

MASAMI ARITA

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is July 20, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to be in the home of Masami Arita at 664 South Ross in Sanger, California, 93657.

Mr. Arita, before we get into the interview proper, I would like to know your full name, date and place of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MR. ARITA: My name is Masami Arita. I was born March 7, 1912 in Reedley, California. My place of longest residence is Sanger.

MRS. HASEGAWA: From what part of Japan did your parents come and why did they decide to settle in Sanger? When?

MR. ARITA: Shosuke Arita, my father, was born in 1876 in Akama Machi, Onga Gun, Fukuoka Ken, Japan. Mother, Yoshi Yoshinaga, was born in 1882 nearby on the sea coast; Ashiya Machi, Onga Gun, Fukuoka Ken. She grew up in the family fish market business. Father grew up in Akama and learned the watch repair trade. However, at the time he left Japan, he was in the ramune business (soda water bottling). He married Yoshi and had two daughters Sumiye and Mitsuye and a son Isao. He left the family with the grandparents and came to America alone with the understanding of sending for them later or returning soon with his fortune made.

He established himself in Reedley, California where there were several other men from the same ken. These same "kenjin" people stayed very close throughout their long life in this area. Records show that father opened a general merchandise store in Reedley. There were many Japanese to support such a store. However, not too long after opening, it was burned to the ground.

In 1911, he started a boardinghouse with pool tables and some merchandise on the ground floor. This was the year that mother left her three children with the grandparents and came to Reedley to join Father at the age of 29. In 1912, I was born, and in 1914 my sister Yoshie was born. In 1916, another sister Yukie was born. All the men were getting wives from Japan. As their families grew with many children, so their fellowships became closer. The special treat for the children was to stay overnight at a friend's house. They had get-together parties at every opportunity. Birthdays, recovery from illness, or any good fortune had to be celebrated. It was called "oiwai." In 1917, Father left the boardinghouse business to go into farming.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are your recollections of your childhood?

MR. ARITA: 1917 is the year that the distinct memory of my life began. I was 5 years old. They bought me a small red bicycle which I remember learning to ride. I know that Father raised watermelons. I remember riding on a wagon piled high with melons when the team of horses spooked at a squirrel and turned sharply to overturn the wagon. I came tumbling down, scared, with the melons.

In 1918, we moved to a peach ranch just a few miles away. This was the year I started school. All through life our language with our parents was in Japanese. The school was about two miles away, in the town of Reedley, to which I went on my bicycle. My teacher, who began to teach

me the English language, was very kind. I remember the many after school sessions getting special teaching from her.

One day Father and I rode into town on our bicycles, and I was amazed at the goings on there. There were some people shooting pistols into the air. World War I had ended and people were celebrating with all the noise they could make.

In 1919, we moved to a grape ranch near Smith Mountain east of Reedley. It was the Hagopian Ranch, and there were children of our age in the family. And so we enjoyed our first daily playmates. I was still in the first grade. Yoshie learned to speak some English from me and from our new-found playmates. One day they took Yoshie to school as a visitor and from that day on she went to school.

In 1920, we moved to a ranch in Parlier. We had to go three miles into Parlier to school. I rode my bicycle or walked with Yoshie to school. Father bought our first car, a Model T Ford and so on bad weather days, he drove us to school. That year my brother Isao, who was left in Japan, arrived in San Francisco. He had a difficult time entering the country because the discrimination against the Orientals had begun. It sure was exciting for me to have an instant big brother.

In 1921, we moved to Sanger onto a grape ranch belonging to Mr. Haber. It was only a mile to Lindsay School. Just a short walk. My best friend there was Toru Hasegawa. At age nine I had learned to drive the family Ford. I had the chore of driving alone to one of our neighbors for eggs and to another for fresh milk. A chore I liked and ready to do at any moment. I got my first driver's license at age 14, the minimum age at that time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was there any racial discrimination?

MR. ARITA: One day, walking home from school, I experienced racial prejudice for the first time. There was a crew of men putting in a power pole, and as I walked by they called me a "Jap," and swore at me. Thereafter, I was always leery of a group of working men and kept my distance from them.

In 1922, we left the Haber Ranch and moved into the city of Fresno. Father was finished with his farming ventures. I know now that he was never a good farmer. His background in Japan was business, and so he, again, turned to business. I enrolled at the Lincoln School in West Fresno. He bought a couple of used trucks and together with Isao was in business. They manufactured "konyaku" a vermicelli-like food. They sold this, soda water, and ingredients and equipment to make home brew beer. They established routes selling these to many Japanese labor camps in the country.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did your father get into the restaurant business?

