. You've got tree trimmers here sitting around you know. What do you call that thing that go over the car, the truck, you know?

**Interviewer:**

Cherry picker?

**Kobayashi:**

Cherry picker; they said, "We got one." "Well, why don't you use it?" "It doesn't work." "Well if it doesn't work, get a new one." And so we got rid of a lot of people and there was this one guy that used to go to work and sign in, go to the card club, play all day, sign out, and go home. There were a few people like that. We saved a lot of money and we didn't have to change anything. Then one year I says, "You know the card club is screwing us." So just before I was going around the second time; anyway he says, "They could kick me, but let's make a new deal here. Every hour on the hour, I wanted to check as to how much they took in," you know. And so they do that... even to this day, I think they're doing it. They have to go sign in how much they take in. And so the guy would say one day when I was in the office, "What are you going to do with this; throw it away?" "How do you know they're cheating?" "Easy." "Okay this one was a Normandie club." It took in \$3,000 in the last three hours or so. So I tell them, "Anybody in the office here want to go eat; go into the card club," one hour; just eat and see how

much they're taking in. They don't know what they're checking on; they're checking the record between 12 and 1, how much did they take in? You can just about tell they take in by the hour. They were cheating by the hour. I used to go there every so often and rag on them after.... How much do you think you're cheating us? We could close you down. So then we started making money; oh it made a lot of difference.

**Interviewer:**

From your perspective, Japanese-Americans in the local community, what do you think the... do you think there are maybe three or four or five different factions of political groups in Gardena, Japanese-Americans?

**Kobayashi:**

Oh yeah.

0:45:29.1

**Interviewer:**

Before the war, there was probably very few.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; before the war there was one---that's all---all poor people. But after the war there is Christian, Buddhist, and all that. You know they are all factions. And then just like when we had the seventh card club; okay I was chairman of the seventh card club. And this one good---one of the reasons we got the money from the club, too. Ernie Primm wanted the seventh card club and by then it had to be Nihonjin vote that is going to win the race. And it was against the club to win anything. And so the Buddhist church was for me; the Baptist church wasn't. So now they're split you know. So I said, "We ain't going to win not unless we get the Baptist church with us." So Nishimoto, the Reverend, my Dad brought him from Japan. So I went to him and said, "Okay we will go for you; go ahead---go to it. I will go for." So they went for us and that's why we won. But that split... I think it's still split because of that you know. And he was an Issei reverend and they got a Nisei reverend. And the Nisei reverend still is against the card clubs. He said, "I'm for you; we'll go for you." So he told them, "Go ahead." So there was factions.

**Interviewer:**

Where do you see the Japanese-American community Nisei going in Gardena?

**Kobayashi:**

Well, going down because the Sanseis are moving out.

0:47:18.5

**Interviewer:**

What can be done to keep the Sanseis here?

**Kobayashi:**

I don't know; there isn't much... well see Niseis were gardeners. They owned their own businesses---gas station, nursery, you know. They all worked there, but now what about these kids? They're all electronic experts, lawyers, doctors, and stuff like that. So why should they be in Gardena. They're moving out; I don't blame them, you know. So the old-timers I hear, but the old-timers are all over; they're not doing nothing now. And then so altogether, even our VFW, we have anything, the old-timer will go out and put the money out... but you know these young kids are not going to do it.

**Interviewer:**

Just recently, Gary **Hori**, the Executive Director of the JCI had passed away.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

And within the Gardena Community, there seemed to be a strong sense regardless of religion or otherwise and a fear in the community there was a lot of support for people. Do you see that something that has continued to grow over the years or do you see that just breaking up and it doesn't matter if you're... like for example; if you ran for Treasurer because you are a Nikkei, they would vote for you. Do you think they---the factors are different now?

**Kobayashi:**

The factors are different. Well see; okay the way I think... a good example was last... what was it, two years ago---three---couple years ago, Cragan ran for Mayor.

**Interviewer:**

Yes.

