

GEORGE ABE

MR. NORMAN ABE: Today is August 25, 1980. I, Norman Preston Abe, have the privilege to be in the home of my uncle, nurseryman George Abe in Selma, California, 93662.

Before we get into the interview proper, I would like to have you give us your full name, place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MR. GEORGE ABE: My name is George Abe. I was born between Selma and Del Rey on July 21, 1908. I've been living right here since 1918.

MR. NORMAN ABE: From what part of Japan did your parents come, and why did they choose to settle in this area?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Dad, Imatsu Abe, was from Niigata and Mom, Hisaye Abe, was from Fukushima. Dad came on a whaling vessel around 1900 while Mother came in either 1906 or 1907. Dad used to tell me about the ship's sailing masts that had to be put up and changed to change course. The reason he left Japan was for a better livelihood. He came over here without the knowledge of customs or language and found work on the railroad in Nevada, I believe.

The he came back to California and worked as a laborer at various ranches including A.J. Wells Ranch in 1912 in Del Rey. I was born first in 1908. Ben and Reo were soon born and since times were rough (and it was hard to support a family), Mom, Ben, Reo, and I went back to Hakodate in Japan and stayed with Mom's parents in 1913. But Mom was pregnant when she left California and my sister Mary was born in Japan. A little later Mom and I came back to California to join Dad; but Ben, Reo, and Mary stayed in Japan. When Ben and Reo were in their teens, they came back to California. But Mary was unable to come over since she was born in Japan.

The first labor camp that Dad ran was at the Gardenlove Ranch on Lincoln Avenue in Del Rey around 1914 or 1915. Around 1917 or 1918, he ran two camps.

One was at Charlie Chandler's place on the southwest corner of South and McCall Avenues in Del Rey. Dad would house about 30 or 40 men. At that time there were very few women. I think there were two families that stayed there and had separate quarters.

Then his other camp was at Fred Camel's place also in Del Rey north of Adams Avenue on Del Rey Avenue. In 1918 Dad bought a grape farm in Selma where I'm living now.

I went to Prairie School, in the first grade, at the corner of American and McCall. Later I went to Walnut School to the third grade and when we moved to Selma, I went to Garfield School. I guess they didn't see any reason for me to stay in the third grade, so they moved me to the fifth grade. And in 1926 I graduated from Selma High School.

I always liked sports and we had a neighbor Peter Christensen. He had two boys who were football players. They were real athletes, and I used to watch them. I asked Dad if I could play, but Dad was reluctant

because I was light and felt that I might get hurt. But I made the lightweights in 1925 and in 1926. I must have played most of the time in 1925, and I don't remember getting taken out in 1926. I might have missed out one quarter all together. I was the captain of the "B" Lightweight Team, and we tied for the Valley Championship which was quite a thrill for me.

This was around the Depression and times were real hard for everyone. I remember raisins were taken to the SunMaid packinghouse in Selma and since they had a surplus, they piled them up in one corner and poured fish oil on it, making it unfit for human consumption, but it was used for hog feed. And labor at that time was 10 cents an hour.

MR. NORMAN ABE: They wanted to destroy the raisins so they wouldn't get on the market and make the price worse?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Right. And later we farmed with Dad on leased land from Redbank Orchards in Woodlake. It had what was called early soil and crops would come out the earliest there (in Central California). That was because the slope faced south and the boulders at the top warmed the soil when hit by the sun. But the venture didn't turn out too good, because getting enough water was a problem.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Where did the water come from?

MR. GEORGE ABE: A well. My father and Ben stayed on for about two years. And on a farm north of Elderwood during winter, Ben and Reo had a beautiful crop of peas but a severe frost wiped them out. That was around 1935.

MR. NORMAN ABE: That was just before the Depression, I assume.

MR. GEORGE ABE: No, the Depression was on then. 1929 and '30 to 1938. Things gradually got better for me. Later I was hauling and selling tomato plants from Los Angeles to the farmers out here. It was about this time I married Jean through a friend. She worked near San Gabriel near Los Angeles, so when I would go after tomato plants in Los Angeles, I would deviate a little to see her. I knew her for about a year and then we got married May 11, 1941 at the Fresno Methodist Church.

