

MR. JIRO OMATA AND MRS. TSUNE LEE

MR. BOETTCHER: Today is September 4, 1980. I, Keith Boettcher, am privileged to be in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Jiro Omata at 1606 North Redington, Hanford, California, 93230. I am interviewing Mr. Omata and his sister Mrs. Tsune Lee.

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.

MRS. LEE: My name is Tsuneko Lee. I was born in Hanford on April 23, 1906. My longest place of residence was Tokyo, Japan. I now live in Sacramento.

MR. BOETTCHER: And Mr. Omata?

MR. OMATA: My name is Jiro Omata. I was born in Hanford, California on December 27, 1909. I have lived here practically all my life except during the war years when we were evacuated to Jerome, Arkansas in 1942.

MR. BOETTCHER: Would both of you care to tell me about your parents' early experience in America? When did they come over? When did they get married, and was the marriage arranged? Something about the story of the immigration of your parents, if you would. Where were they from in Japan?

MRS. LEE: My father's name was Jitsuzo Omata, and he was born September 13, 1874. He came to the United States in the early 1890's, and he went to school in Oakland, California. He finished high school, and he wanted to go into some kind of business, so he was on his way from Oakland to Los Angeles when the Santa Fe train stopped in Hanford. The train had some kind of trouble, so he thought he would walk around town. He found that the people here in Hanford were very nice and kind, so he decided not to go to Los Angeles. He decided to open up a little store in Hanford and found a place on East Seventh Street, and there he opened up his business in 1900, I think.

My mother's name was Kane Okazaki, and when she was 18 she was married by proxy to my father. It happened that his sister had graduated from Oakland High School and went back to Japan and told her parents that Jitsuzo was ready for a wife; that his business was beginning to flourish. So they looked for a bride for him, and they found her in the next village. It wasn't one of these picture-bride things, it was arranged by the family.

MR. BOETTCHER: Was it the baishaku, go between?

MRS. LEE: It was a family arrangement, and she came here in 1904.

MR. BOETTCHER: Would the marriage have been performed in Japan, then?

MRS. LEE: Yes, by proxy.

MR. BOETTCHER: So she came as a bride in 1904.

MRS. LEE: Yes. They were both born in Wakayama-Ken. My father went into the general merchandising business, and that got started in 1900.

His sister-in-law's brother had the big North American Mercantile Company in San Francisco, who handled all kinds of imported goods from Japan. And so he first started with Japanese goods, canned goods, rice, and so forth. At that time, Japanese laborers were working in the different camps, most of them were migrants. He supplied them with all these provisions. Then, gradually, he went into general groceries, meat, and dry goods.

MR. BOETTCHER: Was that here or did he have a merchandise business himself in the Bay Area before he came here?

MRS. LEE: No, here in Hanford.

MR. BOETTCHER: Were most of his customers Japanese?

MRS. LEE: Yes, for a while. And then, gradually, he went into the business of supplying many of the Hanford's American population.

MR. BOETTCHER: The early Japanese, as I understand it, here, would be some farm laborers and some railroad workers?

MR. OMATA: A lot of laborers on the farms, but not railroad workers, then.

MR. BOETTCHER: That business was started in 1900. It was a general merchandise store?

MRS. LEE: Yes.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you remember what it was called, the name of the business?

MRS. LEE: Omata's, I think. Because later it became Omata's Market and Omata's Dry Goods Store.

MR. BOETTCHER: I understand your father was involved with building the flume into Sanger.

MR. OMATA: Yes. In the early 1900's, before 1910, he had a contract to supply provisions for the laborers who were building the flume. He wasn't the builder, but provided the provisions for the Japanese laborers who were on the construction gang for the flume.

After that was completed, he had a contract to plant those eucalyptus trees in the Tipton-Pixley area of Southern Tulare County along Highway 99. They were planted commercially for lumber and telephone poles.

That was before 1910, in the early years of his venture into the general merchandising business. He provided the Japanese crew and supplied the provisions for the laborers through the store. He used to talk about the rattlesnakes in that area.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you have anything else to add about the beginnings of the business here? What about your childhood memories? What are some of your early memories of town here; either of the store or your friends?

MRS. LEE: Well, I attended the Central Grammar School in Hanford, and

that was from grades 1 through 8, and I was the only Japanese the first two years. Later my brothers came along, and we three were the only Japanese. My next brother Minoru came when I was in the third grade. He was two years younger. Two years later Jiro entered. And by that time, I think there were a few from Armona and from the outlying area; Japanese. All through high school, we three were practically the only Japanese students.

