Japanese-American Association of Lane County, Oregon - Oral History Collection
Ken Nagao – Part 2

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Interviewee: Ken Nagao
Interviewer: Elizabeth Uhlig
Transcriber: Ingrid Ockert

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

[00:00]

[EU] This is part two of the interview with Ken Nagao. You were telling me a story about the birds.

[KN] Yeah, we never really believed in feeding the birds around the house because they would make a mess about here. But one day when I was working in the yard, last year sometime, um, this crow came up to me with a broken leg, and so I knew he was begging, or she, and so I said "wait a while" - I talk to these birds even though they don't understand. So I came in and picked up, got some bread and threw it out for the crow and stayed out there and it came up to get the bread. So I wanted to be sure the crow survived so I kept feeding it every day and eventually it brought all of its friends. So nowadays, I have to put out four slices of bread chopped up in bits and a handful of birdseed. But the crow survived and his leg is healed now. But for a while when it was limping, it could only hop on one leg and I knew that I was trying to have it eat, so the other crows would take its food away, so I put big chunks of bread out there so it would and had a bowl of water out there, it would dip the bread in the water, and then while it was still eating down, carrying it off and he would hide it. And he hid it in so many different locations here. The neighbors, if they went up on their roofs, would wonder where these globs of bread came from because it'd stick the bread up into little cervices and all these toweled roofs around here [laughs]. But besides the crow now all these sparrows come over here and our neighbor across the street has kind of an open attic in there and the tiled roof is set up on spaced wood sheeting which means there's gaps and I see these birds flying in and out of his roof all the time, so since I was putting up bird feed and bread, all these birds start coming around here. So now every time when I come home, the birds gather round, and when I leave for my early morning meeting, it's too dark to feed the birds. So when I come back home, I'll pull the car up in my drive way and the birds will gather around there and wait.

[EU] I know.

[KN] But I also feed the squirrels and I started feeding the squirrels first. Several years now, in spring, while I was, begin working in the yard. It's this yard work I think, they think that it's safe if they see a person's out there working in the yard. This squirrel brought her little baby up to me, which is unheard of, and she brought him right up to me, just to have baby see who was feeding them I think [laughs] which is amazing, you know.

[EU] Yeah.

[KN] Who was it, Doctor Doolittle?

[EU] Maybe, this is a time to ask you then about Irene. How did you meet your wife?

[KN] Well I met her actually, the very first time, I still remember. Tom and I, when we were both living in different apartments off campus, the first year he came up, we would actually, rather than cooking our meals, we paid the university to eat at the dorms. So we ate at… hmm let's see where was that at?…I think it was…oh no it was the dormitory just east of Agate St., forgot the name, like where McClain Hall is and Tinker or something, can't remember. But the students of the dorms ate there too, so we use to get together, in there at the times after dinner and sing songs and stuff. Tom's future wife would play the piano and we'd see several of the girls from Hawaii, although then I met a girl from Portland, who I dated all the way through college actually, she was a good friend of Irene's, and even after getting married to Irene, they still communicated, we haven't talked to them for a long time now.

[05:07]

[EU] And where was Irene from?

[KN] Irene's from on Hawaii, the big island, from a little town I didn't even know existed, till I met her. I keep telling her this, that it's not even on a map. She's from Kukuihaele, Hawaii.

[EU] What was her family name?

[KN] Her family name was Masumoto – [spells] M-A-S-U-M-O-T-O which is kind of an unusual last name, most people are Matsumoto.

[EU] Do you know their family history? When and why they came over?

[KN] Probably similar to ours and by coincidence they came from the two provenances, prefectures, that my grandparents came from.

[EU] Why did Irene come to Oregon? What was she studying?

[KN] Teaching

[EU] Ah teaching. Yeah, she was interested in that and became a teacher and taught for five years.

[EU] Here in Eugene?

[KN] In Reedsport first; we weren't going together then. But while she was teaching there, I called her up and got her to go on some dates. So she would drive to and from Reedsport every weekend looking for me I think, and I was out hunting most of the time or fishing [laugh].

