

Japanese-American Association of Lane County, Oregon - Oral History Collection
Hiroshi Ogawa- Part 1

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Interviewee: Hiroshi Ogawa

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig

Transcriber: Christy Toliver

[begin audio 1 - [00:00:23.13]]

[EU] Hiroshi, to get started with, could you tell us where you were born and where you grew up?

[HO] I was born in Pasadena in 1941-- Pasadena, California. And then as, uh, before the war and then in nine-, in February of, or March of, uh, '42 when I was four months to six months old we went to Sanita Race Track and were forced there. And then for the next four years after that we were at Gila Bend, Arizona at camp.

[EU] At camp. You said you were born, you grew up in Pasadena?

[HO] Yes.

[EU] What were your parents doing?

[HO] Well, my mom was a house wife. I had an older brother and sister. And my father worked as a servant and gardener for, uh, rich, richer people in San Marino, which was an adjacent community. And basically worked, not as a laborer, but as a, as a gardener, uh, caretaker. Of homes in San Marino.

[EU] Now did your parents come from Japan? Were they the immigrant generation?

[HO] My father came in 1917 when he was nineteen years old. Married and had a child who both passed away because of the Spanish influenza.

[EU] You said both passed away?

[HO] Yeah.

[EU] The son and...

[HO] No the daughter and the wife.

[EU] Okay.

[HO] And then he married my mom, uh, 1932. And, uh, she was born in Sacramento, uh, 1913. And then was raised in Japan. Her mother passed away and the father, her father, had four children of which he decided he couldn't take care of. And so he shipped them all back to uncles and aunts back in Japan. And he, and they, they raised my mom and uncles and aunts in Japan 'til, I'd say, 1935ish.

[00:03:47.01]

[EU] Do you know what part of Japan?

[HO] Hiroshima.

[EO] In Hiroshima.

[HO] Yeah. My dad is from Hiroshima. A place called Shimofukawa. And my mom she was sent back and she stayed in Yamaguchi-ken with an aunt 'til she was nineteen. And then came back as a picture bride and married my dad.

[EU] Okay. So, I was going to ask, did they know each other before or...?

[HO] No.

[In unison] [EU] It was an arranged marriage then. [HO] It was an arranged marriage.

[HO] Picture bride. And then, let's see, my sister was born in '34, my brother in '35, and I was born in '41.

[EU] K. So your father was a gardener and a caretaker and...?

[HO] Yes. And, uh...

[EU] And where they lived - I mean, San Marino, Pasadena - was there a Japanese-American community then?

[HO] Yes, there was a good community there of Japanese there and, uh, in Pasadena. A number of them worked as, I could say, gardeners or man servants, I guess. And things of that nature. San Marino was a very nice, uh, well-to-do neighborhood and there seemed to be enough people who would pay for that type of service.

[00:05:40.18]

[EO] So was there like a Buddhist church or, I mean a...

[HO] There was no Buddhist church...

[EU] ...like a Buddhist temple.

[HO] ...there was no Buddhist temple at that time. Um, there was one in Los Angeles. It was after the war that my father, in his effort to build a more traditional Japanese life, um, in many ways, uh, helped start the Pasadena Buddhist temple.

[EU] Maybe we can get back to that when...

[HO] Okay.

[EU] Okay. Um... So, you were just a baby though when your family was sent to the camps?

[HO] Right. I was basically six months 'til almost five years old when I left. So I was, I was just a little kid. And some place in there I'm sure you'll ask me what do I remember. And because of my age I don't...there aren't a whole lot of memories. I do have some, some memories. And most of them were good in the sense that, uh, I got to play a lot with other little kids. And, uh, there was no day care center, but the whole thing is all the older ladies - bachauns [unsure of word bachauns - [00:07:28.02]] I called them - just watched over us. So it was a very, I want to say carefree for the little kids. A carefree life of which we played a lot. And I think because of our age we didn't really, uh, comprehend the terrible condition that were existing all around us as our parents and the older people tried to shield us from that as much as possible.

