

Japanese-American Association of Lane County, Oregon - Oral History Collection
Edward Miyakawa – Part 4

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Interviewee: Edward Miyakawa

Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig

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Note: (sp?) means that words prior, mostly names, may be spelled incorrectly

[00:00]

[EU] This is part four of the interview with Ed Miyakawa. Ed, you'd just started talking about your wife, Mary. How did you meet Mary?

[EM] Well, I was in architecture school and in order to pay for my, help pay for my last year in college, it last year something like that, I applied to become a dorm counselor and I could get free living conditions if I became a dorm counselor. And all that was, was a person who was a little bit older and who would move into one these dormitory buildings and he was kind of the guy who would look over everything and I think it was divided by floors or something like that. That's the way I was going to help pay for that living conditions and eating conditions at college. And at that time Mary, my, wife came from Minnesota and she was going into the graduate school of social work and she became a dorm counselor, that's how I met her. And we hit off absolutely immediately and she was a very open minded person and we started dating; that's how I got together with her.

[EU] So her background was Scandinavian, she was from Minnesota?

[EM] So she was Norwegian Swedish.

[EU] So how did she end up in California then?

[EM] Well, she won a scholarship to go to a couple of different universities to study a Masters degree in social work, so she chose Berkeley and that's how we met.

[EU] And how long was it before you were married?

[EM] Well, those were the days when you had to keep things like this secret, we were students and after students we started working in the outside world. So we did fall in love so we moved in together and I think we lived together for about a year before we decided to get married. We had a lot in common and she was very fascinated with the Japanese American experience and things like that.

[EU] And did you have political interests in common?

[EM] Yes, we had political interests in common. And you know this is related to the family and so I don't know whether or not this fits in or not, but to me, another interesting human experience is that her parents, and I didn't know this at the time, were very racist people and so when they found out that Mary was going around with me, that really disturbed them. She told me things that probably she was better off if she didn't ever tell me. But the father said something and the mother said to her that by going, by considering marrying a Japanese was stepping down racially. And then she had an uncle that lived in San Jose, so we would go visit them and they were the same way. They were very disturbed that she was going out with me. So it was a very difficult thing for me to get together with them. But I had this ability to push down my negative aspect when we went visiting her mother and father and uncle and aunt. And, then, given who I was, I won them over pretty easily. But it was difficult for me. But her father, that was the first time I heard about sexual abuse of children. And her father sexually abused her sister and things like this. And he was a serious alcoholic. Almost killed himself. He worked for a Ford Company, on repairing things in the building or something like that. His story was he had to climb up ladders and ropes and one day he fell down and almost killed himself. And he would get drunk every Saturday and be drunk every Saturday and Sunday, until Monday and things like that. But, I'd go over there and win them over.

[05:55]

[EU] Where were you living then? Were you still in Berkeley?

[EM] Yeah, we lived and stayed in Berkeley. She worked with a social work organization and I got established with an architect organization there. Then, one year we decided that we were going to travel around the world and we left Berkeley and then went to Europe. Then went to France and lived in France for a month. And then went to Turkey and lived in Turkey for a year. Yeah, she went to Turkey because as an exchange student, not exchange student, but a program that took her there for the summer, or maybe it was an exchange student...so she went to Turkey when she was a student and then she wanted to go there when we were there so we went over there and lived in Turkey.

[EU] What did you do there and where did you live?

[EM] Well she taught there and it was then that I made a decision...then I started pursuing seriously the writing of my book, *Tule Lake*. I had given it a lot of thought and I went over there and had a lot of spare time. I thought this is the time that I have to pursue the serious writing of *Tule Lake* and that's when I started writing it.

[EU] So for your book, what was the inspiration? Or what happened that made you think about writing that book?

[EM] As I started out...when I told you about the Watts riots, you didn't have this on, right?

[EU] No.

[EM] I was working in an architecture office and this was in the mid '60s. And one day, I was in my office and the Watts riots broke out. And the Watts riots were when the black people went on a riot in Watts, which is near Los Angeles. So we would be discussing the Watts riots in the offices.

[EU] This was what, about 1964?

[EM] Yeah, 1964. And some of the things that I was hearing about it bothered me because it reminded me of the racism that Japanese American people felt. So I felt I needed an outlet. So I stopped having lunch at the office and I started going back to my apartment, which was nearby, and using that noontime to write about the Watts riots. I got to seriously writing about it, just putting down my thoughts; it was writing, it was putting down my thoughts. Then, all of a sudden, after a while, I thought, geez, maybe I ought to be writing about the Japanese American experience. Now, this conversation, does this fit in with what you're asking?

[EU] Yes...

