

**[Begin Ryo Komae File 1]**

**Interviewer:**

Good afternoon, today is May 13, 2004. We have an interview with Mr. Ryo Komae, and thank you Mr. Komae for allowing us to come by and have a chance to talk with you. Can you tell us where you were born?

**Komae:**

I was born in Los Angeles, July 26, 1918.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, 1918 okay; and were you born at a Japanese hospital, or at home, or...?

**Komae:**

Well, in those days they had what do you call them? I'm trying to remember the terminology where the ladies came in and delivered---you were delivered at your own home.

**Interviewer:**

Something wives.

**Interviewer:**

Mid-wives.

**Komae:**

Mid-wives yes; that's the correct terminology.

**Interviewer:**

Then when you were in---growing up in.... What area did you live in when you were growing up, then in Los Angeles?

**OH01M09S**

**Komae:**

I grew up at 1134 East Pico Boulevard, which is near the corner of---one block off of Central Avenue, and Pico was 13<sup>th</sup> Street; so it would be at 13<sup>th</sup> and Central Avenue.

**Interviewer:**

Not far from the current Staples Center?

**Komae:**

Not too far, yes; but my father worked at the City Market on 9<sup>th</sup> and San Pedro; so it was only very close to where he worked.

**Interviewer:**

Was he in produce market or...?

**Komae:**

Well, he was a watchman for the City Market in Los Angeles.

**Interviewer:**

Oh.

**Komae:**

And that was his primary job.

**Interviewer:**

Where did you go to elementary school?

**Komae:**

Elementary, I started at 9<sup>th</sup> Street School, and then I ended up at 18<sup>th</sup> Street School on 18<sup>th</sup> and San Pedro. From there I matriculated to Lafayette Junior High School, and then I spent one semester at Jefferson High School and transferred over to Polytechnic High School where I graduated in February of 1935.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, 1935 when you got out of high school; then what did you do?

**Komae:**

Well, I didn't know exactly what to do at that time, but I had a church young peoples worker by the name of Chuck Severance, who influenced me to go to Chapman College for a year, because I didn't know what to do, or where to go, and so I opted to go to... oh, no, before that time, after I graduated February of 1935, I spent one semester going to a secretarial post-graduation secretarial training course at Jefferson High School. And I learned some bookkeeping, and I learned to do---I learned shorthand. In fact, I even got a grade certificate for being able to write 60 words per minute shorthand.

**Interviewer:**

Did you learn typing, too?

**Komae:**

And typing also, yes; then from there I went---decided to go to Chapman College due to the influence of Mr. Charles Severance...

**Interviewer:**

At Chapman, did you go... was that... how long did you go to Chapman?

**Komae:**

I went to Chapman one year, and then after one year I decided to go to USC Pharmacy School. In those days it was more important for a Japanese male to have a quality education rather than the female member of the family; so although my older sister was a very good student. In fact, I think she was smarter than I was [Laughs], the family opted to spend the money to send me to USC rather than---and go to college, rather than have her go to college; so she ended up going to work, and I went to college.

**Interviewer:**

At that time, how much did SC.... It must have been expensive even then.

**Komae:**

No; it was very inexpensive at that time. In fact, I spent... tuition was \$250 a year. So, basically four years was \$1,000; excluding, of course, buying the books which were very reasonable at that time.

0H04M58S

**Interviewer:**

When you went to USC, then, were there very many other Americans of Japanese ancestry going there?

**Komae:**

Yes, there were a number of Japanese, particularly in the pharmacy area. So, we had, oh, I would say eight or 10-12 Japanese going to the Pharmacy School there... And, of course, at that time there was a number of Japanese going to the other schools of the University, too; so it was not unusual to see Japanese faces on the campus.

**Interviewer:**

When you were at USC, did you also do other sports, like, I notice in high school you played baseball, track, and....

**Komae:**

High school no.... At SC I didn't participate in any kind of physical activities at USC representing the school or anything, but spent most of the time doing study.

**Interviewer:**

... study. What year did you graduate from pharmacy?

**Komae:**

I graduated in February of 1940.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, 1940; and then after you graduated what did you do?

**Komae:**

After I graduated, well, it was difficult to get a job. Oh, after I graduated, of course, I had to take the State Board examination, and I passed the State Board examination. It was difficult for a Japanese pharmacist to get a job at that time. There was a number of big major drug chains, but... such as the Thrifty Drug Store and, but they were not hiring any Japanese; so I went to a Japanese pharmacy in Little Tokyo, TenShodo Drug. I was fortunate to be able to get a job there working for Mr. John Toshiyuki and worked there for a short period of time.

**Interviewer:**

When you were at Ten Shodo, did you also still live over...?

**Komae:**

Yes, I still lived with the family on Pico.

**Interviewer:**

There were stories that pharmacists---that Japanese-Americans that graduated from college and some as pharmacists and others weren't able to find jobs, and they went back to work in the product market. Do you know any of your friends that did that?

**Komae:**

Oh, yes, and it was very common. In fact, you know you used to hear tales of brilliant students graduating Caltech and still unable to find a job; so they would be working in a fruit stand or produce department. We used to call it fruit stands, now, but I guess they call them produce departments now.

