

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON

ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

Japanese American Project

Issei/Kibei Experience

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J. S. KISHIYAMA AND Y. KISHIYAMA

Interviewed

by

Pat Morgan

on

April 6, 1973

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INTERVIEWEE: J.S. KISHIYAMA AND Y. KISHIYAMA

INTERVIEWER: Pat Morgan

SUBJECT: Issei/Kibei Experience

DATE: April 6, 1973

PM: This is an interview with Mr. and Mrs. J. S. Kishiyama for the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project, on April 6, 1973 in Los Angeles, California. The interviewer is Pat Morgan.

I understand you came from Japan when you were a young boy. Can you tell me what you remember about that?

JK: Yes, I came here on November 26, 1919. We arrived in San Francisco on a ship named Shunimaru. We went to Angel Island around San Francisco, where all the immigrants go. My father came to get me from Angel Island and at that time I was fourteen. I went with him to Richmond-- which is across the bay from San Francisco--where he was working in a roundhouse.

YK: On the railroad.

JK: Yes, railroads. At the time wages were so low, about a dollar a day. Bread was about ten cents, everything was really cheap, so they got along fine.

PM: Did you go to school there?

JK: Yes, I went to an American school, but not there. My brother from Phoenix came and got me.

YK: No, he's from Imperial Valley, not Phoenix.

JK: Right. I went to Imperial Valley and farmed, raising cantaloupe and watermelon. My brother didn't do very well, so he quit.

YK: Then you went to school in Imperial Valley.

- JK: Yes. My brother-in-law, Hori, made me go to grammar school to become educated in English. After about two years I was able to go on to school in Hollywood. At the same time, I worked for an American family; "schoolboy," that's what we called them then. I did kitchen work, housework, gardening, and went to school.
- PM: Did your father come here before you?
- JK: Sure, he came a long time ago.
- YK: You saw your father for the first time since you were young when you came over here.
- JK: Yes.
- PM: So he came over many years before you. Do you remember what he did back in Japan before he came over?
- JK: He farmed on a small farm.
- YK: Everybody had come to America and told how they made lots of money in America, so his father came to work and send the money back to Japan. When the children grew up to be fourteen or fifteen, the son was called to America to work, work, work, you know. But since my husband was the youngest, and the only one to go to school, his big brothers would just work, and make money to be sent to Japan.
- JK: At that time, we never thought of education. Now, everyone goes to college, every kid goes to college.
- YK: Just make money, that's all we thought about at the time.
- JK: In 1919, the purpose of coming to America was to make money, that was it.
- PM: Who came over on the boat with you?
- JK: I was alone.
- YK: No, I think you came with your sister or sister-in-law.
- JK: No. We were supposed to come together, my brother and sister-in-law, but they had some kind of sickness, jun-ishicho, which is a stomach disorder like tapeworms. They were delayed one ship behind, so I came first. In San Francisco my father was waiting for me to arrive on the ship Shunimaru.

PM: Do you remember what kind of a ship it was?

JK: It was a pretty big size passenger ship, for that time. Japan had made it. They made three sister ships.

PM: What do you remember about the voyage?

JK: Oh, I got seasick for the first four or five days, but I got used to it so nothing was wrong. First, I didn't like the smell; oh, it was a bad smell. That's what made me sick.

PM: Were there a lot of Japanese immigrants coming over in 1926?

YK: No, I think 1919 was the last year they could come.

JK: No, it was 1922, when they made a change in the law.

YK: Yes, a law that made immigration stop there.

PM: So what year did you come over?

JK: I came over in 1919.

PM: What was your first impression when you came to America?

JK: Oh, my first impression was that it was so beautiful. The lawns were green, there were nice gardens, and when I arrived in San Francisco it was raining. At night we went to supper with my father and he treated me to a steak, a whole big piece of steak; oh, that was good, I'll never forget that. (laughter) When it rained-- you know Japan never had cement or paved roads at that time--it looked like a light reflecting, and I thought the water was a lake or something; that was so beautiful; I remember scenes like that in San Francisco.

PM: Back in Japan, how many people were on your farm? Was it a big family?

YK: No, only the father, mother, son or daughter helped on the small land.

JK: Well, they had four, five, or six small pieces of land, something like two acres in this country.

PM: Did your mother come over?