MR. OMATA: I remember Eiji Hayakawa, a farmer's son. Another high school student was Henry Sugimoto, a "schoolboy" living at the Mission.

MR. BOETTCHER: I assume your parents spoke Japanese at home.

MRS. LEE AND MR. OMATA: Yes.

MR. BOETTCHER: What was it like going to school? Did you know any English when you started school? Was there a shock?

MRS. LEE: Yes. I knew only a very few words. I remember I was afraid to talk to the teacher. But she was very, very kind, and she understood. She helped me along, so I wasn't held back at all. I went all through grammar school without being held back.

MR. BOETTCHER: Did you learn English as necessary?

MRS. LEE: Yes.

MR. BOETTCHER: What about you, Mr. Omata?

MR. OMATA: Well, during our preschool age, my sister and my older brother and I attended this mission school, kindergarten. And it was supervised by a Caucasian lady by the name of Mrs. M.A. Harlow. She took over and taught us English and things like that. So, surprisingly, when we entered grammar school, we were pretty well advanced in the English language, I think.

MRS. LEE: In those days they didn't have kindergarten in the public schools, but Mrs. Harlow and my father thought it would be a good idea to have us three taught kindergarten and childhood songs and nursery rhymes and different kindergarten activities. She was dedicated to the Japanese Christian Church. It was Presbyterian.

MR. BOETTCHER: This school was attached to the church?

MRS. LEE: Yes. It was held in the mission, they called it. We would go every day, and every Friday Papa would supply the cookies and soda, and we would have a little tea party. As we grew older, Mrs. Harlow arranged so that other church members from the Presbyterian Church in Hanford would come and by that time there were a few more Japanese people attending church. And then we would have parties, like Halloween parties and Easter services. At Christmas, we would put on a pageant and then Christian Endeavor later on when we were in high school. So we had all the advantages of having a religious education, too.

MR. BOETTCHER: Religious, in addition to English language and American culture.

MR. OMATA: That's right.

MRS. LEE: Yes.

MR. BOETTCHER: This school was going, about what year?

MRS. LEE: Let's see, from about 1911. I think I was about five, and it went on until -- Well, I went to this kindergarten for a year and then later on my two brothers and Susie Tagawa and Shizuko Wada.

MR. BOETTCHER: What was the name of the church? Was it Mission Church?

MRS. LEE: Japanese Presbyterian Mission on Seventh Street.

MR. OMATA: But we always called it Mission.

MR. BOETTCHER: And at first, practically the only children there were you five.

MRS. LEE: Just the five of us; my two brothers, and I, and Susie Tagawa, and Shizuko Wada.

MR. BOETTCHER: The three Omata children, and a few more Japanese children?

MRS. LEE: Yes, but I think she discontinued after a while, because the Omatas were all growing up.

MR. BOETTCHER: By the time you started school, you were the only Japanese, so you just had to get along with the Caucasians or the majority people. No problems there?

MRS. LEE: No problem at all.

MR. OMATA: No, there were no problems.

MR. BOETTCHER: That was the culture in which you were living.

MRS. LEE: Yes. And to this day we have those friends, many of them.

MR. BOETTCHER: Some of the old-time Hanford families that are still around.

MRS. LEE: Yes, grammar school friends and high school friends. Of course, when we went off to college, we were all separated because we went to different schools.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you have any other memories of what school was like, or something outstanding from your childhood memories; a happy time or a sad time from your childhood that is vivid in your memory?

MRS. LEE: Well, I can only remember the happy times. I don't know of any unhappy times, because we got along with all our friends, the teachers were all very kind. And, as for myself, I got good grades, so that made me happy.

MR. OMATA: We didn't have any problems. I don't recall any. Do you want

us to name the other brothers and sisters?

MR. BOETTCHER: Oh, yes. If you could remember the years of their birth, too.

MRS. LEE: Well, you got our birthdates. Minoru Omata was born in 1908, and Saburo was born in 1911, Shiro was 1913 -

MR. OMATA: And Goro was born in 1914.

MRS. LEE: And Yuko is 12 years younger than I, so 1918. And Robert is two years younger than Yuko.

MR. OMATA: He was born in 1920.

MR. BOETTCHER: Where did your brothers and sister go to school? What did they do for careers?