**Interviewer:**

Do you think there... when you were growing up do you think there was overt or covert forms of discrimination that you felt, or you could only see it happen?

**Komae:**

Job-wise, yes; but friendship-wise no, I guess, we had often heard about discrimination as far as residence---residential areas of concern and whatnot, but, primarily in the job market, that's where the major discrimination was.

**OH08M28S**

**Interviewer:**

When the war, World War II, broke out after December 7<sup>th</sup>, where were you at that time?

**Komae:**

Well, after I worked for Ten Shodo Drug for about a little over a year, I heard of a Civil Service Examination being given for pharmacists. At that time, I was earning \$75 a month, I think at Ten Shoto Drug, and the Civil Service Examination was a position that was paying \$135 a month. So, after I took the exam and passed it, they told me... they called me and asked me if I wanted to go to Fresno. And after debating and talking it over with my family, I decided to take the job in Fresno at the Fresno Air Base...

**Interviewer:**

Oh.

**Komae:**

... where I was the chief pharmacist. So, from about September or August 1941 I was the pharmacist at the Fresno Air Base which is about 12 miles-10 miles out of Fresno, California. When the war broke out, I was the only Japanese on the Air Base, and the officer in charge of the Air Base called me in when the war broke out with Japan and said, "Komae, you're a good worker and we appreciate the fine work you're doing in the Pharmacy Department, but you're the only Japanese on this whole Air Base, and I don't know whether it would be best if you continue working as the pharmacist, especially in view of the fact that you're dealing in medication for the soldiers here." So, he said, "You should seriously consider giving up your job and going back to Los Angeles." And after some thought, I said, "Gee;" you know I was concerned about my family, and I was single at that time... about my family and whatnot; so I told

him, "Yeah; I think that it would be best if I gave up this position and go back to Los Angeles."

**Interviewer:**

So you had a civilian position at an Army base.

**Komae:**

Army base, yes sir.

**Interviewer:**

How did you get back from Fresno, by car?

**Komae:**

Oh, yes; he wrote me up a pass so that in case I was stopped anywhere along the way that I would have documentation showing that I was free to travel and heading back to Los Angeles. And then; so, shortly after... so that was in the mid... about a week after the war with Japan started. And then, from February 1<sup>st</sup>, Uncle Sam called me; so I was soon inducted into the Army.

**Interviewer:**

So you were inducted from Los Angeles, then?

**Komae:**

From Fort MacArthur---I went to Fort MacArthur.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, in San Pedro.

**Komae:**

San Pedro; yes.

**Interviewer:**

Then where did you do your basic?

**Komae:**

Well, at that time, of course, if you were drafted, there was a lot of different people drafted, and so there were some Caucasian fellows and Asians and Blacks and Latinos and we all went to Fort MacArthur after being given all of our equipment and whatnot. One day they started calling off names, and it just happened to be all Asian-Japanese names. They got us all together and said, "Okay, you guys are going to be shipped out and so...." "Okay; where are we going?" "Well, we're going to go to Camp Robinson, Arkansas---Camp Robinson, Arkansas." Well, we never... had barely heard of the state called Arkansas, let

alone, know where it was. But anyways, we got into this rickety old train, and been advised to keep the shades down on the train; so that the people that we were passing would not be able to see us, and we didn't particularly stop at any major stop. Along the way, you know out in the desert area or somewhere where we would not be visible to the local population, because they would wonder whether we were Japanese prisoners of war, or whatnot?

**0H13M29S**

**Interviewer:**

Did you really... did this whole group of Asian-looking people really look Japanese then? You just didn't know the public thought that; or the government didn't know what the public would think? You were in uniform, though?

**Komae:**

Well, we were all in uniform, but still, you know we all had these Japanese faces or Asian faces, and, naturally, it was a precautionary measure, and they didn't want us to have.... So, I took my basic training at Camp Robinson, Arkansas which is just a short distance out of Little Rock.

**Interviewer:**

North or south or...?

**Komae:**

I can't remember where it was.

**Interviewer:**

After that then, your family they went to an Assembly Center?

**Komae:**

Yeah; they went to an Assembly Center---Pomona Assembly Center, and then eventually they were shipped to Heart Mountain.

**Interviewer:**

Did you ever visit them at Heart Mountain?

**Komae:**

Oh, yes; I visited them a number of times at Heart Mountain on furlough.

**Interviewer:**

After Camp Robinson in Arkansas, where were you assigned?

**Komae:**

I went to Fort Leonard Wood, where I spent most of my time. Several years, there, working in the laboratory department.

**Interviewer:**

Did your pharmacy training help you---keep you...?

**Komae:**

I was a pharmacist, but they never---they never did put me in the pharmacy, and I asked them to transfer me to the pharmacy, and they never did, but they kept me in the Medical Corps. And I worked in the laboratory doing hematology and serology and bacteriology and this kind of medical care.

**Interviewer:**

So do you think... so they put you at the other end of the spectrum in terms of chemistry, in other words, you couldn't infect anyone with any drugs [**Laughs**]... you were testing, you were more of a testing things versus being on the other side where you can... So, do you think...? I suppose at that time they were very cautious about things. If... did you have any brothers or relatives that served in the war?

