

Japanese-American Association of Lane County, Oregon - Oral History Collection
Ken Nagao – Part 3

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Interviewee: Ken Nagao

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 three of the interview with Ken Nagao. Ken you wanted to talk a little bit about your engineering background.

[KN] Although I'm not an engineer, I've always wanted to have both architects and engineers licenses. I was originally planning until I got married to get two degrees. After getting my architecture degree, I was thinking of getting a Masters in Engineering perhaps and one of the very few architects, who, when the University of Oregon offered a structural option as well as a design option - you picked and chose between the two- when you entered the school of architecture, I actually took all the courses in both options. So I actually had three years of engineering, plus all the pre-engineering courses I took at the University of Hawaii, which the architecture school there was an engineering school as well as in the fine arts school, so I got a really good background in fine arts as well as in engineering and engineering physics and calculus and all the stuff like that based on engineering you see. So when I came up to school here and started working for the engineering company, they saw that I had done all this structural work in school, so I did most of the structural calculations that most of the engineering firm did, way back then, even for stuff like ski lifts, bridge cranes, stuff that architects don't even get involved with. And even after starting my own firm, after leaving that company, our clients, the folks from Manzama Timber, hired me to even design their barkers and stuff like that architects wouldn't even think of doing, with scrap, material that they had laying around in their yard, I would try to use all that stuff to create a structural system that would withstand dropping 42 inch diameter Douglas fir logs from ten feet up, to make sure it didn't buckle, and then find some way of getting those logs down to where the barker was and strip off the bark and stuff and it's kind of fun doing all that stuff. I actually even designed mills, as an architectural firm, we did when I was with the engineering company, we did some saw mills, some big mills and projects and stuff. One of our major clients is another lumber company, Jackson Wood Products, the McDougal Brothers, all that, and they're the ones that, their foundation is funding that school. Yeah and Imaho (sp?) Valley Golf Course was another lumber company. So the word just gets passed on from company to company. Previous to Manzama, because we work really closely

with the Lane County Building Department, and [unintelligible] when we designed Fernwood Middle School and Veneta Grade School and Pier Point Inn at the Coast, all these code issues, they discuss with the building departments. Their recommendations got spread all over, although they can't recommend a firm directly, but it was because of them that we got into the Manzama Lumber Company's thing, where another architect raised his hands and couldn't deal with finishing the design of that lumber mill in Creswell, we were hired to take over that and to take of the structural problems – it had some big structural problems with it, that they were building over a log pond, so we had to deal with stuff like that. After dealing with those successfully, that lumber company hired us to do lots more projects besides the golf course.

[EU] so it's been a real advantage in your career, these two, engineering and architecture

[KN] [interrupts] Sure, and it should continue to go in hand in hand. But mostly of the architecture schools today are allowing their students to get by, in some schools, with less than one year of structure design, which is so dangerous. These kids cannot design any structural system. They're all going to have to rely on an engineer, or if they do it themselves, they could get into deep trouble. It's amazing, and they're not getting enough art, in my book. They should all be required to take sculpture, because architecture is a three dimensional product, in which we sculpt from the inside out, as well as from the outside in. It's fun because sculptors don't normally have the opportunity to design from the inside out. You've got to create a sculpture piece that looks good from the inside, as well as the outside, so it's really different method of sculpture, that's what makes it fun.

[05:10]

[KN] We should probably go on with the other things though.

[EU] You talked before about some of your other interests, for example, hunting, you talked about that before and I know art. Haven't you done pottery at different times as well?

[KN] I've done pottery, painting, never basket weaving...

[EU] Kites?

[KN] Yes kites, sure. I like to do art that isn't time consuming. I got started in sculpture. I chose to sculpt rock [laughs]. It took me a whole term on that project, but Jan [name] (sp?), who was my sculpture prof., liked my work so much that, although I just signed up for two credits in sculpture, for every term, I actually have twelve credits of sculpture, taking just one year of sculpture from Jan [name]. But because of that, I don't have any of my work, because he kept all of it. I really enjoyed that and I felt good that he kept these pieces.

[EU] What kind of pottery did you make?

