

BEN TSUTOMU NAKAGAWA

MR. TAJIRI: Today is May 21, 1980. I, Akira Tajiri, have the privilege to be in the home of Mr. Nakagawa at 21349 East Manning, Reedley, California, 93654.

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. NAKAGAWA: My name is Ben Tsutomu Nakagawa. I was born in Hiroshima, Japan on February 20, 1902 and have lived in Reedley the longest.

MR. TAJIRI: When did you leave Japan to come to the United States?

MR. NAKAGAWA: I left Japan on February 1916.

MR. TAJIRI: Why did you leave Japan?

MR. NAKAGAWA: I joined my father and mother who were already in the United States.

MR. TAJIRI: Where were they living at the time?

MR. NAKAGAWA: In Fresno County, just about seven miles out of town. Fresno, in the Sunnyside area.

MR. TAJIRI: Is that where you lived when you first came?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes.

MR. TAJIRI: What were your father and brother doing for a living?

MR. NAKAGAWA: They were farming.

MR. TAJIRI: What kind of farm did they have?

MR. NAKAGAWA: They had a vineyard.

MR. TAJIRI: You've been farming all your life?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Well, yes, most of the time.

MR. TAJIRI: What did you do between farming?

MR. NAKAGAWA: When I was young, I went to school part-time.

MR. TAJIRI: Where did you go to school?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Sunnyside. I attended school when I was not busy on the farm.

MR. TAJIRI: How old were you when you came here?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Fourteen years old.

MR. TAJIRI: How many years schooling did you get here?

MR. NAKAGAWA: I don't know. Maybe one year or one and a half years since I went to school part-time.

MR. TAJIRI: You speak English very well. When did you get married?

MR. NAKAGAWA: I was married in August 1925.

MR. TAJIRI: Who did you marry?

MR. NAKAGAWA: My wife Kiyoko Yuke from Sacramento who was introduced to me by a friend.

MR. TAJIRI: Have you ever been back to Japan?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes. The first time in 1939; the second time in 1961; and again in 1969 and 1975. Four times all together.

MR. TAJIRI: You've seen some big changes, haven't you?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Oh, yes. A different world!

MR. TAJIRI: Did your homeplace in Hiroshima get bombed during the war?

MR. NAKAGAWA: No. Just the glass in the windows cracked and the walls cracked. We were about seven miles out of the city, so our place was not so bad.

MR. TAJIRI: How many children do you have?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Six. I have four daughters, two sons. The last son died two years ago.

MR. TAJIRI: What do your children do for their living?

MR. NAKAGAWA: One of my daughter's husbands is the owner of the Strawberry Exchange in Watsonville, California and ships all over Eastern States and California. The oldest daughter Sumi is married to Paul Ichijji, the sales manager of a florist in Salinas. Her job is accounting. My second daughter is Michie and her husband is Buz Noda, the owner of the Strawberry Exchange. Our third daughter Midon is Larry Iwasaki's wife. Larry is a high school teacher in Reedley.

MR. TAJIRI: Is Sammy in between Michi and Midon?

MR. NAKAGAWA: No, Sammy is third from the top.

MR. TAJIRI: He's taken over your farm?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes.

MR. TAJIRI: Steve was the youngest?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Fifth daughter is Minnie in between Midon and Steve. She is married to Dick Hachiya who lives in Thousand Oaks. Her husband is a manager for the produce department in a supermarket. Minnie is a dental lab technician, but now she inspects assembled electric parts.

MR. TAJIRI: How many grandchildren do you have?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Fifteen. Steve, our youngest son, was lost and died in the High Sierras.

MR. TAJIRI: Yes, it was a real tragedy.

MR. NAKAGAWA: I can't help it. I'll never forget.

MR. TAJIRI: Have your children married Japanese people?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes, every one.

MR. TAJIRI: Have you experienced any prejudice?