JK: No, she never came over. She stayed in Japan and died a few years ago.

PM: How many brothers and sisters did you have?

JK: I have eight, right? (laughter)

YK: Eight or nine; one died, so I think there were eight.

PM: Then some of them are still back there with the land, or their children are still on the land?

YK: Two are still there.

PM: Okay, it's your turn now. You were born in this country and then you returned to Japan to live for some time, and afterwards returned here. Can you tell me about this?

YK: Well, my mother died when I was eight years old and my father couldn't take care of the children, so in 1926 he took the three girls to Japan. My three brothers didn't go to Japan, only the girls went back. My father came back to America, but we stayed in Japan, for about ten years. I went to grammar school and jogako-- which means high school--then I came back to America in 1936.

PM: When you were in school, you lived in an American family's home and did odd jobs around the house. How old were you then and how long did you do it?

JK: I was about fifteen, and so I stayed there about four or five years.

PM: What kind of work did you do after that job?

JK: Oh, those people were so nice to me, you know. They treated me like one of the family. They cried when I quit.

YK: I think you just went to a boarding house in Los Angeles and worked on your own.

JK: Yes, I worked for myself.

PM: What did you do?

JK: I worked at a vegetable stand. At that time, lots of Japanese ran vegetable stands.

YK: There used to be a market, a supermarket, but vegetable stands were run by Japanese. Now, everybody does it, but at that time only Japanese ran vegetable stands.

PM: Did you ever do any farming before the war, when you were younger?

YK: Yes, in Arizona, you helped your brother, but not much.

JK: Yes. But in 1938 we met at her sister-in-law's house and got married in 1939. Then we went into flower business in 1946.

YK: My sister and husband ran a flower business, as growers. They wanted to quit, to go into the fisherman business. At the time an American law stopped the Japanese--the Issei, but not the Nisei--from running a boat and going fishing. Issei couldn't run a boat and fish, but Nisei could. At that time they said okay, Japanese could go fishing. My brother-in-law wanted to be in the fishing business, so she asked me to run the flower grower business. We lived in Phoenix then, so we came to Los Angeles in 1946.

JK: We were raising watermelon, and Susu [son] was about five or six.

YK: At first we stayed in Torrance, and then we went to Anaheim for about ten or twelve years.

JK: We sold the flower growing business. I was getting weak. She was all right, but my hips were bad, and I couldn't stand. I just wanted to take it easy. So, we quit the flower business and retired.

PH: That was in 1967, wasn't it?

YK: Yes, 1967 or 1968.

PM: Where were you before the war?

YK: We were in Arizona with his brother. We grew flowers in Phoenix, Arizona.

PM: Do you recall your reaction when you heard of the attack on Pearl Harbor?

YK: We couldn't believe it, and wondered what to do now.

PM: Did the FBI pick up any of your friends on the night of December 7th?

YK: No.

PM: Where did you go?

- YK: We went into the Meyer camp, a small holding area.
- JK: We were there for about three or four months.
- YK: No, not so much, maybe two months.
- JK: Then we moved into Poston, the main camp, in Arizona.
- YK: I think at that time Poston wasn't ready. That's why they sent us to Meyer. I don't know what they used that camp for, but the buildings were not new. It was some kind of Army camp or something. It had a kitchen and everything. Then the camps were ready, so they moved all the Japanese people.
- PM: What did you do in the camp?
- YK: First we worked in the canteen.
- JK: I worked in the canteen, that's what I did there. One by one everybody left, you know. So they didn't have enough people in the kitchen and asked us to volunteer to go into the kitchen and help. That's what I did.
- YK: We worked for sixteen dollars a month.
- PM: Did you work, too?
- YK: No, I had children, so I couldn't.
- JK: Yes, this time Michi [daughter] about two years old. I think Susu was about five years old.
- YK: No. When I went into the camp Susu was about two years old. After eight months--in May we went in--so in December Kenbo [son] was born, so I couldn't do anything.
- PM: I'd like to ask you a couple of questions. You said that you were born out here. Can you tell me where you were born and what your father was doing?
- YK: My father was farming too. He grew potatoes in Idaho. I was born in a small city--McCammon, Idaho.
- JK: It was a small country city.
- YK: They were growing potatoes there. I don't remember much, just that my mother died. I remember the funeral. I remember my father took us to San Francisco when we went to Japan and I saw the ocean for the first time. And I told Papa, "Gee, that's a big beach there. Everybody laughed at me, because I say "beetch." I remember that

but I don't remember the trip in the boat.