MR. OMATA: Well, we went through grammar school and high school in Hanford. And after that we all went to college.

MR. BOETTCHER: Oh, you all went to college?

MRS. LEE: Yes, all eight of us.

MR. BOETTCHER: Your parents worked hard.

MRS. LEE: Fifty-five years ago not many girls went to college. But Mama said I should go, and I went. She said if I can't do anything else find a husband, and I did. (Laughter.)

MR. BOETTCHER: A college husband! So what types of work did the different family members get into? You're the one that took over the store, Mr. Omata. Did any brother or sister stay in town and work for the store for a while? Were they in farming or other types of business?

MR. OMATA: My brother Minoru and I, in 1932, my father took us into the business. At that time we changed the name of the store to Omata's Market. We operated it as Omata's Market until the war in 1941. And then in early 1942, just before the evacuation, we decided to liquidate the store and we leased it out to a Chinese merchant by the name of Charles Young for the duration of the war. About 1935 my brother Minoru left the store. He was employed in Fresno by the Union Oil Company of California as a salesman.

MR. BOETTCHER: I see.

MR. OMATA: But still he retained interest in the store in the company, but he was living in Fresno at the time until the war. Then during the time my two brothers Shiro and Goro were associated with me in the market. In 1941 my brother Goro was drafted into the Army. Of course, we had to evacuate in 1942.

MR. BOETTCHER: What about Saburo?

MRS. LEE: Saburo had a very interesting life. When my mother went to Japan to visit her parents in 1919, she took three of the boys with her. And Grandfather and Grandmother thought it would be nice to educate two

of the boys in Japan. After much thinking, she decided to let them stay with the grandparents, and they went through grammar school and partly high school. Shiro, in his second year of high school, came back. He wanted to come back to the States. But Saburo decided to stay, because he was a baseball player and quite a good one. He was more or less a hero.

My mother took me to Japan in 1929 to marry my husband, whom I had met at the University of California, Berkeley. He was a Korean, but after he finished college he went to Japan and got a job with the Ford Motor Company. Saburo had just graduated from Japanese high school, so she brought him back, but he didn't like it here. He stayed a year and then he went back to Japan and lived with me for a while. He finished Yokohama Technical College, and after that he just lived in Japan the rest of his life. He died in '68.

MR. BOETTCHER: I'm not familiar. Is Yokohama in Wakayama-Ken?

MRS. LEE: No, it's near Tokyo.

MR. BOETTCHER: I see. Wakayama City would be the city in Japan that your family went back to?

MRS. LEE: Well, Mother would visit there whenever she went to Japan for a visit. But I lived in Tokyo because my husband worked for Ford Motor Company in Yokohama until the war.

MR. BOETTCHER: So your husband was living in Japan before he went to college in the United States also?

MRS. LEE: Yes. He went through high school in Japan. He was born in Korea, but he went to high school in Japan. And then his family thought it would be a good idea to have him educated in the United States.

MR. BOETTCHER: So Shiro went and returned. What about Yuko and Robert?

MRS. LEE: They stayed here, and then they went to evacuation camp.

MR. BOETTCHER: What kind of business did they have? Were they in the store?

MR. OMATA: During their high school years, and then just after they graduated from high school, they went to college. And in between college years and the war years, they worked in the store. And then the evacuation came; so that was it, that was the end.

MR. BOETTCHER: They were very young. They just had a little bit of time after college or before the war.

MR. OMATA: Bob was a senior at UC in Berkeley when he was interrupted by evacuation orders. After arriving in Gila River Camp in Arizona, through Temple University he received his degree from UC Berkeley. Later he earned a higher degree from Minnesota.

But my brother Goro was in the Army until the end of hostilities. Then he returned to Hanford, and he and I farmed for two years together. When

the lease with Charles Young expired he reopened the market but renamed it United Market. And he operated that for about five or six years or something like that, and he sold out and -

MRS. LEE: He went to work for the Agricultural Department.

MR. OMATA: Yes, for the Department of Agriculture and then -

MRS. LEE: Yuko got a job with the City.

MR. OMATA: Yes, my sister Yuko was working for Gamble-Skogmo Company in Minneapolis, Minnesota. There's where we relocated during the war years, right after we left the camp in Jerome, Arkansas. And we lived in Minneapolis; my family and - by the way, I was married in 1935. (All three laugh.)