**Kobayashi:**

Okay; Bruce Kaji, Paul Tsukahara, and there were four Hakujin, you know your buddy and Ed Russ and all those big shots went and got together and they're going to back Reagan. I'm the only one against Cragan. So he said, "What's your reason?" "Number one there's a Japanese. I'm not going to go against a Japanese and support a Hakujin." But look at those other guys already going for this Hakujin. So now you get to the Sansei, they think the same way. He's a better man. And then I say "I don't like a drunk anyway." And so I'm the only one you know that right from the beginning, I said, "I'm not for him; I'm for Tereuchi," you know. I don't even know the guy, but I know he was Japanese. So that party they gave for Craigan, I went to it anyway. And Bruce said, "Oh you're the guy that jumped the ship." Well I believe I gave Ed Russ a lot of credit. Russ said that "he did not jump the ship; he never was with us, you know. But the Japanese don't go that far nowadays. They're not going to fight for another just because he's Japanese. But Japanese are for the Japanese, you know if you don't go along with a guy and if you don't... like now Tanaka is running; right. He's... and I never did get along with Tanaka, but still I want---I wouldn't fight it because I'd may even vote ofr him. I asked Terauchi one question; and I said, "You know we've got a VFW room. Now they're...Tomodachikai want to put a desk and a computer and a telephone in there." So I says, "It's not right; it's our room," you know. And he said, "Well your room just for Thursday night?" "No; don't give me that," you know. "We give you the building, you give me \$50,000." "Oh yeah; you gave us money, too." "That was our---that was the agreement that we had---the one room." And he says, "Well why don't you go talk to the Board about it you know?" I said, "Listen; you're a board member. I'm asking you to see it." He said, "Well they're a bunch of bull-shitters anyway." I said, "I don't care what they are; I'm asking you what can you do about it?" And he tells me, "You go ask them," you know. Okay; then I asked George Inouye. He's Tanaka's relative. He says... I asked him; the next day they had padlocks on the door. The Director doesn't even have the key. He calls me up, "Do you have a key?" "Yeah." He says, "Well I don't have a key." George had the Board---he went to the Board and said, "I want it written in black and white... that's an exclusive VFW room and nobody will touch it," you know. And he's a board member, too. And the Hakujin... I figured if a guy asks another--you to do something... if he would have even said, "Okay; I'll try to do something," it would have been it... or, "You go ask." You don't need to go stand for that. But you ask another board member; just like that and the next day there are padlocks on

the door. In fact, yesterday they had changed the key again. [Laughs] So she called me up. So after the funeral I went--- stopped by and they gave me two keys. I said, "What for?" She said, "They changed the lock; all your keys are the same now--- your cabinet, your door, and everything is the same. You don't have to have a different key." So she says, "One for you and one for whoever you want to give it to, but that's the only two keys." You see, Terauchi could have done that. I'll tell you one thing; they will do anything no matter how much it hurts, he's going to fight for you on the olden days. See like when my boy started that pharmaceutical plant in Torrance, he couldn't open it because the county stopped it you know. I asked the Torrance Mayor and he can't do nothing---Gardena couldn't do nothing. So the county stopped it so we can't do nothing. So I call Mas Fukai in 4 o'clock in the afternoon and says, "Hey Mas my kid wants to open it, but he can't open it." Well he said, "Okay the inspector is in La Habra." He says, "It will probably take me a half hour to get there." "He closes at 4:30." "I'm going to rush right now and see if I can stop him." So he runs; he calls from the house about 4:30 and says, "I got him; you can open." So you know Nihongjin's will go that far to do it. But when a guy says, "You go to the board and try to straighten them on...;" but Nihonjin's will actually fight for you in the olden days anyway.

**Interviewer:**

What do you think you... of all the involvement of things that you've done in the Japanese community in Gardena, what things do you look up to as being the most memorable or beneficial to the community?

0:54:39.8

**Kobayashi:**

Well I don't know.

**Interviewer:**

That made a difference that you feel?

**Kobayashi:**

One thing about Nihonjin's, I don't care if it was the Kiwanis Club, the Lions Club, they all joined---they all supported it. I think that's the main thing. I was a Fish and Game Commissioner for 25 years.

**Interviewer:**

Oh the State?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; well in Los Angeles County.

**Interviewer:**

Uh-hm; if you were to do anything all over again and you looked back as to growing up in you North Gardena or the North Torrance Gardena area, and did you always feel that the South Bay area was your home?

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah; I would think so.

**Interviewer:**

Got any last thoughts or words on---that you want to say?

**Kobayashi:**

Nothing.

**Interviewer:**

Or an area that you want to cover?

**Kobayashi:**

As far as that goes....

**Interviewer:**

Yeah; I know one of your passions obviously is politics, and in so many ways you've been a pioneer in politics in Gardena because you've stayed so long and you were able to make some changes and give opportunities to everybody, not necessarily just Nikkei, but everybody to get involved.

**Kobayashi:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

And you made relationships with different people, you know such as Ed Russ, and others that are you know not in the Japanese community per se, but nonetheless have been able to help the community grow.

**Kobayashi:**

Well see Ed and I was opposite sides, because I was Ken and he hated Ken. And we were opposite sides, but then after Ken died, I figured I have to get along with---get together with one big man in Hakujin or I... we'll win nothing. So that's when I

became... called the Gardena Political Action Group, you know we started that thing. We got the permit for it; I still got it. So it's between the two of us. So when we run politics, it's got to be the two of us. But I figure, that's what... you know the Hakujins together. Last time you know when---before Tanaka ran... when Tanaka ran, we would---Ed and I were backing Tanaka, and that's why Tanaka got mad at us because we were backing him. But we found out Ybarra was going to get in, because we knew that Ybarra got all the Holly Park light up, you know. So Ed and I says, "To get him out, we just split the Holly Park vote. And so... I said, "What are we going to do?" He said, "We'll drop Tanaka and go for May Doi," because May is weak, but we got---we can't use Tanaka in Holly Park because he don't have no push in Holly Park." So we got the---we got \$20,000 from the card club and Ed and I dropped Tanaka and pushed and Holly Park. We spent \$20,000 in Holly Park door-to-door; we pushed May Doi. That split Ybarra's vote in half. So that's how Ybarra lost. Otherwise, he would have walked in. He would have been one of your Councilmen today. And then Tanaka got mad because we dropped him and went to May Doi. He didn't understand that we figured he was going to win anyway so why back him. He didn't talk to me for two years.