[EM] So I thought geez. I hadn't thought about that Japanese American experience for years because we shoved it in the background to move on with our lives. But I got started very interested in it. So on the weekends, I'd go from Berkeley to Sacramento and I'd start interviewing my mother and father and saying, "Hey I'd kinda want to write about what we went through. So I want to interview you and ask questions. Would you talk about it?" And then they would start telling funny stories. I would say, "Well, what else happened?" And I would get more funny stories.

[10:00]

And soon, I realized that I wasn't getting anything but funny stories. Then I said, well, I'm going to interview some of your peer group friends and my mother's and my children's friends and father's. And I started interviewing a bunch of them, and all I got were funny stories. All of a sudden, it started to occur to me, that in a lot of ways, we Japanese Americans didn't really know what we went through or the reasons for it or what took place, the historical or what decisions were made that put us in a concentration camp. So it was getting frustrating for me because I wasn't learning anything about what I wanted to learn about. So I decided that I would go to the University of California Berkeley Library and go to the archives. I was stumbling through all these things, you know. And then I came upon two books, to use an old trite term, that absolutely blew my mind. There was a sociology professor there named Dr. Dorothy Swayne Thomas. She had Japanese American students and they were literally taken away from her in her classes and put into these camps. And I started finding and so I stumbled across this book, one called *The Salvage* and one called *The Spoilage*, so I got them out of the archives and sat down and started reading them. To use an old trite term, it just absolutely blew my mind. And *The Salvage* is twice as big as *The Spoilage* and I started reading it. It was all about people like my father and mother, who decided that they were going to become...and then I learned about the loyalty oath. The

questions 27 and 28 were the key questions. That's why, I found out, we were able to leave Tule Lake, because my father became a yes-yes. And then, I started reading *The Spoilage* and that's the one that absolutely blew my mind because it is basically all about the Tule Lake Concentration Camp and why it became the Concentration Camp that it did and why we left and why other people came to it. And then the hell these people had to go through and how crazy people became. We were persecuted and then we became crazy and we persecuted ourselves and turned against each other and violence was inflicted on each other and hatred of each other. Then I felt this powerful urge to put it into a novel form because I wanted to write about it now. But I couldn't do a sociological study because I had a sociological study in front of me. So I wanted to put it into a novel. I had never written anything creative in my life; I was just a highly skilled plagiarizer when I was in college. So I read the Confessions of Nat Turner half a dozen times and I started reading John Steinbeck books over and over to find out how people talk to each other in a book. It took me ten years, but I finally produced a book and called it *Tule Lake*. That's how the novel came about.

[EU] It's interesting that you did a lot of the beginning of it in Turkey.

[EM] Yeah, I had the time then because I stopped working and my wife was supporting us by working in Turkey. I just started writing *Tule Lake*. And then we came back and settled in Minnesota and I went to work, again, in an architect's office, and Mary was working, but I continued my writing. Then we stayed in Minnesota for a year and then we came back to Oregon and we started looking for a place to live. And this is where we found this house on the Oregon Coast in 1967. And I just kept pursuing the writing of *Tule Lake*.

[EU] Why did you choose Oregon? And why did you choose Waldport and the coast?

[EM] Okay, we decided that, rather than live in California, we'd never been to Oregon before. Mary had never been to Oregon. But we just decided that we would go up north and get out of California. We just found out what a beautiful state, the state of Oregon was. We didn't know where we wanted to live, so we were just driving all over Oregon, you know. In the Eugene area, you know, and all these different places. Then we came along the coast and we found this house for sale, there was a big "for sale" sign right outside this window here, and we saw that. In those days, none of these trees were here. It was kind of a barren looking house and they wanted \$20,000 for it and we offered \$18,000 and then we bought it for \$19,000. Then, I could still write, because we had enough money and we saved money, and it didn't cost so much to live in those days. Mary was still working too. So I kept writing...it became dominant in my life now.

[16:07]

[EU] That was in the mid sixties, with the war in Vietnam going on and the Civil Rights Movement and the Women's Movement, and the beginning of ethnic movements, the Asian American Movement. How did those, and coming from Berkeley, which was the center of a lot of those political and social movements, how did all of that influence you and your writing of the book *Tule Lake*?

[EM] It had a very powerful influence on it. Because it was starting to give me a perspective view of what was going on in this country, in this world. Of course, that was the decade that Martin Luther King was assassinated and President Kennedy was assassinated and in those days, there was a powerful Civil Rights Movement. So here we were, a part of that American history. And it provided me a tremendous amount of incentive to learn how to write. Because I identified the Japanese American experience with the Black experience and the days of the Black Panthers and things like that. In the 70s, the Vietnam War broke out. So here were all these historical events that were happening in that period of history. To us, the American history of the sixties and the seventies is a significant and powerful time in American history. I mean it didn't change this country, but it brought out what this country really was about. So it was a fascinating period of history, and that's when I was working on this book, you know. So it provided a tremendous amount of incentive for me to tell this story. So this why *Tule Lake* isn't about me, it's about democracy, that's what my book is about. And what can happen when we lose perspective about what makes this a great country. So that was the incentive to right this book, yeah.

