

Japanese-American Association of Lane County, Oregon - Oral History Collection
Ken Nagao – Part 4

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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 four of the interview with Ken Nagao. Before we leave the topic of Taiko, could you talk about some of the people who joined you, like Harry Youngquist (sp?) and some of the other people that you drew into that group?

[KN] Sure. The core group was originally Cathy Cunningham and her husband Tim, who's a member of the core group today, spent a whole year sitting in the auditorium watching us practice every night that we played. Harry Yonquist is one of the core group people of course, Carol, his wife, definitely. Harry was hard to train, you know because he had a deferent way, he can't bend his wrists, so he was a very different technique. But it was great to have him there, because you see it was a multicultural group. I really wanted this group to be multicultural, you know, mutli-ethnic.

[EU] And Harry is Norwegian.

[KN] Norwegian, yes [laughs] and Carol is Okinawan, Aimee Yogi is Okinawan. Let's see...Tim and Cathy. Cathy Cunningham is David Toyama's daughter and she's the person with the best form of all, you know. I always like to see her play because she always has great form. Then, after that, we have Lois Kishigii (sp?), who is also Okinawan, and my wife plays, Irene Masumoto Nagao. See, Carol and Irene are good hula dancers, so some of the motions come natural to them and the fluidity. Cathy looks like she's had some martial arts perhaps in her moves and she's a musician as well, her moves are timed correctly with the rhythm, you see. Some folks in the group really had to be taught rhythm [laughs].

[EU] Could you talk a little about the hula dancing, because I know that that's become an integral part of the Taiko performance.

[KN] It was really our idea to introduce it. We wanted to show that a large number of our group were from Hawaii or at least had Hawaiian roots. The Toyamas are from Hawaii, but then I think Cathy was born in Japan or perhaps on the mainland. I'm not sure where she was born.

[EU] Maybe Japan.

[KN] Japan, hmm. So we wanted to do some things that were Okinawan also. We sing. Harry and I do the singing – we sung an Okinawan song called *Shima Uta*. “Shima” referring to the island of Okinawa, I believe; “Uta” is “song.” We talk about this maiden with long black hair dancing and stuff, but we even sang at Lois Ushigii’s (sp?) wedding. And then, since Harry’s got such a good voice, I mean he sings for the sons of Norway, we always like to have him sing, you know, *I’ve been working on the railroad*. We also do another Japanese song, I can’t remember what it was.

[EU] Did you do one about the Samurai or the Warrior?

[KN] You know the *Warrior* is a song that we learned from Keynato (sp?) Taiko in LA. Because we don’t have a sensei or a teacher for Taiko, we rely on pieces that other Taiko groups perform and get their permission to do it. We were really fortunate a few years ago where we actually had an original composition from the composer in Japan, who composed this piece to honor the community for standing up against pirates who always raided their town every year. It was a piece written for an orchestra. So we learned the Taiko part of it and then fortunately, the band instructor at Churchill High School asked us to play a piece in conjunction with the band. So we got permission to do that from the composer at Churchill, so we shared the music for all the different arrangements, you know, which a symphony is done that way, which the Churchill high school band, and they performed it really well with Eugene Taiko, so that was a really nice high point in our Taiko careers.

[05:15]

[KN] Unfortunately, we didn’t get the recording of it. They promised to video and record it for us, but we were never able to get that. Hopefully, someone did videotape the entire piece, but we never even got a piece of it. But let’s see, going to other stuff. Harry and I sometimes incorporate guitar and ukulele into Taiko, because we are again, trying to show the multicultural thing, where we do Hawaiian, Okinawan, Japanese. We’ve done a song about Queen Liliuokalani, it’s called Lilioae (sp?), and at first we were just chanting it, because it’s easy to chant, but then eventually, to educate the public, to show them two different kinds of hula, the authentic hula that was done to chanting, originally. So we would do the chant and the women in our Taiko group, mostly being from Hawaii, those who weren’t from Hawaii learned to do the hula. And they were able to show both kinds of dancing. Dancing to chants, and on that same song, they would change and do the Hula ‘Auana type of song, it’s the same words, done more modern style. After the missionaries got to Hawaii, they added the melodic pieces. So then, that same song done in the auana style, the touristy style, and the more fluid type of dancing. All done to Taiko as well as to Harry and my singing and ukulele playing.

[EU] This is something unique to your group, that you do Taiko and hula together?

[KN] Yes, I believe that we were the only ones; there might be some groups in Hawaii that are doing that, I don’t know, but we decided to do that ourselves, just to bridge that gap.