MR. ARITA: Mr. Yamaguchi, who operated the Dinuba Cafe and Chop Suey Restaurant in Dinuba, was a very good friend of my father's. He influenced our going into the chop suey and restaurant business.

In 1923, we moved to Sanger and started a chop suey and American food business called the "Star Restaurant." The place was across the track facing the Southern Pacific Depot. We were on the same block as the Home

Grocery, a general merchandise store, a large store owned by three Japanese families. We were the only Japanese in Sanger. This was where our family put its roots down, and we children started up the ladder of our education. We were the only Japanese in the city school system.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have any kind of vandalism or any trouble with the public in your business?

MR. ARITA: In 1924, not long after we had opened the restaurant, a rowdy bunch came in and turned over tables, smashed chairs, and caused some damage. They even came into the kitchen threatening us. I remember the scary sight of Father facing them with a cleaver and a cook's knife in his hands until they left. We knew who they were, so we went to the Sanger City Court with a case. We hired a renown Japanese Fresno lawyer Mr. Tom Okawara. I heard him tell Father that Japanese had no chance in court. He was right, because nothing came of it. I was 11 years old and was questioned as to what I saw that night of the rough house.

On Christmas Day, 1926, we got a call from the TB Ward of the County Hospital saying that Isao passed away. He had discontinued helping in the restaurant when he contracted tuberculosis. He was 25 years old. The following year, April 1, 1927, our youngest sister Kazue, who was born in Fresno, passed away with cancer at the age of five.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was high school like when you attended Sanger High? What were your extracurricular activities?

MR. ARITA: Yoshie and I graduated from grammar school in the same class. In our moving from school to school, she had caught up to me. We entered Sanger High in 1928. In our freshman year, the student body was about 350. There were about 10 Niseis in school. We did not feel any prejudice in school from grammar through high school. I participated in the sports of football, basketball, and baseball. I know now that I shouldn't have, because I had to help in the restaurant every night, and so my grades suffered. In the senior year, I was elected captain of the Varsity Football Team. I was also voted in to the HI-Y Club.

One day the senior class went on a swim outing to a plunge in Fresno. I was told by the management that I must have a health certificate from a doctor before I could enter the pool. This hit me hard although I had occasionally experienced prejudice in my contacts with the public in the restaurants.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How large was the Japanese community, and what kinds of activities did they have?

MR. ARITA: The Japanese community in Sanger was well-organized. There was the Doshikai for the Issei, and the YMA for the Nisei. We had fun in the YMA. We had a basketball team and played other teams in the Japanese Young Men's Association League. We held parties in our community hall with the Nisei girls. Dancing was controversial in those days among Isseis. One night at a Shinnenekai (New Year's) party in the hall, Mr. S. Hasegawa, in his speech, gave his approval for our dancing in the hall. Thereafter, we enjoyed dancing at all of our parties.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you go to Japanese School?

MR. ARITA: We all went to Japanese Language School on Sundays. It was taught in our community hall with Mrs. Hasegawa and Mrs. Saiki as teachers. We learned to speak correct Japanese and to read and write. When I got to the advanced stage of learning the hard character letters, I quit. The pressures of high school and the work in the restaurant were the reasons for my quitting the language school. The amount that I had learned was useful in later life, because it enabled me to correspond with my sister and other relatives in Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was it like living across from the depot? Where did the trains originate and where did it end? What was the main purpose of the railroad going through Sanger?

MR. ARITA: Sanger was on the Southern Pacific route for passenger trains between San Francisco and Los Angeles by way of the east side farming communities. The daily northbound and southbound would stop to unload and load mail and express packages. I can remember many days sitting on the platform watching and waving to the travelers on the train. I liked the huge steam engine and its smell as it puffed out of the station.

Some of the most fondest memories were in my Boy Scout years in Troop 102 sponsored by the Baptist Church and the Kiwanis Club. Our scout master was always a teacher from one of the grammar schools. We were always planning and going on overnight camping trips along the Kings River. We had fun living up to the Scout Oaths and Laws. My scouting days ended when I started high school. My best scout friend Selmer Thompson and I had achieved the rank of Eagle Scout.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who were your neighborhood friends?

