

[Begin Jack Takeshi Omatsu CD 1]

Interviewer:

It is 10:17 on April 21, 2004. My name is Dale Sato and I will be interviewing Jack Takeshi Omatsu today as a part of the South Bay Oral History Project. The audio equipment recording this interview is being monitored by Ed Mitoma and the interview is being cataloged by Ike Hatchimonji. All copyrights, title, and other rights arising out of this interview whether in its entirety, part, or derivative form, or whether in audio, written, or other format shall belong to the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. Copying of this interview recording, whether in its entirety or part is strictly prohibited without a written authorization from the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. This is the first CD of the interview of Jack Takeshi Omatsu being recorded on this date. Let's begin the interview.

Thank you very much for coming all the way from Bullhead City. Okay; we'll start off first maybe about the pre-war period. Could you tell me a little bit about your parents?

Omatsu:

Well my father---he was born in Fukuoka Japan, and his older brother and he came to Hawaii when my father was around 16, and they worked in the sugarcane fields.

Interviewer:

About what year was that do you know?

Omatsu:

Oh gee; I don't remember---or know, but then after that his older brother went back to Japan and my father stayed in Hawaii because they already had relatives in Honolulu. So my father worked at a drugstore and things like that. And then he joined the U.S. Army in Hawaii; so then he got his citizenship---naturalized citizenship there. And he lived there for 15 years and I understand he was married for two years and his wife died. So he came to the Mainland and then he met my mother in the Fresno area. And my mother---my grandfather, Mr. Koga, he was prominent in Dinuba and he had a boarding house there and also a grape ranch. And my mother was brought up in Japan when she was little and they sent for her when she was 18; so she came. And....

Interviewer:

Did your family, in Fukuoka, your relatives there and your mother's family, know each other?

0:03:15.6

Omatsu:

They did not know each other.

Interviewer:

They didn't know her.

Omatsu:

They... in fact, my dad was working for the Inoki family in Delano and then something came about. They said Mr. Koga has a daughter that just came from Japan and they're from Fukuoka and my dad is from Fukuoka

Interviewer:

It's a kind of an arranged marriage?

Omatsu:

Uh-hm; and then my sister, after they got married my sister was born, Mary Anne. And after a while... they worked for my grandfather, my folks did and then the Koda family in Torrance at Redondo Beach, they were raising strawberries then; they needed some help. So my folks came to Torrance and worked for the Koda family. And the Koda family used to raise strawberries out there near Prospect and Torrance Boulevard, which is considered Redondo. And I finally, my dad went into the strawberry business himself and....

Interviewer:

Did he have to learn about it from scratch?

Omatsu:

Well he was already working in the farms. He had his hands in the farms; so then I think his parents were farmers in Japan--- Fukuoka. So he had a lot of experience in farming. So he learned by working at Koda's ranch, strawberry ranch in Redondo, he learned how to raise strawberries. So then he went on the---my mom and dad went on their own and they leased the place off of

Hawthorne and Torrance Boulevard then, and they started raising flowers... not flowers, but strawberries there.

0:05:06.5

Interviewer:

Uh-huh; and that was about?

Omatsu:

Nineteen... I was born there. My brother, Bob, was born there and my younger brother, Sam, was born there, and my sister is the only one that was born in Fresno before they came there to Torrance. So we all went to school in Torrance. We went to Ferdinand Middle School and everything.

Interviewer:

When your parents---when your family came to the South Bay, were they leasing the land?

Omatsu:

Yeah; they---it used to be owned by Delano Oil Company or whatever. So there was all leased ground and Mr. Yoshinobu, a Nisei man, he was farming on the slopes toward Prospect and he was in charge of the leasing to the Isseis. But my dad was a citizen anyway, but they leased the ground through him and they paid the rent to Mr. Yoshinobu. He gathered the rents and all that. So it's interesting. And then as time went by, there was an Okada family that was living next door and they were the only flower growers right there where we were growing strawberries. And Mr. Okada---Ichiro Okada, he told my dad, "Why don't you raise flowers?" And so my dad said, "Okay." So he learned from Mr. Okada. And then my dad leased the ground further down toward Ansa and there was an old Japanese farmhouse there. So my dad leased that part and he built another house himself. And I remember he used to use the handsaw just to cut the lumber; you know. But he did all that. And then we all got on a flatbed you know with our dogs and belongings and moved to Ansa, and I thought it was a big deal because we're moving finally; you know. And the house we lived in on Torrance Boulevard... or not Torrance Boulevard, but right off of Hawthorne Boulevard there--the strawberry ranch---we had kerosene lamps, no electricity, outhouse, ofuro outside, no refrigerator because it's no electricity, and when we moved to toward Ansa when our folks went into flower growing, they had electricity there. So we had

refrigeration and all that finally; you know... gas stove and everything. No more kerosene lamps. And then there was the Muto family and Ikejiri family and the Mochizuki...

Interviewer:

Were they all in flower growing?

