

FRED HIRASUNA

Today is December 19, 1979. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, have the privilege of interviewing Mr. Fred Hirasuna at 1416 West Stuart Avenue; Fresno, California. Please state your full name, place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MR. HIRASUNA: My full name is Fred Yoshio Hirasuna, born in Lodi, California, February 11, 1908; graduated from grammar school in Lodi; moved to Fowler in 1922; graduated from high school in 1926; then went to Fresno State College. I started in 1926, but after a year I stayed out for two years, mostly because I ran out of money. Then I went to work down in Los Angeles. I returned to Fresno State and graduated in 1932.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you happen to go to Los Angeles?

MR. HIRASUNA: Because two of my brothers were working down there in the market, and I went down there to work near them.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I guess it was the same in those days. Young people still had to earn their money to go to college.

MR. HIRASUNA: That's right.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then, after you came back and graduated from college, what were the chances for a Japanese college student to get a job in those days?

MR. HIRASUNA: I found it very poor. My major was social sciences, and a graduate in social sciences didn't have very many places to look for a job. At one time I had intended to teach, but during my college years I had talked to Dr. Frank Thomas, who was President of the College at that time, and he told me that the chances were very poor for a Japanese to get a job in the public schools as a teacher.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Would you have been a high school teacher? Since you had majored in social sciences, I suppose you would have had to teach in high school or college?

MR. HIRASUNA: Not necessarily. But my intention was to try to find a high school job as a teacher. I never did finish my educational requirements for a teaching job, because I saw my chances to get a job as a teacher were poor.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You were probably one of the very first Japanese students to get a college degree. There weren't very many in those days.

MR. HIRASUNA: I think there were a few before my time at Fresno State but not too many.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of jobs were open for college students?

MR. HIRASUNA: Actually, I think the best chances in those days was to keep on going to school and becoming a professional man; a doctor, a lawyer, a dentist, or something like that.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then you went to Imperial Valley and Delano as a

bookkeeper and a shed manager. What kind of produce did Mr. Matsuoka handle?

MR. HIRASUNA: After about a year out of school, through my future wife, in fact, I found a job with George Matsuoka, who was at that time in the Imperial Valley. George Matsuoka was, at one time, a big fruit and vegetable shipper out of the Imperial Valley and San Diego. But he went broke in the business and then he started all over again as a broker and shipper of produce, and in Imperial Valley he was mainly in the shipping of lettuce, what in those days we called dry-pack lettuce. In those days lettuce was usually shipped out of sheds in ice pack crates where they took the lettuce to the sheds. They packed them and put ice into the pack and then put them into cars or trucks to ship them back east and all over. But there were a few Japanese like George Matsuoka and a man by the name of Osuga who shipped this dry-pack lettuce. What they would do is go out into the field and look over patches of lettuce that were growing, and if they found one they thought was good, they would buy it; right in the field while it was still growing. And when the lettuce got mature, they'd send in Filipino crews who would cut and pack the lettuce into wooden crates. Then they would ship it into Los Angeles, San Francisco, and Oakland to the local markets.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That brings back memories, because my dad was a trucker and he worked for Mr. Osuga hauling lettuce for him. He would go to Imperial Valley.

MR. HIRASUNA: What was your maiden name?

MRS. HASEGAWA: Tajiri, from Santa Maria.

MRS. HIRASUNA: I remember a Tajiri.

MR. HIRASUNA: I don't think it was your father, but there was a Tajiri that used to truck out of this Valley. I don't think—

MRS. HASEGAWA: Oh, Papa did truck lettuce out of the Valley way back.

MRS. HIRASUNA: Was he from Santa Maria?

MRS. HASEGAWA: Yes.

MRS. HIRASUNA: I thought I remembered that name.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That's really interesting to think that you knew my father! Was the lettuce that Mr. Osuga bought raised by Japanese People?

MR. HIRASUNA: Not necessarily. Some were raised by Japanese but others by other nationalities. There was Osuga, he would ship lettuce out of Santa Maria and out of the Imperial Valley, and I don't know if he ever went to Salinas, but he would ship dry-pack lettuce practically year round where Matsuoka would go down to the Imperial Valley, oh, about November, and he would ship out of the Imperial Valley until about, oh, March. And then he would go to Delano and ship out of there. He would ship lettuce in the spring out of Delano. Delano lettuce would also come in about November and he'd ship Delano lettuce and then go to Imperial Valley and shipped Imperial Valley lettuce and go back to Delano in time for their melon and sprint lettuce. In those days, they used to have the

winter peas. They used to grow these pole peas in Delano, Earlimart, Lindsay, and all over that area. Used to be big business in the wintertime.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why don't they plant peas any longer?

MR. HIRASUNA: Because frozen peas are in now and off-season peas aren't in as much demand as they used to be. As a matter of fact, green peas in general you don't find in the markets as much as you used to because they've all gone to frozen peas. The frozen peas can be raised much cheaper during the regular season. And Delano peas used to be an off-season winter pea.

MRS. HASEGAWA: They don't raise peas around here any longer, do they?

MR. HIRASUNA: No.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where are they raised?

MR. HIRASUNA: Oh, I would say in the Midwest. I think Minnesota, places like that. Where they raise them and then freeze them or can them.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What part of this produce business did you handle?

MR. HIRASUNA: When I first went to Imperial Valley to work for Mr. Matsuoka, he had me keeping books, and I didn't know anything about bookkeeping. I had never taken bookkeeping in school. I made friends with the bookkeepers down in the Imperial Valley, and they showed me what to do. So, I was a bookkeeper.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was not something you were trained for?