We have five healthy children, all born in Selma except Arlene. She was born in Arkansas at the Relocation Camp. The names of our other children are Maxine, Christine, Steven, and Jeff.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Are they married?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Just Arlene and she has two children; Adam and Kiki.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Getting back to the high school days, didn't you use to wrestle?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Yes. After my football, basketball, and track days at Selma High School, I went out for the Japanese Nisei football team and the sumo wrestling team for Selma. We formed the Fresno Nisei all-star football team with players from Caruthers, Parlier, Fresno, Sanger, and Del Rey, and myself from Selma. The fellows that played were excellent players. George Domoto was from Fresno State College and was an all-conference guard. Just imagine playing with a fellow weighing around 210

or 220 pounds. Others were Tom Nakamura from Sanger, Tom Nakagawa from Caruthers, and the Omata boys out of Hanford probably weighed 170 pounds or so. They had been playing for Hanford High School and were pretty good athletes. So we must have had enough for two full teams who came out and practiced on Sundays. All of us were pretty steady players in high school and kept our own positions, but we weren't used to playing together. You know, you just don't get that teamwork practicing once a week.

Our coach was Irwin Ginsberg who had coached Fresno High School. And with this group I went to Sacramento and Los Angeles, but missed out going to San Francisco because I was sick with the flu. But when they came down here to play it snowed. There must have been an inch or an inch and a half of snow. And I think we played at Edison High School football field against the Chinese team, and we beat them. We played the Oliver boys out of Los Angeles and also the San Francisco team called the Showa. We had quite a bit of fun.

I think I played for about two years and after that I did a little sumo wrestling. Each town seemed to have a sumo team. We'd practice at night in Selma and would go to Fresno for our matches. We would not have had a sumo team if it wasn't for the Isseis who made us go. Our coach in Selma was Yoshinogawa. His actual name was something else, but that was his name for a surnotori (sumo wrestler). He must have been a pretty good sumo wrestler to have a professional name, even though he may have been on the lower ranks.

We were in the lightweight division and your dad Ben was one of the toughest to handle. He was a darn good wrestler. I don't know if I could beat him, but I know I couldn't beat him at the dojo or wrestling place. Ben, Reo, Hersh, and I all wrestled. Hersh, along with four others, once took the state championship. Hersh was the youngest and must have weighed about 180 to 190 pounds. The oldest was George Hamanata and was number one on the team. Others on the team were Takeo Kunashige and Hy Ikeda. But those fellows beat San Francisco, San Jose, Sacramento, and Los Angeles wrestler for the state championship. They were the youngest of all the sumotories and they beat these ranking wrestlers. I was a spectator when they had their match in Alameda; at that time I was working in Oakland. Hersh was with the Fresno team and I saw Hersh win his match to help his winning team.

MR. NORMAN ABE: I'd like to hear more about your father's farm also. I guess after your dad Imatsu made enough money from his labor contracting, he purchased the farm.

MR. GEORGE ABE: Right. After saving and scrimping, he was able to put a down payment on this farm in 1918. He must have paid around \$4,000 for 13 acres. I remember going to the real estate office in Selma. The farm was in real run-down condition and it had a small pump on the top of the hill. The house on top of the hill wasn't much of a house, and we moved it to the bottom of the hill. Some of the vines on the west side are still producing and are the same ones since the purchase of the place in 1918.

MR. NORMAN ABE: When your dad first got the farm, he had horses, right?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Right. He had a team of hoes, and we built that barn

in 1919.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What other kind of livestock did you have?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Well, we had one cow for milk and some chickens.

I had to do all the chores; feed the chickens, milk the cow, et cetera. Once we had a pig and gave our excess foods and crops to him, like pumpkins. I think we just went to town to buy beef, but food was hard to buy because we didn't have much money. And this wasn't us alone, this was everybody in that particular period of time. Things were just rough. At that time we had no icebox. We just had a square box with a water tank on top and gunney sacks on the sides. The water would drip down the gunney sack and this was a cooler for our food. It kept our food cool, but you couldn't keep any food in there very long. You had to eat it or it would spoil in no time. We did have plenty of milk and eggs.

MR. NORMAN ABE: When did you get an icebox?

MR. GEORGE ABE: We bought ours around the late 20's, I believe. We had to buy chunks of ice for it to keep our food cold. The refrigerator came in the 30's.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Did you always have electricity?

MR. GEORGE ABE: When Dad had the Japanese labor camps, we had lanterns and lamps. It was my job to clean the soot out of the chimney because my hands were small enough to go in there. I must have been seven or eight. And we also had big Japanese baths and it was my job to fill it up and put a brush in there and put wood under it for fire. Then the laborers could take a hot bath. It was out in the open. Maybe some trays or something to cover one side for privacy. They'd stay outside to wash themselves, then they'd warm up inside the tub and then get out. It was my job to clean out that tub, and then make a new bath. The Japanese were clean people and took a bath every night.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Why didn't they just stay in the tub and wash themselves.

MR. GEORGE ABE: Oh, no! Then it would be like soup, it would be mud.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Wouldn't they get cold standing outside?

