

MAKI AND ROY TORII

MR. ABE: Today is August 26, 1980. I, Norman Preston Abe, am privileged to be in the home of Maki Torii and her son, Roy, at 1532 Whitson Street, Selma, California, 93662.

Before we get into the interview proper, I would like to have you give your full names, places and dates of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MRS. TORII: Maki Torii. I was born in January, 1897. I was born in Kumamoto Ken, Hotaku Gun, Hawaguchi Mura, 20-Cho (now called Tenmei Machi, Kawaguchi). Place of longest residence is Selma.

MR. TORII: Roy Masaru Torii. I was born at 1543 West Front Street, Selma, in September, 1925. I have always lived in Selma, except during World War II.

MR. ABE: When and how did you arrive in California?

MRS. TORII: October 30, 1916. I came on the Siberia Maru from Nagasaki. The voyage took two weeks.

MR. ABE: What did she think of the trip?

MR. TORII: She got seasick. She had been told to come first class, but they had no room, so she came third class. Down in the lower decks, pitching and rolling was worse.

MR. ABE: What kind of stories did you hear about the United States or California before you came here?

MRS. TORII: I heard it was a nice place. My father warned "the crows in America must be black, too", but I did not think or worry too much because my in-laws had been here for many years already. They were from the same village.

MR. TORII: She came on a traders passport since the family had a store.

MR. ABE: So she has a traders passport. Was it her husband who had a business here?

MR. TORII: Grandfather Yoshihe was still running the store in 1916. City records show that a Tanouye was issued a trader license in August, 1904. In May, 1905, Tanouye and his brother-in-law, Kitatani were issued a trader and ice cream license. On February 1, 1907, Torii and Nakashima bought the business. My father Tadaki took over the store about 1920.

MR. ABE: Where were you married?

MRS. TORII: In San Francisco, by Mr. Zenro Hirota of the Japanese Interdenominational Board of Missions. I was at Angel Island for five days because they closed over the weekend. When I got out it was late in the day, so we stayed at the Iki Hotel in San Francisco. We made the trip to Selma, the next day on a Southern Pacific train.

MR. ABE: What was it like when you first came here?

MRS. TORII: When I first came here, my in-laws watched the store and I went to pick grapes and cut apricots, but not for very long.

MR. ABE: When you first got here, what was here that was different? Were there electric lamps or cars, et cetera?

MRS. TORII: There were not too many cars around until later. But we had a four-post, Model-T Ford truck for delivering groceries way out to the neighboring towns. Before they got the truck, they delivered by horse and buggy. When I came in 1916, customers were still coming to town on horse-drawn wagons.

MR. TORII: Your Uncle George (Abe) says he used to ride to school with my dad.

MRS. TORII: Many homes had electricity. We had two light bulbs in the store. Father-in-law was thrifty, so we did not have electric lights in the living quarters until after he returned to Japan. We used a hand pump for water, but later, the water level (table) went down and slugs used to come up in the water, so we had the water company pipe it in.

MR. ABE: What was business like?

MRS. TORII: During Father-in-law's time, customers were all Japanese. Except for a few items such as canned milk, canned tomatoes, and Canadian bacon, merchandise for sale were imported Japanese items.

In the old days, much of the business was on a charge until harvest time basis. When the hard times came after World War I, we suffered many had debt losses. Cash and carry chain stores were opening all over. Stores tied to the old ways had a rough time trying to keep up.

MR. ABE: Was there a Japanese Town and a China Town?

MR. TORII: The Japanese came where the Chinese were. They used to call this block Chinatown as long as I can remember, although the Chinese were almost all gone.

MR. ABE: So the Chinese ran the area first, then the Japanese moved in.

MRS. TORII: Some of the people in business on this block, going north from the Mill Ditch were Uyemuras with a pool hall in front and a bathhouse in the back. Kuwashiges who had a garage, later run by Morishiges. Mizukamis had a fish store later run by Nishijimas. The Abes (not your grandfather) ran a restaurant and a tofu-ya.

The Wongs had a store. Satos had a pool hall. Chinese gambling houses, many with Japanese names such as Osaka.