[EU] So when did you get married? This was after you'd finish university?

[KN] Quite a few years after, when I was about 28, so we've been married since 1969.

[EU] And, after you graduated then with your degree in Architecture, where did you work then?

[KN] Well, before I graduated, I worked for the U.S. Air Force. It was during the Korean, not the Korean, the Vietnamese War and when I was starting to work on my terminal project, this was after the fifth year, it should've been the fifth year, but I took too much time working on my terminal project. At that time the terminal project was a thesis; we actually had to write a big book. I took a special sociology course just to do research, to do my project, which we each selected and had a committee of three professors working with each person on the terminal. It was a big thing because the University of Oregon only graduated from five to eight people for year in their architecture school back then out of four hundred some odd students [laughs] it was very tough to get out of the school.

[EU] What was your topic, your thesis project?

[KN] The professor who was the head of my committee was a person I'd pick; I wanted to do a cultural center, like I still do right now. But he says, "Ken, that's too easy for you, why don't you do something that would take lots of research, something for a like a corrective institutional for juvenile delinquents?" So I took him up on that subject and I took a lot of time doing research on that subject, found an interesting sight on Oahu to put this on. Between doing research and taking just a few hours of classes, the draft got after me. I was only taking twelve hours that year and so I had a real low draft number, you know they assigned numbers to everybody, so I had a 187 or something. So I knew I was going to get drafted, so I enlisted in the Air Force Reserves. And when my orders finally came to me to report, where I was, I can't remember, I was assigned to a Squadron in Portland, and I had to report to San Antonio Lackland Air Force Base for basic training, December 6 of 1963. I remember that day, but the day after I got that in the mail, my draft notice arrived. So I was so lucky to have gotten in the Air Force when I did.

[EU] So you were in the reserves then and not the-

[KN] [cuts off] Yeah. But during the end of my career in the Air Force, you know it was a six year thing, doing reserves once a month, going up to Portland first and then to Seattle, our unit got transferred to McChord Air Force Base up by Seattle. So about five of us from Eugene area, Springfield, carpooled every month to get up there. But during my last year, our unit was called up and we were going to be shipped to Vietnam, so just a few months before I got out of the Air Force, I had to take all my shots: 17 different shots I think it was, just to get to Vietnam, and then they decided, no, it's better for our unit to stay in the McChord because we were a troop carrier group. And when we got promoted to McChord, we went from C-119 flying boxcars, which was an old WWII type plane, to a C-141 jet, it's called Starlifter. We became the hospital that flew people back and forth to Vietnam. That was such a high tech piece of equipment that it was real tough for us, working on the C-119s going up to this really high tech jet, to do much on that plane. But they kept our squadron down, since I was in airframe repair. If any damaged airplanes happened over there, they'd fly them back to Seattle and we would repair them there.

[11:46]

[KN] So luckily, I just served about three more months I think it was and then got out of the Air Force. Meantime, I was in the Reserves, you know, just once a month, so I was working for an engineering firm here in Eugene. It was called Western Engineering and I actually got hired there before I got into the Air Force and then I worked for them for a couple of months and then I got shipped off to Texas, and when I came back after six months, they hired me back again and worked for that firm and actually that firm split apart into two engineering firms. I went with the New York Firm and there were five of us that formed this other corporation and worked there until I got my license and then they asked me to be their corporate treasurer so I was a treasurer of an engineering firm, there were 28 people working there. We tried to do a multi-discipline firm: engineers, surveyors, architects, and planners; the state law wouldn't allow that at that time. There was a really antiquated state law and I was determined to get that law changed and I eventually did. Because I worked so closely with governmental agencies doing school work and things, as well as with codes, the State Board of Architects Executive Director and the State Head of the Building Department both recommended me to the governor to be on the State Board of Architects, so I accepted. Even though they said, you know it'll only take eight meetings per year, but I got so involved with other things. I got into the legislative review committees, liaison with the engineers board, their attorneys and our attorneys and eventually we crafted the state law and we had to change the state corporation laws which didn't allow architects to be general corporations; it allowed engineers to be general corporations. And engineers were being general corporations and architects couldn't be general corporations, couldn't get together, besides the architects law that forbade that from happening. To not allow architects and engineers to associate was unbelievable, because we always worked together. So when I got on the State Board, we got this liaison committee to go and two years after that, we got the laws changed, finally. It took many years though; the law finally got changed, just as I

got off the board. We had got the paperwork and all that stuff going so the legislature finally got to a point where it was approved.

