

KICHIZO MORITA

MR. INAMI: Today is December 30, 1979. I, Joe Inami, have the privilege to interview Mr. Kichizo Morita in his home in Sebastopol, California.

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. MORITA: My name is Kichizo Morita. I was born in Fukuoka-ken on March 5, 1902.

MR. INAMI: Please tell me about your parents' early experience in America.

MR. MORITA: My father Takejiro Morita was already married when he came to Stockton in 1902. After a couple of years, he moved to Madera and began a noodle shop. I was 15 years and nine months when I arrived in this country in 1917. When my mother Umeno Morita and I first came from Japan in 1917, my father was working as a gardener. Then we raised raspberries in rural Madera County during 1918 and 1919 at the Shafer Ranch, which was owned by a German immigrant.

MR. INAMI: When did your father operate the noodle shop?

MR. MORITA: I don't know. I have only heard that he had such a shop.

MR. INAMI: I understand there was a pool hall in Madera in those days. Do you know anything about that?

MR. MORITA: Yes. That, too, was before I came here, so I have no recollections. I attended school in Fresno for quite a while. Since I did not understand English, I went to an elementary school to learn the language.

MR. INAMI: What school did you go to?

MR. MORITA: There was a school where there were many immigrants; Chinese, Mexicans, and Japanese, taught by a Caucasian lady named Miss Leppe, a tall big woman. If you ask any old-time Japanese in Fresno they will know about her. She gathered together all those who didn't know English and taught us English.

MR. INAMI: How many years did you go to this school?

MR. MORITA: About two years.

MR. INAMI: You must be fluent in English?

MR. MORITA: No, it is easy to forget.

MR. INAMI: What did you do after that?

MR. MORITA: While living in Fresno, I became interested in photography and spent time learning about it from Mr. Kamiyama and Mr. George Hishida, the old-time photographers in this area.

MR. INAMI: When did you go to photographers school?

MR. MORITA: I went east to Effingham Photo School in Illinois in 1923. I went to New York in 1924 to see if I could find a job in the photography field; but since I could not, I returned to Fresno.

MR. INAMI: Were there many Japanese in New York at that time?

MR. MORITA: Oh, yes. There were many. There was a Japanese Christian Association, and there was a dormitory next door to it, so I stayed there.

MR. INAMI: When did you come back to Fresno?

MR. MORITA: Well, I spent some time there looking around, and then came back to Fresno in 1926. I did not go to Madera although my father was there. I started a photo shop in Fresno and returned to Madera periodically to see my parents. Madera was really back country then. I traveled around taking photographs of people in the rural Fresno area.

MR. INAMI: Did you have a studio?

MR. MORITA: No. I brought the negatives back to my home and developed and printed from there.

MR. INAMI: Did Mr. Kamiyama have a studio?

MR. MORITA: Oh, yes. He was the big time photographer and George Hishida had his shop, too.

MR. INAMI: Did you continue in your photographic business?

MR. MORITA: No. I just couldn't make it, so I turned to farming. Farming is a much easier life.

MR. INAMI: How long was your father in Madera?

MR. MORITA: He was there from 1905 to 1926. Most of the people of my father's age are now gone.

MR. INAMI: Did you help your father in the vineyard when you lived in Fresno?

MR. MORITA: Yes. Whenever I could, I would go back to help him even as I worked with the photo business.

MR. INAMI: Was it expensive to go to school when you came to America?

MR. MORITA: No, if one stayed at the Fresno Buddhist Dormitory. You could stay for about \$15 a month and attend public school; so it wasn't expensive.

MR. INAMI: But in those \$15 was a lot of money, wasn't it?

MR. MORITA: I suppose so.

MR. INAMI: Have you returned to Japan?

MR. MORITA: I went back after 50 years. Then, again, three years later, and then again six years later. I don't like to go as a group, so I go by myself. It is better to go on a conducted tour after one gets older since it becomes more difficult to watch out for everything. The last time I went to Japan, I placed a \$600 Nikon camera under my seat on the Bullet Train going from Osaka to Tokyo. It was toward evening, and I closed my eyes and must have napped for a few minutes. I was sandwiched between two beautiful ladies, but when I got to Tokyo I reached under my seat and the camera was gone! I reported it to the station master, but he told me it would not be found. Also while I was in Japan I went to Hiroshima on my trip. I could not bring myself to take pictures; it was so pitiful! It was too bad--300,000 people died because of the atomic bomb.

MR. INAMI: Was your wife born in Japan?