[EU] How much was what you wrote about in *Tule Lake* autobiographical?

[EM] Well, I started to know, not knowing which direction I wanted to go in writing the story. But as soon as I really got into writing, I absolutely knew that writing about myself, an autobiography, was not the incentive, the purpose of what I had to write. The incentive was to tell how important it is that we maintain the quality, the thing that makes this a great country. It couldn't be about a little boy; it had to be about all those young guys and what the grownups had to go through, when you lose you know, what makes this a great country. There's little parts of this when the little boy Ben, and the other guy writes this little boy, and this little boy steps into this bowl full of piss and stuff like that. That's a part in there. But that just wasn't the purpose of the story. And what I had to do, was put myself into a lot of different peoples' shoes to tell the story of *Tule Lake*.

[20:11]

[EU] In addition to the books *The Salvage* and *The Spoilage*, what were some of the other sources and resources you used to flesh out the story?

[EM] Let me think about that one...well, did I interview anybody around here? I don't think so. And by that time, I was away from my Sacramento American community, there was no oriental people here, so all I did, I think I did, by this time, I was really dependent on *The Salvage* and *The Spoilage*. Because if anybody ever looks at that, it's thousands of pages of interviews of people, so the interviews were there. So if you were ever going to look at this Tule Lake, there were a whole lot of notes I made off the side on the columns there. So that's how I was finding out about who we were and how we thought and how we made the decisions that we made. Because this is why those books were absolutely wonderful. And I'm just amazed that almost no Japanese Americans know about it. That's where it all came from, and I can add one personal thing to it.

When I was in Turkey, Mary and I were living there. She had a cousin, that was a really intelligent guy, but he had a really difficult life because he was sexually abused by his stepfather. He's about the same age as Mary and I, and he came to Turkey. Then one day he went out, in town, or wherever it was that we were, and he got some hashish [chuckles]. So he brings this hashish back and he says, "Have you ever had hashish before?" I said, "What the hell's that?" He says, "Well, you got to give it a try." So I got stoned for the first time in my life, and I got hooked on it. I had such a great trip, I got hooked on it. Then I got back writing and, I don't mind sharing this with you, in order to get into what I felt what was really important after reading those books was to "How I get into the head of somebody else, not myself, the head of somebody else?" Not this little seven year old boy, but in the head of these people. So I got stoned and I end up 200 feet above Tule Lake and I'm looking down on Tule Lake from up above. And then I created these characters, and I'm expressing what I was told, and now I become a believer, is that what makes Tule Lake a powerful story is that it's not a story about one person's point of view, it's a story about a number of different peoples' points of view, that are very personal, powerful stories. I was only able to do that because I felt a tremendous responsibility. And when I got stoned, one day I could be Tonato (sp?) and then when I got stoned another day, I could be this guy and another day I could be guy [laughs]. Then today I'll be Ben and today I'll be so and so. This is what I'm told, you know, by many readers that it's amazing how I can tell the story from so many different points of view. So it was a gift that was given to me and then marijuana brought it out [laughs].

[EU] So you finished writing the book here in Waldport.

[EM] Yeah.

[24:45]

[EU] And it was published in 1979? How did you find a publisher?

[EM] That's an interesting experience too. Because what I understand now is that in those days, well nowadays, everybody writes. But back in those days, only writers wrote. In those days, there were no Japanese American writers, basically or just a few. And nobody ever put the Japanese American experience into a historical fiction form. And that's what I wanted to do, was to put it into a historical fiction form. Now what was the question?

[EU] How it came to be published?

[EM] Oh right. And so, therefore, I wanted to look for people to help me publish this thing. I was so ahead of my time that nobody was interested in me at all. So I'd write to publishing companies and they'd say, "Send me a copy of your manuscript" and I'd send a copy of the manuscript. Then I wouldn't hear from them for a long time and then they'd finally write a letter and say, "Nah, we're not interested in it." So everybody rejected it. Nobody was interested at all. One time, I went to an agent and he said, "You know, this writing is no good here and you have to change this and change that" [laughs]. And so I was totally confused about whether it was headed for anything. But then, every once in a while I'd send it to a Japanese guy. And this was

before I'd even finished it, I was three quarters of the way through and I'd take a chapter and I'd send it to him and he'd write back and say, "This is an amazing story you're telling." He was a guy that recognized that I'd had writing talent and that I was in the process of telling, giving a powerful story about what we went through. So it was that occasional encouragements that continued for me to push through the writing. But that was interesting experience. Because he says, "You couldn't possibly write this unless you experienced it yourself." So then I write to him and say, "I didn't really experience it, I was just writing about it." And that's the last I heard from him [laughs]. But, never the less, I kept that letter. I still have the letters and copies of it because it was such an important encouragement letter for me to continue. You know, I didn't know whether I had any ability to write at all, I had no idea. I didn't know if I was writing a bunch of BS and garbage. But then when he writes back and says, "This is so powerful, I can't believe what you're saying. This is a powerful piece of writing."