[EU] How long were you on that board?

[KN] Nine years, three terms. And I believe in term limits and we decided to recommend a three term limit, so even though they said I could go for one more term, I said "No, I've served my three terms."

[15:28]

[EU] What kind of architecture were you most interested in? Or did you specialize in one certain kind?

[KN] Actually, my goal was, years ago, was to not be the greatest architect in the world, but to be the most influential and so just by being on the State Board and having a lot to do with how architects are tested for licensing. Actually got me to a point where I felt that "wow, I'm on this, we call ourselves the best of the best committee" [laughs]. There are hundreds of architects that have come through being involved with the licensing exams, the writing exams for licensing, and eventually converting for these exams for being taken on a computer and being graded by a computer. So we have nine different sections of this exam that I've been involved with, first, in terms of being a grader. We use to grade ten thousand exams in one sitting. Because once a year, you were allowed to take the entire exam, six months later, they're allowed to take parts that they've failed and then again for the next year. So every six months we'd get together to grade these exams and I believe it's the summer exam that has the greatest number of people. I remember when California had abdicated from the whole system to begin with, created their own exam, and none of us other states would grant them reciprocity [laughs] and so we forced them to come back in. That first year that they came back in was when I was really involved with grading and I was being a grading coordinator, they were teaching architects how to grade the exam, and we graded over ten thousand. But now, we transitioned to the computerized exam to create, design exams that are graded by the computer was unheard of. The system is so sophisticated, that we always test the system. There's about five of us in this international committee in the US that will get together every once in a few years to look at the exams and make sure it's going in the right direction. We got together two years ago for the last time and made some recommendations for the next ten years of the exam and they've already started implementing it now. I just heard some of the kids in our office, you know, the exam's changing.

[18:30]

[KN] Before we went to Hawaii we went to open Tom's boxes to be sure we thanked them…thanks for the goodies but I didn't know what they were [laughs]

[EU] I'm sure you see a lot of changes in architecture. I mean, within the profession, with the computerization…

[KN] Dramatic changes and luckily we got involved with the computers in our office early on. One of the early firms in '88 converted to computerized drafting and it was a little cumbersome then. Every time we entered too much into the computer, we would have to regenerate and you have to go on a coffee break. Because even the highest part computers back then would take twenty minutes just to regenerate the drawing. So that was so time consuming eventually we got to a point where computerized drafting was faster. Now it's so much faster. But the problem is now that our clients think it's instantaneous, see. That's the problem. You got to enter so much information in first before it can become instantaneous, you know.

[EU] Did you have to through a lot of retraining then? To learn the computers?

[KN] I went to LCC to take a class on AutoCAD Version 6, back then in '88. But I really don't do computerized drafting in our office. My time is more valuable sketching things out for the guys, making sure the design that I want to see and let them do all the technical stuff. I'll do the technical writing though to make sure that the projects are done properly, meeting the codes as well as meeting the governmental requirements for bidding and all that stuff. Then I'll monitor the construction during the construction period, I'll have to write all that information down in the stents, to be sure it gets done properly during construction. There's so much paperwork; our sketch book is about three hundred pages long for the public projects, you know.

[EU] Can you talk about some of the projects you've worked on? Some of the different buildings and houses you've designed?

[KN] Hmm. Let's see. Right now, a big project is underway, it's under construction now. We just designed a brand new highschool. It's a boarding highschool. It's up in a very rural community, up in Jasper, and it's a private, church run high school. You know it's many many millions of dollars there that's going take to finish that; it's a ten year project. So it's something that the firm can work on for a long time, I think. But it's under construction. It's very tough to get the plans in the first place, to get the zone changed to allow a school up there. Luckily, there's a planning company that did that. Now the construction part is the easy part.