Omatsu:

... and; yeah flower growers all the way from Torrance Boulevard all the way up to Sepulveda and from maybe Ansa all the way up to Prospect; they were all flower growers in there. Most of the farmers are up toward Hawthorne Boulevard.

0:08:23.2

Interviewer:

Was there a reason why they picked that particular area? Was it just open field or...?

Omatsu:

Well the flower growers are already up toward Ansa, Mochizuchi's and Muto's and all that, and then like I said, Mr. Yoshinobu, that one in the charge of the lease; that was all CCMO Company property and all; nothing but oil there and some things like that. So since they had all the oil there, it's in the oil roads, there is all empty fields. So that's why the Japanese farmers, they leased that ground. So it was good for the oil company, too, because they are... you know no use having all these empty fields. They are---they helped for the tax and everything; right. Then also, between Hawthorne and Madronna used to be a little town like they had their own homes and everything. That belonged to the oil company and people that---parents that worked---their father used to work for the oil company, they used to live there. And I knew a lot of kids there because we all went to school---Kenny Mossier?, Jerry McIlvane... I remember some of those names. But yeah....

0:09:47.4

Interviewer:

Was that just for company families?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; company. In fact, they had a tennis court and stuff there. I used to go over there and skate around when I first learned how to skate, when I got a pair of roller skates. And the Himano's---there used to be a family named Himano on the corner of Hawthorne and Torrance Boulevard. There used to be Himano Grocery Store and we used to go there a lot. They used to sell everything---meat, they had the butcher shop, they had a gas tank and my dad used to fill the gas up there and everything. That's interesting.

Interviewer:

Yeah; when they wanted Japanese food, did this Mr. Himano also sell Japanese products?

Omatsu:

Why he sold Mexican, this Mexican sugar---it was brown sort of. He had a little case with beans in one and the sugar in one, but he didn't sell too many Japanese stuff. We had to go to Gardena, you know. Gardena had a Japanese department store on Gardena Boulevard, Kurata Department Store. We used to go there a lot and they'd sell a lot of Japanese things there.

Interviewer:

Do you mean foodstuff or clothes or...?

Omatsu:

Well I don't know; before the war they used to be a Japanese people that has market in LA Rafu Bussan and all these other people used to come out to the field and take orders. There was the Japanese market in Gardena... I forget what the name of it... oh Motoyama before the war. After the war, they started the store. They used to come to the ranch and take orders from you know what the rice and shoyu and stuff and then they'd deliver; you know. And I remember how the bakery truck used to come by and blow the whistle and then you know---and then they had this Italian fisherman that used to come with a pickup with ice in the back and he'd sell fish to our folks, sashimi and all that. So it was interesting.

0:12:05.6

Interviewer:

And so...

Omatsu:

Yes?

Interviewer:... when they wanted to buy farm tools or equipment, was that also bought in Gardena or did they...?

Omatsu:

Well there was a Japanese company on---I remember on Moneta Boulevard that they used to sell all kind of Japanese fertilizer and seeds and things like that. So my dad used to go by there and there was a Koida family on Redondo Beach Boulevard and they sold all kinds of Japanese. And then after the war, there was a Yamada Company on Gardena Boulevard there and they used to sell fertilizer and they're still there. And then Kuwahara was one of the sons and he was working there just before the Korean War, and he got killed in Korea. We used to all hang out together. And then....

0:13:12.2

Interviewer:

When they did...

Omatsu:

Yes?

Interviewer:

... flower growing you know did they start from the seeds, or how did they go about that?

Omatsu:

Yes, yes; well they... well in the old days, my dad had a horse in a corral you know at the strawberry ranch, and I found out through my sister the horse's name was Rosie. I never knew that just until recently. But my dad used to plow and he used to level and things with the horse. So when we moved out toward to Anza when my folks went into flower raising, he hired Mr. Kuida's oldest son. He had a Caterpillar and he went and you know disked up the weeds... it's all virgin land, and plowed the field with the tractor. And then my dad took over with his horse and the leveler. And then as time went by, my folks started to make money in the flower... well they did okay in the strawberries. You know that was during Depression. That was at

the---they were at the mercy of the brokers at the market---the produce market---and rotten haul-men you know.

Interviewer:

What do you mean?

Omatsu:

After my dad started the flowers, he bought stock in the Japanese Flower Market and went to the market himself. And I remember he bought a brand new '37 Chevy, General Motor truck, and he went to the Flower Market and sold his product at the Japanese Flower Market. And then he started making money. So he started buying his own Caterpillar and everything and pickup and you name it. And we had two families; one was his cousin, Freddie Hori. He's a Kibei; you know he was born in Hawaii. And Mr. Kuboyama---Frank Kuboyama, he was a Kibei. They both lived with us in the late '30s and they worked for my dad, and they were just like brothers because they ate with us and whatever you know.

Interviewer:

Did they have a separate house?