MR. HIRASUNA: No.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you returned to Fresno in 1939, you managed a hatchery, poultry farm, and chick sexing association. Can you tell us about that?

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes, after working for Matsuoka and the Delano Growers Exchange in Delano, I think it was about 1939, my wife's brother Ty Saiki had acquired this chick sexing business from a man by the name of Hattori, and he wanted someone to come back and manage the chicken farm, the chicken hatchery, and the chick sexing business. The chicken farm and chicken hatchery were over there on Ninth Street just east of Fresno. There, I had to learn a new business again. I had never raised chickens before. I had to learn how to raise chickens, and run a hatchery, and also how to run the chick sexing association. I guess at first we only had about 30 sexers, and we'd get contracts from hatcheries from all over the United States to sex their chicks. You know what chick sexing is?

MRS. HASEGAWA: No, what is it?

MR. HIRASUNA: It is separating the male and female chicks the day after they're hatched.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How do you learn how to do this? Is there a school for

this?

MR. HIRASUNA: Hattori had a school. He sent her (Mrs. Hirasuna's) brother Keek (Koyoto) Saiki to Japan to learn it.

MRS. HIRASUNA: In 1934 OR 1935.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long was he there?

MRS. HIRASUNA: Oh, it takes about three months.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It didn't take him long to learn. Where did he go in Japan?

MRS. HIRASUNA: (Uncertain) Oh, golly--well, someplace in Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Then it's entirely something that originated with the Japanese people?

MR. HIRASUNA: No, I think originally it was the Chinese and Korean. Then it got into Japan and the Japanese made the most of it. At first Hattori got some Japanese sexers over here and then sent her brother to Japan and back here to America, and he started to have classes over here. It took about three months for a person to learn that. So, after he trained them--

MRS. HIRASUNA: Nagoya. (Recalling answer to question regarding location of chick sexing school.)

MR. HIRASUNA: Nagoya. And they got contracts with hatcheries and then sent the sexers over there to do the work. And then he would take a commission on their earnings. He developed it into quite a business, but after a few years he wanted to retire. He sold the business to her brother Ty. At that time, Ty asked me to come back and manage the business so I did that for about eight years. It was the winter of 1947, when we came back to Fresno from Minnesota with the intention of getting into another business.

MRS. HIRASUNA: From 1939, to 1942, in Fresno--

MR. HIRASUNA: And until 1947, in Minnesota.

MRS. HASEGAWA: This chick sexing business started in Fresno?

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes. In this country I think it did. Hattori was the first person to start it. Although since then there are other people who claim to have been the pioneers in the business, but really Mr. Hattori was the first.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You said there were about 30 sexers here?

MR. HIRASUNA: At that time, yes. It increased later. And then there started to be other chick sexing associations. So, Japanese chick sexers are spread all over the United States, wherever they raise chickens.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In 1941, you were in Fresno. What happened during wartime?

MR. HIRASUNA: Pearl Harbor came along, and at that time we were on the chicken farm and hatchery. Of course, for a while there was mass confusion. Nobody knew what to do.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When the war came, what did you think about? What was your first reaction? Where were you and what happened?

MR. HIRASUNA: I don't remember exactly where I was.

MRS. HIRASUNA: You were on the chicken farm.

MR. HIRASUNA: On the chicken farm, and it came over the radio I guess. Of course, it was a big shock, although at that time we were expecting some kind of trouble. As you read the papers and listened to the news, more and more it became evident that Japan and the United States were coming to a point when something was going to happen. Personally, I think that Roosevelt was probably as much to blame for the war as anybody, because he was really trying to get Japan to do something so that he could get into the war and still not be blamed for declaring war. He wanted to get into the war, I think Roosevelt did.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you think for economic reasons?

MR. HIRASUNA: I don't know whether it was economic or not. He wanted to get in on the side of England and the Allies. Everything he did was just pointing towards that direction. As far as Japan was concerned, Japan was following a policy in Asia that was against the policy of the United States. I don't think the United States wanted Japan to dominate Asia. The United States wanted to dominate that area, too. Whatever the cause, when Pearl Harbor came we didn't know what to expect. We didn't know what was going to happen. Then, after Pearl Harbor, things began to pile up here in California. There were various incidents of shootings by Filipino farm lands of Japanese and raiding George Saiki's store in Del Rey where they found guns. But that was part of his business, he had guns that he sold. Naturally, he had ammunition, and then they made a big thing about it. But he had to have guns and ammunition to sell. My, oh my, I could just see that something was going to happen. Something drastic, and in the meantime, JAACL was, at that time, very small. Young people didn't have much leadership in the Japanese community, because at that time Issei controlled everything. The Japanese Association and the Issei leaders had the money and the economic control. Nisei really did not amount to anything. After the war came, all of a sudden, the Issei had to look to the Nisei for leadership because they didn't have citizenship, whereas the Nisei did. That's why JAACL all of a sudden became very popular. Everybody was trying to join JAACL. Before, very few wanted to join. They called meeting after meeting at various times trying to figure out what was going to happen. They were trying to think of public relations things that would put us in a favorable light with the rest of the community. I remember we would have some sort of meeting to show that we were patriotic Americans. And then there was this fellow, Gearhart. Was his name Gearhart?

MRS. HIRASUNA: Yes.