MR. MORITA: No, she is a kibeï. She was born in this country. Her name is Kikue Kikuchi Morita. She came back when she was 10 years old and attended school here. Two more years, and we will be married 50 years.

MR. INAMI: How many children did you have?

MR. MORITA: I had 10 children; seven girls and three boys. And 25 grandchildren. On Christmas and Thanksgiving Day, they all come here so we are never lonesome.

MR. INAMI: Are all your children married?

MR. MORITA: Yes, all 10 children are married. All my children live between San Francisco and Santa Rosa. If I need them, they can all come within the hour.

MR. INAMI: That's nice. Are your children married to Japanese spouses?

MR. MORITA: All but three. I would have preferred that they marry within the race, but it cannot be helped here in America. It is not my marriage.

MR. INAMI: Long ago, our parents were very strict about international marriages.

MR. MORITA: Even those that marry within the race got divorces, so it really doesn't matter. In recent times the youngsters go to school and are educated so they can easily obtain civil service jobs.

MR. INAMI: Did all your children go to college?

MR. MORITA: No, not all of them. Three of my daughters did. One of my sons, who is married to a Caucasian, is a US mailman.

MR. INAMI: That is a good job.

MR. MORITA: Another son, who is married to a Caucasian, is taking over my farm.

MR. INAMI: When you lived in Madera and Fresno, did you encounter racial discrimination?

MR. MORITA: Yes. In Modesto, Turlock, and Merced there were signs that said, "No Japanese Wanted," about 1919. It was better in Fresno. There was no such discrimination in Salinas. When I went to Pismo to take pictures, I went to eat at a restaurant, and I was told that they didn't want Japanese.

MR. INAMI: Which camp did you go to during the war?

MR. MORITA: I went to the Merced Assembly Center then to Amachi, Colorado Relocation Center.

MR. INAMI: Was it cold there?

MR. MORITA: Yes. The wind was cold, and there was snow.

MR. INAMI: Did you return here immediately after release from camp?

MR. MORITA: When I came back, we were not wanted! A Caucasian came to our home and ordered us to get out! I called the police, but they didn't respond. I told my children to sleep with their clothes on that night since I didn't know if that crazy man would come back. I went to the WRA Office in Santa Rosa the next day, and the man was arrested.

MR. INAMI: There was a man in Madera who had his home shot into.

MR. MORITA: I was sorry that I came back here too soon. I know I have to go some time, but if I had to go, I would have taken him with me for the prejudice.

MR. INAMI: What organization do you belong to?

MR. MORITA: I belong to the Enmanji Buddhist Church. In Madera, I went to the Fresno Buddhist Church and when we had funerals, we had to haul the coffin up those steep stairs! I am a member of the JAACL so that I can participate in their health insurance. My hobby is bonsai. I have been a member of the Sonoma County Bonsai Club for 17 years. This is a hobby I became involved in only after my children were grown.

MR. INAMI: Do you observe any Japanese customs now?

MR. MORITA: Before we were too poor to, but now we observe New Year's Day. The entire family, grandchildren and all, make mochi. We also observe Hana Matsuri, Boys' Day, Girls' Day. On these days, my wife makes special Japanese foods such as o-hagi and sushi.

MR. INAMI: When you came to America, where did you live?

MR. MORITA: I lived in a very poor house with a hand pump outside the home. We had to pump water for the bath. We burned grape brush under the tub to heat the water. There was a person named Sugioka in Madera. He was a commission boss, a labor contractor. His wife went back to Japan. He had a daughter named Tamaye. I would like to see her once more, but I don't know where she went. She was born about 1917, and I used to carry her as a baby.

MR. INAMI: Were there many Japanese there in Madera at that time?

MR. MORITA: Mr. Sugioka used to go to Fresno to get laborers. He was the first Japanese to buy a car in Madera, a Ford.

MR. INAMI: Did you go by horse?

MR. MORITA: We had a Ford truck that I used to haul berries to Fresno. When I first came I used to go by horse and buggy. After 1917 we bought automobiles. Sano-san had a motorcycle. There was Sugioka-san, Ohashi-san, and later Yamaguchi-san came. He came up from Mexico.

MR. INAMI: Do you still have the negatives for all those pictures you took in the Fresno area?

MR. MORITA: No, I destroyed them. Those I left before going to camp were ruined.

MR. INAMI: You were one of the first Japanese to come to Madera -

MR. MORITA: Yes. I am one of the oldest; one of the oldest but not the richest! I did not make a fortune. Long ago the saying was a lifespan is 50 years and if you lived longer than that, it was said that you robbed the grave.

MR. INAMI: Thank you for this interview.