[EU] I think that you have a group of friends that meet and you do, you play the ukulele?

[KN] Yes, that really snowballed. Maggie Mutova (sp?) is really the originator of this group. She called me up one day and said, “Hey Ken, I heard you play ukulele.” And I says, “a little.” She says, “Would you come over to the house and jam with me and one other person?” So she and Elizabeth, another Elizabeth, who works over at Home Depot, and I, for several months in a row, would get together around once a month and would play along with CDs, Hawaiian CDs. We tried to play along and learn those songs. Eventually, we thought, why don’t we start inviting some other folks? So we had about seven or eight at Maggie’s house, and then it moved to our house here, and we decided to invite lots more folks, so we had thirty people show up [laughs]. And that was a lot of fun. Since that time, it turned into summer, so Maggie had a big back yard, so we were able to continue on, that summer in her back yard as the group started to grow, and then came winter and the group was too large for anybody’s homes. So we had them renting Our Savior Lutheran Church, once a month, the first Friday of every month now. Used to be from seven to ten, now it goes to from seven to about ten thirty, eleven. It’s developed into a real fun fest and a food fest because people are from Hawaii, and even those who aren’t from Hawaii are so use to being with us Hawaiians, they know that we like to eat, even after dinner, you know. So it’s almost like having a second dinner. So we gather and arrange our chairs in a huge circle, all facing each other. We start at one point of the circle – each person picks a song to play and we all bought a book called Haemale (sp?) Aloha, Songs of Hawaii, basically. There are about two hundred and fifty songs, all authentic Hawaiian songs, with the chords are published, written out as well as diagrammed in terms of fingering on the ukulele. So it’s easy to follow along with that. So we just go around the circle and pick songs and whenever we get to the half way point, we break for a snack, and then continue on the rest of the circle until we get done at ten thirty. And just the other day, last Friday was the first Friday of the month; we had about fifty people there. And now people from the other group, called the Ukulenies (sp?), that don’t play Hawaiian music, are coming into our group. And I’ve been going into the Ukulenies and some of our group is going there too so it’s become a great cultural exchange.

[EU] Did your group have a name?

[KN] We call it the kanikapila. “Kanikapila” in Hawaii means to get together and sing, socialize basically. So we just called it kanikapila. Maggie has other great ideas for our group. She wants to call us the “Iron Mangos” or something like that and have our big group perform at events in town.

[11:09]

[EU] Maybe you could perform at the Asian Celebration?

[KN] That’s what she’d like us to do. She, herself now is part of a musical group called Sweet Aloha, and they’ve been performing now for a lot of gigs out of town even. And they’ve actually

invited Irene's hula group to dance along, Irene and Aimee Yogi, and Carol MacIntire (sp?) is a teacher and Aimee knows most of the dances, so when Carol's gone, Aimee teaches also.

[EU] When you lived in Hawaii growing up, did you sing Hawaiian songs?

[KN] No. [laughs] it was like listening to ... I wouldn't listen to Hawaiian songs or western songs, country western songs. I wanted to listen to rock and roll, whatever was popular for kids then. The only songs I knew in Hawaiian was the song of the kingdom, basically, "Hawai'i Pono'i" and "Aloha oe" were the only two songs I knew in Hawaiian. When I came up to Oregon, because one of my roommates was a music major, his friend Rodney Lao, from Hilo too, was also a music major. They've both been in the music instruction sector of Hawaii. They come back to play for Oregon's bands and reunions every year. They instigated Kanikapilas at our house on campus, you know the one on Agate Street and Franklin Blvd house. We were notorious for having parties every weekend, all year long. And it was a party with all kinds of musical instruments: electric guitars, tenor ukes, baritone ukes, guitars, all kinds of stuff, drums. It was fun. That's where I learned my Hawaiian songs.

[EU] It seems that there's quite a community of people from Hawaii here.

[KN] We think so [laughs].

[EU] And I think you played a role in keeping people together with your dinners and your potlucks.

[KN] Well if we hadn't gotten together with the Matsuis (sp?) and those other families looking up Asian names and Japanese names to begin with, I don't think it would have ever happened. We started that when we were over in 40th and Donald. Yes, because Jerry Matsui, we met there. He was always running by our office, every day, and that's how I met Jerry.

[EU] Yeah, Jerry's from Hawaii, but his wife's from Eastern Oregon.

[KN] Yeah.

[14:38]

[KN] But when we got together with them to look up names, to start a Japanese group, that's what started this whole thing, way back when. It started in around 1971, 1972, before we moved into our new building in '74.

