

Japanese-American Association of Lane County, Oregon - Oral History Collection
Miya Kobayashi - Part 3 (Part 2 of interview)

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Interviewee: Miya Kobayashi

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig

Transcriber: Christy Toliver

[begin audio 3 - [00:00:06.25]]

[EU] Miya, can you talk a little bit about, um, the possibility of your family returning to Japan - to Fukushima - when they left Crystal City? Was that ever an option for them?

[MK] Um, let's see. I was born in Crystal City and at that time my brothers and sister were all going to Japanese school instead of American school because my father thought we'd be going to Japan, we'd be going back to Japan. And the doctor that delivered me told my father that she had been there. And that, "Wh-, what are you going to do? There's a shortage of food. And it's not, it's not very good." And my father said, "Okay then, I'll just send the kids." And the doctor said, "Okay, if it came up that either their children were to eat, or yours. Who do you think they would pick?" And so then they realized they can't go back to Japan either. So they were-- they were a family without a country. They couldn't go to Peru-- they were refused there. And they couldn't go to Japan. And, uh, we did send packages to family in Japan after we settled in San Diego, but no, the option wasn't there anymore. And so we would, became illegal aliens and, except me. [laughs]

[EU] Except you-- you were the citizen [laughs].

[MK] Yeah, except me. In, in the United States. Yeah.

[EU] And then this Wayne Collins, the lawyer Wayne Collins, helped your family get green cards.

[MK] Yes.

[EU] And become legal and...

[MK] Right.

[00:01:51.05]

[EU] Okay. Did y-, um, your brothers and sisters and your parents eventually become American citizens?

[MK] They all did. Even my parents.

[EU] When did that happen? Do you know?

[MK] Um, they weren't allowed to until o-, oh Kenge knows the year-- I'm not sure what year it was. Except, that's right, my oldest brother never did. Yeah, he was the only one. He never did.

[EU] S-...

[MK] Everybody else did.

[EU] S-...

[MK] They took the classes and became citizens.

[EU] So what did your older brother, what citizenship did he have then?

[MK] Um...

[EU] Or just...

[MK] Peruvian. He was, he had a green card.

[EU] He had a green card.

[MK] Yeah. And he continued his green card. So that was very interesting. He didn't want to.

[EU] Do you know why?

[00:02:48.00]

[MK] I don't know. I don't know. He was ten at the time the war started, so maybe he harbored some bitterness that, you know, he had a pretty good lifestyle over there. And he, uh, once he came here he had to work very hard. I noticed it with my father-- I didn't know what he was like before in South America, but for, you know for an educator to have to start doing gardening, it was very hard on him. It was very hard on him. And he would see a business and said, "I, you know, I could do better than that." He wanted to do, have a business again, but, you know, Japanese weren't allowed to. And so, he was a very broken man. Very broken man. And then, um, I had a brother who served in Vietnam and he was killed in Vietnam. After that my father just was never the same. It's just like he just gave up.

[EU] Hm.

[00:03:52.00]

[MK] Yeah. My mother, on the other hand, she never showed any bitterness. I mean, never showed any bitterness. She's just a wonderful person. And I told her, "But Mom, look at all the things you had." She goes, "Yeah, but you guys would have been spoiled rotten." You know.

[EU] Uh-huh.

[MK] And she was okay. She just has such a good outlook. And we didn't know how poor we were until I was an adult. Um, every night I used to tell my mother, I says, "Well, why can't we buy groceries like everybody else for the whole week?" Well, we had to wait until my father came home with some money for us to eat dinner. And then we would, you know, she'd send us to the store to buy something. And she raised rabbits to make a little money. [laughs] There were times when we didn't have money coming in, so rabbit was our dinner, but we didn't know it. She didn't tell us. And I'd say, "Gee, you know, these chickens sure have short legs." [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[MK] She never told us we were eating our pets. [laughs]

[EU] Oh. Yeah.

[00:05:03.13]

[MK] But, uh, it was very hard on them. They had such a rough life.

[EU] Yeah. You said your father was educated?

[MK] Uh-huh.

[EU] Where did he go to school then?