MR. HIRASUNA: He was a Congressman. Generally, he had been quite friendly with the Japanese, and I think at first he tried to help us. But public opinion against us grew so great that in the end he couldn't openly help us. Doc Yatabe was really the leader at that time. He was a

Nisei, but he was an older Nisei, quite a bit older than most of us. He was very much respected by the Japanese, too, and the Issei respected him. He became kind of a spokesman for the entire group. Gradually, it came to that place where we knew that they were going to evacuate us. All kinds of talk that they would let us stay in Area II. It was believed that they were just going to evacuate Area I so people came to Reedley and around here from Los Angeles and all over. They figured if they moved here, they wouldn't be moved any more. But, of course, that went by the board because they froze Area II, too. Then the series of proclamations came out and they moved us. There was a time when we were in Area II, because of the City Limits of Fresno was Area I. And we were outside the City Limits, east of Fresno. We were in the so-called Free Zone and the people in Fresno were in the frozen zone where they couldn't move out of that area. I remember time after time I used to sneak into Fresno from the so-called Free Area, but really they were not keeping that close of a check. So when they finally evacuated Fresno, as Area I, into the assembly center, which was at the Fresno Fairgrounds, we were still on the outside--the so-called free territory. It was kind of a funny situation. We visited the assembly center, but they would never let us get into the center itself. They had a visiting room where you could talk to some of the people. When they finally moved the Fresno Assembly Center, the people at the Fresno Assembly Center, they sent them to Jerome, Arkansas. In the meantime, we had our third baby. The baby was born in February of 1942. He was anemic and all this time we were being told of these relocation centers. The housing was going to be crude and no hospitals and no doctors, and all that kind of stuff. So I got a little concerned and I started to try to move the family out of California without going to the centers. There was a time when you could voluntarily evacuate, but they cut that out. So, by the time I got thinking that way, the voluntary move was already prohibited. So I called San Francisco, the Western Defense Command, talked to people up there and explained our situation. I told them that our eastern headquarters was in Minnesota, because during the chick sexing season my brother-in-law Ty would go to Minnesota and stay there, and I would stay in California and do the bookkeeping and all the directing from here. So we told the Western Defense Command that we wanted to evacuate and go to Minnesota. Finally, just a couple days before they froze Area II, I think we got permission to go. So, we loaded up stuff and we had a pickup and a trailer that we loaded with office stuff and other big things. They would not let us go from Fresno to Reno through the Valley, because that was the so-called Area I, so they gave us permission to go, but we had to go through Tioga Pass-- Yosemite and Tioga Pass. We knew that the pickup and trailer would never make that grade. So, we had a friend of ours Mike Vogt, who was our printer who still lives over here on the West Side--he printed all our stuff, stationery and stuff. So he and his brother took that pickup and trailer and took it to Reno. In the meantime the rest of us took two cars. My sister, my wife's sister, our family, my father and mother. We had two cars and we went through Yosemite and over Tioga Pass and then on to Carson City. There we tried to get a room for the night. We went to one motel and they refused to take us--Japs from California. Because it was not a real top grade motel, we figured we had a better chance there. But from there we went to a really nice motel, and they took us, so we stayed there overnight. And the next day we went to Reno and met up with the pickup and the trailer, and in the meantime we had a couple of the people from Minnesota from the Eastern Headquarters come to Reno (that was Motoi Takeyasu and Jack Kawakami), they came and took the pickup and then we caravanned and went to Winnemucca, which was a sort of a

railroad town. We were planning to stay there that night because we had heard that there was a Japanese man there who had a restaurant and a hotel. Just as we drove in, some white guys in a truck or a car went by us and hollered, "Go back to California, you damn Japs," or something like that. And this was really a rough sort of town, rough people, railroad workers. The rooming house or hotel was over a saloon and a lot of noise and banging around. And here we were upstairs in the rooms, and we didn't know what was going to happen. We thought we might be mobbed or something like that. I remember that I didn't sleep much that night, because we had women and kids with us and old people and we didn't know what was going to happen. But nothing happened, so the next day we went to Salt Lake and from Salt Lake on, and we finally got to Mankato, Minnesota. That's where we stayed during the war for about six and one-half years, where we ran the chick sexing business. So, we were comparatively fortunate, I guess.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was quite an experience though, traveling like that, being afraid.

MR. HIRASUNA: We felt like runaways from jail or something, with everybody looking for us. Just as soon as we got into Mankato, it was either Army Intelligence or FBI, they came and questioned us and all of that kind of stuff. But, on the whole, our stay in Mankato was pretty pleasant. There were a lot of Germans there. They were descendants of Germans who came from the old country. During World War I they had a rough time. The people persecuted them, so generally I think most of them were sympathetic to us. And kids didn't have too bad a time going to school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your children have trouble?

MR. HIRASUNA: I don't think so. Do you remember any? (Directed to Mrs. Hirasuna.)

MRS. HIRASUNA: No, not really. Although I remember Alan saying that he wished he had brown hair, so I knew some kid must have said something.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many children did you have?

MR. HIRASUNA: We had three, and they ranged from the one that was born in February 1942, so he wasn't even one year old to three and six.

MRS. HASEGAWA: People like you that had to leave on your own really had it rough.

MR. HIRASUNA: I had a lot of help. I had my father and mother with us, but they just lasted one winter in Minnesota. We got there in July, but they were lonesome. No people their age to talk to or socialize with.

In the winter in Minnesota you get snowed in, and you can rarely go outside. Cooped up in the house all day, it got too much for them so they begged me to get them into camp. And I had a hard time trying to get them into camp. I even went to Chicago to see a fellow by the name of Thomas Holland who held some kind of position in the War Relocation Authority. I read or heard that he was going to be in Chicago, so I went from Mankato to Chicago to talk to him personally. And I told him, "Please let my folks go to camp," and he said he'd see what he could do. He seemed very sympathetic and a very nice sort of fellow. And

it was about two weeks later that we got a letter saying that they could go to camp. So, I loaded them in the car (this was wintertime), and went from Minnesota to Arkansas. They were in Rohwer, which is near McGehee, and we went there because one of my brothers was there. My sister went with them to camp, and so I took three of them from Minnesota to Arkansas. Really and truly, no matter what they say about these camps, I think my folks enjoyed it. They didn't have to work, they didn't have to worry about food and shelter, and they did all the things that they enjoyed. My dad went fishing, and he liked to fish. I don't know what my mother did.

