

MRS. MICHIKO KATAOKA NEISHI

This is a statement by Mrs. Michiko Katabka Neishi who was born February 15, 1920 in Lemoore, California. She lives in Castro Valley, California, but during her youth, she lived in Kings County in the Hanford area until 1941. The statement was written in July of 1980.

Some of the events, places, and incidents in Kings County that my mother has often told me or that I can recall.

My father--Tamesaku Kataoka, born April 9, 1886, Kumamoto-Ken, Japan.

My mother--Fujiyo (Miyamoto) Kataoka was born November 19, 1886 in Nagasaki, Japan.

My father came off the boat in Seattle, Washington and migrated down to Fresno at around the age of 20. My mother, at the age of 19, sailed alone to San Francisco and headed for Fresno where her friends already had settled, and she was to join them. She was not one of the typical picture-brides who had a husband waiting for her. She was single and ready to make a life of her own.

In Fresno, her friends took her in like a daughter, although she worked in their restaurant. Here she met Tamesaku Kataoka. She tried to ward off his courting, even fled to Los Angeles, only to be found by him and finally consented to become his wife. They returned to Fresno and were married in Fresno. They moved to Hanford and started a new life by opening a noodle house called the "Udon-Ya" on Green Street next to Tom Fat's Restaurant which was on Seventh and Green Street. The place became like a meeting house for lonely bachelors who worked as laborers on railroad tracks, on farms, and as schoolboys. Here they found companionship among their own people.

My mother would be busy cooking, waiting on tables, making them feel at home. My father would do the clean-up chores, bringing the sake or whiskey up from the basement. This was during prohibition days. I remember one man whom I didn't like. Mister Miyata, who lived on the Vierra Ranch east of Tenth Avenue near Excelsior Road, would come often to the "Udon-Ya: and would tease me by saying he was going to take my mother away. . . which made me hate him at the time. But, of course, he was one of the nicest men. He lived on the Vierra Ranch until he died. Mr. (Akiyan) Tsutsui lived with him. He was like a son to Mr. Miyata.

My parents were childless, so they adopted me from their good friends the Konatsus (also from Kumamoto-Ken). They had two others at that time and more to follow.

Mr. and Mrs. Sakaguchi lived with my parents for a while when Mrs. Sakaguchi first arrived from Japan. The people who are from the same prefecture have the tendency to come together when they settle in the same community. In fact, more than one-fourth of the Japanese that settled in Kings County were from Kumamoto-Ken. We used to hold picnics every year. Sometimes, it would be held at the Kings River in the Hardwick area.

Someone, out of jealousy, had reported to the police that whiskey was served at the "Udon-Ya." The police raided the restaurant. They searched the basement and found nothing. My father thought that he would

have to go to jail. Nothing happened. All during the search by the police, my mother said she carried me and had some bottles hidden between us. I struggled to be put down as I was not a baby, but she had quite a time keeping me from wriggling out of her arms.

The next two houses on Green Street were some strange looking houses (Chinese lottery) connected to each other with dark doorways. The last house on the block next to the alley was the Tofu-Ya (Tofu factory) run by an elderly couple, Mr. and Mrs. Ishizato (spelling not sure). I always called them Tofu-Ya-no-Obasan and Tofu-Ya-no-Ojisan. I can never forget the taste of the tofu when it was just freshly made. She would offer me a square soft but firm tofu, and it was the best. And even now there is none to match her tofu.

There was a barbershop on Seventh Street, second door from the Cherry Blossom which was not there in those days. I can't remember his name. He was a soft-spoken man, later he moved to another location. There were many little shops on Seventh Street between Green Street and Brown Street. Omata Grocery Store on Seventh and Green; next, the rooming house (Royal Rooms). The Royal Fountain run by Mr. and Mrs. Yumikura, Royal Theatre, Omata Department Store, Kataoka Sewing School (my father's older brother's ex-wife, Mrs. Kataoka).

I have never attended her sewing school. I was forbidden to even speak to her. Next to the sewing school was Mr. Habara's pool hall and boardinghouse. Mr. Noda's coffee shop, Mister Hirazawa's office (dental), and Japanese Association (called the Nihonjin-Kenjin Kai ). Across the street, the Omata residence (the beautiful white house), Mr. Tatsukawa's shoe shop and his home behind it. The Presbyterian Church, the Buddhist Church (which later was moved to Green Street), Taiyo Grocery Store owned by Mr. Hiwano who lived in Armona. Next a dark house that looked like another Chinese lottery house, fish market owned by the Tokumoto family, the candy store owned by Mrs. Wada, barbershop, boardinghouse which was owned by one family, later run by Mr. and Mrs. Shinagawa, next was a small lottery house and then Tom Fat's restaurant.