**Komae:**

Yeah; my younger brother was a paratrooper.

**Interviewer:**

Did he jump in Europe, then?

**Komae:**

No; he spent most of his time in Japan.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, in Japan.

**Komae:**

Yeah; but I don't know how active he was or... he did---made a number of jumps, but I don't know how much intense fighting he was involved in.

**Interviewer:**

When you went to Heart Mountain, I suppose you went by bus or train?

**Komae:**

Yeah; I went by train because, you know airplanes weren't flying at that time; so basically by train, I would go to Billings, MT, and then, all by train, and then come down on a bus to Heart Mountain.

**Interviewer:**

What did it feel like being a U.S. Army soldier and visiting your parents and relatives in a---at Heart Mountain?

**Komae:**

Well, it was an odd feeling. Odd feeling to think that, you know I'm serving in this---in the United States Army, and here we have all these guard towers and our families inside and the guns are not pointing out, they're pointing in, you know to prevent the people from escaping and whatnot. So, it was a very peculiar feeling, and sometimes, you know you felt resentful, but, you know what could you do? Make the best of it.

**Interviewer:**

When you.... I notice that you mention that your mother had passed away in Heart Mountain in 1943; was...?

**Komae:**

Well, she had a heart condition previously; so she passed away with heart condition. In those days, you know medical treatment for heart cases were not what they are today; so she passed away. I think she was 53 or something like that.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, she was young.

**Komae:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

So, did you have...?

**Komae:**

Well, my two sisters, no, my, one sister was married previous to evacuation; so she went with her husband to Elk Grove.

**Interviewer:**

Illinois?

**Komae:**

In northern California and so she and my brother was in the service, and then I have another sister who came along with my father and mother and went to Heart Mountain, and then she got

married there. So, basically, it was just my father and mother at the camp there. And then when my mother passed away, and my father was alone, because all the other the four kids in the family were either in the service or married.

**Interviewer:**

It must have been a tough time for your father, then.

**Komae:**

Yes, I guess it was, but he did have a younger brother who he was close to; so it helped a great deal.

**OH18M29S**

**Interviewer:**

After the war... well, during the war where else were you stationed?

**Komae:**

I was stationed went to basic training in Abilene; they sent me again to another basic training and this time after spending so much time in the Medical Corps, they send me to a basic training in the Medical Corps down in Camp Abilene; so I don't know what the rationale was, but....

**Interviewer:**

Did they think you were a slow learner, or.... **[Laughs]**

**Komae:**

And then while I was there taking basic training, even before I finished, they called me to go to MIS. So I went from Abilene to Minneapolis-St. Paul, and went to the MIS school.

**Interviewer:**

Did you go to Snelling or Savage?

**Komae:**

Snelling.

**Interviewer:**

Snelling.

**Komae:**

Yes; Snelling and I spent six months there until, let's see, the war ended in 1945, huh. Yeah; I spent about six months there until about November of 1944. We graduated and were getting ready... were shipped out to California to go overseas, and

while we were waiting around and waiting for orders and whatnot, the war ended. And they asked me whether I---what I wanted to do, whether I wanted to either waive my discharge and go to Japan, either take my discharge or waive it and go to Japan. And at that time, I was in for just about four years. I said I wanted to just get out; so....

**Interviewer:**

In other words, you... since you were stationed while you were assembling over in Pittsburgh over there right when the war ended your... that's where all the ships were ready to go from; right?

**Komae:**

That's right.

**Interviewer:**

The Liberty ships, the transport ships. So, then, after you got discharged, where did you go?

**Komae:**

Well, my father, when he left Heart Mountain opted to go with his brother because he was alone at that time, now. My mother had passed away; the kids were all gone, and my uncle or his younger brother had evacuated and gone to New York City. And so, my father opted to go to New York City, too; so when I was discharged, I went to New York.

**Interviewer:**

In New York, did you find work there?

**Komae:**

Well, in New York, my uncle had started a business in a hotel, an apartment complex, a five-story building there, and so I started to help him at the building there which went on for about two and half years, two years or so.

**Interviewer:**

So this is from, what, about 1946 to...?

**Komae:**

Yeah; no, no, the war ended, what, in 1945.

**Interviewer:**

But in New York you didn't do pharmacy?

**0H22M37S**

**Komae:**

No; I didn't have a license. I didn't have a pharmacy license; I just had a California license. So I went to take the New York State Board, and they said... and I submitted my college diploma and the copy of my California Pharmacy license, and they came back and said, "You have to continue... take another year of high school English in order to qualify," because New York State required, what, three years of English or something like that, and I had only taken two years of English in... at Los Angeles. So I said, "Well, that makes it kind of difficult." So, I said, "I'll just go across the Hudson River and I'll go to New Jersey and I'll take the New Jersey Board." So I went over there and took the New Jersey Board and I got a New Jersey license. Well, I was going to use it, but I never got around to using it, because by that time, I decided to come back to California.

**Interviewer:**

If you had a New Jersey license, could you have waived into New York without taking...?

**Komae:**

No; they don't

**Interviewer:**

No reciprocity.