MR. GEORGE ABE: I kept that bath piping hot. Also, this was during the summer months; August, September, during harvest time. Maybe into October with the later variety of grapes. But most of the picking was during August and September.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What was the life of the laborer like? Did they sing songs?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Well, I don't know, I was too young. They might have, but they worked so hard. But I tell you Norman, Mom would cook and her night would end about 12 o'clock. She would cook, wash dishes, et cetera. Then get the next day's lunch ready for the boys. They all took lunches, musubi and okazu.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What' musubi?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Rice balls. Mom would make rice in a great big pot, and I had to make the fire of course, for about 30 people. Her days would end about 12 o'clock and then she was up again around 3 o'clock making lunch and breakfast for them, which included miso soup.

It was a hard life. Dad would dispatch the workers and keep the books and he would work until around 12 o'clock. When we couldn't find him, I'd go to see what happened to him. He'd be out there in his office sleeping on a pad on the floor, too tired to come home. They really did work and this was the life for many Isseis. So now the people who worked for Dad are all over California and many are successful farmers. When Dad died, we got messages and koden (money gift) from all over. I didn't even know who they were. Many who worked for Dad at one time or another may have become more successful than Dad. Dad had five of us kids to take care of and that was quite a job. I don't think he cared for farming. But he could keep books and was an avid reader. When he was getting ready to apply for his citizenship, he knew the Constitution and could name all the presidents. He told me he was ready to apply, but we never made it over there.

MR. NORMAN ABE: How long was your dad a labor contractor?

MR. GEORGE ABE: From 1914 until 1918, just during the summer months.

MR. NORMAN ABE: It appears that buying the farm in 1918 was an important step and starting a nursery in 1939 was another important step for your dad.

MR. NORMAN ABE: The nursery had a very humble beginning. When I was hauling tomato plants out of Los Angeles, my dad's friend Mr. Watanabe, who had a nursery in Coalinga, would come down and talk to Dad telling him, "You have the finest chance of starting a nursery. George has a truck and he's hauling plants out of Los Angeles. When he goes south to pick up tomato plants towards the end of the season, he could also bring in a load of flowering plants and you could sell them." Well, Dad loved plants so I'd come back with flowering plants on the tail end of the truck behind the tomatoes. Then we'd spread them out there on ground we rented where the stage line (Greyhound Bus Station) is now. People would come out there and they didn't know what a pansy was, they didn't know what a bedding plant was. They picked 'em because it was pretty. So we were selling these flowering and bedding plants, and Dad grew some grapevines and trees and grafted them, too. At first Dad was by himself at the nursery because I was trucking. He did this in '39 and '40 and I started helping him there in '41. After the war I found a new place by Torii's Market. It was a vacant lot with a big hole which I got filled. It was a dirty old run down place with grass as high as this building, and I bought it (from an engineer who lived in Mexico) in two or three payments.

But we worked hard, seven days a week, and no vacation for six or seven years. We worked from 7:00 a.m. 'til about 6 o'clock at night. Then I'd come home and keep books and so forth. But mom and dad and Jean were there also. Sundays became a darn good day. Sometimes we'd work to 2:00 or 3:00 in the afternoon without eating lunch. That shows things were getting back to normal after the war. People were looking for vines and plants for orchards. Japanese farmers were looking for a place to buy

their trees, because many didn't have much of a place left. We had good years, hard-working years. Ornamentals at that time were secondary, they had to have vines and trees first.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Ornamentals are -

MR. GEORGE ABE: Plants around the house. And in the past few years, it's really picked up.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What was life like during World War II? And what about the prejudice?

MR. GEORGE ABE: We didn't have much prejudice until about February 1942 when newspapers, including the Fresno Bee, started stirring up things. America was quite unprepared for war and was in near panic. The Japanese became the scapegoats and many who lived on the coast were put in temporary concentration camps with only so many hours notice. They (Caucasians) had a lot of meetings at different schools and their topic was, naturally, "What should we do with the Japanese population residing here?" I asked about one particular meeting they had at a school and was told they asked for a show of hands on how many wanted the Japanese completely out of California? No one spoke in our favor.

The Japanese were a small unknown minority group. One reason was that we were just trying to get along the best we could and had no political power. We didn't speak up very much and were quite docile. But I remember when the curfew came, we'd go to Fresno and come back way after curfew and no one ever stopped us.

The people of Selma were outwardly friendly but with the war hysteria, I'm sure a lot resented us behind our backs.