MRS. HIRASUNA: They had friends—

MR. HIRASUNA: And they had a lot of people their own age to socialize with, and we sent them stuff from Minnesota. I think they were kind of sorry that it ended (laugh). But they closed up the camp.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did they do after they came out of camp?

MR. HIRASUNA: Well, they came back to California.

MRS. HIRASUNA: When you came back from Minnesota to build this house so that they could move in, where did they live before that?

MR. HIRASUNA: I'm trying to think. I came back to California in '46, I guess, alone (or with some other fellows). And we owned a lot over there on Eleventh Street.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where on Eleventh Street?

MR. HIRASUNA: North of Floradora Avenue. Because her folks used to live right around there and the hatchery was over there, and we had this lot. So I built a little house and moved them in.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where were your folks from? What ken?

MR. HIRASUNA: Hiroshima.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did your dad do?

MR. HIRASUNA: I guess in his younger days, he worked on the railroad. Then he was a short order cook in San Francisco. Then, he came to Fowler first, and he was just a farm worker. Then, he moved to Lodi, and in Lodi I remember we had a bicycle shop, we sold bicycles. But while we had the bicycle shop, he was always doing something in the country; renting a grape farm, running a work crew, or whatever. He was a cook. He had a reputation for being one of these Japanese cooks for New Year's who could make all these fancy Japanese dishes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you learn to do any of that?

MR. HIRASUNA: No (laughs).

MRS. HIRASUNA: But he's pretty good in the kitchen. He likes to mess around.

MR. HIRASUNA: Then we moved in 1922 from Lodi to Fowler, and we opened



a garage there. Meanwhile Dad had sent two of my older brothers to a mechanic school. Then he opened this garage. While my brothers were running the garage, he was farming, doing other things. Then the garage venture kind of broke up because my brothers left home. There was a time there, I guess for about a year, that I tried to run the garage, and I really wasn't a mechanic and didn't know that much about it. But the garage was there, and I just had to do it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old were you then?

MRS. HIRASUNA: You were going to high school.

MR. HIRASUNA: I graduated in 1926, so it might have been either during the time I was going to high school or one of the years I stayed out of college. As I say, I wasn't really a mechanic. I can putter around cars, but I was not really a mechanic. So, I wasn't much of a success at running the garage. So, finally when I left home, they just closed up the garage and it stayed closed. My mother had a little store by the side of the garage where she used to sell cigarettes and candy and stuff like that. When I was in Los Angeles working, I had the family truck (we had a truck) and I was operating the truck, and I was sending money from the truck income in Los Angeles. Those were really rough days.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Those were the Depression days.

MR. HIRASUNA: We were always on the poor side. Not ever too prosperous.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I don't think very many Japanese were, but they were very enterprising families. They did all kinds of things.

MR. HIRASUNA: It depends on what you want to call enterprising. My dad sure used to get into a lot of different activities. I remember one year we were just flat broke. My father still had friends in Lodi, and one of his Lodi friends Mr. Nakagawa got him a contract to pick grapes on a certain ranch. The way they would do it, you'd get the contract, and then you'd have a labor camp. You'd hire people, and my mother went along and she cooked. I, and I think one of my brothers, went too. We'd have a contract to pick grapes for so much, whatever the rate was, and my mother would cook for the men. That way we made a little money and came back, and I guess we were solvent for a while.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You said you had two brothers and a sister?

MR. HIRASUNA: No, I have more than that. There were six of us boys, and one sister; I was the fourth. We had six boys in a row, and our sister was last. I was the fourth from the top, so I had three brothers above me, and two brothers and a sister below.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are they still living?

MR. HIRASUNA: My oldest brother died, and my mother and father passed away. My mother first and then my father.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many children do you have?

MR. HIRASUNA: Four. The oldest is a girl and then three boys.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What are they doing now? Where do they live?

MR. HIRASUNA: The oldest Joanne is now living in Indianapolis. She got married right after she finished college to a minister. His name is Dave Kagiwada. After having three children, she decided to go back to school.

MRS. HIRASUNA: At age thirty-seven.

MR. HIRASUNA: So we went to Boalt Hall and graduated from Boalt Hall Law School.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is she a lawyer now?

MR. HIRASUNA: No. She never passed the bar. But, she took a job with the Church, the Christian Church Disciples of Christ, at national headquarters in Indiana. She's now Director of International Affairs for that church. She likes it because she gets to travel to Washington and New York, and even went to Geneva and Africa.

MRS. HIRASUNA: Her field really is in international human rights. That's her interest, and she meets all these different people at these different meetings, and she really likes it. She thinks it's fun.

MR. HIRASUNA: She's forty-three years old. And the next boy Alan is in Newport Beach. He's a member in a five-partner engineering firm. He's a mechanical engineer. And the second boy Stuart, he's with me in the produce business. And the third boy, the youngest, is thirty-one. He's at Sacramento Medical Center. He's a doctor, and I guess he's going to be on the staff there.

MRS. HIRASUNA: He's finishing up his fellowship (which is a sub-specialty in pulmonary medicine). He'll finish that in June, and then I think he'll join the staff up there. He had an offer here in Fresno, but then he thought he would stay in Sacramento.