**Komae:**

No reciprocity at all, even with California. There are... it's all by themselves New York.

**Interviewer:**

I know that my relatives, my aunt, Aunt Alice Ono, and I know my Uncle, they were in New York, and I think they must have run into you a number of times there, because they knew of you when you were in New York City.

**Komae:**

Oh, really?

**Interviewer:**

But, when you were in New York, then, what made you come back to California?

**Komae:**

Well, I had my California license and I wanted to practice as a pharmacist; so I thought well, you know. Then, at that time so many of the Japanese families were coming back to California, and just... California was home to me.

**Interviewer:**

Then, when you came back to California, you came back by train, car?

**Komae:**

No; I bought a car for, I think it was \$1,000, \$900, brand new Ford station wagon, and oh, by that time I was married. I married Jean Fukui. I met at church in New York, and when... in the spring of 1949, we decided to come back and then I had one son at that time, already. So, one year old son and my wife, we hopped into the station wagon, and drove across the country, stopping in at different friends along the way, in North Platte, Chicago, Illinois; North Platte, Nebraska; Salt Lake City, Utah, San Francisco and Fresno, and eventually back to Los Angeles.

**Interviewer:**

After you... through all this time frame from the time you are growing up and going to Japanese Christian language school, and the time you served in the Army, and the whole period during World War II, and upon meeting Jean, how important was religion to you at that time? Was that...?

**Komae:**

Well, my mother was early Issei Christian woman, and so it was just normal part of my life. I went to church, you know while I was in the service, and went to churches even while I was in the Army, and it was just an integral part of my life, and just fortunate that I met my wife at church, and so.

**Interviewer:**

When you're coming across the United States at that time, and you're probably fast approaching the 1950s and probably there's a lot of euphoric, can-do spirit within America at that time, because it's after the War and people are trying to get back into life... when you're driving across, did you find yourself just being another American going across, or did you find yourself being, because you look Japanese, or did you see any kind of areas where you thought there's some remnants of negative feelings or discrimination?

**Komae:**

No, no feeling; but when I was in the service, especially when I was in basic service in Arkansas, it was hard for the Caucasian people to believe that we were Japanese soldiers of Japanese ancestry. And they would say, well, you must either be... no or you must be Indian, or something other than... the farthest thing they ever thought about was that we would be Japanese serving in the U.S. Army. And they didn't discriminate, it was just a matter of they were always being surprised that we were Japanese serving in the United States Army. But coming across, we didn't have any problems at all, even when we checked into motels and everything, you know business was business, and they were just... we were just treated like everybody else, and we didn't have any problems at all.

0H29M09S

**Interviewer:**

So, after you returned to Los Angeles, what did you do?

**Komae:**

I worked a short period of time for Thrifty Drug Store.

**Interviewer:**

They were hiring then.

**Komae:**

Oh, yes; this is post-war, now. This is... they were hiring then. And then after working about three months there or four months there, I said, "Gee, maybe I should be looking somewhere to be starting a drug store somewhere;" so I met this fellow, Sam Minami, who was a long-time resident of Gardena, who grew up in Gardena, and had a chat with him, and he encouraged me to come to Gardena and start a drugstore, because he said there was a very large Japanese community in the South Bay area that he felt could use a pharmacy; so I came, and I talked to Dr. Norman **Kobayashi** who was the only Japanese physician in the area. And he also encouraged me; so I finally started---decided to start a drug store at 1134 Gardena Boulevard.

**Interviewer:**

What year was that?

**Komae:**

That was in, well, actually started in October of 1949.

**Interviewer:**

You mean the pharmacy was started in October of 1949?

**Komae:**

Yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Was Dr. Kobayashi still down the street on Gardena Boulevard?

**Komae:**

Yes, he was on 742 Gardena Boulevard. I can still remember the address.

**Interviewer:**

Was Sam Minami still at the other end?

**Komae:**

Well, no, Sam Minami started his sporting goods store about a half a year after I had started my pharmacy.

**Interviewer:**

So Sam encourages you to move to Gardena?

**Komae:**

Yeah; but he was working as a sales person for a Sporting Goods store selling golf equipment down in Little Tokyo, and that's where I met him, and that's---and then he eventually decided to come out and start his Sam's Sporting Goods Store.

**Interviewer:**

Then, after you started Gardena Pharmacy in 1949, how long did it take before your... to have some steady Japanese business, or just business from the Japanese community? Was it kind of hard in the beginning?

**Komae:**

Well, it was kind of interesting, because Dr. Kobiashi would have office hours in the morning and then from about two o'clock to five or six o'clock, he had an office in downtown Little Tokyo, and he would go down there, and then after that he would come back to Gardena and then open up his office about seven o'clock; so he---the farmers could come in and be treated. So, I opened up my drug store at nine o'clock in the morning, and then I stayed open until ten o'clock at night to take care of

the medication needs of those people who came to see the doctor after seven o'clock that same day. So, I more or less, had a set group of people coming, because Dr. Kobiashi would say, you know go down to the pharmacy over here, because he's still open, and it was a situation that was---worked out real well for us.

Of course, in the meantime I started to have a lot of Caucasian families come in and they were super faithful and came and I became good friends with a lot of the customers that came in. And, of course, you know Ron had to work for me; too, you know how we operated the pharmacy and took care of the customers.