MR. BOETTCHER: Important to put in here!

MR. OMATA: Oh, yes, that was my wife. (All laugh.) My sister Yuko, well she worked for Gamble-Skogmo while we were living in Minneapolis, and then in about 1949 or something like that, she returned to Hanford. And she worked a couple of years for a contractor. Then, after that, well, she got this job in the Hanford City Clerk's Office, and she has been there ever since.

MRS. LEE: And Robert has a Ph.D. in bacteriology. And he is with the N.I.H. in Washington, D.C.

MR. BOETTCHER: National Institute of Health?

Where did your family go to college? Did you go to Fresno State at the time or UC Berkeley? You mentioned all of you went to college. Did you all go to the same college or university?

MRS. LEE: No, no. Well, I went to the University of California, Berkeley, one year. I didn't like it because it was too big. So I went three years to Lake Forest College in Illinois. And my brother Minoru went to Berkeley two years, and then he thought he'd like to try Lake Forest, so he went there for two years and finished there.

MR. OMATA: I went to Armstrong Business College in Berkeley for two years.

MRS. LEE: Saburo finished in Japan; Yokohama Technical College.

MR. OMATA: And Shiro went one year to University of North Dakota, and then two years to UC Berkeley. Goro enrolled at UC Davis, and my sister Yuko attended Fresno State one year and one year at UC Berkeley. And during the time that we were residing in Minneapolis, she went to business college and got a commercial business degree. My brother Robert attended UC Berkeley almost four years, and we had to evacuate. He finished up at University of Minnesota and got his degree there, Ph.D. in bacteriology.

MR. BOETTCHER: Let me go back to the beginning. It sounds like during your early years and school years you really didn't work in the store too much; you were busy in school. Did you work in the store after school?

MR. OMATA: Yes, we helped.

MRS. LEE: And weekends.

MR. OMATA: On weekends and during summer months.

MR. BOETTCHER: What type of chores did you young people do for your family or in Hanford here?

MR. OMATA: Oh, we did everything. (All laugh.)

MRS. LEE: We tried cutting fruit.

MR. OMATA: Sweeping floors.

MR. BOETTCHER: I imagine sweeping floors would be in there!

MRS. LEE: Cutting fruit and picking grapes, which only lasted one day. And then we, the three of us--we were very close the three oldest--we went to pick tomatoes one day. But I think we ate so many tomatoes we didn't want to go back.

MR. BOETTCHER: Any other childhood memories; friends or church or social activities?

There's a difference, I think, in the culture and in the heritage and the activities point of view between Christian and Buddhist Japanese people. And they're different in American society I think a little bit. Now, you're Christian; do you know how your parents turned Christian? I assume they were Buddhist -

MRS. LEE: No, they didn't become Christians.

MR. OMATA: They remained Buddhist.

MRS. LEE: But my mother, when asked to do certain things for the mission, she was very willing. She helped us children participate in all activities connected with the Presbyterian Church. She was very active in the Buddhist Church, but when the mission asked her to do anything, she very gladly did.

MR. BOETTCHER: I see. Was there a Japanese language school in town here at the time? Did your parents involve you in that if there was?

MRS. LEE: Later. There weren't any when we three were young. We just had a tutor, which didn't last very long. On Saturday morning we would have this tutor.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you remember the name?

MR. OMATA: We called her Mizuhara Sensei, huh?

MRS. LEE: Her name was Miss Mizuhara. She was a sister to one of the ladies who lived in the country, but she was willing to tutor us. So the three of us went to the Mission, but I don't think we learned very much.

MR. OMATA: Later on, they formed a Japanese language school here. We



attended it after our grammar school schooling. And we attended that, oh, I guess about four or five years. I did anyway, myself.

MR. BOETTCHER: So this would be in the 20's?

MR. OMATA: In the 20's. I graduated from grammar school, Central Grammar School in 1924. After that I didn't attend the language school.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you remember any of the teachers' names there?

MRS. LEE: Hirazawa.

MR. OMATA: Hirazawa was one. Gosh, I don't remember.

MRS. LEE: Sugimoto, later.

MR. OMATA: That was way after; just before the war.

MR. BOETTCHER: Anything else about the childhood time, or do you want to go into the late 20's-30's when you're approaching your maturity and starting to get into the business?