When I arrived in Japan it was a rainy day, everybody came to get me. They told me to eat tofu /bean cake/, good for you to eat. But I couldn't eat tofu, that made me break out in a rash. They told me not to wear stockings. I told them I wore stockings all the time here in America. And they would always stick together. So every time I come back from school my mother-in-law, who was like a stepmother--not stepmother but the one who takes care of me--washed my legs in washtub and take my stockings off. Everyday I did that. But I said, "I'm still going to wear stockings."

JK: Yes, those rashes come out. Most of the people do because Japan is a different climate.

PM: When did you return to America? Can you describe your reactions when you came back?

YK: In 1936. I never forget, that I'm not so surprised or excited of how I came here--It wasn't like coming to a strange land.

JK: You remember that you used to be here, when you were eight years old.

YK: I was not excited about how I came here. I came on the Japanese boat, Tatsutanaru, to San Francisco, and my father came and got me. We went to San Francisco, and my father bought me American clothes. We then took a train to Ogden, Utah. My two brothers met us, and we drove to Idaho in my brother's car.

PM: I'm going to go back a little bit. Did you say something about a law that was passed against the Japanese who were fishing?

JK: The Japanese boat, yes.

PM: When was this? Tell me about it.

YK: At one time Japanese can go fishing. But after that they stopped the Japanese. I don't remember what year it was though. After the law was passed and the Japanese couldn't go fishing, they came to a new decision and it said okay, now the Japanese can go fishing.

PM: Did it apply to just California or everywhere?

JK: I think California and down through Mexico.

- YK: When they said okay, my brother-in-law went into fishing business and we took over the flower business.
- PM: Was that in 1943, right in the middle of the war?
- JK: No, after the war.
- YK: I think 1947.
- PM: You were taking care of the farm when you stayed in Torrance?
- JK: Yes.
- PM: Was that the first time you did any farming?
- YK: No, in Arizona we farmed with my brother for one year. But it's so different, because it's hot there and cold here. But still, we knew how to grow good watermelon. We lived in Torrance for about six years, until the owners sold it to a high school. So we had to move. Everybody at that time was saying Anaheim was good. So we moved to Anaheim.
- PM: When you moved to Anaheim, were there very many Japanese Americans living there?
- YK: Not much, but still some there. We moved in about 1953 or 1954.
- PM: When you were younger, can you remember what your family's religion was?
- JK: Buddhist.
- PM: Did you keep that up when you came over to this country?
- JK: No, we don't go to church. We were too busy raising three kids. (laughter) No, we had no time to go to church.
- YK: No, don't say that. We weren't too busy, but we don't care about that, you know, Christian, Buddhism or anything.
- JK: Yes, we believe in God, but you know, we were so busy.
- YK: We sent our three children to church about three or four times, but they quit.
- JK: They even bought a Bible.

- YK: Yes, a Bible and everything, but they say that they don't like it. I say okay, I don't think my three children will go to church again.
- PM: Dating back as far as 1926, you said everybody really came over here to make money. Did they come over here to make money so they could go back to Japan or so they could bring some of their children back here with them?
- JK: Yes, they get money from here and take the money to Japan. People were poor.
- YK: I think, in Japan, everyone wanted to come to America, make money and then they went back. I think some people wanted to stay here. But I think at that time most of the people made money and then they went back. But after the war, they stopped that, and they tried to stay here and educate their children and do everything, you know, like they do in this country.
- JK: Yes.
- YK: So, when they made one hundred dollars, they sent it back to Japan. They never saved it here, just sent the money to Japan.
- JK: Otherwise, people in Japan--the family--has to starve. So, when the people come here and work, whatever they save, they send to Japan.
- YK: So, Bank of Tokyo, Sumitomo Bank, opened here at that time.
- JK: Yes, Bank of Yokohama, that's the only bank we have here in this country.
- YK: So, when they made money, they didn't put in the American bank, they put it in the Japanese bank. They wanted the money--not to buy anything, clothes or furniture or anything--just to save. And then they go back to Japan. But after the war, most of the Japanese change and they wanted to stay.
- PM: The people who wanted to go back to Japan were the fathers, the Issei. But what about their children that were growing up before the war, did they want to stay in America? Did they consider themselves Americans more than Japanese?
- JK: No, at that time, only one person comes over. We don't bring the wife or the husband. Only one, the head of

family came to America to make the money and then go back. They didn't have any families in this country.