[EU] Uh-huh. 'Cause, um, you said you were at Gila Bend, which...

[HO] Yes.

[EU] ...was on, was that on a reservation?

[00:08:18.22]

[HO] Yes it was, yeah it's on a reservation, uh, of which is still is a reservation. I believe it's the Hopi. Or it could be the Navajo reservation.

[EU] Do you have any memories of getting off, out of the camps into the reservation or...?

[HO] I remember the reservation. And I do remember...the big thing is, it was brought to my light a-, because of the barbed wire fences. Because my sister, uh, oh, I guess fell and tripped and, uh, against the barbed wire fence and cut herself really bad on the leg. Of which she still had scars until, well I want to say 'til she was ten, fifteen years old as I remember. But I just remember that it was very hot, desert like. And we just played in the sand and that's what we did.

[EU] Did your parents, or your brothers and sis-, brother and sister, talk about, since they were a little bit older, did they talk about the camp?

[HO] We haven't...really talked that much about it. Um. My sister who was just recently visiting, visiting here, uh, was talking about what a happy baby I was. Uh, and I think that's just

attributed to the fact that all the older people tried to keep it as stress free and protect all the younger kids as much as they could. Um. And, so, my memories are just being able to play all the time.

[EU] In your family, did you speak Japanese? Or English?

[HO] My parents spoke Japanese all the time. And the three of us we all went to Japanese school and we all do have some, uh, knowledge or some ability to speak Japanese. But, uh, it was not, I mean, emphasized to speak Japanese all the time. In that I think my parents realized at that time that it was better that we can speak English so that we can go on to college and things like that. So, uh, Japanese was not, as a language, was not emphasized real, real strongly.

[00:11:43.07]

[EU] Okay. Do you what your parents did during those years in the camp? Did they have jobs?

[HO] My father was a cook. Not a very good cook, but he was a cook. [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[HO] And I think my mother, um, I never heard her say she had a job, I think mainly because I was still a baby that they didn't assign her a job. But, um, yeah, my father, that was his main job was to be a cook. I do remember him talking about the awful food that they gave them for them to cook. That it really wasn't what Japanese ate. [laughs] So, yeah, it's a... Yeah, I don't know. It was just this huge concentration camps of which people had different duties and I think people did 'em. They weren't, you know, there wasn't a good job or a bad job. There was just something that had to be done and they just, you know, disciplined their mind to do it.

[EU] Did other, did you have an extended family? Did you all go together to the same camp?

[HO] Uh. We didn't all go, um, my, my father's brother and his family also went to Gila Bend. And my, my mom's brother, Yutaka, also went there, but then he was quickly transferred to Tuley Lake.

[EU] Okay, and what was his full name?

[HO] Yutaka Oda.

[EU] K.

[00:14:00.10]

[HO] And he, uh, he was one of those "no-no" boys and I think that's part of the reason they transferred him to, to, uh, Tuley Lake, because they felt he was one of those dissidents.

[EU] Can you talk a little, explain about the "no-nos"? And did your father also...?

[HO] Well, my father wasn't a citizen. Okay. And so, yeah it was no use asking him, because I'm sure not being a citizen, I mean, he couldn't, uh, he couldn't disavow his allegiance to the United States and things like that. But I think my parents, and there were a whole lot of different people - [coughs] were of that feeling that they were being terribly wronged. [coughs] And, um, so throughout their lifetime, um, as far as my father, he was...he never embraced or never followed what the JACL wanted.

[EU] That was the Japanese-American Citizens' League?

[HO] League. Yeah. Of which, um, I can't even think of his name now. He was the wheeler-dealer of...getting us into camps and doing all these different things. Of which he felt was the best way for Japanese-Americans. He was, he was the JACL leader I guess. And, uh, and so my parents and a whole lot of different families were just totally turned off by the organization and their leadership.

[EU] Your uncle though, he was "no-no" and so he, they sent him up to Tuley Lake.

