

Japanese-American Oral History Project

Kenge Kobayashi

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Place: Eugene, Oregon

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig

Part 4 – 21:40 minutes

0:00

EU: OK, this is part 4 of the Kenge Kobayashi oral history. Kenge I wanted to continue to asking you about art. Is your art influenced by Japanese art, or is it more western art, or a combination?

KK: Well, it's more western art. But I guess I'm influenced by Japanese art, Japanese brush painting a little bit, but not that much, just mostly western.

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EU: You mentioned before that you speak sometime to school children about the camp experience. Can you talk about that?

KK: Yes, every once and a while I get called upon to talk about my experience to classes. So I've been lecturing in high schools, middle schools, and college, the UO, I've talked there quite a few times. And I've also talked to OSU, Oregon State. Then I went to Portland once to talk over there. I just get these calls and they want me to talk about it. I went to Cottage Grove last year and talked to the high school students there. But every time I talk, people listen very.., they are very interested in what I have to say. They listen intently, and they all give me a great applause, they even shake my hand after the lecture is over. And they really appreciate my talking about things like that. And so it's really gratifying.

2:15

EU: When you speak to them, what is the message, what do you want them to learn?

KK: I want them to learn what could happen to any group of people if you let them. The government makes mistakes like that. And they do whatever they want, and it could be unconstitutional. So you got to be vigilant over what they do, and try to fight for your

rights, you know. If they go off the track and do something like that, like the present administration currently doing a lot of shady things like wire taping and stuff like that. You got to be careful. And then they arrest people like the Arabs and then all that stuff. And sometimes they get off the Bill of Rights and constitution, so you got to stop them from doing that. So I teach them to be aware of all those things that happen. It could happen to you, you know to anybody else. So that's the message I want to carry to them.

EU: And people have very receptive to that.

KK: Ya, oh ya, they're very receptive. They really appreciate what I said, and all that. But as Japanese-Americans, we were put in camps and all that because they thought they were a lot of sabateurs or spies among us, and so they put us all in camp without realizing they were breaking the constitution. And they use the words "in time of war", you know, the military has the say so. But that's not true because we are Americans and we had the rights like anybody else. So we had to be vigilant about what the government does, you know. Let's see, what else.

5:30

EU: Were you involved with the reparations, in the 1980?

KK: No, I wasn't involved with that, but I was for that. And that proved that, the reparations proved in court that the government was wrong. They said it was "military necessity" but it wasn't, but it was to racism, you know. So that is why they gave us the reparations.

What's sad about the reparations is that I was still young, I was only like seventeen, sixteen - seventeen in camp. And it was almost enjoyable there. But my folks are the ones who lost everything. They lost the farm. They lost everything. And they died before the reparation was given. The reparations was in 1988, and they died in 1960s and 70s. So they didn't get any of that. And there were many people like, who died before the civil liberty was signed. And they're the ones who deserved the most, cause they lost everything. So in that way I thought it was unfair, you know.

EU: Were your parents bitter or angry?

KK: No, they weren't. They lived as the Japanese saying "*shigata ga nai*," it can't be helped. They took it all in stride, you know, but I really felt sorry for them.

7:40

That's why I want to talk about the memorial a little bit. That's why we decided to build a memorial in front of the Hult Center. We're in the process of getting enough money and everything. But it's gonna be about the Japanese-American internment. There are about 50 different artists that submitted ideas. Two of us were picked, I was one of them, and the other guy is from Idaho, David Clemons was the other one. He's the one that came up with the statue about a little girl playing with a butterfly on top of the suitcases where they were gonna be shipped to a camp from there. So the whole project is called "Forced Journey, 1942." The Hult Center was the site of where they registered to go in to camp. So it has significance, putting it in front of the Hult Center. And it's this statue is gonna to be there in the front.

9:30

And then in the back, toward the back, is gonna be my design which is three rocks, three big rocks. And the first rock is gonna have a picture of three people who fought the reparations, not the reparations, but the internment. They were a couple of lawyers, one of them was Min Yasui. He's a graduate, a UO graduate law student. And he [thought] that the government was wrong in putting us in camp, so he says, I'm not going in camp. And so he and these other two guys that's on the [monument] Korematsu, Hirabayashi, and Yasui – those three people resisted the internment so they were put in jail for two years. And so they brought the case up again in the '70s and they won. So their name was cleared. So then we started thinking, hey, if they won, well how about the rest of us, the other 120,000 people who were put in camp. We had the same rights so we, the whole, the 120,000 people took the government to court and they won in 1988. So that's where the reparations came from. OK, that's the first rock.