YK: In 1919, right?

JK: Yes, that's the early time, when the husband was all alone.

YK: But when you and your brother came, as just young boys, sometimes you wanted to go back. Or did you want to stay here?

JK: I was going to go back. I had to make money and go back.

YK: I think everybody thinks that way. Some of the smart people liked this country so they stayed. But I think most of the people said, "Ah, I want to go back, I want to go back."

PM: Well, what happened when some of the people started sending for wives and raising children and as these Nisei started to get older and form the JACL [Japanese American Citizens League] didn't they consider themselves more American?

JK: Yes, I think so.

YK: They went to this country's schools, so I think they think of themselves as Americans. So, I think there is a big difference between the Issei and Nisei. The Issei couldn't speak good English and Nisei couldn't speak good Japanese.

PM: Do you think the war made a big difference between the Issei and the Nisei?

YK: Yes, I think the Nisei say, "to stay in this country we have to fight for this country," you know. But Issei say, "it's foolish to fight for the Americans." So, in every camp they divided--some people don't like to stay in America and they were picked up and sent to Tule Lake. Lots of people go to Tule Lake camp.

JK: What do you call that group?

YK: That group is Issei. They say, "I am Japan side."

JK: Those kind against the Americans.

- YK: But we have to fight with Americans. Some Nisei were born here, but some Issei say that is foolish. But I think that is wrong. Still I think that is wrong. They have to fight with the Americans, they have a citizenship, you know.
- PM: Did very many Issei that you knew want to go back to Japan after the war?
- YK: Not my friends. Nobody we know go to Tule Lake and then go back to Japan.
- JK: No, not too many that were already living in America. But Issei people go back to Japan, that's quite true.
- PM: I mean right after the war.
- YK: No. Right after the war they stay here.
- PM: I was reading that there were a lot of people who didn't want to live in America after they got sent to concentration camps and decided to go back to Japan because that was their home.
- YK: Maybe at that time Japan was winning or it was an easy life. Maybe they would like to go back to Japan but war made Japan so poor, after war it was not so good country at that time. So, I think Issei never go back to Japan after war.
- JK: They were beginning to like it here, wanted to stay. It was a better living, you know, more money, easier life than Japan.
- YK: But besides that they were getting old, so the children take care of father and mother. So, I think everybody wanted to stay here. After thirty or forty years they say, "Japan is not my country anymore."
- PM: Do you think a reason for so many of the young people who wanted to go back, ones who came over here in the early days, was the discrimination that they faced? You know, not too many people liked the Japanese at that time.
- JK: No. There was no discrimination, Japanese were treated pretty good. The people were nice to the Issei.
- YK: Yes, after the war. But before the war some say they don't like Japanese.
- JK: That's true. In Arizona, in 1928, they come at night and turn over my brother's car and try to put his house

on fire. That was just for a few days.

JK: I don't know anybody here. That's why I went back to Japan. If you stay and make money, okay, but if you can't make money and you go back to Japan, you can't live there. Everybody say, "Gee, that man is no good, he can't make money." Everybody talk like that in Japan, I know that. So, when some people make lots of money they say, "Oh, Japan is better, I can live good in Japan." So they go back. But when you can't make money, you can't go back to Japan, only rich people go back and live in Japan. So those poor people die in this country, or when they getting old, they go to old homes and nobody takes care of them. They go to old homes and die.

PM: Could you tell me why you think so many Japanese took their Nisei children and sent them back to Japan to be educated?

JK: I think Japanese people think Japan education is better, because they talk the same language. In Japan, big difference from this country. In Japan, had to take care of father and mother and the eldest boy had to watch over brothers and sisters. But this country is not like that, that's why I think that everybody thinks Japanese education is better.

