

YOSHIO HONDA

MR. YOKOMI: Today is May 22, 1980. I, Joe Yokomi, am privileged to interview Mr. Yoshio Honda in his home located at 304 South Fourth Street, Fowler, California, 93625.

May I call you Yosh?

MR. HONDA: Yes, you may.

MR. YOKOMI: Okay, Yosh. What year were you born?

MR. HONDA: 1907.

MR. YOKOMI: 1907. That's many, many years ago. That should make your age about 73.

In the past, when you were a youngster, you went to school here in Fowler, is that correct?

MR. HONDA: Correct.

MR. YOKOMI: How did the teachers treat you when you went to school here in Fowler?

MR. HONDA: As far as I know, I think they treated me just like any other student.

MR. YOKOMI: Was there any discrimination when you attended school?

MR. HONDA: No.

MR. YOKOMI: No discrimination.

MR. HONDA: No.

MR. YOKOMI: What was your favorite subject in your grammar school days?

MR. HONDA: Favorite subject? Nothing special. I didn't pick out anything that was special.

MR. YOKOMI: Say, like mathematics or history?

MR. HONDA: Oh, mathematics, I guess. History I didn't care for so much. Mathematics was easy for me, so I guess that's what you call favorite then.

MR. YOKOMI: Did you have any hobbies when you were a youngster?

MR. HONDA: I played basketball, baseball, and then I took up fishing, on weekends, when I was in school.

MR. YOKOMI: I see. Now, during your high school days, did you go right here at Fowler High School?

MR. HONDA: Yes, I did.

MR. YOKOMI: As I recall, you loved baseball quite a bit.

MR. HONDA: Yes. I played baseball all through high school. And then Fowler Japanese Young Men's Association had a baseball team, and I played on that.

MR. YOKOMI: What year was that when you organized?

MR. HONDA: They started, I would say, in 1922 or '23, I would guess.

MR. YOKOMI: Oh. Like I see in a picture, in the past, it was the year 1926. Was that the year, the championship year? When all you youngsters got together?

MR. HONDA: I don't recall that. We had a championship team in 1921. Team players included James and Bob Morishige, Matsumura, the Kelly brothers, Harold Hirasuna, Jack Yanagihara, Gio Fugiwara, Harry Nakatsu, Kubo and Hotta. I don't remember the last player's name.

MR. YOKOMI: How about your form of transportation when you went to the various communities playing baseball?

MR. HONDA: The community people that formed the baseball team in Fowler, they're the ones; such as Mr. Miyake, Mr. Renge, and Mr. Osaki (Frank and Harry's dad), Mr. S. Oda -- who else? Mr. Nakamura, Harley's dad. Kouno helped quite a bit, but I don't think he had a car that was good enough to take us. Oh, Mr. Shirakawa took us around. Other than that, I don't recall right offhand.

MR. YOKOMI: Well, like Mr. Hirasuna, was he one of the inspirational leaders? As he had about three or four sons on the baseball team.

MR. HONDA: Mr. Hirasuna was a quiet type of fellow, and he and Mr. Tanaka would go out to the ballpark. Mr. Tanaka, especially, did a lot of work over there at the ballpark. He repaired the backstop and grandstand (as the bleachers were called then), and all of the area such as cleaning the playing field and the parking area. Mr. Tanaka was a bachelor and semi-retired. He passed his time away out there at the ballpark and Mr. Tanaka and Mr. Hirasuna were buddy-buddies. They went fishing together all the time, so they both did nearly all of the maintenance work out there.

MR. YOKOMI: So, going to the garage business. Did your dad start this garage business, or was it some other people that started this garage business?

MR. HONDA: Dad started the garage business. I don't know what year, but in 1917 when the Armistice was declared, he was in the tire and battery business. Mr. Cole had a bus service between Fowler and Fresno. His bus battery was dead on this foggy morning and Dad was busy, and I was sent out. I was too young, too small, to carry a big battery (in those days batteries were three times the size of present batteries). I was too small to lift it out of the car and put it back in so Mr. Cole said, "I'll do that." So he took me over there and we changed the battery. Now, all the packinghouses had steam in those days. While I was changing the battery the steam whistles all started blasting away, and we didn't know what in the world was wrong. Then we came back to the shop and found out that the Armistice was signed and the war, World War I, was over.