The first Japanese school in the community was the Hanford Gakuen on the corner of Seventh and White Streets. The building was situated in the center of a wide, wide ground, sandy ground, where we used to try to run fast and couldn't. This school covered half the block. It was built by the contributions from the Japanese community in Kings County. At one time, all the children of all the families in Kings County attended the school. Mr. Iwama was the teacher for many years. Mr. C. Mori was our next teacher, but after several years returned to Japan. Then a lady teacher (cannot recall her name) taught for only a short term. She taught some girls the "naginata" (a long pointed pole arm, in the art of defense). Every year the school would put on a program showing the various talents of the students and to entertain our parents. Another program was also put on, the "hanashi-kai." The students had to memorize a speech and give a recitation in front of our parents to show how much we had accomplished in learning for the year. Mr. Henry Sugimoto was our teacher after the lady teacher had left. And until the evacuation, Mr. Sugimoto taught the Japanese Language School.

During the early stages of the Japanese school, (I think during Mr. Mori's teaching), the Board of Trustees disagreed on some matters and some families broke away to start their own on Fifth Street with Mr. Hirazawa (dentist) as their teacher. Mr. Hisamoto was a young teacher

after Mr. Hirazawa quit to return to Japan.

Sometime soon, after the Hanford Gakuen was organized, the Buddhist Church started their own classes in the church building. They, also, started a class in the Armona Buddhist Church. So, the community had four Japanese schools. Then just before evacuation, the Fifth Street Japanese School disbanded and rejoined the Hanford Gakuen. I remember being so happy to have my friend join us in our class, for we had attended the same public school at Lucerne. Hanford Gakuen had a bus that would go around the countryside picking up students on Saturdays. In fact, we were the only Japanese school to have a bus. The bus would start from the south side of town and make a wide swing around Armona, Lemoore, Hardwick, and around the Lucerne area and back into town.

The townsfolk sent their children on weekdays after the public schools were dismissed. My day on Saturday, would be thus: after our lessons were through, we would walk to the Hanford Library, browse around for about an hour or so, walk back leisurely and, of course, sometimes stop at Mrs. Mori's Ice Cream Parlor to buy an ice cream cone. The fountain was only one-fourth block from the Japanese School. We would get back to school in time to get on the bus and go home.

Mr. and Mrs. Mitsunaga (another from Kumamoto-Ken) lived on White Street in a big brown house with a veranda on the three sides. Mrs. Mitsunaga was the midwife who brought many, many Nisei into the world.

I remember accompanying my mother to visit Mr. and Mrs. Nakamura on Fifth Street where the lumberyard now stands. There were many families living on Fourth Street and Fifth Street between Douty and the railroad. In those days, there were many different Nihonjin kai (prefecture) Kumamoto-Kenjin-Kai, Wakayama-Kenjin-Kai, Hiroshima-Kenjin-Kai, and others.

We seemed to be moving periodically. After the Undon-Ya was closed due to the raid, my parents moved to Lemoore and tried their hand at farming. That is, arranging to work the land and in return receive about 30 to 40 percent of the income after harvest. Some families would get together and work on one farm to help each other. After struggling for a few years, my parents decided that this alkali land would not yield enough to support the owner and our family, so we moved to the Kirby Ranch in Armona. Here, the farming situation was much better, and we felt we could settle down. We often went into the Armona town and visited friends. The town was very small, but there were many Japanese crowded into this very small community. I remember the Nobusada Grocery Store, the Yoshida Boardinghouse, the Armona Buddhist Church, and few other families in small wooden clapboard frame houses. Across the street, the baseball diamond owned by the Japanese community was situated behind the homes of the Fujimoto family, Mitsuyoshis and the Hiwanos.

Three blocks off the main street of Armona was Chinatown.

My mother enrolled me in the first grade at the Armona Grammar School. I had to walk from the Kirby Ranch but not alone. The Kirby girls also walked with me every day. We moved to Lucerne because my mother was offered the job of cook at the Lucerne Japanese Labor Camp by her very good friends Mr. and Mrs. Yumikura. He was the foreman for the Japanese labor camp. This was one of the largest farms in the Hanford area,

located on Twelfth Avenue, still there but much smaller.