MR. OMATA: Well, during my high school days, I used to help in the store--in the market. And in 1928, the year I graduated from Hanford High School, I went to Berkeley to attend Armstrong Business College. In 1930 I returned home and worked in the market. And in 1932 my father took my brother Minoru and myself into the business. We renamed the market from G. Omata Company to Omata's Market, and my brother and I operated it. As soon as we took over the market, became partners into the market, my father opened up a department store--like a dry good store--two or three doors away from the market.

MR. BOETTCHER: So he let you take the market, and he started a new business.

MR. OMATA: That's right. And he operated it from about 1932 to about 1938, then he became ill, and he passed away in 1939. Then in 1941 the war started.

MR. BOETTCHER: In the 30's you were expanding your business and getting into business yourself, you and your brother. What was the Depression like then? How did the Depression affect your business?

MR. OMATA: It was rough!

MR. BOETTCHER: Did you have trouble, like making payments on the store? Or did you own it outright already at the time?

MR. OMATA: No, we owned it outright.

MR. BOETTCHER: Would there be any problem with Alien Land Law and a business in town? You know the Alien Land Law applied mostly to farmland. Did your father have any trouble owning property in California?

MR. OMATA: Well, he owned the property before the Alien Land Law became in effect, so there was no problem there. But, later on, if we wanted to purchase any property well, he had to use his children's names; our

names. And that's the way it would have to be.

MR. BOETTCHER: I see. And by the late 20's, of course, you were adults -

MR. OMATA: That's right.

MR. BOETTCHER: -- and could take responsibility. It did not have to be baby children, as it was in some cases.

MRS. LEE: No.

MR. OMATA: No.

MR. BOETTCHER: How did you hear about Pearl Harbor? What are your memories of December 7, 1941?

MR. OMATA: Well, the start of the war we heard over the radio.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you remember where you were at the time?

MR. OMATA: I was home, Sunday morning. (Laughs.)

MR. BOETTCHER: So you heard it the way most people -

MR. OMATA: Well, we couldn't believe it. How this could happen, you know.

MRS. LEE: I was in Japan--Tokyo--and I couldn't believe it! I just couldn't believe it! It came over the radio, and I dashed over across the street to my friend's house, who had lived in New York for quite a while. And I told them, and Mrs. Hata and Mr. Hata were so nervous they could not believe it either.

MR. BOETTCHER: Were they American citizens?

MRS. LEE: No, they were connected with Nozawa Company, Tokyo. They represented that company in New York.

MR. BOETTCHER: So, here you were, an American citizen in Japan.

MRS. LEE: No, I wasn't an American citizen, because I had married before the Cable Act. So I had lost my citizenship; but I have never felt that I had become Japanese. In those days Koreans were Japanese, too, so I had become a Japanese citizen just legally. But in thought and otherwise, I never became Japanese, because my husband had been educated here, too. It wasn't as though I had married into a Japanese family.

MR. BOETTCHER: So, were you able to communicate with your family, then, after the war started?

MRS. LEE: No, there was no way to communicate. I wrote to them when I found out that they were in Minneapolis.

Oh, after the war, my husband worked for Eighth Army in Yokohama, and there he made friends with several of the officers and many young GI's who had come up from the Philippines. They used to come and visit us on Sunday, just to sit in chairs and speak English. They offered to mail

letters if we wanted to, because, otherwise, we couldn't mail them.

MR. BOETTCHER: There still wasn't any mail.

MRS. LEE: No. And in the meanwhile, some letters from my mother and one of our brothers came to us through the Philippines. They had been stalled there for some years. It was sent through the Red Cross, and we finally received them and found out that they were in Minneapolis. I wrote a letter and one of the GI's mailed it for me, and in that way they found out that we were all safe. Otherwise, I imagine my family here thought that we were all dead, and I didn't know where they were.

MR. BOETTCHER: You heard about the evacuation?

MRS. LEE: Oh, yes. They played that up big in Japan.

MR. BOETTCHER: What about you, Mr. Omata? What about the community reaction? What happened when you went to the store Monday morning? Anything?

MR. OMATA: Well, most of our customers who were Caucasians were very close friends, and they all sympathized with us. They knew that we didn't have anything to do with the war. We didn't have any animosity or anything like that, because we all grew up together. They gave us a lot of sympathy. Then the Presidential Order came out that we had to evacuate, and the only thing we could do was to liquidate what we had, the tangible merchandise. We were lucky to find someone to lease the place for the duration; so that was it.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you remember what month you had to leave? Did you go to an Assembly Center?