[MK] He went to school at the University of Tokyo. As a businessman and that's why my grandfather chose him to continue the business. So even gardening or, or growing something he always picked up books, read it thoroughly. But what was interesting was, we never knew. I did not know my father's background until this other family from Japan came and they says, "Oh, we thought San Diego," you know, "there'd be just farmers. We didn't know there was anyone educated here." So my ears perked up and... I didn't know all this about my father.

[00:05:55.25]

[MK] So...

[EU] Hm. You've mentioned a few times that you've, there were reunions?

[MK] Yes.

[EU] Of the people that were in Crystal City.

[MK] Uh-huh. There were Crystal City reunions and Crystal City Peruvian reunions. And I went to both. I went to one in Los Angeles with my mother. That was the Peruvian reunion. And then I went to a Crystal City reunion in Texas. And you know, I was just born there, but I welled up with tears and I think it was mainly thinking of what my parents went through-- how difficult it was for them. And then there was a, a man there that did the dedication. He was an architect and he erected the memorial stone that's there. And he told his story about he and his father and, uh, it was very interesting 'cause they took us on a bus - we went by bus - and they took us to the site. And it was very interesting. Uh-huh.

[00:07:14.27]

[EU] So what's left now in Crystal City? Is it just a monument...?

[MK] It's just a slab. Yeah, one building, just a cement slab. And just mainly the monument. Apparently the buildings were used later for migrant workers and the farmer were allowed to buy them. And we did go to one of the farms, but he wasn't home at the time. So, we didn't get to go in and look and see what their living quarters were like. But they had, in the past done, had done that. And I couldn't understand when we went to Crystal City why we were treated so well. I mean, the police escorted our bus, there was a parade, and there were chairs all ready for us. And, uh, I didn't understand it and I came home and - I wasn't very good at history - so Kenge explained to me that the Japanese rescued the lost bat-, Texas battalion.

[EU] Oh, the 442nd rescue then.

[MK] Uh-huh. and so they're just forever thankful. And that's why we were treated so well. So, that was nice though. It was nice just listening to stories.

[EU] Uh-huh. So has, um, has there been like historical groups that record the histories? Or have done research?

[MK] Uh-huh. Just like you're doing now. Uh-huh. While we were there at the reunion there was a gentleman who was following my mother around, because there were two elderlies-- my mother was one of them. And, um, she was just speaking in all Japanese and he just nodded his [laughs] head once and a while.

[EU] [laughs]

[00:09:10.20]

[MK] But he followed her around and talked. And her friend that was the minister's wife in camp, she was there also. And ten o'clock at night she agreed to go down and have some coffee and talk some more. She said, "I can sleep at home." You know. [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[MK] So my mother was just tired so we didn't, but she went down and talked some more. But they just followed them around and recorded whatever they had to say.

[EU] Does your family have any pictures? Any photographs left from that time?

[MK] A few. Not very many. Because they couldn't bring anything from South America. And camp, oh, just very few pictures we have in front of the building. That's about it. Yeah, because they weren't allowed to during camp.

[EU] There was, for the Japanese-Americans, you know, who were in the camps here. They had the restitution movement, um, what am I trying to say? You know, the government apologized for the camp then.

[MK] Oh yes. Yes.

[EU] What's the political situation with the Peruvian Japanese? Is there any kind of apologies from the American government or...?

[00:10:38.58]

[MK] That they're working on right now. They're still working on it. They did a letter and twenty-thousand dollars, you know, for the people that were in the camps. And the Peruvians they offered them five-thousand dollars and they said, "No," and gave it back. Um, but it's split, because my whole family got the twenty-thousand dollars. And I think it was because of Wayne Collins work. Because we were registered. I know my brothers and sister said go in under this and register your name in there. So I, all these years I thought it was because brother that was killed in Vietnam. How could they refuse us? And our family friend, Ted Sudan [unsure of name Ted Sudan - [00:11:38.28]] is the one that said, "No, no, no. There's for other reasons." And that's when I found out that because of Wayne Collins' work we were registered as legals, right?

[EU] Uh-huh.

[MK] Given a green card. That we were in the records. Whereas many of the other Peruvians, they did not do that. And so they weren't in the records. They were in camp, but they weren't registered in the government records. And so to this day they are still trying to get the government to treat them equally. And I think Senator Inouye is also working on something on that, on the Peruvians.

[EU] Who was that?

[MK] Senator Inouye, from Hawaii.

