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Hi Kris
A few articles I
thought you might be
interested in - Laura Snyderman - a class
mate of Kimi in high school
- Kimi's article
parts of Rolando's book
that could be put into
the Usmin tour
see ya

his farm in Wisconsin. I helped to run the whole farm. It was exciting. I never knew what the next day would bring. One day I was a farmer, the next day I was a carpenter, a mason, a dishwasher and then a cook. I had to do everything and do it well. I had to learn the whole process of housekeeping, both working in the laundry and in the kitchen. As an architect, when you design, you design hypothetical rooms. If you don't know what it is like to work in a kitchen, what you design may not suit the people that need to cook there. But because of Mr. Wright's farm, I knew what every room in the house was used for and was able to create rooms for other people because I knew what would be practical. Working under him helped me get the knowledge I needed to become a great architect.

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Kaneji Domoto is eighty-two years old. He is an American of Japanese descent and was born and raised in California. Today, he is married to his second wife and spends time working as a landscape architect.

I keep telling people that I'm the same age as Nixon except he's dead and I'm alive. I plan on it staying that way. I'm eighty-two years old, born in 1912, and I plan on working until the year 2000.

Right now I am a landscape architect. If you ask me, landscaping is healthier than architecture. If you're an architect, you stay in an office all day drawing. Not me. I want to be outside in the sunshine, the rain and everything else. That is what it is to be alive and I feel that way when I am working outdoors.

I started out as an architect and had the experience of a lifetime working under Frank Lloyd Wright. I was one of fifty apprentices living on his farm in Wisconsin. I helped to run the whole farm. It was exciting. I never knew what the next day would bring. One day I was a farmer, the next day I was a carpenter, a mason, a dishwasher and then a cook. I had to do everything and do it well. I had to learn the whole process of housekeeping, both working in the laundry and in the kitchen. As an architect, when you design, you design hypothetical rooms. If you don't know what it is like to work in a kitchen, what you design may not suit the people that need to cook there. But because of Mr. Wright's farm, I knew what every room in the house was used for and was able to create rooms for other people because I knew what would be practical. Working under him helped me get the knowledge I needed to become a great architect.

I eventually strayed from that type of architecture and began to concentrate on landscaping. I guess I inherited the desire to be close to nature from my father. I always wanted to be out experiencing the weather, not in some stuffy room. I learned about my father by reading a book. In Japanese culture, the first born inherits the father's business and I was at the bottom, so I didn't count for much. I really did not know him very well. So when the book came out this year, I read it. He was tremendous. My father was a big nurseryman. He imported the bonsai from Japan, along with camellias, azaleas, rhododendrons, bulbs, and lilies. Because of him, I got a brushing knowledge of these things when I was younger. I used to sell bonsai trees but people would always complain to me that the bonsai that I sold to them had died. You have to take care of bonsai trees like you would a puppy or a child and they have to be watered regularly. In landscaping, I have decided to concentrate on making stone gardens. The people that I make stone gardens for do not have to prune them, water them or care for them at all. Stone gardens stand up against time, forever.

In landscaping, I have a distinct style of using big rocks and waterfalls. I am an American Japanese. The Japanese in their culture have borrowed tremendously from the Chinese. I borrow from the Japanese, but it is not quite the same as Japanese landscaping or architecture because I am American. Japanese people call their art Japanese art and it is different from Chinese art. Why can't I call my work American art borrowed from the Japanese?

Part of me is distinctly American in my work. I have read about the American Indians and their religion and I found out that they are not like the Catholic or the Jewish. They think that everything on earth has a spirit of its own. I use stone just as I find it. It has become a religion with me. I believe that religion means that there is a place for everything. In my rock work, I

don't chip any of the rocks, but I use them just as they are found. By the time that I have finished, I have used all of the rocks and they all seem to fit. My gardens look good. When I was younger, I used to think that I had talent. Now I realize that I must have gotten help from above to put the rocks in such a fashion that they look like they belong there.