MR. HIRASUNA: Those are the four kids that we have. We have five grandchildren. One just about two weeks ago-- after about thirteen years we had this one. So we have three by Joanne, one by Alan, and one by Stuart.

MRS. HIRASUNA: Our oldest one is going to be twenty in February.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Your grandchild? Goodness.

MRS. HIRASUNA: It's no wonder we're getting old.

MR. HIRASUNA: Pretty soon we'll be able to have great grandchildren, if we live that long.

MRS. HIRASUNA: Fifteen is Alan's boy, and then the thirteen-year-old girl is Joanne's. But then she has two girls and a boy, and Alan has one boy, and we got this brand new one, and he's almost a month old.

MR. HIRASUNA: Is that right? Time has been going so fast.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your children marry Japanese?

MRS. HIRASUNA: Joanne married a Japanese. The two boys married non-

Japanese, and the older one is now divorced. He's been separated for a number of years?

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was she Caucasian, too.

MRS. HIRASUNA: Yes. And neither is remarried; his former wife or Alan. But then this second boy, they've been married six years, and they just had their first baby.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Pretty wonderful, there's nothing as wonderful as grandchildren. When did you get out of the chick sexing business?

MR. HIRASUNA: When I returned to California in the winter of '47. I got back into the produce business.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did you leave this chick sexing business?

MR. HIRASUNA: Oh, a number of things. I thought there was really no future in it for me. I was just working in it, and I wasn't a partner in it. Another thing, I wanted to get out of Minnesota. Six winters there were enough for me. I wanted to get back to California. So, when I got back to California, meantime I'd been talking to this Min Omata who had already moved back to California, and he wanted to start a produce business. I got together with him and we started a produce business. That was in 1948. Then there was another fellow, an Italian by the name of Morris Cocola, and the three of us started Sunnyside Packing Co. It was real tough at first. We didn't have too much money, not too much capital. Then we had to gather a group of growers who were willing to ship through us. After a year or so, Morris Cocola dropped out, and that left Min Omata and me. Then in 1949, we were instrumental in organizing the Strawberry Exchange Cooperative which was a group of Japanese strawberry growers, and we were able to get them to ship through us. Since that time, we've always had them, even today they ship through us. The strawberry acreage is getting smaller and smaller, because the Japanese growers are dropping out. The strawberries were not so good the last couple of years. The Japanese growers are dropping out, and right now out of about forty-five growers, at least half are Mexican growers.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many growers did you begin with?

MR. HIRASUNA: It must have been about twenty or twenty-five.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I thought strawberries were a Japanese crop, but to Mexicans grow strawberries, too?

MRS. HIRASUNA: Just in the more recent years, not in the beginning.

MR. HIRASUNA: In the beginning it was mostly Japanese. The Japanese grew almost all the strawberries before the war here, and in Florin, and around Watsonville, and down in Los Angeles. But since the war, the Japanese are still in it, but I think they are getting to be a smaller and smaller percentage.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why?

MR. HIRASUNA: Strawberry growing is getting to be big business. One thing, the University of California has developed some new varieties that produced heavier tonnage,

berries that ship better. They look good--maybe they don't taste as good--but they are large, and they look good. A lot of big money got into the business, white people and white companies. When they grew, they didn't grow five or ten acres, they'd grow a hundred acres or two hundred acres or three hundred acres. One of the biggest shippers today is the Driscoll firm. The Driscoll family was big in strawberries even before the war. After the war when the Japanese first came back, a lot of the Japanese people grew strawberries for Driscoll on a share crop basis, because they didn't have the money to start their own. Gradually, these sharecroppers started to save money, and then they went out on their own. So Driscoll, today, does not have too many Japanese growers.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where is the Driscoll farm?

MR. HIRASUNA: Around Watsonville and Salinas. And they have strawberry farms in Santa Maria and Oxnard. They are big in strawberries today.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You're the biggest here.

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes, but we're really peanuts here. The biggest in Fresno doesn't mean anything. Even at our biggest, I guess we had two hundred fifty acres of strawberries. But now, for the next year, we're down to ninety acres. So, we're really small now.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What do you see in the future for strawberries in this area?

MR. HIRASUNA: I don't see too much future in it here, because our share of the market is getting smaller and smaller. It used to be that we had about six weeks of clear market where Watsonville hadn't started yet, and the south was all through. But now, when we come into our peak, which is usually the latter part of April to the end of May, everybody's in the business, north to south. In that period, there's just too many strawberries, so we're getting less and less chance to make any money. We're coming in at a period when there are so many strawberries that the prices aren't good. That's our only chance, because here when summer hits, we're all through. Strawberries won't go through the summer heat. So, usually by the middle of June, and in past years it used to be until about the end of June, we had to stop shipping. Nowadays, we have to stop shipping by maybe the tenth of June, because in the modern method of growing strawberries you grow on the same land, year after year. Where, before, you had to grow on different pieces of property. They fumigate the soil. You can grow strawberries on the same land year after year, where before you couldn't do that. With the new varieties, we have to plant in July. When we fumigate the land, there's a period of about two weeks that you can't plant anything, so that means June 10 or June 15 is the latest we can harvest strawberries; even if they have strawberries on the vine, even if the weather is right. That's why I say I think strawberries may be a thing of the past around here.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You recently build this brand new, expensive plant. What will you do if there are no strawberries. Can you use it for other produce?