MR. YOKOMI: This battery business, did your dad, more or less, make some kind of an invention on the batteries?

MR. HONDA: No, he didn't make an invention on the batteries. But he invented a stop and turn signal. He hired a patent lawyer and got the invention patented. After paying for the lawyer and fees, et cetera, Dad ran out of funds so he could not manufacture the signal lamp. Sometime later, having saved enough money to have the signal lamp manufactured, he went to the safety deposit box at the bank to get his patent out. It was not there--gone. He inquired and the bank said that he was the only one who could get into the box. So he tried to find out what could have happened to it, but didn't get anywhere. No one would pursue the search.

MR. YOKOMI: You would say that someone had stolen that patent and got some money out of it?

MR. HONDA: I don't know whether they got any money out of it or not, but they took it. So Dad didn't have the patent. He just had the original copy of his own drawing of the turning signal. He got a patent, but then he didn't have enough money to go ahead and manufacture it.

MR. YOKOMI: Then during this time, was there discrimination when your dad tried to get a loan from the bank to get the patent?

MR. HONDA: Well, gosh, I don't know. I was too young in those days to remember or to know anything like that. I don't know whether he tried or not. I couldn't tell you that. All I know, we were all poor; we were working people.

MR. YOKOMI: As I recall when you get a patent, you've got to go through a lot of red tape. Was there someone that knew that he had to do all that before he got a patent?

MR. HONDA: He got a patent lawyer, and then some mechanical engineer to draw up the picture of his turning signal and the functions of it. Then, he sent this to Washington and got his patent. He got a patent number and everything, and then didn't have enough money to go ahead and start manufacturing, so, like I say, it was gone when he got ready to go ahead manufacture. That's all I know.

MR. YOKOMI: Right now there are a lot of turning signals, but this was way back, if I can remember, 19 -

MR. HONDA: He patented it on May 15, 1923.

MR. YOKOMI: But I've never heard of any turning signals during that time until about 1940's on your vehicles.

MR. HONDA: Right.

MR. YOKOMI: Okay. Would that thing come back by the year when your dad had it. About 1920's. Would it come back, then, about 1940's? That turning signal apparatus?

MR. HONDA: Well, the turning signal apparatus--what he patented was a signal with two faces, facing front and rear. And it would be mounted on the driver's side of the windshield and door post. It was a round signal

divided into three sections. The upper portion had an arrow going to the right, in the center it spelled "stop," and in the lower part was an arrow going to the left. And it was mounted on the driver's side, where the present rear-view mirror would be or a spotlight would be.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, could you go back and, say to Washington, D.C. and say your dad had this patent, why shouldn't you get something out of this turning signal?

MR. HONDA: I don't know. He didn't follow it up. It was gone so he just left it as it was, that's all.

MR. YOKOMI: He just dropped the case, then?

MR. HONDA: Yes.

MR. YOKOMI: How did he get an education to be a mechanic? Where did he learn to be a mechanic?

MR. HONDA: Well, in reading and personal experience.

MR. YOKOMI: You mean practical experience. Did he ever go to some class? Like right now, they have classes for these mechanics, new things coming up.

MR. HONDA: No. There was no school in Fresno at that time. Where he got his first start was out on his farm he had two wells, two pumps, and there was gas engines, and he just worked on those and got a little experience on them and got so that he could get those running good. And then worked for all of his neighbors around there and kept all the neighbors' gas engines on the pumps going, and then he started in on this tire and battery business. He and Ochi together started this. And then Mr. Ochi said, "Well, it's getting too big, so we'd better split it." And the tire business was the biggest part then. The battery end was just coming. Prior to that they didn't have batteries. They had this carbide lamp or a kerosene lamp. Then the batteries came in and then we got self-starters and generators. What they call a self-starter. We call them starting motors today, but then they called them self-starters. Other than that they had to crank it to get it started.