MR. OMATA: Yes, we went to the Fresno Fairgrounds on May 13, 1942. We went by bus, carrying what luggage we could. We were in the Fairgrounds from May 13, 1942 until the end of October 1942.

MR. BOETTCHER: That was when they closed down the Fairgrounds.

MR. OMATA: Yes. We were the last ones. By the way, in 1935, when I got married, I married Kikuko Domoto of Oakland, California.

MR. BOETTCHER: Oh, yes, I'm sorry for not asking. If I may ask, how did you meet Mrs. Omata?

MRS. LEE: Childhood friends. It was very interesting. Her mother and my mother came over on the same ship as brides, and they had children just about the same time. They came over in 1904.

MR. BOETTCHER: So your family and the Domoto family kept contact.

MRS. LEE: Well, we were relatives, because a Domoto had married our uncle in Japan.

MR. BOETTCHER: But Oakland is a ways away. But you were in school in Berkeley.

MR. OMATA: Yes.

MRS. LEE: Every summer Papa would take us to Oakland, and then while he would do his business in San Francisco, we would stay with the Domotos.

MR. OMATA: Then my wife and I had two children. A daughter, Jean, and a son, George; both born in Hanford. They went through the Hanford schools, and my daughter graduated from the University of California at Berkeley, and my son graduated from Fresno State College. They were very active in grammar school and high school here. My daughter was born in 1937, and my son was born in 1940.

MR. BOETTCHER: So, in the spring of 1942, you had two young children.

When you went to the Fresno Assembly Center, did you have more family with you?

MR. OMATA: My mother was living with my older brother Minoru who had a 40-acre farm in Sanger. He didn't go to the Assembly Center, he went directly to the Relocation Center in Gila River, Arizona. So, we were separated. My sister Yuko went over with my mother; but just before we were relocated to Jerome, Arkansas my sister Yuko joined my family at Fresno, and we went together. Also my brother Shiro joined me at the Fresno Assembly Center, and we went to Arkansas together. Then after we got to Arkansas, my brother Shiro volunteered into the United States Army Intelligence.

MR. BOETTCHER: Language school?

MR. OMATA: Yes, language school. Because he had the Japanese language background and also the English language background.

MR. BOETTCHER: So the Omata family was split between Arizona and Jerome.

What was the trip from Fresno to Jerome like; several days on the train with young children?

MR. OMATA: Oh, boy, that was really something! (Laughter.)

MR. BOETTCHER: Was it an uncomfortable adventure? Were the shutters drawn on the train?

MR. OMATA: Very blacked out. We sure went in a roundabout way. Through Arizona; part of Texas; through Oklahoma; and then into part of Arkansas; and then into Memphis, Tennessee; and then back into Arkansas.

MR. BOETTCHER: Tell me some of your reactions or feelings to Jerome.

MR. OMATA: When we got there, the barracks weren't quite finished, and the first night we arrived there our whole train had to sleep in one of the warehouses there. And the next morning they assigned us to certain blocks. Our block wasn't completely finished. We had to take our showers at another; we had to go to a mess hall in another block; and then, gradually, they finished it up. But it was rough, especially with two little kids.

MR. BOETTCHER: What was your job there?

MR. OMATA: I became the chief purchasing agent for the Co-op store in Jerome. My brother Shiro was working in the recreation department, but he didn't last very long in that job because he volunteered into the Army Intelligence. Of course, my wife had to take care of the children.

MR. BOETTCHER: It sounds like they used some of your business knowledge.

MR. OMATA: Yes, which was easy for me. I was out buying on buying trips. About two or three days a week I'd go to a neighboring community, just outside the camp, to purchase merchandise for the Co-op. And then occasionally they sent a team of us up to Chicago or St. Louis. or Little Rock or New Orleans, Memphis.

MR. BOETTCHER: How did the people there react to you?

MR. OMATA: They treated us very well. We were instructed to go to the best hotels and for our meals to go to a real reputable restaurant. We didn't have any trouble at all.

MR. BOETTCHER: No one said that you were "enemies" walking around free?

MR. OMATA: No. They looked at us kind of funny or something like that, but we had no racial trouble.

MR. BOETTCHER: That part of the country probably hadn't seen any Japanese people.

MR. OMATA: No, they hadn't. When we got into Arkansas, the blacks there that were laborers building the camp remarked to us, "Gee, you guys speak perfect English!" They looked at us with surprise.