But we had some real staunch friends, too. People like Lowell Pratt who was the publisher of the Selma paper, Dr. and Mrs. Burns, Mr. and Mrs. Hoegh, Mr. Henry Nielsen who taught Sunday School, Mr. and Mrs. Crossley, Mr. and Mrs. Wrightsen (she was a schoolteacher), and a number of others. These people thought it was entirely wrong to move us out because we were small in number and because we were of Japanese parentage.

Anyway, we went to the Fresno Assembly Center which was the Fresno Fairgrounds. There were several of these temporary camps in the state and Fresno's held about 3,000 to 5,000 people. We sold quite a bit of the nursery stock to Sid Whitehorn, a Fresno nurseryman. Then we sold the rest for \$200 to Jay who used to work for the Fresno Bee. About then I picked up a pickup load of trees from Jay and planted them in front of the race track on the north entrance. I don't know if they're still standing, maybe the cypress is.

From those so-called Assembly Centers, we were sent out to various camps. The first or advance group would go out and prepare the place.

I wasn't in this group, but I was in the first regular group because we were in Block B. It was either 300 or 500 that went on this train. I was appointed in charge to oversee the passengers.

The people in each car had to stay in that car. If they wanted anything, they would tell their captain and I would relay the message to the

commander. We had no serious problems except most were tired and grumpy after riding nights and days straight without hardly a break. It was hot in October, and we had to go through the desert. We went through Texas and through the town or Texarkana, and finally into Arkansas. It was a long tedious ride and we were supposed to have two 30-minute daily stops to exercise. They did not let us get out at all. I complained an awful lot, but they said they were behind schedule. You see, whenever there was a troop train, or even a cattle train coming through, we had to be sidetracked so they could go through. And whenever a troop train was going by, we'd pull our window shades down so they wouldn't see us. They said these guys (troops) might not like seeing us.

There was one incident which involved the bachelors group. They were getting very, very tired and real grumpy. They were running out of cigarettes and so forth, and we finally made one stop in Texas. There representatives from each coach got off and purchased goods. Some little station, we practically bought all their cigarettes, took all their change because we had nothing but bills. On top of that the girl was having trouble counting. The commander of the train said, "Come on, George, get everybody on the train." But the guys were saying, "We're in no hurry, let 'em go. If they don't want to wait for us, they don't have to." So the train started off and had gone 50 yards or so, then stopped. It was kind of comical. They knew they couldn't go without us. They were saying, "She's got our money, we're not going to leave without our change." And we came back with arms full of cigarettes, candy, and gum; but that was the only stop we were allowed.

It was hot and sticky, and I don't remember if we even got to take a bath. The fellow who was in charge of the sick people was quite disturbed because he couldn't do much for them. I don't remember, but there must have been a doctor or nurse on the train, or someone to give medical attention because we did have pregnant women and elderly people on there.

MR. NORMAN ABE: I guess the only way to get exercise was to get up and move around in the aisles?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Yes. But most just sat there. There was very little movement. I know Mother was in one section and Dad was in another. I don't know why, they didn't separate Jean and I.

When we got to Arkansas, it was beautiful. Fall was just coming, and we saw a lot of red leaves. We arrived late afternoon, but before we got there (Jerome) we were sidetracked for a couple of hours. That was almost unbearable after six days and five nights of confinement. As long as we were moving it was okay, but any time we'd stop, then people would get jittery.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What kind of jobs did you have in camp?

MR. GEORGE ABE: I worked with a soil survey team, checking for arable land. The land we checked was like a jungle, and it was hard. Dad wanted to start a nursery. That did not go over too well, because nobody wanted plants. So he cleaned the Co-op office, which took about 40 minutes. Later I worked for the Co-op as the coordinator of different

departments like the shoe store, the grocery store, beauty shop, barbershop, and the two dry goods stores. I went around to see how they were doing and checked their inventory. I also went to the bank once a week with three others and carried a pass with me with my picture on it so I could show it to the sentry and get out. I went to Little Rock twice. Once because the Co-op wanted to start a beauty shop, so I went there to buy the supplies with three others.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What were camp conditions like?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Arkansas was hot and humid. Your bedding stayed wet and while sitting at the mess hall, perspiration would drip from your elbow. Real high humidity and never too windy, except in the winter. In the winter, icicles would hang down about two feet.

As far as social conditions, the young people would dance now and then. And, naturally, we had fights at times. Various groups would meet and people would get together for their own socials. But all of a sudden we were thrown together; 10,000 Nihonjin (Japanese) in one place. It was quite a feeling and you became close knit with certain groups. Then before you know it they tell us to go out and get a job. First they kick us out of California, then they tell us to find a job outside of Relocation Center. And we did. We went to work outside the camp (and inside the camp, there were barbershops, hospitals, et cetera). We did get a certain amount of clothing and food free. I think they fed us for about 50 cents a day, but don't quote me on that.