Mother Nature is very important to me and I would not want to destroy her in any way. I am just taking a part of nature and altering her. When you use oil, you convert it to another state of matter, from a liquid to a gas. I use natural stone and simply place it in a different way. Mother Nature has already done what I do, only she does it on a much bigger scale. I'm not destroying nature, but using nature as it is.

The use of rocks in landscaping may be considered Japanese but the way I use the rocks is not. I have borrowed from American culture by taking Native American thought and applying those beliefs to my work. In a way, I feel I am my work. I put all of myself into every stone I place, every stone I lift, and I have weathered the ages as they have.

People still refer to me as a Japanese American. I should not be called a Japanese American. I should be called an American of Japanese descent. I was born and raised here. I am American. That's my platform when I run for president.

Not Just Another Typical Japanese American

America has traditionally been seen as the Land of Opportunity for many different immigrant groups. For Kaneji Domoto, a second generation Japanese American, America certainly provided a lot of opportunity. He was born in 1912 and has had a full life, working under the esteemed Frank Lloyd Wright and then becoming a well-known landscape architect himself. Kaneji Domoto's experience, however, is not typical. While many immigrant groups see America as the Land of Opportunity, many of them are persecuted in their homelands and graciously accept the small amount of opportunity afforded them. Not many immigrants "make it" by the mainstream American standards. While Kaneji Domoto does share some common aspects of Japanese American history, his overall experience was different.

Like all Japanese Americans living in California during World War II, Kaneji Domoto was told to go to an Internment camp, but unlike many of those Japanese Americans, Domoto tried to find some positive aspects of the experience. An evacuee said of the experience, "it is difficult to describe the feeling of despair and humiliation" (Takaki, p.393). Of course, Domoto must have felt a little disturbed at being uprooted from his home, but he felt that internment was a little different for him than for a lot of other people. He had just gotten married, was young and did not have any property. If the authorities told him to move, he was not losing anything. His brother, however, had a nursery and he lost a lot of money on that, so his brother, like the typical Japanese American, felt very strongly that it was an injustice. Kaneji Domoto did not lose anything financially, so he considered it a good opportunity to explore the unknown.

Kaneji Domoto also reflects the experiences of the general Japanese American population in that luck played a large part in his life, but luck for him not only helped him to get by, but also helped him to really succeed. Historian Bill Hing labeled luck as a defense mechanism often implemented within the Japanese American community. For the Japanese Americans, it really is a matter of timing that they came after the Chinese, for a farming community was already developed. The land was therefore already irrigated and the Japanese were then able to live as farmers and create their own farming communities, which allowed them to assimilate. So there was definitely a need for farmers, or for people who tended the land, and Kaneji Domoto wanted a part in that business and was able to get one. Luck, however, manifested itself somewhat differently for Domoto. Domoto had an atypical family life. His father had a large reputation as a nursery-man and imported many plants and flowers. He was lucky, therefore, that his father had a lot of money, enough to give his sons a good education. Kaneji Domoto enrolled at The University of California at Berkeley and originally wanted to take architecture, but there were too many students for the few spots available. He looked around to see what other course he could take that had more space and, by chance, he wandered into the landscape department that had plenty of room. So luck certainly played a significant role in Domoto's life, for he eventually became an esteemed landscape architect.

While Japanese Americans were stereotyped and often discriminated against, Domoto believes that stereotyping actually helped him to get into the work force. Like most Japanese Americans, Domoto was called names. Often, he was mistaken for a Chinaman and called a "ching ching chinaman" or some other racial slur. Domoto said that he could take all of the slang hurled at him, but he is not Chinese and he would rather be called a "lousy Jap" than a

“chink.” “People even spit on Japanese in the streets” (Takaki, p.181) recalled Juhei Kono in an interview. Although the Japanese were discriminated against, that treatment allowed Domoto to get a job. In his two fields, landscaping and architecture, the mainstream thought that Asians had talent, and they were often stereotyped as gardeners. Therefore, he had no problem starting out and he was able to make enough money to support his family, and to eventually create a name for himself.