MR. BOETTCHER: How did you get from Jerome to Minnesota?

MR. OMATA: Well, they encouraged us to relocate from the Relocation Center. So, being that my brother Shiro was stationed at Camp Savage in Minnesota--and on my last buying trip I was in Chicago; in Memorial Day in 1943. I had the day off, so I took a train to Minneapolis to visit him, and also my brother Minoru who had relocated from Arizona to Mankato, Minnesota. I took the train and went to Minnesota and visited my brother and his family, and also my mother. And then I came back to camp and made arrangements with my brothers that we would relocate to Minnesota also. It just happened that we relocated to Minneapolis. As soon as I got back to camp, I told my wife, "Let's get out of here." I sent them ahead, and I stayed behind to finish up the work I was doing for the Co-op and then I left.

MR. BOETTCHER: What type of business did you get into in Minnesota?

MR. OMATA: I went into the restaurant business.

MR. BOETTCHER: Did you work for someone else at a restaurant there?

MR. OMATA: Oh, no, no! I looked around, and I noticed that there were quite a few Nisei soldiers at Camp Savage, and then after I got there they closed Camp Savage and they moved the language school over to Fort Snelling. I noticed that there were about five or six thousand Nisei

soldiers stationed there. I thought, well, gosh, these kids might want Japanese food. At least rice and tsukemono, you know. So I got in touch with a very good close friend of mine who had relocated to Cincinnati. His name was Fred Yoshikawa from Fresno, and his wife was a very good cook. We got together and bought out a run-down restaurant and remodeled it a little bit, painted it up. We opened up a Japanese restaurant in Minneapolis.

MR. BOETTCHER: I'm not sure where the Army posts were, in relation to Minneapolis.

MR. OMATA: Well, Camp Savage was located about 25 or 30 miles southwest of Minneapolis, and Fort Snelling was between St. Paul and Minneapolis.

MR. BOETTCHER: So that was good luck for you.

MR. OMATA: It was a booming business while it lasted. Finally, they transferred the language school from Fort Snelling to the Presidio in Monterey, California. So my partner and I thought, this is it. Our business was going to go down, so we decided to come back to California in 1946. We had started the restaurant in August of 1943, and then we left in 1946.

MR. BOETTCHER: So, actually, you could have returned to California, according to the evacuation laws, earlier than you did.

MR. OMATA: Well, not too much earlier. I think it was about 1945 the restrictions were lifted. It was the spring of 1945.

MR. BOETTCHER: And you still had the business.

MR. OMATA: The language school was still there, but as soon as we found out they were going to move out to California, well, we decided we'd move back, too. We came back to Hanford just before the new school term started in the fall. The reason we came back was we figured Hanford was our home. We owned property here and that was it. I looked around to see what I could do, and I went into farming in the fall of 1946. I farmed for two years.

MR. BOETTCHER: Did you have enough money to rent some land?

MR. OMATA: Oh, yes.

MR. BOETTCHER: So you farmed instead of going into the store right away.

MR. OMATA: Well, the lease on the store hadn't expired yet. As soon as the lease expired, my brother Goro, who was farming with me, he decided to go into the market business. That was it.

In 1949, my brother and my brother-in-law, who lived in Berkeley and had experience in the import-export business, we got together and formed an importing company in San Francisco. We became agents for a well-known Japanese sake and also we became agents of the Mikimoto cultured pearls. And in 1951 we decided to expand the business, and we opened up an office in Los Angeles. And I was delegated to take care of the Los Angeles office, and my brother-in-law took care of the San Francisco office. I was commuting every weekend from Hanford to Los Angeles, which

I did for 27 years.

In 1978, we decided to sell out the pearl business. We turned it over to the parent company, which is K. Mikimoto and Co., Japan. They gladly took over from us and the arrangement was very satisfactory. They took over the assets and reimbursed us for developing the market for them. And that's it. That's the end of my business career in Los Angeles.

MR. BOETTCHER: Was this wholesale import? Who did you sell to?

MR. OMATA: We sold to retail stores.

MR. BOETTCHER: In the meantime, you still were active in the store in Hanford, too?

MR. OMATA: No. My brother operated the store for about five or six years, and he decided to call it quits because of the supermarkets being so strong, and independents were gradually being phased out. He got this job with the Agriculture Department, and he worked for them for about 10 years, I guess.