11:30

The second rock, is about - I want to talk a little bit about the *issei*, which is the first generation Japanese. They came from Japan, and they came over here, and they worked hard all their lives. And when the war came out, everything was taken away from them and most of them lost all their property. And so it shows the whole family there behind barbed wire and the guard tower behind them. So that represents them. And besides the site in front of the Hult Center is gonna be a Japanese garden. Because my

father and mother who, when we were in camp built a little garden in front of the barracks to make it look more homey. And so that's why I decided to make the whole site in front of the Hult Center a Japanese garden to dedicate it to them, the *issei*, the first generation. So that's the middle rock.

12:50

The third rock is a GI in front of – a soldier in front of the flag. It's about all the people from Hawaii and also who volunteered from these camps that we were in, these prison camps we were in, and volunteered to form this all-Japanese-American military unit. And they fought in Europe, and there they [were] the most highly decorated unit in American history. And they sacrificed their lives for America, to prove that America was wrong in putting them in prison, putting us in prison. So they proved their loyalty with their lives and blood. And then there's these – also the MIS, what they called MIS, which is the military intelligence. They fought in the Pacific, they were people who decoded the Japanese messages, and they interrogated the prisoners. Most of them were fighting like just like the rest of the Americans and they died, a lot of them died. And so that's the other flag. So that's the three units that I wanted to show in my design. So they represent what happened to us in camp.

15:05

EU: When will this memorial be finished?

KK: We're aiming for February 19th, which will be when the dedication will be. Because February 19 is the 65th anniversary of when President Roosevelt signed the order to put us all in camp.

EU: Have you drawn these paintings already?

KK: Yes, I've drawn them.

15:40

The statue is a little girl, and they're making the face like this little girl who was Min Yasui's sister from Hood River. So they're replicating that girl in that statue. And then they, on my rocks, the soldier is – we're gonna to use Kenny Namba who is a 442nd veteran from Portland, he lives in Portland now. So he's goinna represent the Japanese military.

EU: And this family in camp?

KK: Oh, that could be anybody – a family.

But this, the memorial, in the back of this brochure had Senator [Daniel] Inouye, who was all in favor of it, [Representative] Peter Defazio, Kitty Piercy [mayor of Eugene], [Sid] Leiken [mayor of Springfield] – they all have a statement written in back. And then also [Governor] Ted Kulongoski, State Senator William Morrisette, Oregon State Superintendent of Public Education Susan Castillo, 4J School Superintendent of Schools George Russell. They all endorsed this project.

17:50

EU: I imagine there's going to be a big celebration in February.

KK: Ya, the dedication, And I can assure you all the 442nd veterans are gonna be here mostly from Hood River and Portland. I had a luncheon with Kenny Namba, he's a good friend, and he's on the committee, our Japanese-American internment committee. And he's gathered all the 442nd people from around the area in Oregon. I had a luncheon with them and there were like, I don't know, about fifteen of the veterans there with their wives. It was a very humbling experience for me. Because I saw all these old people – a lot of them were injured. This Kenny Namba, his brother was killed in the 442nd, in the war. But to see all these people almost brought tears to my eyes. But one of – and then I had my paintings there, the paintings on the rocks, and it was about this big. And I told them to sign it, all the veterans to sign it, so they did. And after I brought it home I looked at it and I saw one signature and it says his name and Company I. Company I. And I looked at it and I have a book on it on the Company I of the 442nd Company I. And the book was called "And Then There Was Only Eight" – that's the name of the book. I read the book and it says out of 250 people in the I Company, just the I Company, there were only eight left. And he's one of them, the guy who signed it.

EU: Do you remember his name?

KK: No, I forgot his name, but I got it at home. Then Kenny Namba's outfit, he was in L Company. They had only very few left, they only had about 15 or 16 people left. Most of

them died, was killed saving the Lost Battalion, they called it the Lost Battalion, Texas.
They lost 800 men to save 200 people from the Texans.

OK, that's it.

EU: Well, thank you Kenge.

KK: Thank you.

End of Part 4

21:40