Japanese Americans were pushed into the field of agriculture, and similar to many Japanese Americans, Kaneji Domoto began in agriculture, but he managed to use his knowledge of agriculture to specialize in another field. Approximately 40,000 Japanese Americans were in agriculture in 1909¹, which consisted of a vast majority of the Japanese American population, making Domoto’s feat of specializing in another field even more impressive. Abiko Kyutaro believed that “his fellow Japanese were ably suited to become Americans through agriculture” (Takaki, p.196) and that land ownership could provide them with some standing in society. Domoto did gain acceptance in society, but he treated the field of agriculture, not as a permanent job, but one he could move up in. He started out handling plants and flowers that his father had imported from Japan. He realized, however, that taking care of plants was not what he wanted to do. Often, he became annoyed at the attention a plant needed in order to survive. That is why he chose his current landscaping specialty of stones, because rocks don’t have to be taken care of. Domoto had a lot of foresight and drive, for he decided that he needed to be taught by a professional architect once he decided that landscape architecture was his passion. He wrote to Frank Lloyd Wright and got the opportunity to be his apprentice. At the Wright farm, Domoto learned how to be practical. Not

¹ Ronald Takaki, Strangers From A Different Shore, p.182.

many Japanese Americans, or any Americans, have had an experience such as Domoto's of working under a famous professional in their field.

Kaneji Domoto is not a typical Japanese American. His experience in America has had some similarities to what other Japanese Americans have experienced, but he has gone farther than the typical Japanese American. Now, whether his success is luck, as Hing would say, or simply an ingrained personal drive to achieve, Kaneji Domoto managed, by American standards, to prosper. It seems that his ability to succeed may have been a mixture of both luck and biology. Obviously, luck seemed to always be with Domoto, from birth when he became part of a wealthy family to later life when he wandered into the landscaping class at UCAL Berkeley. But, knowing some of the other members of the Domoto family, it seems that all of them have a biological drive to achieve. Not only was his father a successful man, famous for bringing the bonsai and other plants into America, but his children and even grandchildren reflect this trait. Kaneji Domoto wanted success, and at eighty-two years of age, he can look back on his life with pride.

Transcript of Interview with Mr. Kaneji Domoto

Background:

1. What is your full name?

Kaneji Domoto--Kaneji means number 2--second generation

2. When and where were you born?

Oakland California, November 5, 1912. 82 years old. I keep telling people I'm same age as Nixon except he's dead and I'm alive.

3. Where were you raised?

California, around east bay area, San Francisco area.

4. When did your family arrive in the U.S.?

Father came late 1800's. Young man then.

5. How many siblings do you have?

6 sisters, 1 brother, he is second son in family.

6. Where does the rest of your family live now?

1 sister in New York. 1 sister in Berkeley, California. 1 sister in Japan.
1 brother in California.

7. So, you're married now. How many children do you have?

From first marriage, have 3 daughters and 1 son.

8. Are you a dual citizen?

Born in US, so is automatically a US citizen. Never took out dual citizenship in Japan or any other place.

9. As you were growing up, did you feel like Japanese culture was important to you?

Yes.

10. Were you interned?

Yes.

11. Could you briefly describe your experience to me?

Internship to me was a little different than a lot of other people. I just got married, I was young and I didn't have any property or anything to do too much. If they told me to move tomorrow and go to Colorado, I wasn't losing anything. But my brother had a nursery going and everything else and he lost quite a bit of money on that, so he feels very strongly that it was an injustice. And I felt it was a new experience, because I didn't have any financial loss or anything like that, so for people like me, it was a good opportunity.

12. What is your current occupation?

Landscape architect and an architect. Studied architecture at the University of California and with Frank Lloyd Wright.

Reason he got into those two fields is because when he enrolled at UCAL with architecture course, 100 freshman enrolled at same time. Establishment only big enough to take 50. Looked around to see what other thing he could take that had more room. Wandered into landscape department and there only 10 students--big space. Enrolled in that. Now most of business in landscaping--healthier part of business than architecture which is staying in office and drawing away. Landscaping, you are outside, in sunshine and rain and everything else--healthier outdoor work.

Labor History:

1. So, when you enrolled, you enrolled in both landscaping and architecture?

Yes. That was what made it so easy for me. New York state requires a license to be called a landscape architect. California doesn't require one. To

get license, need 4 years of college and I didn't have a college degree, only 2 years and practical work with Japanese architect during World Fair.