A railroad track led to the huge packing sheds. There was a cook house, a large red house for the men who worked on the farm, stables with 20 to 30 mules and horses, and there must have been 100 catfish in the two large watering troughs near the park. Peacocks graced the park at the entrance to the farm.

The main road from the Twelfth Avenue led past the foreman's little red house, past the boardinghouse, cook house, and the packing sheds. Gradually the road got narrower and dustier, winding past the little road leading to the white shack which I always felt uneasy about. And the road ending at the Japanese camp. Here there were rows of long buildings for sleeping quarters, and a little square house the men used for recreational purposes. The bath house was situated at the front of these buildings alongside of the driveway. The large, long, mess hall was on the right side of the camp. Our sleeping quarter was at the rear of the hall, next to the foreman's office and living quarter.

Mr. Yumikura, the foreman, also ran a soda fountain in town next to the Royal Theatre. Mrs. Yumikura would make the hamburgers and hot dogs. Hot dogs were 10 cents and soda was 5 cents. They, too, had adopted a daughter (from the Omata family).

New Year celebration was the most important holiday for us. It was celebrated for three days. My mother had to make preparations several days in advance of January 1st. This was a special time of merriment when all the men joined in pounding steamed mochi rice in a "oosu" or "usu." They pounded the mochi with a long wooden mallet, keeping time by singing. Jim Cotton, ranch foreman, always joined us and enjoyed the merry-making. My mother used to call him "Jimmy." He always had his four or five greyhounds following him wherever he went.

In the winter, the number of men in camp would be as few as 20. Then in January some would return for the pruning season and sulfur spraying for the vines and the trees. One summer about six young fellows from town had moved in. Their parents had asked Mr. Yumikura to allow them to work in the fields to toughen them. They were: Leo and Tom Fumita, Shig Tokumoto, Shiro Omata, Yori Wada, and another fellow. Of course, it has been many, many years so I cannot remember too well.

During harvest time, my mother had to cook for 70, 80, 90 men, and a couple of years over 100 men. This I recall because I had to help set the long rows of tables. The rice was cooked in huge pans that looked like oversized wok set on a cemented brick on the hard dirt floor with an opening underneath them for burning wood. There were three lined on the one side of the huge kitchen. The floor was, as I said, hard dirt floor. We did not eat in the mess hall with the men. We ate in a little room behind the barn-like kitchen.

Every day, I would walk alongside the shallow ditch that wound along the edge of the vast pasture separating the stables, sheds, and packinghouses from the Japanese labor camp and the Hindu camp. I would walk to the boss' house (this house was at the front with the beautiful park in front) and from there walk to Lucerne School with Jimmy Reynolds. His stepfather was Mel Adams who was the manager of the Lucerne Vineyard.

There was a Chinese camp situated beyond the People's Ditch that ran through the Lucerne Vineyard.

I can never forget the huge fire that destroyed 90 percent of the main part of Lucerne. The sprawling packing sheds, the big house, and the piles and piles of wooden trays, the white owls and their babies burned to nothing. Luckily the mules and horses were saved. It was a nightmare. We were sleeping in the screen house that the men had made for us because it was summer and very hot. My mother dragged me out of the screen house. We thought our camp was on fire.

A few years later, an incident happened that my mother could not spend another night in the camp. A middle-aged bachelor who had too much to drink was found floating in the hot tub, dead. We all used this bath (large, rectangular wooden tub with tin underside) a typical Japanese community bath that accommodates about six men at one time. Of course, we (my father, mother, and I) would take a bath after all the others had finished. The bath water was always kept hot by someone always feeding kindling and logs to the fire under the tub.

Thus, we moved to the Shoemaker's Ranch on Fargo Road. I continued to go to the same Lucerne School until the eighth grade. Again we moved. Hardwick was a small town; combined post office and grocery store, small saloon, small fire station, few houses, and a three-room school. I entered the eighth: grade, then on to Laton High School for two years. (Finished at Hanford High School.) My parents worked hard on the Kirby Ranch (which had two places). My father would be out in the orchards, and my mother would be working in the cutting shed during the fruit season. In those days, the fruits were cut, smoked in the sulfur house, and put out to dry in the sun. Our parents always looked forward to their children being dismissed for the summer vacation. Work was waiting for them. I was the only child, so my father expected me to help like a son. Most Niseis obeyed their parents and worked throughout the summer.

There are many more experiences that can be told...the hardships, language barrier, and the dreams my parents had but stopped all too soon by evacuation in May of 1941.