

Japanese-American Oral History Project

Kenge Kobayashi

Date: June 3, 2006; August 11, 2007

Place: Eugene, Oregon

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig

Part 1 – 27:24 minutes

00:00

EU: This is an oral history interview with Kenge Kobayashi. Today is June 3, 2006. We're in my apartment in Eugene. My name is Elizabeth Uhlig and I'm the interviewer.

00:27

To start with, could you tell us where you were born?

KK: I was born in Imperial Valley, California, which is southern end of California. And my folks were farming, and they had about a hundred acres of farm. And they were very successful farmers.

EU: What kinds of things did they farm? What kinds of crops?

KK: Vegetables, like tomatoes, cantaloupes, squash, Let's see, cucumbers. But mostly vegetables. Cantaloupes. That was the main source. They were doing pretty good. OK. My father and my mother were from Japan, the northern part of Japan. They came to the States, to the United States in 1905, the turn of the century.

1:45

EU: Did they come to the United States together? Were they married here or in Japan?

KK: They were married in Japan, and they came over as soon as they got married. My mother was 18, something like that, very young. They were farming, and and they were very happy farming. There were a lot of laws against them, like the Asian Land Law where they couldn't become citizens, they couldn't become naturalized. So, but they didn't mind, they just farmed.

EU: You said they had 100 acres. Were they able to buy the land? Or were they renting?

KK: No, they were leasing it. But the Asian Land Law and many other laws against them. They were very happy.

EU: How did they decide to settle in the Imperial Valley? Do you know the story?

KK: Well, they came to San Francisco. My father worked on the railroad with the Chinese people who were working on the railroad. He joined them and they were working on the railroad. And he heard about farming in the Imperial Valley and so he decided to start a farm there.

EU: How long did he work on the railroad?

KK: I don't know about eight years, I guess.

EU: Did he talk about that? Where did he go?

KK: Near San Francisco, and eventually joined the other railroad from the East, and they got together somewhere, I don't, know in the Mid West. And they were very successful doing that. They built the railroad from the West Coast to the East Coast. That's where he was working on. But he decided to farm in the Imperial Valley.

EU: What was your mother doing while your father was working on the railroad?

KK: She was housekeeping.

EU: With him, or...

KK: Yes, with him. She traveled with him. And,

5:35

EU: Do you know - why did they leave Japan?

KK: They heard about the riches in America and they heard it was a good country and they tried it. Since Japan was in a very depressed state at that time and they were struggling and they coming to the New World they would be more successful making a living.

EU: What did their families do in Fukushima?

KK: They were farming a small plot of land, they were farming rice and whatever.

EU: Did they come alone or did brothers and sister come with them?

KK: No, they came alone, just the two of them.

EU: And how old was your father?

KK: My father was 18 years older than my mother,. So he was 26, or something like that, No, not 26 – 36 – he was 36.

EU: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

KK: I had two brothers and a sister. So there were 4 of us.

EU: Were they older or younger?

KK: My brother was older, I had an older brother and an older sister.

EU: What year were you born?

KK: I was born in 1926. July 1926.

EU: Then after working for the railroad for eight years, they decided to farm. How did they hear about the Imperial Valley?

KK: Through mutual friends. They knew a lot of Japanese were gathering in the Imperial Valley and starting to farm so they heard about that. So they farmed for, lets see, how many years was that. Since 1913 to 1942, they were farming.

EU: Almost 30 years, 31 years [sic]

KK: And they had no intention of going back to Japan. They loved it here and wanted to stay, so they were successful farmers, and they were happy in America with the food they were producing, So even though they couldn't become American citizens, they wanted to, but they couldn't. They were still happy over there and to me they were good Americans.

EU: How... You said they had 100 acres, which was a lot. How did they did they start small?

9:35

KK: Yes, they started with about 20 acres and it grew to 100 acres. And they were making money, and so in 1936 they made a lot of money. And so they built a new house and bought a new car, and bought new furniture, and threw out the old ones. And so from 1936 they were doing very well, you know. And until when the war broke, they had to move, they had three days.

10:45

EU: Do you remember your house?

KK: Yes, it was very nice.

EU: How many rooms was it?

KK: They had, well, we had had two separate houses. One was the bedrooms, we had three bedrooms, 3 big bedrooms. And the other one was the kitchen and dining room. And at that time we got electricity. We never had electricity before '36. And we had gas, so it was very convenient. So the house was fairly new and we had all the farm equipments, tractors, a barn, and everything. Plus we had two cars, one truck and one car. And so we were living pretty good, not really high class, but we were living pretty good.

12:30

EU: Did you have to work on the farm?

KK: Yah, I – that's the reason I didn't go out for sports. I was still in grammar school, of course. I had to come home and work.

EU: Did you work during the summer, too?

KK: Yes, in the summer too. But in the summer time it got too hot, besides the crop was finished in early July. So from there we used to go to LA, Los Angeles, to go on a vacation for a couple of months.

EU: Who did you visit in Los Angeles?

KK: In Los Angeles we had our uncles there, An uncle had a farm, a flower farm, and we stayed there. And my folks helped out on the farm, and got free rent. But, it was a lot cooler in LA and we had no air conditioning at that time, and it was really hot in the Imperial Valley.