2. What was your first job?

Landscaping--at UCAL Berkeley, on campus at place called Strawberry Canyon. Did large stonework on waterfalls and streams.

3. Did you have trouble getting that job because of discrimination?

In these two fields, if Japanese, got the job. Landscaping and Japanese people went together. It wasn't like if you were in law or medicine where prejudice might occur.

4. When you were starting out, did you set goals for yourself?

Just thinking about present--job and what to do, not future. Didn't think much of that.

5. You mentioned that you studied under Frank Lloyd Wright. How was that experience?

Old-fashioned apprenticeship. On his farm, you helped run whole farm. Farmer one day, carpenter, mason, landscaping, dishwasher, cook. To be architect, good requirement. Had 6 sisters, never got into kitchen. Didn't know anything about running a kitchen or cooking. But at Frank Lloyd Wright's, got whole process of housekeeping, laundry and kitchen. When designing, you're designing hypothetical, you knew what it was like to work in kitchen. One of better practical experiences that I had.

6. How many of there were you under him?

50. Mrs. Wright ran household. Frank Lloyd Wright in charge of architecture.

7. So, where was this?

Talieson in Spring Green Wisconsin. FLW has another school in Talieson West in Arizona. Every year he would bring us to Arizona in caravan, big truckload of people. Educational., Students never west of Mississippi, he would take us. College education should do that now--go across country on bike, car. That's what I enjoyed mostly.

8. How did you get this opportunity?

Father's a big nursery man, brother is too. I could have also. Read a magazine once, Coronet magazine on FLW. During Depression, opportunity came to me to go back to school--that's how I took up architecture.

9. What school did you go to?

Stanford. Had physics and math as majors. then Depression, had to quit school to work. Went back to school after Depression and went to UCAL Berkeley because Stanford didn't have architectural/landscape department. After 2 years at UCAL, war came and was kicked out of California to internment camps.

10. So, when did you start working at Frank Lloyd Wright's?

Worked for him. 1939-1940.

11. So, it was before internment?

When I was in internment camp, I wrote to him and asked how FLW could get him out of camp. Better to go to FLW. FLW said to come out. He didn't go out because there were other problems.

12. You didn't leave?

Couldn't at that time but in a few months, government reversed its policy. 10 camps. Mistake because it costs millions of dollars. Want to get rid of us. Government would finance travel expense if went East to look for job. I took opportunity and went East to look for job.

13. So, you left. Do you know what year you left?

Around 1943.

14. So, did you go to Frank Lloyd Wright's then?

Wrote to him. (Whole thing on World Fair) Got job in New York. Then went back to FLW. Took Model A Ford across country after wrote a letter saying he wanted to be his apprentice and went to Wisconsin.

15. That was the first time?

That was the first time.

16. What was the most memorable experience you had in the time you worked for Frank Lloyd Wright?

Master's up there, don't see him much. He was a human guy though. We revered him as the master.

17. How do you think being Asian American has affected your life in terms of making money and supporting your family, getting jobs?

In my two fields, being Asian American was an advantage. People thought that Orientals were good in field of art.

18. So, were you able to make money pretty easily?

Yes. Had enough to send four kids to college.

19. What year did you start having kids?

Oldest is daughter in Washington. She born 1940.

20. Do you think that there is a stereotype of Japanese American workers? How might that stereotype have affected you?

Beginning, must have been a stereotype. But we been in all different types of professions. I think they accept us as American now. We're in business, law, doctors, manufacturing. Now they accept us. It's been gratifying. Before war most of us in California thought heaven was California. Never been anywhere else. War kicked us out of California. Before war, if went to different town in US, might have found Chinese restaurant, but no Japanese restaurants. Japanese stayed in California. Chinese were everywhere. Now, if you travel, you will find Japanese everywhere. Internship scattered us around. College education should allow students to travel, to know your country. (Missions) Need education on own history.