[EU] Oh, senator from Hawaii.

[MK] Yeah, I think he is working on helping them also.

[EU] Has the Peruvian government then ever actually apologized for their...?

[MK] Oh no. Oh no. Because it was before. You know. Yeah, it's not the U.S., so...[laughs]

[EU] Yeah.

[00:12:47.16]

[MK] They're not accountable for the government prior to theirs. [short pause] But growing up in San Diego was very difficult after the war. I know the church we went to many times there were rocks thrown in the windows and fires started. Myself it was difficult because - I was in Kindergarten - I had to wait 'til my brother in junior high came by to pick me up. And there was a, I must have been in...yeah, I was in Kindergarten and he must have been in fifth or sixth grade, I don't know. But he would push me off the swing and say, "You Jap." And I remember crying, but I had to wait for my brother. At least once a week I'd have to do that. And then San Diego was a navy town. And so it was very hard-- I was called Jap all the time. Yeah, it was hard after the war.

[EU] Did you understand why they were doing that? Or how...?

[MK] Uh-huh. And I remember after high school I was going to be a hairdresser so I went to beauty college. And the kids we road together-- we carpoled. And I remember one of 'em saying something about Japs. And I said, "Don't say that. That offends me." They go, "No, you're not one. You're American." And I says, "No, but I am Japanese. And that offends me." So some were saying it unknowingly and other, you know. But we all felt it in different ways. I know my brother just above me his neighbor gave him a really bad time. This was after he had children and he had his own home. And finally he went over and he talked to him and he goes, "I don't know why you don't like me." And the neighbor said, "Because you guys killed my son." And this was WWII. And so he told him about my brother that was in Vietnam and he says, "We lost someone also." And after that they were the best of friends. So sometimes it's not, you know, not misunderstandings, but educating people, too. And it was hard because Japanese-Americans, because they look, as they say, "you look like the enemy," you know. It's real hard that, they do say, they say, "you guys." They don't realize that at the time I had never been to Japan. I didn't know what Japan was like. I didn't know how my people acted, you know. I just know I was born in America. But because we looked the same, it was very hard that we were not separated. And yet, the people in Japan did not accept us either. Because we left the mother country. [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[MK] So, so it was hard.

[00:16:05.17]

[EU] Yeah. In San Diego, where did you live? Was there a Japanese community? Or were you...?

[MK] No. Huh-uh. Like in Los Angeles you see all these little groups?

[EU] Yeah.

[MK] No. We were all over. Um, there were farmers in Chula Vista. The family that sponsored us was across the water in Coronado. We lived about a mile from the church, 'cause we used to walk over to the church. No, there was not a Japanese group. But we did get together on Sundays, you know, at church, and, uh...

[EU] Was this a Christian church or a Buddhist church?

[MK] Buddhist church.

[EU] Buddhist church.

[MK] Uh-huh. And they would have Japanese movies there and... So there was a little community there that did get together, but we did not live all together.

[EU] Uh-huh. Did you have Japanese super markets or grocery stores?

[MK] Yes. Uh-huh. Yes we did.

[EU] So you got...

[MK] Uh-huh.

[EU] And what did your father do then? Or what, your, what kind of work did he do then?

[00:17:11.25]

[MK] He did do gardening. I remember we all helped work at the church also. I mean, so many children to feed. And my mother did a little house work. And I didn't know it, but farmers brought us food, uh, friends also brought us clothing. I didn't know this 'til I grew up, because, oh I know, I remember [sniffles] we moved and we got a house and mother had a big freezer. And my father went fishing a lot. And he would feed practically all of San Diego, you know, the fish. I told my mom, "Why don't they keep it in their own homes, you know?" And she told me, she goes, "These are the people that helped us-- that gave us your shoes and clothes." So, that was the reason.

[EU] Yeah. Okay. [short pause] At the beginning of the interview you talked, was it your grandfather that did the singing?

[MK] My father.

[EU] Your father. Okay. So your fath-, could you talk about that again?

[MK] It's called shigin. And I call it the Japanese opera like. [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[MK] But, um, he learned it in camp. They had a group that did shigin. And when we went to San Diego he taught it. He had classes, he taught the shigin. He even went to Tijuana and taught it. And I just remember in the car I'd roll up the window-- I didn't want anyone to hear him. Because it's not like, you know, like opera you can't understand it. But yes, he was a teacher. He taught.