MR. ARITA: My neighborhood friends were all Italian boys. Our street across the tracks was nicknamed "Whiskey Row" in the prohibition days. We were a rough bunch. However, vandalism, stealing, and dope were unknown to us. We just played hard and rough.

In 1930, my father contracted tuberculosis and was no longer able to cook in the restaurant. Mother, Yoshie, and I worked after school every night and operated the restaurant. Father went to live in the mountains 30 miles from home to breathe mountain air which they said was good for TB. We drove up every week with groceries and laundry because he was alone.

As winter came, he was transferred to the TB Ward of the Fresno County Hospital. Next spring, in April of 1931, he passed away at the age of 55. I, being the oldest and the only son, became the head of the family at 18. Mother was 50, sisters Yoshie 16, Yukie 14, and Masaie 12.

Yoshie and I graduated from high school in June 1931. The country was in the depth of depression. The business was down to where it could only feed us. We were not having money left to pay the rent for the building for our business place and living quarters. Mother and I decided that I should go out to work, so that we could pay the rent. We also agreed to protect the three sisters from financial problems and the struggles of making a living. My first experience at working out was a job on a hay ranch baling hay at 17 cents per hour. When that job finished, my next job was with the Round Mountain Citrus Farm Company which was owned by a

Japanese group and also the same people who owned the Home Grocery Store and was our neighbor in town. They paid 20 cents per hour and later 25 cents. They were a produce, grape, and citrus wholesale company with their market outlet on Front Street Market in San Francisco. I did a variety of jobs in harvesting grapes and citrus. I also drove trucks and worked with Mexican crews in the field as their foreman. These experiences influenced me to go into farming later in life. By 1935, the wages were up to 35 cents per hour and things started to look up. Mother and I saw no future in my working out and so I quit my job to work in the restaurant.

We tried a business venture of selling fried noodles in packages like potato chips and in it had a recipe for chow mein. I bought a new Ford panel truck with which to make deliveries to the grocery stores in the county. But through inexperience and unknown expenses, it was a failure in one year.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It seems you were ahead of the times in your pre-packaging venture. What did you do after that?

MR. ARITA: We decided to upgrade the restaurant for more family trade. We closed and started to completely remodel the dining room. We started with a new linoleum floor. I hired carpenters and rebuilt the interior. I drew up all the plans making use of what I had learned in school on mechanical and architectural drawing. I did the painting and the wallpapering, too. The kitchen was equipped with stainless steel ranges. After a month of hard work, we were ready to open. It became a bright place to eat. This was the turning point in the life of the Arita family. Business picked up. Good business people of the town became our customers, and we began to prosper. I became the chief cook and mother was demoted to helper's status. By now Yoshie had married Shigeru Domoto and was gone from the restaurant. Yukie and Masaie were now working with us.

We decided to give Mother a trip to Japan as she was longing to see her two daughters who had remained in Japan. As years went by they were married and had families. In the spring of 1939, Yukie and Mother made the slow boat trip to Tokyo. They were met there by her daughter Sumiye and went by train to their home in Kyushu.

We wanted one of our family to go to college, and so Masaie enrolled at Fresno State College and lived at the YMCA in Fresno. She came home on weekends to help in the restaurant. With my sisters away, I was alone on weekdays and so I hired a helper who lived across town to help nights waiting on tables. It was the slow time of the year, and so I was able to manage. However, it was a very lonely three months for me doing all of the things that had to be done to keep the business going.

Mother and Yukie returned from Japan and Yukie was exhausted and tired. It must have been an ordeal for her, looking after Mother and facing everything strange. She had a boil low on her neck near the spine. She immediately went to our family doctor in Sanger who had had a heart attack, and so Yukie was referred to another doctor. She was placed in the Burnet Sanitarium in Fresno (now Community). The next morning she died from blood poisoning and diabetes. To this day, I think that it was the bungling of the second doctor that caused her death. Now I have two sisters in America, Yoshie and Masaie who are destined to live a normal life with family, children, and all that goes with it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What were your reactions when you learned that Pearl Harbor was bombed by the Japanese? How did your community react?

MR. ARITA: In 1941, Pearl Harbor came like a bombshell. There was nothing we could do against the decision of the military and the bad politicians making hay, fanning the flame of racial prejudice against the Japanese people in California. The order for evacuation followed and like all other Niseis who were starting in life, we had to leave. Some offers came to lease our business, but they were waiting to get it for practically nothing after we left. My good realty friend in town offered to take over the place and would try for a respectable deal after we left. I gave him the power of attorney and we rented the place to a Chinese at a low rent, which was the best he could do. I didn't complain, because he was looking after my property which was the restaurant and equipment.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was your relocation experience?