And in that Co-op I worked for, we started a co-op employees club and had the best record of all the camps of profit made and profit that went back to the people.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Since your dad liked plants, did he put plants around his building?

MR. GEORGE ABE: I don't remember. But he did take a sago palm there and they brought it back. All the way to Arkansas and all the way back. It was one that I had bought for him out of Los Angeles. Then, one day in winter when it was cold, it was left outside. I had asked someone to bring it indoors, but he left it out and it froze that night.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Where did you go from Jerome?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Well, Arlene was born in 1943 and we moved to the Rohwer Camp when Jerome was closed. We moved to Chicago and stayed with Johnson and Mieko Kebo for a short time. My first job was where I ran machines that would cut steel rails and mill various parts for railroad crossing switches. I worked from 8:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and many nights until 7:00 p.m.

I believe I saw two Christmases in Chicago. I remember how icy it was. In February 1945 we left Chicago for home. Arlene was quite sick at the time, and the doctors there couldn't diagnose her problem. When we reached Denver where Jean's mother lived, we took her to a Japanese doctor and he diagnosed it immediately as bronchial pneumonia. He said, "You can't go to California, you won't have Arlene. You'd better put her in here and let us take care of her right now." So it was a Catholic hospital that Arlene went to, and they steamed out her congested lungs. She was in there for about 10 days.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What comments do you have about the numerous clubs and organizations you belong to or have belonged to?

MR. GEORGE ABE: I've been a member of the JAACL (Japanese American Citizens League) since the late 20's. The first meeting I went to was at Dr. Yatabe's office (a dentist) and I went with Chic Yamaguchi. They said the purpose of the organization was to get Japanese American citizens together, to become more active in civic life and to better the Japanese life in the community. And by banding together we could do this, alone we couldn't. It made a lot of sense. And as Nihonjins, we have a lot of things in common. I believe in the organization and see the importance of it. We haven't tested it to the fullest, but I think we're quite well accepted. I have been accepted by the Masonic Lodge and have been a Rotarian since '54. I belong to trade clubs and there they don't care what you are; before they did. And the Rotary Club would not accept minorities before, but now they do.

I also joined the San Joaquin chapter of the California Association of Nurserymen, which goes from Madera to Tulare. I've been president two different times and from there I went to state representative for our chapter. They're all strong workers and when it comes to prejudice, I doubt if there is any there. You know nurserymen are all earthly people. People who love plants are a pretty friendly group. I attended the state conventions and trade shows and still do so. Coming back to the Shrine, I think the Shrine is a good organization also since they contribute to the old people's home and to the Children's Hospital in San Francisco. There, underprivileged children get in without any charge, without regard to creed, color, or race and they get real close attention.

MR. NORMAN ABE: What other officers have you held in these clubs or organizations?

MR. GEORGE ABE: I guess for the Selma JAACL. I must have been president two or more times and I was the Fresno District Governor. I was on the board of directors for the Rotary Club. And I was a director for the Chamber of Commerce group for about five or six years.

MR. NORMAN ABE: Well, we're just about through. Any other comments about your life or the nursery?

MR. GEORGE ABE: Well, concerning the name of the nursery. There was a Selma nursery sometime before us owned by Mr. Mulligan, but it wasn't registered.

Also I have learned a lot when I joined the Nurserymen's Association. I would attend refresher courses for nurserymen at Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo. I picked up all I could and read all I could. I think I must have gone to those courses at Cal Poly six or eight years without a miss. There we learned about different and new plants, different methods of propagating, different equipment, and sales. And the students were there also, and it was fun. Now we have conventions.

As for the highlights of my life, my marriage in 1932 and when Arlene and each of the kids were born.

The saddest days were when my parents died. Dad died in 1954, Mom died when she was 90. They helped you, nursed you, but you know you don't stop. You just keep going-- as long as you are mentally and physically capable-- enjoying your work and helping others.

Finally I'd like to say that I'm quite proud of my family. My wife Jean has helped me a lot at the nursery besides taking care of our home and raising our children. Steve is presently managing our "Selma Nursery" and has a degree from Reedley College. He is helped by Chris who has a BA Degree in Arts and Crafts from San Francisco State. Maxine is teaching at Jackson Elementary School and has been teaching in the Selma School District for eight years. Arlene works in Berkeley as a landscape architect and has a BS Degree in Landscape Design from Cal Poly, Pomona. And, finally, Jeff, the youngest, is going to college and also helps at our nursery.

MR. NORMAN ABE: In closing, I'd like to thank you for sharing your thoughts and your experiences with us.