

DR. AKIRA TAJIRI

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is January 3, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to interview my brother Dr. Akira Tajiri at 19371 East Parlier Avenue in Reedley, California.

Please state your full name, your date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

DR. TAJIRI: I was born in Dinuba. California on January 5, 1927, and I've lived in Reedley probably the longest--since 1951.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Will you please tell us a bit about your childhood--what recollections you have about what it was like then and how you see the changes?

DR. TAJIRI: Probably the biggest change is in the toys that we made ourselves. I think that it served some good purpose, because we learned how to use our hands and our imaginations to make things. The modern kids have all these plastic and electronic toys that are given to them.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I guess we really learned how to do things for ourselves. What do you remember about your childhood? About some of the things you remember as being traditionally family things?

DR. TAJIRI: Our parents spoke nothing but Japanese, and at home, we spoke only Japanese. We were seen and not heard, and I think this probably made us all more introverted and less able to get in front of a group and talk. It had its good points, but I think it had some drawbacks.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you grow up in the Dinuba area?

DR. TAJIRI: I was born in Dinuba but raised in Santa Maria, and I was there until the war broke out. When the war broke out, I was a freshman in Santa Maria High School, and we evacuated out to Dinuba. I finished my freshman year there.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What do you remember about the time when the war broke out? Do you recall how you felt on December 7, 1941?

DR. TAJIRI: I was in a movie--one of the rare occasions when I was watching a movie, and they announced it at the theatre. Of course, we were very excited thinking about what was going to happen, so we all went home.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What happened to your father during that time?

DR. TAJIRI: In the middle of the night, the FBI came and took him to Crystal City, and we were very worried because he was quite ill with asthma and he didn't have time to take his medication with him.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What happened to you after you got to Dinuba--when you were evacuated?

DR. TAJIRI: During the summer we worked some, then after that we were evacuated to Poston, Arizona.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you remember anything about that trip to Poston?

DR. TAJIRI: All I can recall is being on the train and nobody really knew anything and nobody really gave us too much advice on what we could take--or couldn't. One of my regrets was that I didn't take my bicycle.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did you do in camp?

DR. TAJIRI: I went to school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who were your teachers and what kinds of subjects did you study?

DR. TAJIRI: I was in college prep so I took all the courses that prepared me for college, and when we were in camp we were new to the camp and the people from San Diego were already there and they had been in previous relocation camps so they were pretty well organized. The kids were lazy and they wanted none of the other kids to study. They didn't want to have to study themselves so they intimidated the rest of them not to study. But, since I wanted to go to college, I felt that I needed to study, so I took up Judo. In one tournament, I choked out four people right in a row, so that scared them off.

MRS. HASEGAWA: They didn't bother you anymore! How long were you in camp and what did you do after you left?

DR. TAJIRI: I was in camp for two years. I wanted to graduate on the outside so that I could go to college. I was afraid that if I stayed in camp they might not recognize my diploma, so we moved down to Denver. When we went to Denver, I went to Manual Training High School. It was still during the war and there was quite a lot of war fever. I remember one little Japanese kid whose name was Fred Inouye and this little kid was less than five feet tall, and apparently he didn't have a mother, just a father. There was this six-foot-two white guy who was on the wrestling team and he'd rip his shirt off--just rip it--so I thought the first chance this guy gave me, I'd settle his hash! I was in the gymnasium one day holding my English Composition book. He came and just knocked it up, and before the pages fell to the ground, I had thrown him and landed on top of him and I threw a choke hold on him. And as he was turning green I told him, "Leave that kid alone or I'll kill you next time!" When he landed the whole gym shook and the coach was standing there but he didn't say anything. After that they left us alone.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did you think about the quality of the education you received in camp as compared with Manual.

DR. TAJIRI: Well, education in camp was very primitive and the teachers were not really qualified. But, I did have Plane Geometry from my future brother-in-law, Sho Tsuruoka.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have difficulty passing your college entrance exams, or was there anything like that?

DR. TAJIRI: Yes, they did have college entrance exams, but at Manual I graduated 7th out of a class of 209, so I got a high school scholarship from the University of Denver. That kind of restored my faith in the United States. Even though I'd just been there one year, they gave me a scholarship.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You had three years of high school in camp, then?

DR. TAJIRI: No, the first year was at Santa Maria and Dinuba combined, then two years at Poston.

MRS. HASEGAWA: As a Nisei, during the war, you did come across a lot of discrimination? How long were you at the University of Denver?