[KN] Well I do weird things [laughs]. I'm not a great potter. But I like to look at the medium and see what things could happen with it. I don't throw very large parts. The term throwing is actually to lift up a bowl by putting it on the wheel, you know. I might be able to do a 12 inch pot and that's about it before it starts globing on me. But because of that, using the excuse, "it adds character," do these pots and change the form. I never got to throw on an electric wheel when I was taking pottery in school, and I spent two years there on pottery. Then, after getting out of school, there was a Valley Potters Guild, which was right at the office building that we built at 4th and Hyde, and it was a barnlike structure out there. I had fun taking ceramics there too, real down to earth ceramics. In fact, we even had a ceramics lab every year up in the top of Dillard Road, where one year, they built a geodesic dome and it was big three dollars for weekend, ceramics party. Built a kiln, we actually did a wood fire ceramics kiln there, and we made pots out of native clay that we dug up right there on site. That was really earthy, very hippy [laughs]. That was so much fun being able to drop with tongs your pot in through the chimney and then watching it to see how it developed, and then after it got to a certain temperature, we pulled it out and did raku. Raku firing, where we put it into a metal barrel, filled it with either hay or manure or other stuff and closed. When the manure and other stuff started burning, we closed the lid and starve the fire out of oxygen, which changes the glazes into some really interesting colors. That's what raku's all about. But when I was taking ceramics at the university too, I was taking it from Bob James. He was not the typical instructor. He allowed you to do stuff on your own. And then he would come in and advise you. He never taught technique, actually, and even with kiln, the class kiln was just to experiment with different types of chemicals that I didn't know anything about, just to see what happened to them [laughs]

[09:40]

[KN] Well, that was so loose and I like loose art, even with kites, that's a one night project. I like to do fast stuff, even in my sketching in my architectural firm. I like to do sketches in about two, three hours that look like you spent a whole week on them. Now that we're going to computers, I told the guys today, that our computers did really nice, three dimensional drawings now, to get the background rendering and stuff like that, we could probably send it over to India and get them to put their background on it, rather than to have us trying to spend too much time developing something that looks like a finished product. Sketches, to me, should not be a finished product, because we don't want buildings or building sketches, to look like finished buildings, we want them to look like sketches, so clients feel comfortable asking for changes. It's a moving piece, it's an art work, you know.

[EU] Is this a time to ask you about your gingerbread houses?

[KN] That's artwork too and architecture too at the same time and sculpture. Again, I don't like to take too much time, even on the gingerbread. It looks like it took lots of hours and stuff...it

didn't take that much time. As long as you get the gestalt image and the shapes, so it has a lot of character that's the main thing.

[EU] How did you get interested in gingerbread houses?

[KN] Let's see, when was it? I went to the festival of trees one year, at Valley River, and saw some nice gingerbread. I thought that they could do better [laughs]. Then, when I got onto the state board, another woman, Candace Robertson, from Portland, Robertson, Merrymond (sp?), and another firm, three ladies. She knew that I was interested in gingerbread, so she brought a photograph one day of a gingerbread that their firm made of the Portland skyline. It was really nicely done, huge, and she said that the architects of Portland always have a competition each year, they do this. So I said I'm going to do something like that. And so she sent me the recipe on structural gingerbread, because I told her the first one that I did, the Notre Dame, Paris, just a stylized version of it, collapsed after a year. I had it in the garage, of course, which pulled in moisture. She said that if you use this structural gingerbread, it'll hold up better. It won't swell up and rise on your when you're baking it; like the Notre Dame, I really had to reshape a bunch of pieces after I baked it. So using this new recipe, I could pre-cut everything, and everything ended up the same size after baking. So it was much easier to deal with.

[EU] Besides the Notre Dame, what other buildings have you made?