[EU] Have most of the projects you've worked on been in this area - the Eugene/Springfield/Lane County?

[KN] Oh no, actually I'm licensed in eight states. There's only one state I haven't worked in, the eighth. The eighth state was Utah and we're supposed to be working on a big trucking facility there, but the trucking company got bought out just as we were going to get going on it. Luckily, we hadn't started it though. That was Utah. But we've done lots of things. Huge trucking

facilities for the Redwood Company in Colorado and Montana, I think it was? Washington, California and here.

[22:35]

[EU] Washington…

[KN] Some as big as a hundred and twenty trucks parked up against the building, restructuring the contents or the drivers. And we also did huge truck repair garages in those facilities. I mean acres and acres, and they were big projects. The first one we worked on was in Salem, and the guy liked us so much, we went to the rest of the places. So we got licenses in all those places, I did…wherever they wanted these facilities. And Taco Time was the same thing; you know, they wanted buildings here, there, wherever, so we did stuff in Northern Montana, all of those places too for them. Getting to understand different kinds of climate conditions where, up in Montana we had to put our foundations three and a half feet underground to prevent a freezing, you know. We don't do things in Alaska though because there is so tough to deal with, because of permafrost. Whenever you compress ice, if you had any physics? No? What it does is the compression will thaw out the ice. So when you put a building on ice, even if it's solid for twenty, fifty feet all the way down. It'll eventually thaw the ice out and it'll start sinking, you know. I've taken courses in arctic construction too, but I decided no it's not worth it. They have to drill pierce through the ice, put refrigerant coils around the pierce to keep it cold and if the fire goes out, you're out of luck [laughs].

[EU] In this oral history project, we interviewed Hiroshi Ogawa and I know when his pottery studio burned, you designed his new studio?

[KN] Yeah, we did and we did it at no cost because we really wanted him to get back into that. And everyone contributed time and money for that.

[EU] The building looks very Japanese.

[KN] It is intentionally done that way. And I like to have that platform look where the whole building is raised up on "piloti" P-I-L-O-T-I [spells], Le Corbusier word, building on posts so that the environment falls through. He kind of wanted that also, you know, I spoke with him as far as what type of design he wanted. The main thing was to be sure that the floor was designed to accommodate huge loads, because I know heavy clay is so you can use any part of that building for storage.

[EU] Have you designed other buildings with a Japanese theme?

[KN] Oh, Rosie [last name] (sp?) home has a Japanese order to it, but it's not really a Japanese house. It was a very expensive home. I think she's trying to sell it for almost a million now. It should be a little less than that, but she's been advertising it for some huge amounts. It wasn't

designed to be resold really. It was a designed for a particular kind, her way of living. She wanted a two story house, but didn't want it to look like a two story house, so we had to camouflage it in a one story shell, basically, so it was difficult, and I don't like the way that some of the roof overhangs. It's a matter of communication between me and the person who did the joints probably and lack of cooperation there in office [laughs].

[26:51]