**Interviewer:**

Well, one of the nice things about you locating in Gardena was that probably you provided a central place for a community. It is probably the initial parts of having this community besides the Japanese Community Center over there off of, where they had the kendo and the rest off of 162<sup>nd</sup>, the JCI, now, but before then, it was that building...?

**Komae:**

Community building; yeah.

**Interviewer:**

Right.

**Komae:**

Yes, that's right.

**Interviewer:**

And so... but when... I thought it was interesting because Dr. Norman Kobayashi delivered me when I was born in Boyle Heights at the Japanese Hospital.

**Komae:**

Japanese Hospital on First Street.

**Interviewer:**

And then... but then you're from Dr. Kobayashi's office to the pharmacy... that's kind of a long walk.

0H34M25S

**Komae:**

Well, it's still driving; so, you know it's just right straight down the street.

**Interviewer:**

Was it paved then?

**Komae:**

Oh yeah; it was paved, yes. It was a regular street. Why, you think... did you grow up in this area?

**Interviewer:**

Well, I grew up in Redondo Beach until 1953.

**Komae:**

Some of the streets weren't paved in those days?

**Interviewer:**

Well, people tell.... I guess it was Hawthorne that some of the streets weren't paved, and I guess more of the side streets then didn't have asphalt on them.

**Komae:**

But when we first started, there was a residential discrimination against Japanese, and there were certain streets in Gardena, especially, streets where some of the city officials resided that the word was out among the real estate agents that it's a no-no to sell to Japanese-Americans or any Japanese on these particular streets. And that was primarily for I would say, maybe, about five years or so before some type of anti-discrimination....

**Interviewer:**

The Fair Housing....

**Komae:**

Laws or something were passed; so that....

**Interviewer:**

Well, I think over there not far from the pharmacy, where St. Anthony's Church is and where Gwen Duffy lives and those streets there, Japanese even in '53 when my father moved from Redondo Beach to Gardena, you couldn't buy there.

**Komae:**

Yeah; I know.

**Interviewer:**

And you couldn't buy in HollyPark, because the Jewish community didn't want the Japanese to live there; so the Japanese were stuck with the southern end of South Redondo Beach Boulevard, certainly to live in which was apparently....

**Komae:**

Which turned out to be....

**Interviewer:**

The best part. [Laughs]

**Komae:**

The best part. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:**

But at the time, was the part that was not desirable. Along that time, though, on Gardena Boulevard, what other stores were there? I guess there was a Bank of America or...?

**Komae:**

Yeah; Bank of America was there. Well, originally, there was a theater. The theater is where the Gardena Department Store is right now. And then there was the Bank of America and then among the Japanese there was a Tak Isobe photo studio, and then Tad Uyemura had a children's shop close to the pharmacy. There was a dry cleaning establishment. There was a beauty parlor. Let's see, what else there was there, and, of course, the post office was across the street, too. So it was sort of a convenient place.

**Interviewer:**

Over the years, you've always had a strong and close relationship with the Guiliano family. When did they open up their...?

**Komae:**

The Giuliani family opened up in 1953; and so....

**Interviewer:**

So you were there before they were there?

**Komae:**

Yes; so I was there about three or four years before they were there, and they recently celebrated their 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary over there last year, but...

**Interviewer:**

Then, along the way, I know you were real active in things with the boys, and among them was Cub Scouts and Boy Scouts. What got you...?

**Komae:**

You were in my wife's Cub Scout group?

**Interviewer:**

She was my den mother; so that made you the Den Dad.

**Komae:**

Yeah; okay.

**Interviewer:**

What got you started with, like, Mom and Pop O'Haver and, remember Pete, and all those other people that.... Was that because Glen was...?

**Komae:**

Yeah; Glenn was interested, and, of course, I was busy with the pharmacy working long hours; so, primarily, that was the job of my wife. And she was involved in the PTAs and the Boy Scouts and things of this nature, but I was primarily concerned with doing the pharmacy. But then, at night I was involved in doing--able to go help with the community affairs, and was involved in a lot of community different organizations.

**0H38M55S**

**Interviewer:**

You were real active and still active in Kiwanis?

**Komae:**

No; I'm retired from Kiwanis. I was the... in 1952 a group of us... at that time there was no Gardena JACL. And about in early-late '51 or early '52 or something, several of us in town, Sam Minami and his wife, and Paul Tsukahara and his wife, and Yo Kobata and his wife and some of us got together and we wanted to start up the Gardena JCL again, and so we did start up the JCL and I was the president of the Gardena JCL in 1952 and '53. But my primary concern was with being a member of the Kiwanis Club of Gardena Valley, and working at... with the YMCA on different fund drives, and building projects, and different kinds of activities there.

**Interviewer:**

I recall when I was working at the pharmacy in the mid-'60s that people like Yo Kobata would come by a lot, and Dr. Hori, the dentist, would come by a lot, but you had a regular group of people you played golf with on Wednesdays as I recall.