21. I know you say that there isn't a stereotype now, but was there back then of Japanese American workers?

Yes, there must have been. I don't quite remember because unpleasant things I try to forget. They had a slot for the Chinese and a slot for the Japanese. I don't remember off-hand just what that would have been. Often, they mistook us for Chinese and called us "Ching ching chinamen" or something like that.

22. Did that bother you?

I can take slang, but I'm not Chinese, I'm Japanese. If they called me a "lousy Jap", I'd appreciate that better than being called a "Chink".

23. I know that a person's work is considered a major part of who they are, what type of person they are, motivation, likes/dislikes.

How do you think that your occupation reflects who you are?

My father was a big nurseryman. He imported the Bonsai from Japan. I knew something about Bonsai's. When in Chicago, there was a Hill nursery. (Midwest Bonsai Festival) Went away from Bonsai's because someone would come and say that the Bonsai that was sold died. Went away for weekend and it wasn't watered, it died. Got to take care of Bonsai like puppy-dog or child--had to be watered regularly and taken care of. Landscaping has gone to stonework because I'd rather not have to constantly watch over trees. Can do stone garden. People that I make stone garden for don't have to prune it, water it, care for it at all. Stands up against time, forever. That's how I got into my landscaping specialty--stones.

24. Did your father bring the Bonsai into America?

There's a book on my father. First born inherits father's business. I'm way at bottom, so I don't count for much. I really didn't know my father that well. Read this book this year on my father's business. He was tremendous. He imported Camellias, Azaleas, Rhododendrons, Bulbs, Lilies. I got a brushing knowledge of these things. I know basic part of growing plants. My father had a reputation according to this book of hiring immigrants that just came off the boat and giving them jobs and teaching them how to raise things. And when they got to the point of knowing how to raise things on their own, he encouraged them to go into their own business. They call it "Domoto College" because he gave them the information.

25. Do you remember how old you were when you stopped being a part of the Bonsai business?

During the Depression.

26. What types of obstacles have you hit, and how did you overcome or become defeated by those barriers?

Chose New York because it was a very impersonal place. So many races, there wasn't the strong prejudice that you might find in Texas.

27. What year did you go to New York City?

First during World Fair.

28. Do you feel like you are a part of American society?

I am part of American culture. In landscaping I have a distinctive style of using big rocks and waterfalls. Japanese in their culture have borrowed tremendously from the Chinese. Lot of Japanese architecture and painting, art, reflects this influence. I'm an American Japanese. That I've seen the Japanese but I've used the American culture as part of my original work. It isn't distinctly Japanese but this is American Japanese. You know like the Japanese borrow from the Chinese, I borrow from the Japanese, but it isn't quite the same as Japanese landscape or architecture because I'm American. This should be brought up more. Japanese people call their art Japanese art and it's different from the Chinese, why couldn't I call this American art and it's borrowed from the Japanese.

They shouldn't say Mexican American. We should be called American of Japanese descent. We were born and raised here. We are Americans. We should not call ourselves Japanese Americans. It should be American of Japanese descent. That's my platform when I run for president.

(English should be main language)

29. What aspects of your stone-work is Japanese?

The use of natural stone as a garden. I use stone just as I find it. It became sort of a religion with me. I read about the American Indians and their religion and I found out that they are not like the Catholic or the Jewish. They think everything on earth has an equal importance which is something. When I say equal importance, I mean they have a spirit of their own. When they kill a rabbit, they beg its pardon because they have to eat and they give that reason for killing something else. They have a lot of myths and rules about the use, but I look at the rock and I use it the way I think it will look well.

30. So that's which, Japanese or American?

That's American.

31. Do you know what other minorities or immigrants have in common with the struggle you might have felt in obtaining your job?

I am a consultant on tree shaping. I am getting a little older, so I get some young people to help me prune. Among these young people, I find

nationalities of all kinds. One of the best workers I have at pruning trees is Mexican. Other people may have the same feeling if they're given the opportunity.

32. America is considered "The Land of Opportunity". Do you feel that it has been this for you? Why or why not?

I look back at the Japanese, Mexican and Italian and they made it here. It is the 'Land of Opportunity'. They couldn't have done it in their own country. But they came here and had the opportunity. All of them don't make it that much, but we have a certain group of them that make it all right. If you have the talent, you can get into any field.