So then, when we tried to find publishers, we basically couldn't find any publishers. That was at the time when, the connection was that we adopted our children and then at '75, we adopted two children from Vietnam. Through that adoption, we met a lot of Vietnamese people because of that. Here was this guy in Portland, a Vietnamese man, and he was guy about my age. He was a Vietnamese guy that had a powerful, social conscious. He was the one who did a lot of opening doors and bringing Vietnamese into Oregon and having children adopted. We became very good friends with him because of our adoption and he actually had a small publishing business that he was doing. So he recognized the importance of what I was doing. He says, "Well, I can help you publish your book." So we published it through him. And that's how all that came about. Then, it became fairly well known, but we only sold about 8,000 copies of it, and then that was the end of it. Then we got into raising these children and I had to get back into supporting the family. So I gave up writing and forgot the book for about 15 years.

[29:51]

[EU] So then the book was reprinted in 2002?

[EM] Yeah, and let me tell you how that came about, 'cause that was very fascinating to me. I did a house for a guy that was just up the road, a mile up the road here. He was a sociology professor from Long Beach College, southern California; it's not Long Beach State anymore, it's called something else, but in those days, it was Long Beach State. And I was designing this house for him. And one day, it was a winter day in 2001 or 2002, he calls me and he says, "Ed, would you come over here? The wind's blowing and this house's shaking like mad. And I need you take a look at it because something's wrong." And I'd designed the foundation of it. The carpenter built it and he didn't build it right, he didn't fasten it correctly, he didn't secure the walls, so the house was shaking. So I went over there and we looked at the foundation and all that sort of stuff, you know. It was windy day, ready to rainstorm. I just wanted to get back home. I didn't want to stand there on the beach looking at his house. All of a sudden, he says, "Hey Ed, you gotta get your book back out." I'm looking at him like, "Book? What the hell you talking about?" And he says, "Yeah, your book, *Tule Lake*." I said, "What do you mean? You got my book?" He says, "Yeah you gave it to me." I said, "When?" He said, "You know, four or five years ago." "Really?" And I said, "Why?" He says, "You know, since 9/11 happened" he says,

“it’s really important to bring your book back out.” So he was the one who really triggered this thing, you know. So I started thinking, “what bring what *Tule Lake*, this piece of trash?” So he triggered me and we came back out again and we found a publishing company and all and you can do it for \$2,000 and people can order one book, you know or ten books, or something like that. And publishing, book houses aren’t interested in carrying it because of that. But that’s why the book came out and again so much of our human lives, we don’t have control over. All you try to do is to go through life in kind of an intelligent kind of way, in a survival kind of a way. Because of that, then one day I get a call, and this guy says, “We’re commemorating the hundredth anniversary of the Oregon State Library and this is the Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission. We’ve chosen 100 books from the last 200 years. We’ve chosen your book *Tule Lake*.” So I’m thinking, “this is a big joke, this is a con artist, it couldn’t be serious. Pick my book 100 book of 200 years.” Ken Kesey, Ursula Le Guin, and Ed Miyakawa [laughs]. So I thought it was a big joke. Then I found out it was for real. So we republished it and everything and it came out again.

[EU] So that was a great honor to be...

[EM] Oh, unbelievable. Then I thought, “Gee, I guess I can write.”

[EU] Would that help you think about doing more writing? Like short stories?

[EM] Well, you know, because people do know me, constantly telling me, “you should be writing.” I’ve been told that for many years. I don’t know...who knows what motivates people and motivates myself. But then this story I told you about Toshiko came up and my friend Kenge and fascinating short stories, if I could make them into short stories, so I’m working hard to make them into short stories. And then I started writing about...Bunke (sp?), that was my nickname when I was a little boy. I have an aunt, no, daughter of an aunt down in Los Angeles, and they’re interested in buying this house. And she writes me an email and says, “Dear Bunke,” [laughs] I’m still being called Bunke, I gave that up when I left Tule Lake. But people want me to write again. So I’m working really hard on it.

[EU] This is the end of part four.

[EM] Oh, okay.

[end 35:31]