Shinagawas had a pool hall later run by Oyamas. Futas had a noodle shop. Our store then at 1543 West Front Street. Ide had a barber shop later run by Kakui.

MR. TORII: I remember Kakui-san's suicide by hanging next to our playroom.

MRS. TORII: Wong Lee had a laundry in back of some more gambling houses. Tagamis had a bicycle shop, which later became Emory Chow's store. Then

there was Ito's Chop Suey. Mr. Ito had been successful in another location and built the tall, two-story brick building that is still standing. Charlie Kee and Wong Kee had stores next to each other. On the corner where West Front meets McCall, Umedas had a restaurant later run by the Matsuis. Grandfather Kajitani had a store between Itos and Charlie Kee. His son, Yoshi, came from Japan to help. They soon needed more room, so they moved to 1605. Eventually, they acquired all the buildings from 1605 to Ito's.

MR. TORII: It would be interesting to see the City records, because Selma has records going back to those early years. Kajitanis later owned service stations and restaurant properties in the next block, north of the lumber yard on Whitson and West Front. Your grandfather, George Abe's dad, started his nursery on West Front Street next to the service station.

MRS. TORII: Oh yes, the Yoshinos opened a boardinghouse next to the ditch. We lost some rice stored in their cellar when water seeped in. Yoshinos and Uyemuras later moved next to Kajitanis. These buildings were between 1605 and Tagamis. A man named Mori-san had a barbershop in Oyamas pool hall. One night he thought he heard a burglar at the front door. He fired his shotgun and killed a man who was just drunk. Although exonerated, he soon left for Los Angeles.

MR. TORII: The Takeuchis had a liquor store north of the nursery. They later moved past the fire station to the store building near First Street. They sold jewelry and did some watch repairing. They were among the first to come back from camp. They started a grocery store there, later run by Paul and Ken Ota when they came back from the Army.

MR. ABE: What were the Japanese migrant workers like?

MRS. TORII: They were mostly single men carrying blanket rolls, who went wherever workers were needed. Many were hard working, hard living men who drank and gambled too much.

In the old cemetery, there is a tombstone that had a round ball on top that kept getting knocked off by vandals. This man from Kumamoto was killed with a hatchet by another man from the same province around 1904. I used to hear stories that he used to be called Seishoko (Kato Kiyomasa). Could be he bragged too much at the wrong time.

Within a few years after I came, most of them married and settled down. Others went to labor camps in the country and did not need boardinghouses in town.

After the women started coming, it was not so bad. At first, there were so few of us, we used to get lonely with no one to talk to.

MR. TORII: The picture-bride system apparently worked fairly well.

MR. ABE: What about Prohibition times?

MRS. TORII: We used to sell beer and sake. These were picked up at the Kingsburg depot and stored in a barn on Mill Ditch Road. Sake came in sennoji (barrels) from Japan. These were opened in the cellar and poured into large glass jugs (carboys).

MR. ABE: What kind of jobs have you had in your life?

MR. TORII: She worked in the store. Oh, she delivered some of the Japanese babies horn around here.

MRS. TORII: I just went when asked by customers and acquaintances.

MR. ABE: How much did you get paid as a midwife?

MRS. TORII: No set amount. They gave what they could as "orei" in envelopes, which I just gave to my mother-in-law, unopened.

MR. ABE: Do you remember who you first delivered?

MRS. TORII: The first baby was Masato Morishima. The second baby was Minoru Okubo.

MR. ABE: How many children have you had yourself?

MRS. TORII: Six.

MR. ABE: What were their names?

MRS. TORII: Yoshiki, Margie (Matsuye), Helen (Fusaye): Bessie (Miyeko), Roy (Masaru), and Charles (Yoshikatsu). All were born between 1917 and 1927. Mother-in-law Moju helped deliver the first two.

MR. TORII: Grandparents were still here in 1919. Yoshihe and Moju were born in 1870 and married in 1890. Yoshihe was a second son and came to America about 1898, leaving Moju and sons Tadao, Tadaki, and Tadayoshi in Japan. Grandmother came April 18, 1906--to Vancouver, since San Francisco was devastated by the earthquake.