EU: Did your parents hire other people?

KK: Oh, yes. We hired Filipino and Mexican workers, especially to harvest the crop. There were a bunch of them. They had their own tent houses that they lived in. But we got along good.

14:45

EU: Were there lots of Japanese in that area?

KK: Yah, I think there were like a thousand families there. They were all farmers. Most of them were farmers.

EU: Do you have organizations, like school or church?

15:35

KK: Yes, we had a Buddhist church that we were going to. And I got my religious teaching there, and all that. And then when the war broke out, when the Pearl Harbor happened, they signed an order in February to put us all in camp. And by May we had an order from the government saying that we had to pack up and leave everything. They gave us three days. And we could take just what we could just carry. So we had to leave everything. We didn't have

time to sell the farm, or sell the crop, or anything. We just packed up with our suitcases and left there.

EU: Did.....So you couldn't sell anything?

KK: We sold the cars for one thing. For \$75 for both the car and truck together. We couldn't sell the crop or anything?

EU: Were there many Caucasians around? What was the feeling in the community?

KK: I don't know. We didn't ask anything. We were trying to get help, but nobody wanted to touch it.

EU: How old were you?

KK: I was fourteen. And so we sold the car and truck for \$75 and we had to leave the rest, the houses, and the crop was coming out in May. We started harvesting the crop at that time. And it was a bad time when they told us to leave. And so my folks lost everything. They just lost.

18:10

EU: Did they talk about it? How did they feel?

KK: They felt like all Japanese do when things like that happen. They call it *shigata ga nai* - which means "it can't be helped" you know. So they just accepted it. But they lost everything and not only that, but when we were put in camp they lost their stature, because they were the breadwinners and we were living off the farm. And all of a sudden they weren't the breadwinners and so they were dejected about that.

19:10

EU: And you, you were fourteen. You had to leave your friends...

KK: Yah, I had to leave my friends. Of course, in those days, farming, our next door neighbor was five miles away so we didn't get too much with our neighbors because they were too far away. But in school, we had our friends there. But, we didn't have a chance to say 'good bye' to anyone, we just left. When we went in camp, I was still, I was only fourteen and all of a sudden,

I met a lot of people, in the camp we got a lot of people together, and so it was fun for me, I met a lot of people and we played baseball and everything. But I felt sorry for my folks. They are the ones who suffered the most.

20:35

EU: When you went to the camps, where did you go first?

KK: Went to a place called Gila River, Arizona. Which is in the middle of the desert, and really hot in the summer time, so hot. The heat - many people had heat stroke and stuff like that.

EU: Did you have to go ... from the town did you have to go to a gathering place or did you just go from the farm directly to the Gila River?

KK: No, we first went to a place called Tulare Assembly Center, it was just an assembly center, But they turned it... at Tulare, there was a race track there, a horse race track that they turned the stables into barracks, stables into living quarters for us. So we lived there for seven or eight months in Tulare. There was ... we lived in a stall, a horse stall, and the smell of manure and all that kind of stuff. And we suffered for seven or eight months there.

22:12

EU: There were six of you there, your parents and...

KK: Yah, my parents, right...

EU: Were you in one room?

KK: Yes, we were in one stable, so we had no privacy. In fact we had no privacy with the next door neighbor, because the stable had open top, the ceiling, the walls just go up so far and that was it - we could hear what the neighbor was saying.

EU: What did you do during the day?

KK: During the day...

EU: Yah, I mean, for the seven or eight months.

KK: I just fooled around, went to school. They started a school there. We played baseball and stuff like that. ... But, so it was, as far as I'm concerned it was kind of enjoyable, because all of a sudden I didn't have to work on the farm any more. And I had all these friends that I could play with. But, to think back, I felt real sorry for my folks because they were the ones who suffered the most.

23:40

Then we were moved to Gila River, 'cause that's a more permanent camp. They built barracks there and everything. So we moved there. But it was so hot there. There were people dying from what they called valley fever. I don't know how you catch it. In fact, it was almost an epidemic there, valley fever. People were just flocking to the hospital there. But they survived that.

24:30

But we were only there only about a year in Gila River, because they came out with a questionnaire, a loyalty questionnaire. The government was trying to weed out the disloyal with the loyals. Trying to find out who disloyals was. The two questions were ... One was .. we foreswear any allegiance to the emperor of Japan or other country, and be patriotic to America and all that. And the other question was will you would serve in the military or fight for America if you had to, you know.

25:25

Those two questions – and I was too young to answer those questions, because I was only sixteen and I was underage. You had to be seventeen or older to answer the questions. So I just followed what my parents did. And my parents said if I foreswear the allegiance to Japan, that's my citizen[ship], that's my country, my citizen[ship]. And I can't become an American citizen, so I'll be without a country - a man without a country, and they'll take away my Japanese citizenship. So what am I? Nothing.

And then besides that, they took all my farm and we had nothing left. If I wanted to go back out there, I would have to start all over again. So they decided to put "no", and they put "no-no" on both the questions. And so they were thinking about going back to Japan, because in Japan they had relatives they could live with. But because they put "no-no" on the ... the whole family was shipped to Tule Lake.

End of Part 1

27:24