**Interviewer:**  
[Laughs]

**Kobayashi:**

Now he sends the VFW a check for \$100 for promoting Loyalty Day and puts my name in there instead. I got one last week from another check from the city, but with my name, and he signs it. But politics are funny.

**Interviewer:**

Well do you have any other areas that you wanted to cover?

**Kobayashi:**

No; as a whole, I'm---I was lucky I started my store. I ran Kyoto Sukiyaki and open Baron, it's Suzuran now, but I opened Kyoto Sukiyaki. My sister-in-law wanted to do something; so we opened it. So she asked, "If I would put the money up." So we put the money up, did that, and then sold it. So they then... you know the Blue Lantern right now is going to be Walgreen's?

**Interviewer:**

Right.

**Kobayashi:**

One day Tommy Yamaki and I was at Vermont and 190th Bar; we were drinking in there. And the guy says, "We're closing up." We said, "Why?" He said, "Lost the lease and this and that." He says... and you couldn't get a liquor license in those days. We said, "What are you going to do with the liquor license?" He says, "You want to buy it?" "Yeah; how much you want." He said, "Five hundred dollars." We gave him \$500 and we ended up with a liquor license. So we didn't know what to do; so we opened a liquor store---Blue Lantern Bar right here. We got it all fixed up. Just before opening, we went to the Colony Club. Tom his wife, and my wife went to the Colony Club. We celebrated; my wife didn't know nothing about it and Tom's wife asks, "Yeah our husbands are in a business venture together." She said, "What?" She said, "He's starting a bar." Oh man, she got mad.

**Interviewer:**

[Laughs]

**Kobayashi:**

So he said, "Oh man, I've got to get rid of the bar." So I called up Ken, "You want my half of the bar?" "You'd be the silent partner then." So I sold him half of the bar. And that's... you know after that I bought Kyoto Sukiyaki, but I told my wife, "I'm buying a restaurant, not a bar."

**Interviewer:**

Right, right.

1:01:07.8

**Kobayashi:**

But the only trouble I ever had with the Hakujin is during the war. During the war I bought two Hawaiians came to Daniel's Cafe... you know it's Desert Inn now. It used to be a cafe. The three of us walk in, the two Hawaiians and myself walk in and sit down and order a drink, and the guy said, "We don't serve Japs here." I said, "What's a matter? You don't like our uniform?" We was in the Army. The war was still on. And he says, "Well we don't want you." So he said, "Let me talk to Lou Daniel; is he around?" He said, "Yeah." He said, "I know him." He come out and say, "What's the matter; don't you like our uniform?" Lou Daniel says, "You better get out of here before there's trouble." I said, "Listen you son-of-a-bitch I'll never forget you; one of these days I'll get even." So the three of us walked to the Gardena Hotel and we were going to stay there

overnight and they said, "We don't serve Japs here." Now what are we going to do? So we took a taxi. They said, "Go to the YMCA." So we went---we went clear up to San Pedro---that was the only YMCA. The YMCA, they kicked us out of there, you know. They said, "Go to the YWCA." Well they were joking so the three of walked to the YWCA and say, "We want to sleep here tonight." "Fine;" they gave us a bed. They gave us a breakfast. They took us to Terminal Island to the Navy depot so they could fly us back to San Francisco; that's where we were from. I never forgot YWCA. But then---you know the guy, that Lou Daniels that kicked us out? I never forgot him and one day he's in the Blue Lantern Bar and I'm in the bar. Willy was the bartender. He brings me a drink and I says, "What's this?" He said, "Oh Lou Daniels," you know, "Is giving you a drink." He said, "You know and he wants to talk about...." See that he in the Lions Club and I was in the Kiwanis Club, we all have a party once a year. "And he wants to talk with you." I said, "What's he drinking?" He said, "Martini." "Bring the Martini over here." I took the martini and put it in front of him and said, "Listen, you SOB, get the hell out of here." He said, "What do you mean?" I said, "Remember you kicked me out of a bar a longtime ago?" He said, "Oh we forgot about it." I said, "I never forgot." I said, "You get the "H" out of here right now you know before I throw you out." And so the bartender, "You better go or I'll throw you out myself." So then the bartender...did it feel good, sure felt good. Kiwanis Club and Lions never had a party after that. [Laughs] But I got even.

**Interviewer:**

Well thank you very much for making time and I know there are probably a lot of other things that you want to talk about or are thinking about talking about; so we can at some other point in time do that. But well thank you very much for making the effort and time and helping us out with this oral history project.

**Kobayashi:**

Okay.

**[CD Ends; CD Begins]**