[EU] And you said he wasn't home often then?

[MK] No, because at nights, I think that's when he connected to who he really was. And so he would teach his classes two, three times a week. And then he would go Tijuana. Growing up we never played ball and, you know, did things too much as a family. We did go up to the mountains, Palomar Mountains during the day, um, we'd have picnics by the ocean. And my father did go to the boys' wrestling matches and things, but not play in a, you know, mingle like they do now with kids.

[EU] Uh-huh. Uh-huh. So you went to high school. And then you went to beauty school?

[00:20:10.07]

[MK] Yeah. To be a hairdresser. I got married. And, uh, so I grew up in San Diego, [short pause] and I got divorced. Moved to Los Angeles where my brother and my sister were. And raised my three children. And I met Kenge in, um, '79, before '79-- we got married in '79.

[EU] Okay. What were your children's, what are your children's names?

[MK] My eldest son is Darrell Osaka. And he's, um, I think forty-two now. And my other s-, oh, let me see... And he lives in Portland. And he does sales for computer software, something like that. Something in the computer field. And then my second boy is forty. They're all two years apart. He's in Las Vegas. His name is Mark. And he's a homicide detective there. And Lori, my daughter, is thirty-eight. And she finally finished school. She's a professor at Saint Anselm in New Hampshire. And they're all married. They all, let's see, Darrell, my eldest, has a daughter. Mark, my second boy, has three children [unintelligible - [00:21:45.17]] from his wife's previous marriage, and then one of their own. And then, uh, Lori and John, they don't have children yet.

[EU] Okay. Did your children have Japanese names?

[MK] Yes. They all have Japanese names. Darrell's is Kenge. It means second son, but I liked the name so I picked it anyway. And Mark is Akida [unsure of name Akida - [00:22:10.18]]-- I

named him after my younger brother. And Lori is Kimiko. I just liked the name. So they all have an American name and a Japanese name.

[EU] Uh-huh. Um, your, wh-, are your parents still living?

[00:22:31.17]

[MK] No. They're not. No. They've passed away.

[EU] They've passed away. Okay. Um, okay. And so you said you met Kenge? In...?

[MK] I met Kenge in Los Angeles. And, um, at the time I remember telling me my father, 'cause I'd been single a long time, ten years - and I said, "You know, I just can't meet anybody." And he told me, you know, "He'll come up. You don't have to go looking for him." And a year later I met Kenge. He said what I was do-, my father said what I was doing wrong was I was looking for someone my age. And he says, "Someone your age is very busy with their career." 'Cause I was divorced, right? So he says, "They're either busy with their career or they're married." One or the other. And so, um, "It'll have to be someone older." And I thought, "Ah, I don't want anybody older," you know. [laughs] And look who I married! [laughs] 'Cause Kenge and I are nineteen years apart. So we got married, he has seven children, and I have three. [laughs] So when we got married there were eight kids at home. [laughs] Yeah, his youngest one was in fourth grade and his oldest was twenty-something at that time. Yeah. So it was very interesting.

[EU] Yeah. So not only you married him, but you then had all of a sudden this large family to...

[MK] Yeah. That was difficult. It was really hard. 'Cause I was still young. I only knew about children as old as mine, you know. I didn't know about teenagers. It was very difficult, but we managed. Got through it. And we're still together. [laughs]

[EU] Did you continue working then?

[MK] Yes, I did. Uh-huh.

[EU] As a hairdresser or what were you...?

[MK] No, I had to stop that, because, you know, lot of women work and they were their hair done at night. And being a single parent, nighttime is when your children want you at home. Want you to tuck 'em in. And it was too difficult. So I started working in an office for my brother, for his insurance company. And then I continued working in an office.

[EU] So you had a full-time job and raising eight kids at home.

[00:25:10.15]

[MK] Uh-huh. But, um, they all helped. Oh, definitely. They paired off and cooked meals. And depending on who was cooking we went out or didn't [laughs]

[EU] [laughs] Yeah. Where did you live in Los Angeles?

[MK] We lived in Arcadia. And we had a pretty big house. There were two kids to a room. And one time I had to have the air conditioning man come out and he was working on the stairs and kids were going up and down. Finally he goes, "How many kids live here?" [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[MK] But, uh, it had a pool and it was a nice house. Kids grew up there. And then Kenge was ready for retirement and I wanted out of California.