MR. ARITA: We were sent to a camp at Gila, Arizona. Everyone knows what we faced in camp, so more need not be said of camp life.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you return directly to Sanger after camp?

MR. ARITA: No. I left camp as soon as we were allowed and went to a job in Joliet, Illinois. I became allergic to the dust from the material I was shoveling out of a freight car. I left the job and went to Dayton, Ohio and took a job in a battery factory. I went to a night vocational training school and completed a course in arc welding. In the spring of 1944, with a certificate of arc welder in hand, I went to Detroit, Michigan. I took a job at my newfound skill as a welder at a steel fabrication shop doing war material jobs. When the war ended, I was a certified Navy welder with a mark of my own to stamp on my work. Mother and Masaie had joined me in our apartment in Detroit. When the war ended, I knew that I must go back to Sanger to restart our restaurant business. The confined factory work and a clock to punch was not for me.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you meet your wife, and what was her maiden name?

MR. ARITA: I had met the nicest Japanese girl in Detroit. Her name was Barbara Tsuyuki, originally from Watsonville. She was teaching at a children's boarding school in Grosse Pointe, a suburb of Detroit. We first met at a church get together sponsored by a Baptist church for the evacuees. We were married and came back to Sanger to start all over again.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did the Sanger community receive you?

MR. ARITA: All of our old friends and customers welcomed us back to Sanger, and our business prospered. I added a banquet room to seat 50 people and it paid off. We became the meeting place for the Kiwanis Club, Lions Club, Rotary Club, Y's Men Club, Toastmasters Club, and many other meetings. Mother retired and Masaie married Seichi Yamamoto and so, now Barbara and I operated the restaurant.

Mother was ailing with diabetes which she had for the past 30 years. In her last few years, she developed Parkinson's Disease and had difficulty

in her movements. We nursed her in her home until she died at the age of 70.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did you decide to close your restaurant and go into farming?

MR. ARITA: We were now operating the restaurant with many hired help and was very busy. In 1953, I started having kidney stone troubles. In the fall of 1954, I went through surgery and lost a kidney. It was a sacrificed to the heat of the kitchen ranges. I had been working 10 years in this confining restaurant life and so decided to get out.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you become such a successful farmer when you had no previous farming experiences?

MR. ARITA: I bought a 40-acre vineyard and ranch next to one of my classmates of high school days Al Krum, the best neighbor one could have. He was the finest grape farmer in the country. He generously gave me all the important advice on grape farming and so with that and my love for farming, was able to make it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you still observe any Japanese customs?

MR. ARITA: I grew up within the Japanese culture of my parents and so I enjoy all things Japanese. They had nice customs and manners which I hope will not be lost.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How about your involvements with community organizations?

MR. ARITA: Some of my activities in organizations are as follows: I was a chairman of Sanger YMA. I took active part in the Sanger JAACL and was elected president in two different years. I served as secretary of Sanger Unit of Sun-Maid Raisin Cooperative when we used to have separate district meetings. I am a member of the Sanger Farm Bureau Center and was elected and served as secretary-treasurer. After seven continuous years, I declined nomination as a matter of in good taste.

As for my exposure to religion, I can't say much. In 1922, the year we lived in Fresno, the family was converted from Buddhism to Christianity through Father's friendship with Reverend Fukushima. The family went to the Japanese Congregational Church in Fresno. When we moved to Sanger, Father closed the restaurant and took us to church in Fresno on Christmas and Easter. I went to the Sanger Baptist Church during my scouting days. This was to earn gold stars which our Scoutmaster gave our patrol for church attendance. My church-going ended as my scouting days ended.

When I married, Barbara was a churchgoer, and so we became members of the First Methodist Church of Sanger. I would occasionally attend church with her. I never had a chance to get a knowledge of the Bible. In 1979, I was invited by Hugh Marshall, a close friend who lives near our home, to join a Bible study group at his home called, "Men for Christ." This group of about 15 is non-denominational. We meet every week at a breakfast cooked by Mrs. Marshall. I am now learning the Bible. At age 68, I am now semi-retired and trying to enjoy the remaining years as much as possible.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you for sharing your memories of your life and of history of Sanger and its community in relation to the Japanese.