[HO] Right. And then after the war he and his wife were, in '45 they were shipped to Japan. He lost his, uh, U.S. citizenship. And then, uh, he went back to Japan. It was a very difficult struggle at the beginning. Well, Japan was in a big struggle at that time as it was-- '45, '46. But he got a job, uh, working for the government.

[00:17:24.20]

[EU] The Japanese government?

[HO] No, the U.S. government.

[EU] The occupation huh?

[HO] Yeah, the occupation. And he became, oh, I want to say a translator. And, uh, worked in, I don't know, what was it called? Classified? Or something that sort a up there. And I remember him laughing about, "They, yeah, they take away my citizenship and this and this and then I get to Japan and after a couple years I get a job working for the U.S. government in a classified position. Now, is that dumb!?" [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[HO] But because of that, um, and I think he saw how bad it was in Japan - in the occupation and everything like that - he worked himself into the good graces of some of the top people, of which they made it possible for him to regain his U.S. citizenship and he came back to the United States in the early 50s. So, uh, but yeah, he, because of his decision for him to, um, I'm not really sure how the wordings for the 27th and 28th questions were. But he was, he was, you know, one of a

number of people who said, "no, they won't join the army," and "no they will not renounce the Japanese citiz-," oh, "no, they will not support the U.S.," something of that nature.

[EU] Yeah, I'm trying to think-- those were the loyalty oaths.

[HO] Yeah, the loyalty oaths.

[EU] That they had to sign in the camps. And I think they had to renounce, like, loyalty to the emperor or something like that.

[HO] Yeah.

[00:19:36.17]

[EU] Did your parents or your uncle and aunt, I mean, did they show anger? Or, how did they feel about this? And did that change over the year as they got older?

[HO] Um, my father really never showed anger. He did, uh, I think he used to...I never really saw it at the dinner table or interaction with him in much of any ways. When he would talk with different friends and things like that I would hear more or less all of them denouncing the government and things like that. But they said it, in some ways, quietly. And, uh...you know, it's just, um, I think my father showed his, well, not anger, but his feelings the most when he told me oh, when I was over twenty-one anyway, in a sense that, "If it's possible," well, "never trust the U.S. government. Never trust the U.S. president." Which at that time was the grand leader F.D.R. And, you know, and I remember just asking a neighbor friend down the way, we were just talking, and I said something about, "Do you, what do you think of F.D.R.?" And he says, "Oh, he was a great president." And I said, "Well, my father told me that he wasn't. That he was just so totally...." And I said, "And he's the one who signed 9066." You know. [laughs] And, so... [laughs]

[EU] Yeah, 9066 was the...

[HO] Bill that...

[EU] ...bill that put the...

[In unison] [HO] Japanese in the camps. [EU] Japanese in the camps.

[HO] Right. And so, [laughs]... Yeah, uh, my father had a completely different look of the U.S., the government, the presidency, and, and, uh, you know, he did say, you know, "And if possible, try not to pay income tax." [laughs]

[EU] [laughs]

[HO] But everybody says that so, you know. [laughs] But he, uh, I think he said it in a soft way just as sort of advice. And so he didn't show anger at that time. It was just, you know, "You're

my son and you should listen to this." That, "Never trust them," you know, "you're getting involved in here. Never trust them." You know. [laughs]

[00:22:56.00]

[EU] Yeah. What about your uncle? How, um, over the years were you able to talk to you uncle about his experiences in the camps and in Japan and so forth?

[HO] Um, he tried not to talk to me about it. And I, you know, I did over, only recently in the last five years, as I visit him once or twice a year. that he would talk a little bit about it. But... He was, I mean, the whole war and the camp totally, uh, I can't say ruined his life, but it really changed his life, because, uh, at that time he was going to Cal Tech. And he was working to become an engineer. Of which in the late 50s when he was able to come back to the United States he was able to get a job as an engineer. But from 1941 to, let's say, '55 - for about a fifteen year period there - his whole life was in turmoil from his selected endeavors of, you know, working and living in the United States as an engineer. And he... He has shown, at the end of his life, you know, some anger and bitterness, but he always tried to be more positive and he held whatever pains he had within himself. And, you know, um... But I think that's the whole thing that, um, it's been impressed upon me ever since I was little, but, uh, you know, our parents, and a whole lot of other parents, they all used to say, uh, use the word gaman-- gaman shinasai. You know, just, uh, hold it in within you. and, uh, I think, you know, that is what my uncle did his whole life, except little cracks in the armor when I'd try to dig things out of him.