**Komae:**

Oh, yes; well, Sam Minami used to be the---my primary golf buddy. He was a very, very excellent golfer, and one of the premier early Japanese golfers, and there was Harvey Chapman, who was a retired professional golfer was a part of our group, and there was a Dr. Dean Brown, and several... and Dan Crist, and Eddie. They were a wonderful group of golfers that... we played every week and played all over, different courses, and I had just a great time playing golf.

**Interviewer:**

Along those ways, among... in Kiwanis, what did you find the most fun, the pancake breakfasts, or the scholarship programs, or...?

**Komae:**

Well, I was in charge of the Kiwanis scholarship program for about 25 years, and the greatest joy I had was being able to interview graduating students at both Gardena High School and Sierra High School, and to listen to how they perceived the world to be, and how they perceived, how they feel that they would like to do, and to encourage them, and to eventually give scholarships to the winning person, and follow their career as they matriculated through college.

**Interviewer:**

One of the... I believe just on the outside looking in, but even for myself participating and having a chance to work with you, you've always given people opportunity, and certainly among them was Howard Atsumi, and Craig Yamada, your nephew you know help everyone along the way, and those kinds of things, you can't buy. You can't ask someone to help me... you and Jean have always been out there trying to make a difference in people's lives, and, you know kind of among those things, but, you know Howard; can you tell us some more about Howard, or Howard came to you, or how you got Howard to work, and then...

**Komae:**

Oh, well Howard was a fellow very much interested in automobiles as a youngster, and he needed some funds to be able to purchase parts and work on his cars and whatnot. And so he came to me and wanted a job. I said, "Okay; I'll hire you," and he turned out to be a wonderful worker. And when he graduated Gardena--- that was before what---he was going to Gardena High School. He saw what kind of operation I had, and we talked it over, and he said, "Well, okay; I think I'll go to pharmacy school. So, he ended up... when I graduated pharmacy school in 1940, well the only degree they gave was Bachelor of Science degree in Pharmacy, but Howard eventually went six years, and he got his doctor degree in pharmacy. But he turned out to be a wonderful pharmacist; and so I was able to, after he graduated, to put him on full-time, and basically had him practically run the pharmacy while I did more community work, and went to Kiwanis luncheons; excuse, me.

**Interviewer:**

Go ahead; here, take the thing off.

**Interviewer:**

What year did Howard start working for you at the pharmacy?

**Komae:**

Oh, gosh, it must have been in, maybe, '52 or '53, 1952 or '53.

**Interviewer:**

And then he went to school; so about 1960 he started working full time?

**Komae:**

Yeah; and then he worked until 1981 for me, and at that time, he was getting to be in his late 40s or something like that, and he said, "Well, you know I think I'll go out and see if I can start a pharmacy somewhere;" and I said, "Well, how about taking over the pharmacy?" And he was delighted; so in 1981, or prior to 1981, I was involved in starting a local community bank. About 1974, as one of the original directors of the bank; so I was spending a lot of time going to loan meetings and whatnot, and he was running the pharmacy. So I said, "Why don't you just... I'll just sell you the pharmacy." on the basis of what we estimated the inventory to be, and the fact that he had purchased some of the bank stock that I had encouraged him to buy for just a matter of a couple of tens of thousands of dollars, he took over the pharmacy. And he got a good deal, but, you know I was happy with the situation because he didn't--

-I didn't generate a lot of good will or anything out of selling the pharmacy, but I knew that he would properly take care of the customers that were so faithful to the store. So I was happy to relinquish the pharmacy to him which he ran from 1981 to 1993 where he just unfortunately had a massive heart attack while he was shoveling snow up at Mammoth Mountain one winter and passed on.

**0H47M22S**

**Interviewer:**

I think that was a shock for everybody, and I know for Cookie that had to be really tough for the whole family.

**Komae:**

But all in all, I had some wonderful people working for me. Howard was a wonderful worker, Yone Shintaku and I had a bunch of guys that worked for me---Ronnie Ikejiri, for one, and Bob Nakata, and Lee Fukuzawa, and the Matsushima boys and Tom Muranaka, and Jerry Kado, and oh just a great bunch of young men that worked for me and made things a lot easier for me. One of the hard things that they had to do was to mop the floor and whatnot, but they didn't seem to mind doing a little hard work for a change.

**Interviewer:**

Well, mopping the floor was the easy part; the hard part was... one of the things you have taught me, among them was when I first started I think you started me out at \$1.05 an hour, or maybe it was \$1.10 an hour, and you told me if I was any good at this, and if I learned properly in two weeks you would consider giving me a raise. So, after two weeks, I think you raised me five cents to \$1.15 or \$1.20. **[Laughs]** And at Christmas time, I remember you, I was probably making about \$30 or \$40 a week, my guess is something like that, and at Christmas time you wrote a check for double---two weeks' worth of work. And I thought this was the neatest kind of Christmas gift you can ever get from somebody, two weeks of pay for Christmas. But, no; I learned a lot by example for the things that you did, and I appreciate you not.... Before they had cell phones, I remember, I made a delivery. At that time you had Clearview Sanitarium.

**Komae:**

Yeah; that's right.

**Interviewer:**

And then you had the other one; what was that?

**Komae:**

Alandro Nursing Home.