[IO (Irene, Ken's wife)] But we really didn't start until '84. I mean, because then we had a meeting here, in this house.

[KN] That was the Asian Counsel we started here in '84.

[IO] No. Japanese Group.

[KN] Yes, did we start the Japanese Group here too? Oh that's right.

[IO] Yeah, because that's when we had Frank Kimomoto (sp?).

[KN] That's right, we met several people after inviting people to the house here.

[IO] Frank and Joyce.

[KN] Yeah, when did we start the Japanese Potlucks? Before then?

[IO] I don't know. I'm not sure. But I know that we really didn't get going until after...

[KN] Yeah it took a long time.

[IO] Because we're in this house when ...

[KN] And it took a long time to get David to participate [laughs].

[IO] I think we met them by approaching them in the grocery store.

KN: And Genie Ma. She was working in the basement of the Bon Marche and we'd always talked to her about stuff we were doing in the Asian community and she finally got interested. And then she got her two boys interested, the two boys play Taiko with us. They played in the first Obon, I remember. The second Obon, maybe, that's right, it was the second. They're Chinese, right, so they had no idea what the rhythm was for Japanese music [laughs]. And here they were, playing this drum, while the ladies were trying to dances and got everybody off beat. That was at Lambcote (sp?) when we first started that.

[EU] Where is Lambcote?

[KN] Right on the river, by Skinner's Butte. We did that for three years there before we moved it all to Baker Park. That was Misa Jo's idea. She said, "Ken, do you think we could do an Obon here sometime?" I said, "Sure. If we can get Carrie involved, we'll have the Obon", and that's what happened.

[EU] Getting back to the more formal organization, is, you had just begun to start talking about your ideas for a cultural center. I don't think we pursued that.

[KN] Oh yeah. I've always wanted to do a cultural center, as you know, even from my selection from my university project, way back, in the 60s. That was before I went into the Air Force. And after I came back, I didn't get back into school until 1968 or '67 and went back and completely changed my project because I just wanted to graduate then. I didn't want to do any research. They'd change the format on how to do terminal projects. Then I was deeply involved with being a judge for skating at that time, so I said I want to do a regional skating center, where I wouldn't have to do any research at all, although I pretended to do tons of research because I was a competitive judge, I was a competitive skater, and all that stuff. Wrote a whole bunch about

skating at that time just to make it seem like it was research. So Irene typed up most of my written material, she could read my chicken scratch and she and I typed up my book. I was working for Western Engineering at that time, two story office building with these circular stairs, so you could see upstairs and downstairs, so I would type on the downstairs typewriter, she would type up there, we would communicate back and forth. So I think we got my terminal project done in two weeks. That was sort of a cultural center all ready. There's a different kind of culture that goes along with skating. But I really wanted to do an ethnic type cultural center, sometime in my life, and I was actually involved with the Hawaiian Cultural Center, to do a Hawaiian Paniolo Cultural Center, the period of Hawaiian cultural around the time the cowboys were introduced from Spain, Mexico, to help control the cattle in Hawaii and how that influenced Hawaiian culture. We're designing in [unintelligible] where's there's a riding academy over there, right in the midst of Hawaiian ethnic community there.

[20:09]

[KN] We had actually designed a site for the cultural center. It was appropriated \$500,000 from the legislature to start the design work, but then the governor vetoed it. It was an ethnic thing because the governor then funded his own Pilipino Cultural Center. So it's never come back to life again. They say it could. We're just waiting to see. But it would be really nice to do that. And I'd like to do a multicultural center here because we know that the Asians just can't support its own so if we, all the different cultural groups, and not just the ethnic cultural groups. Eugene has so many different kinds of cultural groups. Everyone should be proud of what they stand for and have a place that they could display something of their own cultural within the center and hosts all kinds of events. It doesn't have to be really large to get it to work nicely. Right now, we have a very generous person who inherited a huge fortune from one of the networks, like ABC or NBC. They sold to ABC or NBC years ago and amassed this huge fortune and he's a sole heir, and he has this huge property up by Cheshire and he wants to develop it into a cultural center. We have lots of folks in our foundation who are resisting it, because it's so far out but Cheshire isn't that far away. And here we have a willing participant. There's a couple of nice creeks running through it, we already set the area for a big amphitheater, musical things, whatever, just as a start. The neighbor, you've met her, Lida, who is a hundred and two years old. She was at the Christmas party. She's the one who died recently. And she's willed her property to help fund this cultural center. Because she got to meet us and we talked about this cultural center. So some of the resources are all ready there, waiting for things to happen. The person who wants to donate this has had cancer this past year, so he couldn't do anything this whole year. He's finally recovered now. So he's already talking about rejuvenating this whole plan again. So we'll see. A little at a time, that's what it takes. It's takes lots of money one time to do these things, but I guess he's willing to do some of that. And with the other property and the earnings from that earmarked to support this thing in perpetuity. The other plan for that is to create housing to take care of elderly.