MR. BOETTCHER: We are now talking about how your family business has changed over the years. Is there more you can add?

MR. OMATA: I can say this: that most of the Japanese people that returned to the Hanford area were property owners. That is why they returned. Just like my family.

MR. BOETTCHER: I think I saw some records from the War Relocation Authority that indicated that in Fresno County perhaps 90 percent of the people returned, perhaps; or at least more than half. And, yet, in Kings County and Tulare County, maybe only 30 percent of the people returned. Does that sound reasonable to you?

MR. OMATA: That's reasonable, because that's about the percentage that had property here.

MR. BOETTCHER: I think in Fresno County there were farmers that had a few acres and had that to come back to.

MR. OMATA: That's right.

MR. BOETTCHER: What changes have you seen in Hanford? In the Japanese community and its relation to the rest of the town? What about you, Mrs. Lee, when did you come back?

MRS. LEE: I came back in 1961, and there wasn't a great deal of change, except that there were supermarkets. The town is the same. It's just that Shortacres had developed and that used to be farmland when I was living here.

MR. BOETTCHER: Was this house the family house?

MR. OMATA: No. I bought this house in 1951.

MR. BOETTCHER: What about the change in the treatment of the Japanese people?

MR. OMATA: When we were kids, there was quite a bit of discrimination.

MRS. LEE: We heard of it; but, to our knowledge, we didn't feel it.

MR. OMATA: We didn't experience any.

MRS. LEE: I think it was all political. Because my father had a lawyer Mr. J.L.C. Irwin, a friend who was elected to the Senate, and that Johnson or somebody was always anti- Japanese and anti-Chinese and he asked Mr. Irwin, "Why do you go and talk to him?" And Mr. Irwin said, "George, it's all political. I don't have that feeling, and I don't think that Johnson has that feeling, but he has to have the votes." Many of the American farmers thought the Japanese were going to take over everything. See, the Japanese were very industrious.

MR. OMATA: Ambitious, too.

MRS. LEE: And the Chinese went into all kinds of businesses; they weren't going to be Coolies all their lives. And so they started that "Yellow Peril" business. All that was politics and journalism.

MR. OMATA: All that stuff was building up.

MR. BOETTCHER: But it didn't get down on the personal level with the people you knew.

MRS. LEE: No. I live in Sacramento now with my older daughter. And my son-in-law teaches at City College, and my daughter is a librarian in the State Library, and they are not treated as a minority any more. It's the blacks and Chicanos who are, so when it comes to jobs, they're in with the whites.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you try to maintain Japanese culture in your family? Is there anything important about Japanese culture that you would like to see picked up by the Sansei and the Yonsei?

MR. OMATA: We still appreciate Japanese food.

MRS. LEE: And respect for elders.

MR. BOETTCHER: Do you think there is enough of that being transmitted, or that times are changing too fast?

MR. OMATA: No, I don't think so.

MRS. LEE: No, I don't think so. I think it's been instilled into them, like my grandchildren. Well, my daughter was born in Japan because I lived there, but in her thoughts and speech and everything she's a Sansei. My son-in-law is a Nisei, and they both feel that the children should respect elders. And when I retired from teaching school here in Hanford, they wanted me to come and live with them. And the grandchildren are very respectful. However, they don't speak Japanese. It's always English because of their friends and the schools. That's the way it was with us. We couldn't speak much Japanese because of our friends.

MR. BOETTCHER: Well, the Nisei were encouraged to become



Americanized.

MRS. LEE: We were. Papa always said, "You are Americans, you are American citizens."

MR. BOETTCHER: Did you have to give up some Japanese things to be Americans?

MRS. LEE: No, I don't think so.

MR. OMATA: No.

MRS. LEE: Discipline was very strict. We had to conform to their way of disciplining us; but, otherwise, we had to be Americans.

MR. BOETTCHER: Is there anything else you would like to add? Anything about other family members?

MRS. LEE: Lt. Shiro Omata went to Japan as interpreter to General MacArthur during the Occupation. He was married to Patsy Kodama of Reedley before the war. My elder daughter Yumi is married to a brother-in-law of the Nakamuras of Reedley. Two of his sisters are married to two Nakamura brothers.

MR. OMATA: I think we covered things pretty completely here, unless you want to ask some more questions.

MR. BOETTCHER: I guess we've got it then. Thank you for your interview, Mr. Omata and Mrs. Lee.