MR. HIRASUNA: We don't ship just strawberries. We ship things like squashes, cucumbers, cherry tomatoes, bell peppers, Chinese vegetables. And we ship all the fruits; plums, peaches, nectarines, persimmons. In the wintertime, like right now, we're shipping green onions. And this

year, for the first time, we had kiwi fruit. So we handle just about anything.

MRS. HASEGAWA: No citrus?

MR. HIRASUNA: No citrus. Citrus is pretty much a specialty here. Sunkist and a few others. It's a different kind of business. We have some grapes, not too many. Thompson Seedless and Ribiers.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How about the new variety? The red one with the seeds?

MR. HIRASUNA No. We don't have any growers in that.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where do you ship your strawberries?

MR. HIRASUNA: Strawberries are shipped all over the United States and Canada.

MRS. HASEGAWA: In the Fresno Bee, you said something about shipping out of the country.

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes. We shipped some to Europe, but we don't anymore because the best chance to ship to Europe is the early season, and here we don't come in really until between the tenth or fifteenth of April which is a little bit too late for the European market. So, that's mainly from down south, Southern California. Southern California can come in with strawberries as early as, in some years, the middle of February. Usually by March 15th they're going pretty good down there.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I've seen about three different varieties of strawberries. What kind are being shipped today?

MR. HIRASUNA: Down in Los Angeles or around Southern California, they ship Tufts, Tioga, and some Fresno variety. In Watsonville, one of their big varieties is a very late one called Aiko. That's getting very popular now, the Aiko variety.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was that named for a Japanese woman?

MR. HIRASUNA: No. They just gave it a Japanese name, and someone must have suggested Aiko to them. You see, these varieties are developed by two people, Dr. Royce Bringhurst, who is the head of the Department of Pomology at the University of California at Davis, and there's a Victor Voth who is also in that department. He works mainly down on the South Coast Field Station which is near Santa Ana. These two people developed these new varieties, and they also named them. They have a new one coming out now that might change the picture a little bit in Fresno. See, we grow here the Tioga variety. Tioga is a good berry, but after the first set is gone, the berries get real small, and it's hard to sell them because in the meantime, there are other varieties that are producing better berries. So far we've not been able to find a better variety. We're trying a new variety this year called the Douglas, and we're going to see if that might prolong our season a little bit. But, in the meantime, the Japanese growers are getting out anyway, because they're getting older and the kids aren't coming into farming. I don't see that there will be very many Japanese strawberry growers very long.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Strawberries still have to be picked by hand, and I

guess that's the hardest part.

MR. HIRASUNA: Absolutely. The main source of labor for the strawberry growers is Mexican. There's no getting around it.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have any kind of labor problems with the strawberry pickers?

MR. HIRASUNA: Usually not. We're going up with the wage scale, along with the rest of them. Another thing, at strawberry time, there's not much work for them in this area. Towards the end of the season, we tend to lose labor. The picking gets harder and harder, and the crop gets lighter and lighter. And the laborer goes to other things. But when strawberries first start, there's no problem. Now, you know that on the coast down in Oxnard they're paying five dollars per hour, and over, for labor. Over here, I guess it was this past year three dollars and twenty-five cents to three dollars and fifty cents. It could be up to four dollars, I don't know.

MRS. HASEGAWA: About how much does a picker make in a day?

MR. HIRASUNA: Over here it's usually a combination of hour and incentive. They pay so much an hour and so much a crate, in addition. And during the good part of the season they can make maybe an average of six crates an hour, and with the combination rate, I think they can make about four dollars, or more, per hour. Towards the end of the season, the picking gets lighter, and it drops down to as low as two crates an hour.

MRS. HASEGAWA: After Mr. Omata retired in '75, you took in five employees as shareholders. Why did you do this?

MR. HIRASUNA: Well, because they had worked for us a long time, and they were good employees. I thought they should have an interest in the business.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who are these people?

MR. HIRASUNA: That are left in the business? There is Masami Yoshioka; Ben Isogawa; my brother Bob Hirasuna; my son Stuart Hirasuna; and myself. My other brother Herb sold his share and retired, so it's just five of us now.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That gives everyone more incentive to-

MR. HIRASUNA: Be part of the company.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That's great. Will you tell us a little bit about your new plant--what it does, and how it differs from the old plant?

MR. HIRASUNA: Prior to the new plant, we had this shed at 2040 "G" Street, in Fresno. We were in there twenty years. Before that we used to rent sheds here and there, but even then our shed in Fresno was too small for our business, so we used to do most of our shipping out of a place called Midland Cold Storage, which is on Santa Fe Street in Fresno. But Midland was not built for our type of business, and we had to improvise. The owners of it wanted to sell us that building at the time we were talking of building. They offered us very good terms,

believe me. My son and I decided that it was better for us to build. So, we built in Selma, because, well, one thing was that there was a piece of property that was available and the other thing is that Selma is more central to our growers. The only growers that suffered from our distance were some growers in North Fresno and in Merced. They had fifteen miles further to travel. Generally, most of the growers were right around that area, so it was better for them. We built the plant to fit our type of business. So, everything at the new plant is built exactly for the type of business we do. It is a great saving in labor.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you ship your vegetables across the country, too?

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes, we ship within California, too. And we ship to British Columbia and Washington, the Midwest and the East Coast.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of cooling system do you have in your new plant?

MR. HIRASUNA: It's a fast cooling system. It's a forced-air cooling system that's very effective. We can get the temperature of strawberries down within about three hours to 34'; whereas, it used to take maybe half the night in the old place. Fruit, at the old place, used to take us twelve to fifteen hours to pre-cool and here now we can do it in maybe five or six hours. That makes a big difference.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you do your packing? Do you have a label?