[EU] Would that be at the same area in Cheshire?

[KN] Two different things – setting up two 501(c)(3) tax organizations, one for this cultural center, one for this Hanimalani (sp?).

[EU] And who would that be for? Anyone?

[KN] Anyone. It's earmarked for the Kanikapila (sp?) group, basically and another group that they befriended. They come to our Kanikapila's every month too. And then the Hanimalani is for the group after one of the guys who does the hula. You know who they are?

[EU] Yeah. Are there other groups that you've been involved with that we should be talking about?

[24:23]

[KN] Lots of groups [laughs]. Kiwanis is my charitable organization too. We do lots of kid friendly projects there. So we're involved with the [unintelligible] option. We donate every year, which is the gingerbread party. This year they raised three thousand dollars for our gingerbread party, so that was pretty nice. I've been involved with the Boy Scouts career education thing. Use to be a scout in Hawaii. I've never been officially a Scouter here, but whenever the Boy Scouts ask, I'll do stuff. So Rod Hansen, my other partner at the office and I help with career education, going to different high schools. We have high school students at different times doing internships and mentorships. We've had middle school students also doing whole terms of mentorships, it's surprising. We've actually done some great projects too, fun projects with them. Last year we had a high school student from South Eugene. The other year we had one from Junction City even. You know, we can't pay them. We just allow them to do some work and expose them to what we do in the office and meeting clients, getting involved with some gingerbread parties too. Our high school student this year helped design two of the big houses that we did at the gingerbread party. Our university intern did the others [laughs]. So every term, we have a university intern. And if the high school asks, we'll allow them to come in too. We had a Sheldon student here too, besides the South Eugene one. And tomorrow, I'll be doing lunch at Sheldon for the kids who are interested in architecture. You know, being on the board, I'm kind of obligated. I'm not on the board anymore, but I'm still obligated to make sure that schools tell their students what they need to know about how to get prepared for a career in architecture or interior or landscape architecture, I do all those three. I even do engineering if they want to. Too many kids don't know what accredited schools are. They think that they can go to any school to become an architect. Portland State always advertises on TV that they have a great architecture program, but they're not even accredited. If students waste their money going up there, they will never get license in Oregon. You have to graduate through an accredited school and an accredited program, see? Oregon is the only one in Oregon. We have a list of about fifty odd schools across the country with degrees that are accredited too...one counselor at Willamette High School, a few years ago, when I did a career education there, told this really

bright student to go to a drafting school in Arizona to become an architect; you cannot do that. It's unbelievable what the kids learn [laughs].

[EU] Is there anything else I should be asking you or you'd like to add to the oral history?

[KN] Well, I believe that I'd like to see students who have some music background too. Because that I think also helped lead me to architecture and makes you well rounded. I really like to see schools to require some music, some art to get people mellower [laughs]. Really! On my own, because we could never afford to take lessons by the way, I started with the harmonica in third grade and ukulele also then. My two older sisters' boyfriends started me on the harmonica and ukulele and my oldest sister's boyfriend left his ukulele with us so that I could play it. He taught me three chords. In the third grade, I knew three chords. And when my cousins moved from the big island over to Honolulu, we always go together, almost every weekend, to sing along. I played ukulele as we played "Old Black Joe" and "Swanee", you know. But never Hawaiian songs [laughs]. Then I took orchestra in the seventh grade. I was telling Irene just the other day, it's amazing what those teachers did for us kids because some of us probably listened, but I didn't. To be able to teach me how to play the violin. It's just one instrument, and in an orchestra situation, there are so many different instruments, you have to teach everybody how to play these things. I was really happy - there was a competition to determine who was the concert master, and I won that competition and I was the only one there who never took lessons.

[EU] This was on the violin?

[KN] The violin, yeah. I started with the viola and I didn't like it because they didn't play the melody. I play by ear, I pretended to read music really well. But if I knew what the piece sounded like, I could play it any time. I play the ukulele that way too [laughs].

[EU] That's it?

[KN] That's it.

[EU] Good. Well Ken, thank you very much.

[KN] Well, thanks for doing this.

[end 30:36]