[KN] In the Emerald Valley, the Forest Inn, right on the golf course in Emerald Valley, there's a 54,000 square foot building there, sort of a Japanese order to it too and that was a fun project to do because at that the time the owner was a timber company, had millions of dollars that they needed a tax write off for, and even when my process meter/reader said it was going to cost four and a half million for that building, including the water systems and the sewer systems that we had to put in, it was unincorporated, he said I could build it for less and I said, it's going to cost that much, as it's sure not going to get exactly four and a half million dollars [laughs] for all the infrastructure and the building. That was a real fun project because we only had one year from when, less than a year, from when I had a sketch on a napkin, to when the building was to be finished. And actually, it was on a napkin, and I have that napkin filed somewhere [laughs]. He says, "That looks great. Let's build it!"And that's when he signed up the National Ladies PGA Tournament for the golf course, September 14th, 1979. I remember that date, because then when I found it out, I got all the governmental agencies together. It was nice that LCOG, the main council of governance, had Gary Darnell, who was most recently a hearings officer. And I worked together on that. I asked him to bring together all the agencies that had to make decisions on this project and we all sat around this huge table and I says, "we need to be open at this state how soon can you review it, and what do you need?" So the state building office, who had jurisdiction there, and from he county building department and the city building department, all three had jurisdiction there, because it was in an unincorporated area across the highway. We convinced city council to annex a ten foot strip all around the buildable elevations of the property, around the flood zone, and to agree to annexing officially any portions that were fully developed. As soon as it got developed, then they would annex it, so it wouldn't be a tax strain on them too. We convinced them to extend a ten inch water line from east side of the freeway, under the freeway, over to our site, so we would have fire protection. And they allowed us to create our own drinking water system, so we would have a 42,000 gallon tank there, on the side that we hid behind a berm. Then we got them to approve a municipal system of sewers and sewage treatment, so we have the lagoons on our side and to agree to take them over after we got them completed, even the water system. So that's all happened. And that's really been snowballing. But to do that, I had to spend every day, from seven in the morning to two o'clock in the afternoon, sketching to keep ahead of the contractors, who worked 24 hours a day. They had three crews…Mazama Timber Company which owned that, had three crews working on that project. So I can remember sketching the stairway, but I couldn't get our draftsman to fully

comprehend how that stair would be put together, so I hand draw at the site and the next morning, it was there. But to do this, the building departments, all three of them that had jurisdiction, had to agree with us, to allow us to build, without a full set of drawings. I actually was on site drawing and I take it back to the office and things would get drafted. Sometimes I was out there with a shovel, describing lines on the site where they wanted things to get poured. And so our "as-builds" are really not accurate. It was just the most fun project an architect could have.

[31:37]

[KN] Just to get the heights of the concrete columns that held up the street lights in there, the project manager from the mill took his fork lift and took our light fixture and raised and lowered and said, "Where do you want this to be?" We says, "Stop!" He says "Measure that height" and that's how we poured all those concrete columns, the heights and then the light fixtures could hang from them, things like that, you know, that was so much fun. We created the first permeable paving anywhere to actually save some big Douglas firs, because we have this circular drive, so people could drop their guests off at the front door, and then go out and park and we had these big Douglas firs in there and we wanted to save those. As so, we did some research on what Douglas firs really need. They need air as well as water. A lot of folks would pipe water in, but without air, you can't get them to survive, you see? This is shooting from hip, okay? [laughs] Excavated the lowest turn around driveway. I said, well, we could put not raw sand, but sharp sand I called it, to prevent silt from coming up and then some pea gravel and stuff on top and then just set some official pavers on top of that, so that the air would go down through it. But besides that, the perforated pipe, underneath the street, so that air and water could get down into it. So the trees have stayed from '79 til now, so.

[EU] Do you have your own architectural firm now?

[KN] Yes.

[EU] How long have you had that?

[KN] Since 1972, actually. Because of the architect engineers' law that didn't allow us to be multi-disciplined, that was to my advantage, actually, at that time, because although I could own my share of that engineering company, and I had a small share, about ten percent, now that I was a corporate treasure, they couldn't list me in the name of the firm, which was Choud (sp?), Steminen (sp?), Walter, Engineers, Surveyors, and Planners and Ken Nagao Architect, it was a separate firm, but listed together. When we had to do public projects, their firm name, and my firm name would be on the sheet, and I would have to handle all the architecture parts and have stamp their engineer sheets so that worked out really nicely for name recognition. So when I left the firm in '79 to start completely separate from the engineering firm, I had lots of school work, and all kinds of work besides that that came along.

[EU] How many people work for you now? Irene works at your company.

[KN] Sure, Irene does. We have six, including us, four others, plus a student.

[EU] There are four other architects, then?

[KN] One other architect, who's now going to be owning 20 percent of the firm, when we sign our papers and he'll eventually take over.

[EU] So you're looking for retirement? Is that what you're planning for?

[KN] We never retire, but yeah. Just wanted someone to keep that firm going so we're writing tons of proposals too on different projects. We just want to be sure the firm has lots to do later.

[EU] We're going to stop here.

[KN] Okay.

[end 35:42]