MR. HIRASUNA: No. The only thing we pack now in the shed is sugar cane.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Sugar cane?

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes. We take sugar cane and cut them into eight-inch stalks and shrink wrap them in plastic packages, but the other things are all packed by the growers on the ranches. They bring it in, and then we pre-cool it, and sometimes we restack them to fit the orders and ship them.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you find markets for them?

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes. On fruits, the growers make a big savings, because they make the profit on the packing that the sheds make, when they take the fruit to the shed. For instance, it costs farmers about two dollars a lug box for the shed to pack it, pre-cool it, and to ship it. Personally, I think there is a margin of up to fifty cents a package profit. And when the growers pack it, they make that profit.

MRS. HASEGAWA: The growers pack it on their ranches, and they bring it in, and you sell it for them. Is that right?

MR. HIRASUNA: They bring it in, we receive it and pre-cool it, and sometimes we restack it and ship it. Some of the growers are pretty big, and they have shed facilities equal to the commercial packinghouses. And really, the fruit is better, because it doesn't have to take that trip from ranch to shed. And, usually, I think I could say that the growers will handle their fruit better than the sheds would. They have a little more personal interest in it. If they don't get too greedy and start to pack a lot of poor stuff, they can usually pack a better package than the sheds can. As I say, if there a fifty-cent margin, that's a big

margin on a package of fruit.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I'm learning a lot. I'd like to ask you a little about your JACL work. You're Mr. JACL. How did you get started into being an active member, and what are some of the things that you've done with JACL?

MR. HIRASUNA: Really, Mr. JACL in Fresno is Dr. Thomas Yatabe. He came to Fresno from San Francisco in 1923, and he started this so-called American Loyalty League in Fresno which later became a chapter of the JACL in 1929 or 1930, I guess. When I was living in Fowler and going to school in Fresno, Dr. Yatabe used to be my dentist, and he interested me in JACL and persuaded me to become a member. I think it was in 1929. And in 1930, his wife was pregnant and expecting a child, so he couldn't go to Seattle. I think this was in September 1930. The first national convention of the JACL was held in Seattle. So he asked me to go in his place. I and two others, Yoshio Honda of Fowler and Tom Kanase of Fresno; the three of us went to Seattle from Fresno and attended that first JACL gathering at the JACL Convention. And from that time on I was in the Fresno Chapter, except the years that I was working in Delano and the Imperial Valley. In those years, I didn't get to come back to Fresno very often. So there was a period there, 1933 to 1939, about six years, that I didn't do much in Fresno. After I came back in 1939, I became active again. Of course, when Pearl Harbor came, the Chapter got really active, and we got into all kinds of things. First trying to avoid evacuation, and then after accepting the fact that we were going to be evacuated, trying to make it as easy as possible for everybody.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you feel that it was important that we were evacuated?

MR. HIRASUNA: No. If I had my choice, I would not have evacuated. I don't think it was necessary to evacuate, rather it was up to the authorities to protect us while we remained here. That's what they should have done, but they didn't do it. Of course, they all gave way to the hysteria of the time, and so many people joined in "Get the Japs out of here." I was surprised at some of the people. Of course, there were a few that were very, very good; very comforting, who tried to prevent evacuation. After evacuation became a fact, they tried to help us all they could.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are there any members living in the Fresno community now that helped us then?

MR. HIRASUNA: Well, you know the outstanding ones, I think, have passed away. Like Mary Baker, who used to be the Dean of Women at Fresno State, she died, of course. Dr. Phillips, who also died, and there was a Marjorie Tanzer (Marjorie Tanzer Zelhart), she died not too long ago.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was she a college person, too?

MR. HIRASUNA: She was a college person. Those are the three that I remember most vividly. There were others, principally either in education or in the churches that tried to help. But most of them gave way to the public sentiment. And even if they favored us or wanted to help us, they kept silent. In the end, there was nothing to do but accept it and do the best you can. There are people now that blame us for accepting it. Really, there was



nothing else you could do. I think if it had come to the point of saying, "The hell with you, I'm not going to go," then they would have used actual physical force and got the Army to do it, and someone would have got hurt. In our generation, when there were so many of the older people, of course now that we're old, it's hard to think of them being old. I guess they were in their sixties at the time. Here, I'm almost seventy-two. We thought if they were Issei and unable to speak English, then they were like little kids. So I think there was more of an idea of protecting them, and the women and children, that we went along with the evacuation.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What offices did you hold in JAACL?

MR. HIRASUNA: I guess I was President of the Fresno Chapter a couple times, I was Governor of the Central California District Council a couple times, and various other offices.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You're still very staunch, do you go to all the Central California District Council meetings?

MR. HIRASUNA: It's getting harder and harder. Really, JAACL before Pearl Harbor didn't amount to much. It was a gathering of quite young people; things they worried about most are the New Year's Dance, things like that. I guess Pearl Harbor was the thing that strengthened it and made it effective. Postwar and even now, it's hard to keep interested members. Fresno Chapter has five hundred members and has a Board of Governors, I believe of eighteen people. It's hard to get eighteen people together to have a meeting. Usually, we have about ten or twelve. If we had a general meeting of five hundred members, I doubt if we'd get fifty people. All the chapters in the Valley are that way.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What is it that holds them together?

MR. HIRASUNA: One thing is the health insurance. That's one of the things. Maybe that's the main thing, I don't know. But, now they have this redress movement, and that has divided support. Some people like it, and some people don't.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How do you feel about it?