[EU] Why was that?

[MK] Well, at forty-two I had a heart attack.

[EU] Oh, wow.

[MK] It was the job and everything was a bit stressful. And Kenge was laid off and it just became too much for me. And so, the kids were all grown, they were all out of the house. And I said, "We need to leave." So we came to Oregon.

[EU] How did you choose Eugene?

[MK] Yeah, I get asked that a lot. Because we don't know anybody in Eugene-- we have no family here. When I had gone to Hawaii I had met some people from Eugene. And they were telling me how nice it was. So we read up on it. And the university-- there would be plenty to do because of the university and I asked Kenge if we had ever been to Eugene. He goes, "No. I drove through it when I was stationed at Ft. Lewis, Washington. That's about it." And I said, "Well, we can't take much with us, because we're going from a big house to a smaller house anyway." So we gave the kids and got rid of everything but I think, uh, our bed. And so we sent it up. And we said, "Well," you know, "we don't know anybody, if we don't like it we'll go on to Portland." And so that's how we ended up in Eugene. We just picked it out by word of mouth and here we are.

[00:27:37.02]

[EU] Yeah. And so when did you move here?

[MK] We moved here in January, '89.

[EU] '89. It's almost twenty y-...

[MK] Getting close to it. Yeah. Yup, I remember that, because it started snowing. I had never seen snowfall. It was beautiful.

[EU] And you never continued on to Portland then?

[MK] No. I felt like I came home. I mean, I felt like, "Wow. This is where I was meant to be." I didn't like Los Angeles at all. I didn't care for California.

[EU] Why do you think Eugene was so comfortable for you?

[MK] You know, I don't know. I just felt like I had come home. Maybe it was the peacefulness after I had been sick. I don't know. I just knew this was my home. And I was worried about Kenge. You know, "Did you want to go back to Los Angeles?" And no, he likes it here too. And he's been, you know, really enjoying the community. And he wanted to offer his talent, which he's done with the Asian-, Asian Celebration, and the JAA so...

[EU] Uh-huh. Have you always lived in this house then? This same house?

[MK] Uh-huh.

[00:29:05.16]

[EU] In the, amongst the trees.

[MK] Yes.

[EU] Yeah. In south Eugene.

[MK] Uh-huh. Yup, this is the first house. We stayed in an apartment. And I started working and Kenge kept talking about this house. But he says, "It's so dark," and, you know. And so finally I said, "Let's look at it. Because you talk about it all the time." So the floors were real dark and I told him, "You know, it's cosmetic. We'll lighten the floors, lighten the carpets." And here we are.

[EU] Yeah.

[MK] Yeah. I love it here.

[EU] Yeah. Okay.

[MK] [unintelligible - [00:29:46.05] really calm and peaceful. And he wants to stay here. Kenge's, what, 81 now. And I was getting concerned with the stairs. But he said, "No. That's my only exercise." So as long as we can we'll stay here.

[EU] And where do you work? You contin-, you're continuing to work now?

[MK] Yes. Uh-huh. I'm not, I don't qualify for retirement yet. I can't retire yet.

[EU] Okay.

[00:30:17.10]

[MK] I work at Papé. And they are a family company that has aircrafts that they rent out. And large equipment, trees, uh, construction. I first worked for Chef Francisco, but they were bought out by Heinz. And so I had to leave that job. And then I went to Papé and I plan to finish up there. Hopefully in four more years. [laughs]

[EU] Four more years and then you'll retire huh? [laughs]

[MK] Yes. I could join Amy and everybody else.

[EU] Yeah. Do you see your children very often?

[MK] Uh-huh. Yes I do. Um... I was in Las Vegas last month and my granddaughter just left here last week and she's up in Portland now. But yes, we do. And I go back east to spend time with my daughter. We went through a difficult time when my son in Las Vegas was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer. And, uh, but he's been six years cancer free. so we've been very, very lucky. He's my miracle child.

[EU] Well, that's good.

[MK] Yeah. I've got wonderful children. They're just great.

[EU] Good. I think I'll, this is the end of Part 2.

[end audio 3 - [00:31:40.09]]