MR. YOKOMI: Yes, we got that, correct. More like a magneto like I remember they had like, what they call that, it was a bunch of copper wires on the vehicles.

MR. HONDA: Oh, a coil box. That's in a Model-T Ford.

MR. YOKOMI: I see you have a patent letter in front of you, right now. Would you read that to me?

MR. HONDA: "United States of America. To all to whom these present shall come. Whereas, Yakichi Honda of Fowler, California, commission by the patent, patent applied for the chart of letters and patent of -- " It's a patent for a stop arid turn signal and patent by Yakichi Honda is -- "is assigned the heirs for the term of 17 years from the 15th day of May, 1923." That's when it was patented.

MR. YOKOMI: Okay. You think you could go back and get some royalty if you could go back, get an attorney, go to Washington, D.C. and Detroit,

Michigan?

MR. HONDA: No.

MR. YOKOMI: No possible way.

MR. HONDA: I don't think there's any possibility. Dad tried to find it. You know, went to the bank and asked them about it, and they don't know anything about it. And then he just dropped the matter there. If he'd have continued and carried it on, then at that time when he couldn't find it, well, there might be some chance of somebody infringing upon his patent. But, anyway, when these turning signals came they weren't mounted on the side of the car, they were in the back. Now, at first they were in the back and the first ones were in the rear only. Now they got them front and rear.

MR. YOKOMI: That's right. Now they have flashers also, for caution.

MR. HONDA: Yes, that's right. They have flashers now. But previously they didn't. They had a big light where it showed an arrow pointing in that direction, and the light would light up and that's the direction you were going to turn. It didn't flash, it didn't flicker, it was just a constant light.

MR. YOKOMI: Well, according to this patent letter here, it says turning signal and stop. That means when he put it on a stop portion, the red light would be on stop.

MR. HONDA: Yes. Well, this light was divided into three compartments, you know. The top portion was to the right; the center was "stop," it had letters that spelled "stop" in the center; and then the bottom portion of it was the left turn. And then the arrow pointing that direction and when it would light up it would show an arrow pointing that direction. And this was two-faced: the approaching car and the car following could see it both ways, either front and rear, because it was mounted on the side of the car.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, you went to high school in Fowler, you went to four years of high school. During those years, did you take up mechanics in high school?

MR. HONDA: Yeah, I took up auto shop for two years.

MR. YOKOMI: Were you interested in being a mechanic or following your dad's footsteps?

MR. HONDA: Yes. I would say yes.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, your brother Harry. When he went to high school, did he take mechanics also?

MR. HONDA: I don't think so. He wasn't too mechanically minded, at that time. But, when he got out of high school, he went to air conditioning school, and then came back, and then he got a job at Ford Garage. And he got working there as a mechanic and that's how he got started.

MR. YOKOMI: Then, you say that you and your dad were operating a garage

on the old Eight Street, then?

MR. HONDA: Yes, Eighth Street, which was old Highway 99.

MR. YOKOMI: What year did your brother Harry join with you at that garage on Eighth Street?

MR. HONDA: When he got out of high school. When he got out of high school, he helped a little bit at the shop and got a little mechanical knowledge. When our garage needed a mechanic to help, he would help. The rest of the time he helped on the farm. Later he went to Ford Garage and stayed there.

MR. YOKOMI: What year do you think he came back and joined you and your father at the garage? Do you remember?

MR. HONDA: Dad retired from the garage around 1928.

MR. YOKOMI: Would the reputation of your dad bring customers to your present garage?

MR. HONDA: I think it helped, yes.

MR. YOKOMI: Did your dad teach you how to do these things--to tinker with small electric motors, gas motors?

MR. HONDA: Well, I'd hang around and help, because I had to. When I was going to high school first thing in the morning I got up, went to the shop, cleaned off all the tools and swept out the garage. Then I'd go home, wash up, change clothes, had my breakfast, and go to school. And then high school let out at 4 o'clock. And at 4:15 if I wasn't home, I'd get my pants whipped.