MRS. TORII: They farmed until 1907. Son Tadashi was born in 1907, a daughter, Tadae was born in 1910, and another son Tadaichi was born in 1914. The three attended grammar school here. My husband came from Japan to help about 1913. Tadao and Tadaichi, the oldest and the youngest of my husband's brothers are still alive.

Mother-in-law told me that when Tadashi was born in 1907, people came from miles around to see what a Japanese baby looked like. George Nagata, a cousin, was the first Japanese baby born in Selma. His son Raymond was the first Sansei born in Bakersfield. George gave my children their English names. Only Charles has his English name on his birth certificate. The rest only have their names on their certificates.

MR. ABE: Where are your sons and daughters now?

MRS. TORII: Yoshiki was taken to Japan as a child and died there. Margie, of course, is married to your Uncle Reo. Helen is married to Yoshitaka Wakabayashi. Roth daughters are living in Los Angeles. Bessie married Troy Hill of Visalia. The two are buried at Floral Memorial. Roy and Charles are still running the store on Grove Street.

MR. ABE: About when did the Chinese move out and when did the Japanese move in?

MRS. TORII: They moved out during the Depression following World War II. Many of them were involved in gambling and could not make it through the hard times.

MR. TORII: Part of our second store building at 1525 West Front Street had been a gambling place. After entering, one had to walk the width of the room several times to get to where the action was. There was a buzzer system. By the time raiding lawmen got through to where they were gambling, they weren't gambling anymore.

Sano-san was the treasurer of the Tokyo Club in Selma until it folded. He loved gambling and spent a good part of his free time at the Hong Kong banks and race tracks. He was never caught in raids. Once at an "out-of-city-limits" operation in Fresno, something didn't feel right, so he ducked out the back, walked around front and asked a policeman, "What's the matter? Something wrong?" "There's illegal gambling going on in there!" "Oh is that so?"

About this same time, the Gomonsu (Lord Abbot), head of our Nishi Hongwanji was in Fresno. Now Mr. Sano's church attendance was pretty well limited to funerals, but at a reception for the Gomonsu, when someone is shooting movie films of the receptionline, who gets his picture taken with the Lord Abbot? Mr. Hikotaro Sano!

MR. ABE: Who was Sano? Where did he come from?

MR. TORII: He was an only son from a good family in Hiroshima. He came to Hawaii where he had an older, married sister. Went to Montana and worked on construction of a spur track. He knew Grandfather way back when. When the Tokyo Club broke up, he came to work for my dad. When the family went back to Japan in 1934, he and Ishihara took care of the store. When Dad died, he worked for Mom and then for me. When your brother Charles worked at the store, Old Man (he gave himself the name) was still around.

Among the Japanese in this area, Sano-san must have been about the first to start collecting Social Security. He was covered from the very start of the program. Because of his age, he was collecting early on.

MR. ABE: What did you do when they said you had to leave for the concentration camp?

MR. TORII: When the news came out, a man who had a store in one of the neighboring towns came to buy the stock. We started to take inventory but he said he had other places to go and offered a flat price. He came back in the afternoon with a truck and took all the stock. He said, "Without counting, I may be losing money." I don't think he did.

MR. ABE: So you still had the store, right--and the equipment?

MR. TORII: Yes, we stored some things like the registers at the Allen Chevrolet Garage. We boarded up the store windows.

MR. ABE: Did anyone ever break in during the War?

MR. TORII: Yes, they just climbed over the tall fence. In March 1945 after basic and before shipping across, I came back here with Charlie

and Lon Ishihara. Portable items were stolen. Shoyu was spilled over the rug. Everything was scattered. We still have the telegram we sent saying if Sano wants to come back, the sooner the better. We were lucky the building was not burned down. Candles and matches had been used by the intruders to see their way around.

When the three of us came in March of 1945, Takeuchis already had their store opened. We spent our first night there. After that we slept at Yoshinols.

MR. ABE: When you came back from the War, was it hard to get started again?

MR. TORII: No, not really. We just started back up from scratch. Sano had come back in 1945 and started cleaning up the place. Charles and Mom came back after the school term ended in June 1945. Charlie did field work until I came back from the Army. The store was reopened in October 1946.

MR. ABE: What did you think about camp?

MRS. TORII: School-aged children had their education interrupted by having to leave their own schools. Young marrieds with babies learned about better nutrition and better baby care.