**Interviewer:**

Alandro Nursing Home...?

**Komae:**

And they're not a sanitarium.

**Interviewer:**

And, right over there. And I would be making a delivery, and I delivered the Clearview to Ayarlar, not the Ayarlar the one over on Rosecrans.

**Komae:**

Alondra.

**Interviewer:**

And Alondra to Clearview, and when I got back, you looked at me and I felt so stupid, I had to make another run, but you didn't get mad, which goes a long way to saying, well, you know I guess we all make mistakes, but I appreciated your kindness in not getting upset. But, you know along the way, too, with so many people in terms of pharmacy, who were the people that worked for you in the pharmacy went into pharmacy, in the Gardena Pharmacy?

**Komae:**

Atsumi, Manaka, and Ted Mochidomi, and Bob Nakata, and Jerry Kado, four or five of them.

**Interviewer:**

Craig wasn't in the pharmacy.

**Komae:**

Craig went into pharmacy, too... yeah; Craig.

**Interviewer:**

You know what always amazed me, too, is I remember I was in charge of the candy section, and, you know I would learn how to rotate the product to make sure that the oldest part got to the front. And one day, I remember it was in the summer time, and I said, "You know Mr. Komae, I don't think it's worth anyone's time to sell candy, because you know a couple of cents here, a couple of cents there," and you sat me down and explained to me.

You said, "By selling this candy, we're able to pay for the electric bill so you can have air conditioning in the store."  
[Laughs] And so, then that's when I learned about profit centers; one section does this, and one section... perfumes do something else, or cards and other things. So it all adds to the total, but it was really like taking an MBA course with hand on experience. One of the things in pharmacy that changed certainly over the years is the use of the computers.

OH51M31S

**Komae:**

Oh, yeah now; uh-hm.

**Interviewer:**

Do you think that has made pharmacy better?

**Komae:**

Well yeah; I think it is better. And then the information that it generates, you know about different drugs and allergies and whatnot. I think it's a wonderful way of explaining to the people that they have more concrete information, and if you tell them something, even if they forgot, they have a piece of paper that they could go back to.

**Interviewer:**

I wanted to touch on the things that... Stan passed away, but the things that he had set forth, and just... on Easter Sunday there's an opening of the church.

**Komae:**

Oh, yeah; well, Stan went to... of course, after getting a teaching education, he decided to go into---he was teaching for a number of years and then he decided to go into the ministry; so he took some graduate courses, and eventually got his doctor degree in Theology and decided to start his own church. So he started here at my house, here, and he started out with about 30 people, and move first to the Torrance YWCA, because Torrance, the South Bay area and especially Torrance was his desired area to do his evangelism work, and so we started at the Torrance YWCA, which eventually was closed down because of financial difficulties. And he went and moved over to the Torrance YMCA where we were there for several years. Then Torrance YMCA wanted to enlarge; so they closed down the area where we were having our church services so we had to move again. So we moved to a street called Ranier street and joined and had services

there until we were merged with one of the Hope Chapel churches, and eventually moved again after merging with another church to Pacific Coast Highway where we're situated right now, but his desire was---his main concern was being a prayerful, praying church, and praying for the people in the area, and so he emphasized that in all of his prayer, in all of his sermons. And he was a very concerned person about the individual persons that were either sick or in need of prayer or help, but due to an unexpected heart attack that he had while he was driving one day, although he didn't crash into anything, he went into a coma, and after six months in a coma, he passed away. We're just thankful that he was part of the family, and started a church and that's his legacy that we have to look up to and appreciate all the time.

**Interviewer:**

Well, I think what touched me is I happened to be over at the Aloha T&T, that Japanese restaurant just kind of behind the current location of the church. And I saw this notice that Easter Sunday they're going to have a special service. And then I read the article in the Daily Breeze and that's when I called you, but obviously, I knew Stan growing up, and although I was in the same age group as Glen, and one of the things that I think I always was touched by was the conviction that both you and Jean had regarding Christianity and the importance of the things that Christianity teaches you. And regardless of anyone's faith, you've always had faith in their ability you know to follow certain tenets of those things. I think it's really been a guiding aspect to helping people along the way when sometimes you become lost. And in today's kind of a situation, we need more people like you and Jean to kind of chip in and help out, because I've always felt, unfortunately, within the Gardena community, particularly, as the children get older, and now we're talking about children's children, and having them come back to the community and try to maintain it. And, unfortunately, well, people move on to different areas, but one of the reasons I decided I wanted to come back and make a difference in the city of Gardena is, I was trying to recapture the Gardena of the 1950s. Well, I've learned that you can't necessarily do that, but at the same time, you do want to make it in such a way, especially for the Nisei. They will live in Gardena for the rest of their lives.

0H57M10S

**Komae:**

Oh, yes.

**Interviewer:**

Most people will not leave.

**Komae:**

We won't move; we could have moved to, you know PV or somewhere a long time ago. But going to my work, two minutes to drive to work; hey man, you can't beat that.

**Interviewer:**

It really makes a difference, but from... If you look at the... let's talk about some of the things you've done in local government. You were on the Planning Commission and you were chairman at one time.