MR. HIRASUNA: I think in its principal form it might be all right. I think of it more as an educational thing rather than a thing for compensation. And if people are made to realize what really happened-- and lots of them don't know about it, especially the younger people around here. They don't know what happened in 1941, 1942. They really don't. And if these various meetings that they are going to hold in the different districts get enough publicity and people realize what actually happened, then it may be a good thing. I'm not concerned about the redress thing. Of course, there are some people in JAACL that think that should be first, redress. They say that in this country money is the only thing that matters. Something like, if the money compensation isn't involved, why nobody is going to pay any attention to it. I don't know,

MRS. HASEGAWA: I read in the Pacific Citizen about some people's antagonism because of the redress.

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: The public, not the Japanese, but others are saying, "Why bring this to the attention of the people again?" This is creating some kind of antagonistic feelings.

MR. HIRASUNA: Well, with the present stage of the economy, why I guess anything that involves more spending by the government will create opposition. They think the government spends too much, anyway. I think it does. But money matters seem to lend a sort of a commercial tinge to the whole thing that we're not interested in people knowing what happened, but more interested in how much money we're going to get. Personally, I'm more interested in having the people know what happened, why it happened, and what we think is a terrible wrong that was done to us. If that is accomplished, I think I would be satisfied. Now, I'm not saying that because I don't need the money or anything like that. Principal of the thing. I think you take a lot of these younger Americans, you ask them about the evacuation, and they don't know anything. I don't know if it's even mentioned in the history books of today. I never had read any account in any history books.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I am told that it is included in recent history books, but I have not come across anything yet.

MR. HIRASUNA: Yes, every country tends to gloss over its own mistakes, and emphasize the good things. That includes Japan and all the rest. So, I imagine that history that is taught in grade school and even high school may not say too much about evacuation.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Well, if that can be added, that can be part of the educational system, part of the history of the United States and taught to the youngsters.

MR. HIRASUNA: That I think is very important. It should be done.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you. This biography has been very interesting, and I'm sure that later on, in the future, when people want to know about the packing industry or the chick sexing business, this will be a very good reference source.

MR. HIRASUNA: I must say today, though, that in the packing business there are some pretty big Japanese people. Jimmy Ito in Reedley, John Kashiki in Parlier. There's Bill Minami, Hamada brothers (Jim Hamada now), and in other areas, the Minamis in Santa Maria and Oshita in Salinas. There isn't anybody in Imperial Valley. Imperial Valley used to be the home of a lot of Japanese shippers. No more. The Japanese people generally didn't go back into Imperial Valley.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why is that? Do you think there was more discrimination there?

MR. HIRASUNA: I really don't know. There used to be an Eddie Kito. (Directed to Mrs. Hirasuna), Remember Eddie Kito? He was a graduate of Stanford, I think, and he was a chemist. But he was an older person. Maybe he's even older than I am. I don't know if he's still alive.

MRS. HIRASUNA: No, he died.

MR. HIRASUNA: Oh, he died. He couldn't find a job as a chemist, so he

was in the Imperial Valley and Calexico, and he managed a Mt), Signal Produce Company in Calexico, shipping lettuce and cantaloupes and vegetables, and in time, he became a member of the firm. He was a very, very prominent shipper down there. The evacuation came and he ended up in Chicago, and he became a chemist. That's what he was trained for, and he stayed in Chicago until he died. In the Imperial Valley, in those days, there were a lot of salesmen/manager- salesmen, as they were called. Issei would own the shipping company and probably rented land that the crops were grown on, and they would ship. Like in Brawley, they used to be an Asamen Company, Aoyama Company, Katekaru Company, Standard Produce. Anyway, about six or seven Japanese shippers who moved a lot of produce out of Brawley. And there used to be some in El Centro, Holtville, and Calexico. Japanese farmers were big in the Imperial Valley before the war. They raised a big portion of the crops there. They were noted for being good farmers. But after the war, there is hardly anyone there. There are a few back there now.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When I talked to you earlier, you said "no church," but aren't you a member of the Congregational Church?

MR. HIRASUNA: No, my wife is. My folks were Buddhists, but I guess I'm an agnostic or maybe even an atheist. So, I've never been a church member.

MRS. HASEGAWA: There's one last question that I'd like to ask and that's what kind of Japanese traditional activities, or anything Japanese, have you carried on through your family?

MR. HIRASUNA: Let's see (pause).

MRS. HIRASUNA: Actually, you're not that Japanese.

MR. HIRASUNA: Don't get me wrong, I'm not ashamed of being Japanese or anything like that. I believe in a lot of things in Japanese traditions. As a matter of fact--my kids--I try to see to it that they know something about Japanese history. Books like the Nisei, I see to it that every one of them has a copy of it. But, at home, the only thing traditional we do here is, I guess, the New Year's so-called celebration (laughter) Japanese foods. But all our kids have learned to like Japanese foods. We taught them very early to use chopsticks.

MRS, HIRASUNA: The Caucasian people like Japanese food, too.

MR. HIRASUNA: Our kids know about the Japanese. Like our first son Alan. He's very much impressed with Japanese history. He reads books on it. Maybe we're typical Nisei. We grew up as Japanese kids with our folks, and learned a little of the Japanese language. But I'm ashamed of my Japanese today, it's terrible. But I think there's a certain something that's passed on. Don't you think so?

MRS. HIRASUNA: Yes.

MR. HIRASUNA: I don't know how the Yonsei will do.

MRS. HIRASUNA: By growing up--

MR. HIRASUNA: But the Sansei, our kids, I'm pretty sure learned lots of the things, and we hope the good things stick with them from the

Japanese family. I think we had certain things as a group.

MRS. HASEGAWA: This has been a very informative interview. Thank you for your cooperation and your time.