[KN] Let's see, I've done the Black Castle, it's called the Matsumoto Castle in Japan. When we were on a Kyoki (sp?) tour in Japan, we visited that castle, and I was really impressed with it. I was able to walk the entire grounds, go into every nook and corner of that castle, including the attic. Irene never went into the castle because the stairs were too tall; she couldn't get up those tall stairs. So she waited for me outside in the gift shop. She found a little brochure that showed a drawing of the castle, and architectural drawing of the castle, with the elevation, and a sight line. So when I came back, I decided to do a gingerbread of the castle, to scale this time. I still have that upstairs. And then Neuschwanstein, King Ludwig's Castle. One time the computer graphic's magazine had on its cover a computer generated, three dimensional drawing of that castle. So I took that and photographs I've seen of the castle, made a stylized version of the castle, which I've had for about five years now. Last year, I added, on the second mountain top, a little chapel, with a bridge across, a little gingerbread bridge across to finish Neuschwanstein Castle, so I could do a smaller gingerbread that year. But even the small one is two feet high [laughs]

[15:10]

[EU] So you bring these out every year then?

[KN] The one's that last I do, and I'll touch up sometimes, change the color scheme. The Neuschwanstein's changed color schemes three times now, I think.

[EU] Didn't you make the newspaper too about, I'm trying to remember, Christmas tree?

[KN] Oh, yeah, I put vodka, that went all over the country, and if you look on Google's website and look under my name it still lists the vodka under my gingerbread, because the newspaper did an article about all the gingerbread I've done, over the years. They also did an article about my narcissus bulb carving, and then the Christmas tree. And the Christmas tree, it went across the country, on some TV stations too. I think it was KOTR that came over to the house and featured the tree. KOTR also featured the gingerbread. They came over when I did a gingerbread party for the birth of three kids and because they're on this network, it lasts all the way through the country. Stations across the country picked up on both of those items. I think it was even Jay Leno, who talked about this guy in Oregon, and this vodka.

[EU] So what's your recipe, what's your secret?

[KN] It's not a secret. Because growing up in Hawaii, where these ships sit for five weeks or longer, we always had to do special things to try to revive them. My dad would always cut off two or three inches off the bottom. He would actually burn the bottoms, and I didn't put two and two together there. We would do things to get the water up, aspirin, sugar, weird things. I was cleaning the class on some of these doors here, after we moved in here, and when I sprayed it with Windex, I noticed that some of the lacquer was being dissolved, by the Windex. So I quit using Windex, and I thought, oh, maybe if I use alcohol on the bottom of the trees, because what's keeping the tree from sucking up more water, it's the fact that the sap's congealed into lacquer at the bottom of the trees. So if I could dissolve that lacquer, and the gooey junk that partially congealed, then the tree's going to drink water. Sure enough, it worked. But I tried rum and gin, and some other stuff, but the thing that works the best is vodka. So there must be some relationship between tree and sap and some vegetation that's related that might create the vodka. What is vodka made from?

[EU] Potatoes?

[KN] Oh yeah potatoes, I think it is potatoes. But I use a pretty strong mixture of vodka to begin with, to get it to work fast, then I tone down with a lot more hot water. The hot water actually keeps the sap liquefied too. And, really, the tree will start expiring vodka into the air, you can actually smell it, the first day or so, you can tell when it's really drinking up a whole bunch, like two gallons of water and vodka per day [laughs]. That was fun.

[19:20]

[EU] Should we move over into a topic about the Japanese American community in Eugene?

[KN] There was none to begin with. I've been here since 1959, and there was no community, no restaurants; a few Chinese restaurants that didn't serve Chinese food. You know, there was none