**Komae:**

Yeah; I was chairman of the Planning Commission, and I worked on the Citizens Advisory Committee, and I was chairman of the Kiwanis Scholarship Committee, and I chaired the Landscape Committee when we build this new YMCA, in fact, the original clause of the landscaping was set at \$100,000, and through the effort that we were able to generate through the different contributions, and material and labor contributions of primarily the Japanese gardeners and nursery people, and big organizations like Home Depot and then the help of the Y's mens Group and the Japanese Gardeners Association and whatnot, we didn't spend it. We spent about five or ten thousand dollars for some of the watering equipment and whatnot, but basically we were able to do the whole project, which was, as I said, geared to costing \$100,000 for about \$10,000, and it was just a wonderful feeling to be able to contribute that much to the YMCA. So that was my latest project that I worked on,

**Interviewer:**

When are you going to run for elective office of Gardena?

**Komae:**

[Laughs] No; I don't think so.

**Interviewer:**

Did you ever think about it?

**Komae:**

No.

**Interviewer:**

I'm sure you've been asked.

**Komae:**

I was asked, but, no. I didn't particularly feel that I was - I was more qualified to do other things, rather than to be politician people are always taking potshots at you, as you know. [Laughs]

**Interviewer:**

It's... you learn from Patience; I notice that you had put down Gambatte and kiotsukete. What... if those are important words, what is it about gambatte and when you hear those words, what do you think about?

1H00M24S

**Komae:**

Well, you know you're going to meet adversities in life, you know. Life is not just one smooth thing, and when you meet these formidable things that confront you, you just got to grab a hold of yourself and just go for it and just take care of it, you know. Life is not easy and.... But when you overcome these things, you become a stronger person, and you appreciate them.

**Interviewer:**

If you were... let's say it is 2004 and you're going to open up a pharmacy again, and.... What things would you do differently if you would do anything differently? I guess you could open up a pharmacy again, with the chains nowadays, huh?

**Komae:**

Well, the pharmacy field is so different nowadays, and when I had the pharmacy, I would say 85-90% of my business was cash customer business. So the cash flow was constant, there, but now the pharmacy business is, you know you make a small payment, and then the rest is billed to an insurance company or to Medicaid or Medical or whatever the case might be, and it's tough. You can't operate a pharmacy like I did; so much of your income is always coming late, or later, later. It's not that easy these days.

**Interviewer:**

It's kind of tied up in the future somewhere.

**Komae: `**

So unless you have a lot of resources, you know. I started a pharmacy with... I had \$15,000 at that time.

**Interviewer:**

And that was a lot of money, too.

**Komae:**

But I spent that money for the fixtures. And I didn't have any money for the

**Interviewer:**

Inventory?

**Komae:**

Inventory; so I went to the... before that, before I went to the drug houses, you know I told them, "This is how much money I have, and I need most of it or all of it for my fixtures. Will you send me the inventory on credit?" And Brunswick Drugs says, "Okay; we'll do it." And so, that's the way I got started. So I was faithful in paying all my bills and whatnot, but nowadays, the cost of medication is just out of this world. There's nothing for a pill to cost three or four dollars a piece, you know; so it takes a lot of financing now to start a drug store. I wouldn't encourage hardly anybody to start one, and I think most of the graduates are either working for major pharmaceutical houses or going into research or working for pharmaceutical companies.

1H03M54S

**Interviewer:**

So, what next, before we wrap up?

**Komae:**

Oh, not much; just looking forward to the grand kids. I have nine grand kids, five of them are out of college already, and doing different... two of them are in teaching, and one of them is in retail sales; two---one of them is working for Enterprise Auto company, and one recently graduated; so she doesn't have a job yet. But I just look forward to the grand kids eventually getting married and having family and enjoying a good retirement, and trying to stay healthy.

**Interviewer:**

Have you thought about getting all those grand kids and having them walk over to Pop Ohaver's's cabin up there above Chantry Flats?

**Komae:**

I don't know. Is it still there?

**Interviewer:**

It has to be there unless it got washed out.

**Komae:**

Yeah; I remember spending a night or so there, too.

**Interviewer:**

I think for myself in the '50s and early '60s, having the opportunity to go... I remember we were in Cub Scouts in elementary school from Denker coming over here, or even Boy Scouts going to Pop O'haver's place off of Denker or going to these different Scout events, and I remember you had that station wagon. And you would take a group of kids and we would all go, and at that time it was probably made much more fun and enjoyable----memorable because so many of the parents like yourself would give time, you know to take us places so that we could....

**Komae:**

I remember a trip that I took the kids to Bass Lake.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, yes.

**Komae:**

That was good, too.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, Bass Lake; I often wanted to try to go back up there again. But, we want to thank you very much for taking the time for this. What we'll do is they will put this particular oral interview and put together because of the grant that we have with California State, and they'll index it and catalog it, and then from time to time they'll place onto this website at Cal State University Long Beach so that anyone in the world can come on and learn more about the life and events of -American community.

**Komae:**

South Bay History Project  
Interview: Ryo Komae  
File No. 1

May 13, 2004

Thank you for spending your time to come.

**Interviewer:**

Oh, no; this has been very enjoyable.

**[Begin Ryo Komae File 1]**