YK: And another thing, when you send to Japan, you can work here, make more money. But when children are here, there is no time, because mother has to take care of the children. But when you send them to Japan, you can work and make more money. So, there are two reasons: Japanese education is better and you can make more money. That's a big mistake, you know. When they send the children away and they come back it's never good between father and son or between father and daughter.

JK: They lose the affection between father and children. They don't see them for so long. They are like strangers.

PM: You said that everybody wanted to go back. They all came here to make more money and then they wanted to go back. But how many of them really did? Of all the Japanese that came here before 1920, how many do you think actually got to go back?

JK: That's hard to tell. Probably lots of people go back.

YK: No, not many people go back to Japan. You think lots of people. I don't think many did.

JK: I don't know. My father go back to Japan two or three times. He was making pretty good money. He got a nice job and so he came over two, three times.

PH: What did he do?

JK: He was in Richmond working on turbo-engines. You know, big engine that turns around. It has a big turntable to turn it with. He stood in a little house, and made whole engine turn. That's what he was doing. At that time I thought my father was a great guy, moving such a big engine with just one hand. (laughter)

PH: Where was he during the war?

JK: In Japan. He went back to Japan and died there.

YK: So, how many sisters did you have?

JK: I have four sisters, four brothers.

YK: How many in America?

JK: Three sisters, three brothers. And I tell you this, the relationship was not so good with my father or mother because we were separated. I came over when I was fourteen, and my mother was crying. She didn't want to send me to America because I was so young. So, she was crying, "Don't go." But my father forget what I looked like. When I come to San Francisco the loud-speaker said, "Kishiyama, Shiego Kishiyama's father, where is Shiego Kishiyama's father." and he said, "Here." "Shiego, I am your father, remember?" That was when I first come over. Otherwise I don't know who's who. Everybody doing that.

At the same time we had what you call a photograph marriage. That's so much fun to watch. (laughter) Some guy played dirty and sent a young picture from Japan, and wife say, "This is not you, this picture is too young for you. I didn't know you were so old." But in about 1921 or 1922, they change the immigration law and say those kind can't come no more.

YK: Otherwise, in this country, our men--Japanese men--had no Japanese women to marry. But that's a long time ago. (laughter)

JK: I think at that time we didn't have Japanese women here. Very seldom did you see a Japanese woman in this country. They were all men, mostly old, just mostly old people.

- YK: At that time it was hard for the Issei, they don't have a house, a home or anything like that. They have only a blanket and something to cook on and they just pack it up and move it around. When they married, they settled down and tried to raise a family. But at first they get a job and just move around.
- JK: Yes. They move around, with their blanket on their shoulder.
- YK: Lots of people do that, they move to this camp and that camp.
- JK: Japanese people sure had ambition and they try to make money. No waste. When they finish one job they go out tomorrow morning to another place.
- YK: I know a family, both the husband and the wife are working, and the wife say that she wants a stove to cook on. But the husband say that it's a waste of money. So they just use cement blocks and cook like that. Gee, they save money, try to save lots of money. And she say, when they lay down, she can't move, so uncomfortable.
- JK: When she lay down sleeping, she would moan. (laughter)
- YK: They have money, but still they lived like that. They just save money. Even when they have children, three or four, they still wanted to go back. You know, the whole family together would go back. But then the war started, so they stayed here. Well, that's the Issei, but the Nisei is different, a lot different.
- JK: You can't compare them to when I was young.
- YK: But the Nisei know the Issei and how they are poor and hardworking. But the Sansei don't know anything about the Issei and the hard times that they had. Sansei all different now. Nisei leans in some ways to Japanese, but Sansei--no, no Japanese there. Old Nisei, some of them still think Japan is a good country. Old Nisei are about fifty, fifty-five now.
- JK: Sometimes I think I'll go back to Japan, but she doesn't want to, so I stay here; besides that, the children are here.
- YK: I don't think Susu and Kenbo know anything about Japan.
- JK: I think one of these days I'm going to send them on a tour--you know, those group people, that's the only way to go.