of the good food that we had in Hawaii, there was a pretty good ethnic mix there, and we had pretty good food there. None of the festivals, none of the cultural events. So when I was working for the first engineering firm I mentioned and we had just broke apart and created a new engineering firm. A few of us moved and started off in the shopping center at 40th and McDonald there, I met, I believe, he was a highschool or middle school teacher, from Hawaii, Jerry Mutsui (sp?), because he would run by the office jogging after teaching school, we were still working of course. We finally got to meet them, got into conversation, got to know them pretty well, he and his wife. That was way back in 1960...1970, 71. We started to talking to them. Their kids were just getting into high school, they were pretty active in orchestra or something like that. They said to us, although we don't have any kids, you know, our kids are going to grow up not knowing anything about Japanese culture. So we had a long conversation with them and one of the families, I can't remember who the other family was, and so we decided, why don't we start getting together? So us three couples look through the phone book and found Japanese names in it. And we would invite people to pot lucks – that's where we finally met Nisa (sp?) Joe, Carrie we hadn't met. We knew Carrie's cousin, who was from Hawaii, and she, what is there names? Otoglass (sp?), Joyce Olson Otoglass (sp?). Joyce was meeting with us periodically. And the first potluck we had was at one of the schools, I can't remember which school it was, then we started talking about an organization then, of course nothing formal ever happened. So we thought that we would get together every couple of months and try to expand this group. And finally, we found Carrie. We had invited David Koyamuka (sp?) because his name came up several times, but he lives near Milkshoot (sp?), and we thought that Milkshoot was too close to campus, he must be a student. So we didn't invite him until later. Then Bern Hall (sp?) was found. He found us after we started our architecture program, that was in '79, that was a quite a few years after that. He had talked to Ada Lee and also Bruce Dean's wife, Angie Dean, Filipino, about starting some sort of an Asian business club. That's how the Asian Counsel started first of all, Bern wanted to start this business network group, because he was into more marketing and stuff like that so. We were already having some Japanese community potlucks and stuff so. The Filipino group was already strong in this community then. My partner, at 79, Tom Orion joined me. He was active in the Filipino community, and so we got meet a lot of Filipino groups at their Christmas parties. And so that started forming a nucleus, Angie and Tom and several other Filipinos. One worked for Bi-Mart. And Bern Hall mostly with the leadership was thinking about some sort of a Chinese New Year when I said, you know we shouldn't make it that ethnic, we need to make it more general, you know [laughs]. So the first Asian celebration started in '86. So it took quite a few years to get it that far. We had already started this Asian business network, we even had a phone directory listing the Asian businesses.

[EU] Before you had mentioned “Asian's Together.” Is that or was that something else?

[KN] That was something else. We found out about them through Misa (sp?), when we got Misa. We didn't know what ethnicity Misa was. Jo doesn't sound Japanese or whatever, but someone

suggested her, so we finally got her involved. But that's the way she was talking about "Asians Together." It was this political group to get the Japanese Americans who were interned paid off, things like that... Peggy Nagai was really into that. We said, "No we want to keep out of that kind of stuff, so we wanted something completely cultural" [laughs]. Although Bern had other business ideas. We got in trouble to begin with, we tried to start a 501 C3, tax exempt charter organization. But because of the business directory, the IRS wouldn't allow us to do it. But until today, we were still a 501 C4, the Asian Council. They're the ones that put on the Asian celebration.

[25:48]

[EU] Was David Toyama involved?

[KN] Not yet, no, not yet. David got it involved... maybe after we found Harry Yonquist? No, David brought Harry Yonquist in and Howard Yamamoto. David was actually able to get the big nucleus of the group that continued on, you know, together. Once he got involved and knew what we were all about. He didn't want to join to begin with [laughs]; that was a split. Didn't like what Misa was doing either, I don't think. Misa was a little bit from the cultural end, although political too, you see. There was that kind of a split.

[EU] So you said that the Asian celebration started in '86, okay. Where did you hold that?

[KN] At the Fairgrounds. At the Quonset hut. The building that attached to the office, right by the front gate. It's 6,000 square feet, we had 500 people the first year, our budget was 2,500 dollars. The city public works administrator, Christine, asked me about what kind of budget did you have? I said \$2,500. "How could you put an event on like that with only 2,500 dollars? Even at that, we were able to keep that money and seed the [unintelligible] event. We made quite a bit of money the following year. Then people like Misa, and Tony Lam was involved then, said, "We should make it free" [laughs] I said, "you can't keep events like this going if you think that way." So we reduced the admission by a dollar and it didn't do well. We broke even, but there wasn't enough to keep going really. We struggled and the following year, raised the price up a little more and eventually got so big we needed the performance hall, which is 12,000 square feet. We did that for about three years, and then we got big enough to do the exhibit hall which is 24,000 square feet... We were doing it step by step. We were there for about two years, and then now we have the whole thing.

[EU] Was your vision always like it is now? You have the food, and you have vendors and you have a craft section and with martial arts. Was it always that mixed?