MR. YOKOMI: So, in other words -

MR. HONDA: I helped all the time, before and after school.

MR. YOKOMI: Do you remember what year the garage burned down, the old place?

MR. HONDA: 1937(?).

MR. YOKOMI: What caused the fire?

MR. HONDA: A customer got into an automobile accident, and went out and towed in his car. When I towed it in and left it in there, well, not knowing, not having too much experience, I did not disconnect the battery, and I think it shorted and caught fire.

MR. YOKOMI: That would be a lesson, then. From then on you always disconnected the battery if you pulled into a garage.

MR. HONDA: Right.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, after this garage was burned down, what did you do after that? Did you go back to start a garage business or did you work for some other garage?

MR. HONDA: George Atkinson, right next door to my shop, had a shop by himself. So he said, "Come on over and work with me. I've got lots of room in here. You work on this, you take your jobs on this part of the shop, I'll take this part of the shop." And so we worked together there, until the war came.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, the war came. How did people treat you when they came to the garage? Say George Atkinson was on one side and you were on the other side. Did they come and still ask you to repair their car, or did they go to George Atkinson?

MR. HONDA: I grew up with everybody around there and everybody knew me and I never felt anything. Nobody said anything about it, so we just went along just as ever--no difference.

MR. YOKOMI: You went to Gila, Arizona during the war years. Did you leave the camp and come back here to Fowler, or did you go to some other area?

MR. HONDA: I went to Chicago, Illinois and worked for a Chevrolet agency there in--right out of Chicago--in Wilmette, Illinois.

MR. YOKOMI: After you worked over there, then your decision was to come back to Fowler, start a garage in Fowler?

MR. HONDA: Well, yes. That's the only thing I knew is auto mechanics, and I kept getting letters. People asked me, "When are you going to come back?" "When are you going to come back?" "Why don't you come back?" So Harry came back and Harry wrote back and says, "Hey, you'd better hurry and come back. Everybody is asking for you." So I came back.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, where did you start your garage?

MR. HONDA: When I came back from Chicago, there was a barn on the farm, so we knocked the ends out and started the shop right in the barn until 1952. And at that time, in 1953, we bought the existing Ford agency, which was left here. But the agency was sold to Earl Hill, and Earl Hill had his own shop, his own store across the street. So he converted that into a Ford agency. So this building was up for sale, and we bought it. And we moved into that in February 1st, 1953.

MR. YOKOMI: Now, when you moved to this new location, did you have a lot of new equipment when you moved in?

MR. HONDA: We had lots of equipment, yes. But we bought more equipment after we moved here. But then we had practically all the equipment such as steam cleaner, front end aligning tool, brand new aligning tool, and tune-up tool. We had had everything out there, you know, cylinder reboring tool and all, valve refacer. You name it, we had everything out there on the farm. We did everything out there.

MR. YOKOMI: Since your brother Harry would not touch air conditioners, and he'd always ask you, how did you get the knowledge how to repair air conditioners?

MR. HONDA: Well, first, first thing I did some reading and then they had some classes in Fresno, evening classes. So I went to those classes

and picked up everything as I went along. Well, when I got stuck with things, I could go to the bigger air conditioning places in Fresno and they would help me out. And then I just kept right on until I got so that I could handle everything.

MR. YOKOMI: Would you say you are more or less semi-retired on your present garage?

MR. HONDA: Well, as far as the garage goes, I am retired from there. Doctor says after my surgery, "You'd better get out if you want to live any length of time at all. You'd better get out of the garage, it won't be good for you. So you can go out and work in the garden or do little odds and ends out there on the farm" So that's what I'm doing right now.

MR. YOKOMI: But I think you still miss that garage, because once in a-- periodically, when I come to Fowler, I see you at the garage. You kind of look like you miss that kind of job.

MR. HONDA: Yes, I do. I miss it.

MR. YOKOMI: Thank you for your interview.