[00:25:55.00]

[EU] After you family came out of the camps you went back to Pasadena?

[HO] Yes, we went back to Pasadena. Well, first of all, I mean, it's a strange situation [laughs], I think about it. Like, my father was, oh, let's say forty-seven, forty-eight when he, when they say, "Okay." And so, you know, what do you do? So he scrambled and we, there was this, um, I guess sort of job. It was being a migrant farm picking, uh, fruit picking, uh, jobs and things more or less from I want to say Texas to Colorado and we were stationed in Colorado. And I do remember that a lot more and that, you know, we lived in I guess you call them cold water flats. They were just concrete floors with cold water, outhouses. And, uh, it was in a place called Rocky Ford. And, uh, that's where we stayed for about, well I want to say maybe close to a year, but I'd say six months until he saved enough money so that he could buy...he bought a '33 Model T Ford. And drove over all the way back to Pasadena. Then after he got things settled there we all, the three of us, well my mom and the three kids, we all came on the train from Colorado to L.A.. And so then we live in Pasadena from about '46 on.

[EU] You had mentioned about the community then that your father helped reestablish. The community traditional...

[HO] Yeah, well I think it was more traditional. He helped start and find the Pasadena Buddhist Temple. That was about forty, I want to say '48, '47. And, uh, the minister from Los Angeles would come. Reverend Hiashima. Anyway, he, and, uh, around 1951 I believe they, he was able

to, oh I guess he used to go every night and try and raise funds to build the building and I think in 1951 they broke ground and built the first Pasadena Buddhist Temple. And then, uh, I don't know, it was probably around 1965, uh, it became too small and they built another bigger temple at its present location now, which it's been there for forty or so.

[00:29:48.13]

[EU] Your father, was he a priest? Or...?

[HO] No, he, he was a, he was not a priest, but he [sighs], I want to say a religious man. And, uh, he believed in trying to continue different traditional things as, oh, I want to say tea ceremony, flower arranging, uh, and uh, through the Buddhist temple and uh... Yeah, he was more, I want to say, the old school and so, and he's considered an Issei, while all the younger...people, the Nisei were ready to just try and assimilate and become model American citizens. And I think we see it still everywhere in all these different communities of each immigrant group that comes that there is a certain group of people that want to hold on to their old cultural and traditional things, of which that was my father. While the other group want to be more American. You know. And so our family just happens to fall into the more old traditional group.

[EU] Uh-huh. Do you think that background and the Buddhist background had an impact on the way that they reacted to the camp, to the incarceration there?

[HO] Um. [short pause] I don't know really. Um. I do think, um, I think before the war and before the incarceration I think my father, you know, you have three kids and got a pretty good job and things are going well, I think he was sort of seeking perhaps in some ways the American dream. But when you're forty-ish or forty-five-ish and sent away into desolation of Gila Bend that your opinions and your optimism sort of change.

[00:32:52.09]

[EU] Yeah. Were your parents still alive during the redress? Were they able to...?

[HO] No. My father passed away in '73 and my mom passed away in '76.

[EU] So they never were able to receive that?

[HO] No.

[EU] The money.

[HO] No. But the three of us, the children, we all did.

[EU] You did.

[HO] Yeah.

[EU] What about your uncle? I wonder...?

[HO] I don't know. I'm sure he did, but he never talked about it. I think in some ways he felt it was fully earned and [laughs] that it should be more. But, no, he never talked about it.

[EU] Okay. All right, let's take a break.

[HO] Okay.

[EU] This is the end of Part 1.

[HO] Okay.

[00:33:55.28]