DR. TAJIRI: I was there two years. Then I went to the University of California at Berkeley. I was trying to get into optometry school, but because I was considered a nonresident, they wouldn't consider me. They were only taking two or three out-of-staters, so I applied down at Los Angeles School of Optometry. They said, "You're the caliber of man we want," so they took me right away. It was a private school and the tuition was quite steep, so I worked during the summertime to earn my tuition and during the winter while I was going to school, I earned my keep.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you do that?

DR. TAJIRI: Part of the time by unloading trucks at night-time. And my grades pretty well went along with what kind of job I was doing. When I was doing night work, that was probably the roughest, you know, because I was unloading crates outdoors, and if I missed the streetcar, it'd be 2:00 or 3:00 in the morning before I got home.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where did you live when you were going to school?

DR. TAJIRI: Well, I lived in a boardinghouse for a while and then an apartment--a one-room apartment. And then I moved into a house.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did you graduate and get your doctorate?

DR. TAJIRI: In 1951.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then when did you begin your first practice?

DR. TAJIRI: I started in Reedley that year, and I've been here ever since.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did you choose to become an optometrist?

DR. TAJIRI: I really wanted to be a medical doctor. My father was ill, and I felt I needed to get out as soon as I could. And optometry at the time I was considering it, it was a four-year program. When I got into it, it turned into five years. Now it is a six-year program.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was the optometry field like when you started your career and what are the changes that have taken place since you started your practice?

DR. TAJIRI: Well, when I first went into optometry, it was considered a second-class profession. The MD's always downgraded optometry, and the optometrists themselves didn't think of themselves as a first-class profession. But, today their reputation is second to none. In fact, medicine is practicing optometry by virtue of the exemption of qualification. They don't have to pass the State Board. And I would say

that most all of them probably couldn't pass the Optometric State Board.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You mean the MD's could not?

DR. TAJIRI: Right. They can still refract by virtue of exemption.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Besides practicing optometry, you are the owner of Tajiri Visual Products Company, Vice President of the Sequoia Contact Lens, Inc., and partner of the Conifer Laboratories. Would you please describe these companies. What did you produce?

DR. TAJIRI: Tajiri Visual Products main product is a frame molding compound. You take a frame and catalyze silicone rubber at room temperature and place it on the patient's face and let it set up. It takes about five minutes. Trim off the excess and you have a good fit. This is particularly important with children whose cartilage is still forming, and for people who have cancerous growths or special problems.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It fits your glasses to your face?

DR. TAJIRI: Yes, it takes an impression of your nose and face and adheres to the frame.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Like it's custom made.

DR. TAJIRI: That's right. It has been sold all over the world.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is this something you invented or thought of yourself?

DR. TAJIRI: It's something I invented, but I was not able to get a patent on it. We still make it to this day.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why couldn't you get a patent?

DR. TAJIRI: The patent office decided that prior inventions covered portions of it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What about Sequoia Contact Lens, Inc?

DR. TAJIRI: No longer. I sold my share in the Contact Lens Lab. At the time I started the lab, I was not able to get the contact lenses of the quality I needed and I felt that it was possible. To this day, that contact lens company makes the most precise contact lens available.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What about the Conifer Laboratories?

DR. TAJIRI: Again, at the time that Dr. Stover and I formed a partnership, we were interested in very precise prescriptions. The commercial laboratory lenses were so poor that we weren't satisfied, and that's the reason we started it. We eventually had to give it up because the cost went up so high we couldn't afford to continue it. There are very few labs that can meet our standard.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What do you see as the future of the optometric field?

DR. TAJIRI: I think that optometry is really an exciting and dynamic field. Electronic technology is going to make a tremendous improvement in the way that we examine eyes. We'll be able to give a much more

thorough examination than we have been giving in a much shorter time.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What is your role for the future?

DR. TAJIRI: I'm working on a book to try to train other doctors to test for hyperphoria. This is a condition in which one of the eyes tends to be higher than the other. And this is a problem in 80% of the population. First, you have to identify the patient, then you have to do the special testing. This is an area in which most optometrists are still not testing. I have lectured on this in Japan as well as Hawaii, and on the mainland, of course.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is this something you discovered and did something about, or has it been done before?

DR. TAJIRI: The technique that I am using is one that I have developed myself. There are those who have used the patching technique to identify it, but they use a much longer period of blocking. They don't feel it is a common problem.

MRS. HASEGAWA: But, obviously it is. As a lecturer to professional groups in both Japan and the United States, what have been your most satisfying experiences? Also, when you lecture, what kind of topics do you lecture on?

DR. TAJIRI: I lectured on Hyperphoria, Contact Lens, different phases of contact lens--design, fitting, and also on Hypnosis.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You talked about a different kind of contact lens besides the hard and soft lenses. What is that?