33. Has anyone given you good advice and support about how to adjust to this society?

If they have, I haven't been listening because I don't remember. I don't remember any distinctive one person that gave me advice that really helped out a lot. I did a lot of reading so a lot of influence must have come from the books.

34. Are American Indian beliefs important to you?

Their religion appeals to me more than the Catholic one which stresses Jesus Christ the son of God tremendously. I think that it isn't the son of God you should be worshipping, but the God. (Religion) I'm more for Gandhi. who would walk to work, simple-living. That's what I think religion should do, not show hierarchy. Bahai religion is a composite of beliefs, one temple in each country. In my rock work, I'll take a rock off back of truck and fix it in my garden. When I'm finished, I used all of rock, they all fit. Religion--there's a place for every thing. I don't chip the rock, I use it just as I find it. I use one next to the other. By the time I've finished, I've used all of the rocks and they all seem to fit. I get my own religion. I get my gardens and they look good. I must have gotten help from above--my religion--to get help from above to put rocks in fashion so that they look like they belong there.

35. Is nature really important to you?

We're in the wrong direction with the natural land. Organizations trying to preserve land as it was. If we keep going the way we are, we are going to destroy ourselves. When you take so much from Mother Earth it loses its balance and earthquakes occur.

36. Do you feel that in your work with stone gardens you are ruining the nature that is already there or are just taking it and altering it?

I'm just taking it and altering it. When you use oil, you convert it to some other thing, liquid to gas. I use natural stone and I place it in different way. When I look at finished product and I look at some of natural stuff--like Colorado--it's there already only they did it on a bigger scale. I do it on a big scale, but Mother Nature is much bigger than that. You know your place. You're not destroying nature, you're using nature as it is.

36. Do you think that it would have been more or less difficult for women to enter the work force at the time you entered it?

Yes, it was difficult for women.

37. Have you known many women landscapers?

Yes there's been quite a few. They don't get into rock gardens. They think it's hard work to get into rock gardens. I use machinery. I haven't got any ladies who would take lessons from me. I have a good technique on how to move big rocks. It's logical and simple.

38. Do you have a favorite project that you've worked on?

In New York. A waterfall in Harrison New York for a doctor. And a huge Bonsai garden, Straus Garden, in Long Island Sound called Mamaroneck.

(area near NYC). I've done a lot of stone gardens. Island called Saint Martens in the Caribbean and I did a big corral garden there with waterfalls and sculptured pieces. In Dartmouth College in a courtyard there's a Japanese garden that I did there. (Shopping centers). Jackson Park in Chicago. The Penguin Pen on Cony Island. Seal cage in Mystic Connecticut. Japanese people can't understand how I got these big rocks. Rocks in abundance here.

39. Are you working on anything now?

I'm finishing up the job in Harrison. (Doctor wants waterfall like one in South America)

40. How many people do you have working under you right now?

I hire contractors. (Contractors)

41. Do you feel like your job has changed a lot over the years?

Muscle power --> machinery. Got a job from a farmer called the Garlic King. He saw us working with stones--pushing. He showed us how to use tractors. From now on I decided to use just machinery--the modern age. (Operators of machines) They think I'm a white collar guy and don't know how to move rocks. I know more than they do. I only need two other people besides myself. (Moving rocks)

42. What year did you stop doing manual labor?

The year 2000. I'm 82 years old. I don't want to retire.

43. So, you're not planning on stopping?

No, as long as I get jobs, I'll do them.

44. Just to go back to Frank Lloyd Wright for a moment, what did you learn from him exactly?

Just how to be an architect. When you go to school, it's a different kind of a learning process. Apprenticeship is a must for something as practical as architecture or landscaping. It's a must more than going to a regular school. In fact, architecture now, even if you finish 4 years of college, you need 2 years of internship to get license. Practical part of it. That's what I learned there.

45. When did you start using machines?

Early. Before the 1940's.

46. Do you have anything else to add?

(Changing of careers, Educational systems)