MR. NAKAGAWA: No. I don't feel it myself, but I saw it happening. While we were in relocation camp Poston III Arizona during the war, I took a trip to Denver where I visited my uncle. At that time, at the Parker Station, a Nisei was waiting for a train. When some Caucasians came in and started a fight. The station master came out and chased the Caucasians away. It was the first time I saw such an incident. Another time, during the very early part of the war, when I was on my way by train between Flagstaff and Pueblo, Colorado, I saw a Caucasian fellow who did not think I was Japanese. He told me he didn't like Japan, and that he had come from Long Beach, California. It was wartime and there were some who lost lives in the Pacific, so he hated Japanese. So he did not want to sit by a Japanese, so when the conductor came and told him to sit in a certain place, he refused to sit by a Japanese. So the conductor told him to sit somewhere else. But later this same man came to sit by me. I don't know why, but he probably didn't think I was Japanese.

MR. TAJIRI: Maybe he thought you were an Indian?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes. It was a funny experience, especially people on the West Coast hated the Japanese.

MR. TAJIRI: When you came back to Reedley, were you discriminated against?

MR. NAKAGAWA: No. Reedley people were pretty good. They accepted us. I have heard of certain incidents where some tried to keep the Japanese from coming back to this area. When the first ones came back, their windows were shot at, but overall Reedley was good. Lots of people didn't understand the Japanese.

MR. TAJIRI: The old-timers were all right.

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes, the old-timers welcomed us back.

MR. TAJIRI: What was it like before the war?

MR. NAKAGAWA: No problem.

MR. TAJIRI: Have you noticed any difference in the treatment of the Japanese people?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes, because we are now citizens. I never expected that, but because of the sacrifice of the Nisei soldiers, we Issei have received better treatment.

MR. TAJIRI: Their sacrifice was not in vain. What economic and social changes have you seen in your community over the years?

MR. NAKAGAWA: It is better both economically and socially. Issei still have handicaps in the English language.

MR. TAJIRI: You and your wife were the king and queen of the Reedley Fiesta, were you not?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes. I don't know whether we deserved it.

MR. TAJIRI: Oh, yes, you deserved it. They honored you because you are fine, upstanding citizens and have contributed much to the growth and welfare of the community.

MR. NAKAGAWA: That was unexpected--an honor!

MR. TAJIRI: I thought it was a good choice. You are very active in the Buddhist Church. What other organization do you belong to?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes. I belong to the Nikkeijinkai and was formerly called Kiyogikai.

MR. TAJIRI: Do you still observe some Japanese customs during birthdays, weddings, or funerals?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Yes. Not much change in 60 years.

MR. TAJIRI: Do you make New Year's gochiso (feast)?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Not as elaborately as before the war, because the Issei are gone. And not strictly in the traditional Japanese style, but we still observe the custom of special days and events.

MR. TAJIRI: How about mochitsuki (rice pudding)?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Mochitsuiki? We now use machine to make mochi instead of in the old-fashioned way.

MR. TAJIRI: Too bad! Weddings are still conducted in the Japanese way?

MR. NAKAGAWA: Oh, yes, but eventually it will not be so.

MR. TAJIRI: No one likes to get up and perform at the reception. The Issei were much better than the Nisei.

Is there any other information about the Japanese-American history that you would like to discuss?

MR. NAKAGAWA: There is one thing I would like to mention. The Issei all come from Japan. Each immigrant felt that he represented Japan, so we did not intentionally do anything discreditable or to be ashamed of. We did not want to spoil the Japanese image. All the Issei felt the same way, that's why we observed the rules and, therefore, our community

respects the Japanese people.

We want our children and grandchildren to have the security and receive the respect from society, and be the best ethnic group in the nation. That is the wish of the Issei.

Maybe after this, 20 or 30 years from now, it may not be as strong, but I hope the future generations will keep the good qualities of the Japanese culture and heritage forever.

MR. TAJIRI: Yes. I think the Issei have really succeeded in getting this idea across to their children. And they, in turn, are trying to pass it on to their children. That is something we really don't want to lose.

MR. NAKAGAWA: My boys have the same feeling, and they will pass it on to the next generation. I hope it will go on forever, as long as the Japanese live in America. That was the one thing I wanted to emphasize.

MR. TAJIRI: Is there anything else you would like to add?

MR. NAKAGAWA: If I could speak better English, I could add a little more, but you understand.

MR. TAJIRI: Thank you very much.