MR. TORII: But you take doctors now, they were paid practically nothing and were working their butts off.

MRS. TORII: As enemy aliens, we could have received far worse treatment.

MR. ABE: Have you been back to Japan?

MRS. TORII: Yes, in 1934 and in 1965. The whole family went in 1934. The girls were left there to study. Fortunately, they were called back in time. The Sino-Japanese War started in 1937 the day they landed in San Francisco. Many Nisei were stranded in Japan during World War II.

MR. TORII: I was slated to go, too, after high school graduation. That was considered the wisest course, to make the Nisei bilingual.

MR. ABE: Didn't you run the store for a while?

MRS. TORII: Yes, my husband died in December 1938 so I ran it from 1939 to 1942 with the help of Sano-san and the children. Tsutomu Fukuda, still going to high school, took care of the books.

MR. TORII: Nenokichi Miyada and Hanjiro Yamao were two customers from Grandfather Yoshihe's time who helped us in countless ways over many years.

MRS. TORII: A man named Jyo-san used to be very active in volunteer work for the Japanese community and Nihongakko. He died of injuries suffered when a car hit him as he and Hachiya-san were walking to Kingsburg to see Sato-san.

MR. ABE: What Japanese customs or holidays do you still observe?

MRS. TORII: I observe all the holidays, American and Japanese, including

Girls' Day, Boys' Day and the Buddhist holidays.

MR. ABE: Do you belong to any organizations or social groups?

MRS. TORII: Selma Bukkyo Fujinkai (Selma Buddhist Womens Club), Kumamoto Shinwakai (Kumamoto Prefecture Club), Howakai (Selma Buddhist Worship Group).

MR. ABE: Were there incidents of discrimination against you during the War?

MRS. TORII: No, never. I cannot remember ever being made to feel uncomfortable or felt discriminated against.

MR. TORII: People who were anti-Japanese did not come to our store. She came back from camp in June 1945. By then, most ill-feeling was gone. She did not have to go to places where she might have been unwelcome.

MR. ABE: How about you?

MR. TORII: I can remember some minor incidents, but nothing that really hurt my feelings.

MR. ABE: Were there people who were good to you?

MRS. TORII: Yes, there was Mrs. Einar (Mildred) Nielsen who used to teach cooking at night school. There was Miss Lola E. Brown and others of the Methodist Church.

MR. TORII: We used to go to Japanese Language School, Saturdays and Sunday mornings. On Sunday, after school, there was a Christian Sunday School, followed by a Buddhist Sunday School. Some of us attended both. In December 1941 Selma teachers went out of their way to help us adjust to an awkward situation. In 1942, just before we were sent to camp, a Christian group gave us a farewell party.

MR. ABE: You're 83 years old. To what do you attribute your good health, pleasant smile, and your long life?

MRS. TORII: I eat lots of vegetables and a variety of foods. I don't eat much rich or fancy foods. My parents were long-lived.

MR. TORII: She takes care of herself.

MR ABE: Do you care to say anything else?

MRS. TORII: I am neither talented or well-educated. I can only recall for you some names, a few incidents and some trivia. When New Year comes, I'll be 84 years old. I am glad and grateful to be able to live so long. Okagesama.

MR. ABE: What does okagesama mean?

MR. TORII: It covers a lot of territory. It means something like. Nothing stands alone by itself. All things are interconnected and interdependent.

MR. TORII TO MRS. TORII: He wants to know what okagesama means.

MRS. TORII: For me to live so long, all things had to be favorable--natural conditions like the weather--people who provided food and shelter. There has to be doctors and nurses to care for me. Living things had to die so that I could eat and live. In the laboratories, living things suffer and die so that doctors may be provided the medicines and the techniques to prolong my life -

MR. TORII: This book "Wet Sleeves", by Reverend Fujimura mentions okagesama. I think this book reflects the faith and philosophy of the Issei very accurately and can help you to understand some of the exasperating ways and attitudes of the Issei.

MR. ABE: In closing, I would like to thank both of you for taking time out and sharing your knowledge and experiences with me.

MR. TORII: Actually, we owe you thanks for spending your whole vacation on this project.