- PH: Do you wish that the Nisei and Sansei would have carried on more of the Japanese culture?
- YK: Yes, I think so.
- JK: Some Nisei and Sansei are very smart--a lot of them.
- YK: But I wish more could speak Japanese and read Japanese books, but that's a lot of hard work.
- PH: When did your father come over, and what did he do over in Japan?
- YK: I don't know what he was doing in Japan. But I think that he was a farmer. He came here first. When my mother came here, she married at that time. My mother lived in the city; it was a big difference from country to city, you know. But still, my mother died when I was eight years old in this country. They were both farming in Idaho. After she had six children, my mother died. Well, that's all.
- PH: Most of the Japanese people were in California and the West Coast states. There weren't many in Idaho, at least to my knowledge. How did they get there?
- YK: When they got out of the camp, they couldn't stay on the West Coast. They have to move inland.
- PH: No, I mean, when they first came over to this country, how did they ever end up in Idaho?
- YK: Oh, lots of Japanese people were working on the railroad. So, I think they know Idaho and Utah were over there. I'm not sure of the reason, but I think one of the reasons is that they were working the railroad and they just go around. Lots of people went to Idaho.
- JK: Mostly railroad. No money to run their own farms. So most people got work that paid wages.
- YK: Some got work with railroad, others work on farms out there and then they started their own. They had a big cannery up there in Utah.
- JK: Vegetable cannery--tomatoes and beans.
- YK: That cannery lend money to the farmers to run the farm. The company paid the expenses.
- PH: They leased the land to the farmers?

- YK: Yes. So at that time, when Japanese had no money, it was still easy to start farming there. I think that's why a lot of people were going to Utah.
- JK: This canning company commended the Japanese, said they were all right, good farmers. They put out the money and they used so much and run the farm. Crops went to the company, and I think the profit was divided, something like that. Now, the Japanese have big farms.
- YK: They were small to start with, but when they find out they can make money, they started their own.
- PM: Before the war they couldn't own any land though.
- YK: Yes. You can't own the land but some borrow hakujin's name, white people's name, and they made a lease or something like that with it. And same on the West Coast, too. Japanese couldn't lease, but some Hisei could lease when some white people gave their name. I know Sasaki-Sen leased some land, but in some older Hisei's name. At first, you can't make money when you work for the cannery, they take a good part of it. You just got enough to eat. When you got enough money, you could quit and start your own farm.
- PM: Did your father work that way with the cannery?
- YK: No, I don't know how he got started.
- JK: Your father was a potato grower.
- YK: Yes, only potato grower there in Idaho in 1936.
- JK: I think he thought it was better to be independent, you know.
- YK: My father's different than other people, he worked in a hakujin's house for a long time, so he spoke good English, at that time, in Idaho. So when something would happen, my father would go and talk with the white people. They said to me, "Your father is the best English speaker." They wanted him to go to court and be a translator. He worked there a long time. He went to summer school and night school. He liked books. He died in 1974, he was about eighty-one years old. Oh, he'd read a book every-day. But after awhile he went back to Japan, he was happy there.
- PM: Do you have any comments that you would like to add?

- JK: You know, when I first came over here, I liked coffee so much. Boy, my father got mad. We used to live in a boarding house, and my father told the cook, "Don't give my son coffee anymore. Coffee is no good. Don't give him no more." And that woman would hide it sometimes. She didn't bring me coffee everyday. Oh, I liked to drink it so much. I would sneak in the kitchen and drink a cup of coffee.
(laughter)
- YK: You know, Issei say, "Don't do anything bad because brings shame on Japan." So, Issei is all quiet. And some Nisei are the same sometime. "Don't do anything bad because we are Japanese." So, I think they are quiet, Nisei all quiet. But Sansei don't know that, they don't care. They say, "I'm an American." Those around Susu's age say, "I'm a Japanese American," so they say it's the same as American. I think a fifty or sixty year old Nisei still say they are Japanese. And they say, "Don't do anything bad or something that would bring shame." I know some fifty or fifty-five year old Nisei, same thinking as the Issei.
- JK: I think it's better for them to think they are Americans.
- YK: I am a citizen but still not a real citizen inside. I tell my Susu, "Okay Susu, you are still a Japanese, so be careful." Okay, Japanese or American, some people are about the same. My husband said when he went back to Japan, "This is my country so I am proud to be here."
- JK: That's true, you know, feelings are different in Japan.
- YK: I know that, but still I don't want to go back. I want to stay here.
- PM: I'd like to thank you very much Mr. and Mrs. Kishiyama, on behalf of the California State University, Fullerton, Japanese American Oral History Project for your help and cooperation.

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