DR. TAJIRI: It's a silicone lens. It's really a combination of silicone and methamathacrylate, and the one from Japan is a silicone methamathacrylate, Hema combination. So it's a synthesized material that allows gaseous exchange as well as being wetttable. The basic thing we try to do with contact lens fitting other than obtaining good optics is to maintain normal corneal metabolism. Up to now, as far as the hard lens goes, we had to rely on the transport of oxygen by the tears and also the exposure of the cornea to the atmosphere. If you didn't get an adequate supply of oxygen to the cornea, the tissue would swell and begin to break down and this would result in a form of abrasion. If you were unlucky enough to get an infection, then you lost the eye. To this extent, it's very important that the cornea gets adequate oxygen, and the silicone lens allows gaseous exchange right through the material. Carbon dioxide and oxygen go through the membrane and as a result, you have virtually no problem with the lack of oxygen.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You have fitted thousands of people with contact lenses. Have any of your patients lost their sight through careless use of the lens?

DR. TAJIRI: Fortunately not. But, just about a month ago, I had a young lady who had been wearing hard lenses for about nine years and hadn't been checked--we recommend a check-up every six months. One of her corneas had developed a scar due to the fact that she had tremendous deposits on the inside of her lens and it acted like sandpaper. Secondly, she had begun to take birth control pills about two years previously and this had slowed down her tear flow so she didn't have

enough tears. So, with that bad combination, she had some cornea scarring that she'll probably always have, but fortunately at the periphery and not at the center of the cornea. It won't affect her vision, but if she had continued, it's very possible that she might have permanently destroyed the central part of the cornea. The only thing that would help then would be a cornea transplant.

MRS. HASEGAWA: According to Who's Who in the West, 1971 edition, you have been active in other areas besides your practice. You were a trustee of the Los Angeles College of Optometry. During your tenure what were your duties and your observations of the college?

DR. TAJIRI: As a trustee, like any other trustee position, our primary purpose was to set the policy and to see to it that it was executed. At the time that I was on the Board, we decided to move the college from adjacent to the University of Southern California in Los Angeles to Fullerton. We purchased some land there and were planning to build a college.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are you on their Board now?

DR. TAJIRI: No, I'm off of it now. I'm an Honorary Lifetime Trustee, but no longer active.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In 1964, you were the recipient of the Junior Chamber of Commerce Distinguished Service Award. What were the circumstances that led to that honor?

DR. TAJIRI: I had the speaker at the American Academy of Optometry on the detection and correction of Hyperphoria-- that's to determine how much the eyes are off, and this was picked up by the media across the nation. I suspect that this was the reason the award was given me.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then in 1965, you were named the Central California Optometric Society Optometrist of the Year. What are your recollections of that event?

DR. TAJIRI: I think that was probably a continuation of the same.

MRS. HASEGAWA: As a diplomat for the Contact Lens Section of the Academy of Optometry and a Fellow of American Academy of Optometry, please explain what these organizations are and what the qualifications for belonging are.

DR. TAJIRI: The American Academy of Optometry is considered the elite of the professional organization. You have to first be in the practice professionally, and you have to be invited by a member. Then, you have to present a specific number of case histories. If those are approved and you pass the interview, then you are accepted as a member of the Academy. Fellow of the Academy--there again, you must present case histories of contact lens patients and different lens types. You have to pass a written test, a practical test, and also be interviewed. If you pass all these things, you are accepted. At the time that I became a diplomat, there were only about 25 diplomats in the contact lens section in the world.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That would be kind of an exclusive group then. As the

California Optometric Association Chairman of the Congress postgraduate courses, what part do you play and what are your personal contributions to the Association?

DR. TAJIRI: I am no longer active on the Congress Education Committee. When I was on the committee, our job was to set up the education program at the Congress. We did that by selecting speakers and setting up the programs so that we'd get the best speakers and arrange the programs so that we'd have more than one type of lecture on simultaneously.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Now, is this Congress just for postgraduate people? Is it part of the school or is it for practicing doctors?

DR. TAJIRI: It's primarily for practicing optometrists.

MRS. HASEGAWA: During your successful career in the optometric profession, you have contributed greatly to your field. What would you say were the most important and significant contributions you have made to the optometry field, besides hyperphoria?