[KN] It was always that mixed plus some. We still want to expand deeper into the community to have more venues do the same type of thing that we're doing, the same week. We're trying to, we use Junction City's Scandinavian festival as an example. We also got information on what

they do on Vancouver, B.C. They have an Asian Celebration up there, where all the different venues take part. So, you know we get the University's museum to help. BSU theater did it for a year. We tried to get the health center, but then they've never been good about doing it, you know. More recently they did, but that's our goal to get quite a few other venues to take part in this Asian Celebration. Then, I think, two years after we started the Asian Celebration, we did the Asian Kite Festival. When I was president of the Kiwanis club, one of the ideas for presidents was to start a kite's festival in towns. So I decided to use Kiwanis and the Asian Counsel as the resource, and with Carrie being in the city, we always got the city support and that helped a lot. Carrie was really the catalyst to keep this thing going, you know, with the city. Although she's not there anymore, but at least that's continued on.

[29:53]

[EU] So the kite festival still continues in the fall? In September?

[KN] Yes, I'm trying to make sure it continues. Last year was a real failure. David Tan tried doing it all by himself and it didn't go very far and there was no ads, and nothing, you know so. I got Jacq Ein's (sp?) wife to take over and hopefully she's working on it. I give all my kites we display in the kite museum every year. She's promised to do it, but there's lots of others to do it. To start it, I should convince about six or seven others in the community, Ada being one of them, Angie Dean, Tony. We took carloads of people from the Asian Counsel to the coast, I wanted them to see a kite festival down there, to get them all excited about doing a kite festival here. And they did get excited, so we started this kite festival in Eugene and it kept on going, for I think this is the 20th year. The Oblong festival is another event. When we started the Taiko group in '89, and it was Misa's doing, she had brought a drum from a drum maker in California. And her excuse was, he told me that he was going to take this drum back, if I don't play it. So we helped out and [laughs]. She said "we have a university student in law school, whose is willing to come teach us. She's a member of the Seattle Taiko." Shari Nakashima was there and she was really good teaching us how to play Taiko. So she brought in three ladies from Seattle Taiko down one weekend and she asked us all to bring tires and they brought their three drums down and we all learned how to play Taiko on tires. And that was the start of Eugene Taiko and that was, I think, fall of '89.

[EU] Who was in that first Taiko group?

[KN] None of the folks are in there now. Debbie, who now lives in Colorado, I think, Svajko Hessling (sp?), who died a couple of years ago. I'm trying to remember faces. I have a picture somewhere up of the group on that first thing.

[EU] So you continued learning in Taiko? I mean, did you have teachers from Japan?

KN: Oh yeah, Sensei Tanaka, Sensei Yamamoto from Gion Matsuri, which is a festival in Japan, he was a prefectural master. You know they really worshipped their artists in Japan and he was one of those artists so. Then, he was so generous that he paid for one of our highschool students to go to Japan with him and learn some stuff there. He brought his Taiko group over to teach us stuff here too. They played for Orbone (sp?) twice. He passed away, so that all disappeared. It was really great when that happened; it was a great exchange of stuff, mostly one way from him. I mean he gave us all different kinds of gifts, kimonos and stuff. Taught us a lot about what they do on their cultural parade. It was called Gion Matsuri and all over Japan they have this festival you know, where they parade Taikos throughout the town. I went to see all the floats in Kyoto just before, just a few days too soon, just before the parade. But they were building all these huge floats with their Taikos on it. When we went to Japan, I think Takuyama (sp?) is the historic village, and there's a big cave in the mountain, where they store all the floats, for their Gion Matsuri parade. And we were able to go into the mountain and see these floats and a lot of them are mechanized, so these mannequins play Taiko on these floats. There's the world's largest Taiko there, and everybody's allowed to play on that, so it was really interesting to do that and to see one the historic villages. The whole village is preserved and they have artisans, crafts-folk there demonstrating, making [inaudible], those things on a wood fired stove and stuff. We went to a grass village that's been rebuilt; grass shacks, all the roofs are made out of thatch, and there are all those different stations with different artisans there demonstrating their crafts. It was really nice to see something like that. That's our goal here is to eventually build a cultural center or to help fund partially. I'm sure we can't fund and maintain a big cultural center. None of our local groups can afford to do that. So we have to have cooperation from somebody with deep pockets [laughs].

[EU] I think I'll stop here for a minute.

[ends 36:10]