DR. TAJIRI: When contact lens was in its infancy, there was very little standardization of the contact lens edge so that even though the inside curve, the power of the lens, and the diameter were the same, the patient reaction to the lens was different. If they lost a lens and we made another replacement lens of the same specification, they would say that it hurt or it bothered them. The problem, I reasoned, must be with the lens edge. The only way you could study the shape of the edge was by splitting the lens and looking at the cross section under a microscope. But once you did that, the lens was no longer useful. Using RTV (Room Temperature Vulcanizing) silicone rubber, I molded the lens edge and removed the lens. Then I sectioned the mold and studied the cross sectioned mold and found that the lens shape varied from one lens to another even though the lens specification was exactly the same. After using this molding technique, the laboratories found out they were not making uniform repeatable edges. There was a tremendous improvement in the repeatability of the lens edge from that point on. So, it was a temporary thing, but it really contributed to the contact lens edge standardization.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I would say that was quite a contribution!

DR. TAJIRI: At the time, it really shook up the laboratories.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In spite of your busy professional life, you have been active as a community person. What social organizations do you belong to?

DR. TAJIRI: At the present? I had to take a leave of absence from the Lions Club because I had another office in Fresno, but I'm thinking of rejoining it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Talking about offices, you've had offices in different parts of the Valley, haven't you?

DR. TAJIRI: Well, I've had part-time offices in Kerman, Fresno, and Orange Cove.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Your other social organization besides Lions?

DR. TAJIRI: Just J.A.C.L.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In the last six years, you have been a member and the Chairman of the Board for Sierra Kings Hospital. How did you become involved with the hospital?

DR. TAJIRI: The reason I decided to become a trustee of the hospital was that I felt that every individual should contribute something to their community. This seemed to be an area that I liked and where I could be helpful because of my background.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What do you think about the hospital now and what changes do you foresee in the future for small hospitals?

DR. TAJIRI: As far as the small hospitals such as Sierra-Kings, unless we get more doctors in the area, we are going to continue to have problems making ends meet. Some of the ways we are trying to improve the income of the hospital and make it survive is to increase the outpatient services such as X-ray, lab, and physical therapy. We also have new radiological services, so we are directing the hospital more and more in this direction. But the occupancy rate is about 40%. Between the rising cost of labor and governmental restrictions, we are finding it very difficult to make ends meet.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You've been practicing hypnosis professionally for many years. How did you become interested in hypnosis?

DR. TAJIRI: Hypnosis fascinated me because you could harness something that you couldn't in the normal waking state. You can control the automatic nervous system. As a result, it has lots of useful medical and optometric uses. For instance, if you have a patient who's afraid to put her contact lenses in, with hypnosis, you can teach her to put them in without fear, or you can even control excessive tearing--someone who gushes tears and just does not stop. You just give them suggestions that their tearing will be normal. One of the more interesting uses of hypnosis that I have is to control nystagmus, which is a rapid oscillation of the eye, usually side to side and uncontrollable. With hypnosis, I am able to slow it down so that the casual observer doesn't know that it's happening. Of course, this makes the patient much less self-conscious so they perform better in their work and in their social contacts. If you have a rapidly bouncing eye, everybody is distracted by it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are there many cases of that?

DR. TAJIRI: Nystagmus is a fairly rare condition, but it does happen.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then you feel that hypnosis is helpful in your job?

DR. TAJIRI: Yes, I think it's greatest asset is to make people relax and sleep better. I often have two or more people in at nighttime. I teach them to do this just for the pleasure of helping them--no charge.

MRS. HASEGAWA: We have talked about your professional life, now please tell us about your family life. How many children do you have?

DR. TAJIRI: We have five daughters. Our oldest one Allyson Tajiri



Farrel, is practicing with me in my office as an optometrist. Her husband Robert B. Farrell, is also an optometrist.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where does he practice?

DR. TAJIRI: He's working for an ophthalmologist in Visalia. Our second, Jill, has just graduated from Fresno State and is a business major now looking for a job. Jeannie is going to Fresno State and is in her junior year. She was at Berkeley to play volleyball, but now that the season is over, she would rather be closer to home. Lorraine is at the University of San Francisco and keeps changing her major. Colleen is a senior at Reedley High. She is a volleyball player, too, and made All-Conference this past year.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are some of your hobbies?

DR. TAJIRI: Golf, primarily. Some skiing, and when the mood strikes me, some woodwork and flying.

MRS. HASEGAWA: As a Japanese-American, second generation, what are some of the traditional things you have retained in your family life or your personal life?

DR. TAJIRI: The father is always right!! I think that father is a benevolent father, and certainly believes in his children doing the best in everything they do. Having struggled to get where I am, I want my children to be careful about their finances and to achieve something worthwhile. Not just going to school but going to college with something in mind.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there anything else you might like to add to this interview?

DR. TAJIRI: This interview was more than I anticipated.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you very much. I am sure that scholars in the future who look for contributions of the Japanese to the Valley life will find your interview valuable. Thank you for your time and your cooperation.