Omatsu:

Yeah; separate house, and then I remember Fred, he always was home on weekends you know. But Frank Kuboyama, he had a sister named Mystal Ohara and they were flower growers. So Frank used to always take off on weekends and go visit with them. And then there was a Mexican man named Morses and he worked for my dad. And anyway after the war... well during---when the war started, we moved to Dinuba where my grandmother was living when she had the boarding house.

0:16:05.0

Interviewer:

Can I back up a little bit?

Omatsu:

Sure, sure; oh we'll go back to Torrance again.

Interviewer:

[Laughs] We're going to get to all of it.

Omatsu:

Sure.

Interviewer:

When you said the strawberry growers were at a disadvantage; what did you mean by that?

Omatsu:

Well because they are all Isseis for one; they weren't Niseis you know.

Interviewer:

They weren't citizens.

Omatsu:

What happened is they grew the product like my dad did you know and they grew tomatoes and rhubarbs and stuff---blackberries on the side, but primarily it was the strawberries; okay. So what happened is they have to have a way to sell them---sell the product; so these---there's a lot of Japanese produce... they called them horu-men.

Interviewer:

How would you spell haul?

Omatsu:

Haul, you know like hauling things.

Interviewer:

Oh haul, h-a-u-l; uh-hm.

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then I guess a lot of saying I pick up from parents--- my mom you know; but anyway they did... my folks would pick the strawberries and then they'd pack it in tray---baskets and trays, and we're having a---there's a platform, a wooden platform, and you'll stack it there and in the evening, the haul-men would come and load it on the truck and they would take it to the market. So you're at the mercy of whatever they do--- brokers or whatever, and they get a cut and that; so you don't see as much profit you know. But when we went out to flower raising, everything is my dad's see. So then they start going getting modern things you know. And just before the war started... then there was Kendo Dojo right there on Torrance

Boulevard and we used to go there, *Kendo* and Ted Tanouye (the Medal of Honor winner) , he was there and his younger brother and them and the teacher, he was teaching *Kendo* there and he was teaching it in a Japanese School; it was Redondo Japanese School. It's up the hill on Prospect and Torrance Boulevard... or not Torrance Boulevard... yeah; Torrance Boulevard. And then we were going to the Japanese School on Sepulveda near ocean and then that was at Torrance Gakuen. And then the husband and wife were *Hoshimiya*. They lived in Los Angeles and they commuted from L.A. to the Japanese School on Saturdays and once in a while their Nisei daughter used to come and play the piano and things like that. So it's interesting.

0:18:51.6

Interviewer:

Did you learn any Japanese?

Omatsu:

I learned a little bit; I wasn't really interested in Japanese. You know I wanted to go play cowboys and everything you know after school and everything. But one time they had---they didn't show up until late and I guess they had car problems and I was kind of happy about it. But you know---but right now you know you look back you know, but when you're young you know you don't think about that kind of stuff except playing you know.

Interviewer:

Well when were you born?

Omatsu:

Nineteen Twenty Nine; I was born during the Depression and we were... right at the strawberry ranch and my other two brothers were born there at the strawberry ranch. And then they had a doctor from downtown Torrance come while we were you know born, at least you know.

Interviewer:

So did your mom... what was the usual customs when mothers had babies... so the doctor would come; they didn't go to the hospital?

Omatsu:

Gee, I really don't know. I don't remember---recall; but I do know that one time my father delivered me. The doctor was there, but my father wanted to deliver---do that so he delivered me, I think, from what I've heard. But anyway, yeah so anyway we....

Interviewer:

So the first elementary school you went to---you were in Torrance and your family lived... they were doing the strawberries at that time?

Omatsu:

Yeah; strawberry fields and ranch and then we used to play with the family close by you know.

Interviewer:

And the kids, where did they go to school?

Omatsu:

They all went to the same school we did.

0:20:44.0

Interviewer:

Yeah; and what school was that?

Omatsu:

Fern Avenue School.

Interviewer:

Fern Avenue School.

Omatsu:

And then Torrance High School... like my sister went to Torrance High School.

Interviewer:

What memories do you have of going to elementary school?

Omatsu:

Well let's see; I remember when I was under five I wasn't going to school. My older brother, Bob, and Mary Anne was going to grammar school and I remember a little car used to come and pick them up and take them to school; you know. And then when I turned five, my dad took me to Fern Avenue School and I still

remember that first day there because my mom was working out in the ranch already at the strawberry. And then my dad went back home, and I still remember; it seems like yesterday I went to Fern Avenue School. And then as time went by, we---they---we got on the bus. The bus will pick us up and take us to school.

0:21:42.9

Interviewer:

Do you have any memories of teachers or school activities?

Omatsu:

Sure; well I don't remember kindergarten teachers, but I remember a third grade. It was a Mrs. Anderson, and I remember....

Interviewer:

Were there a lot of other Japanese kids?

Omatsu:

Oh a lot of Japanese---lot of Japanese.

Interviewer:

Like half of the class, or...?

Omatsu:

Well not quite, but quite a few because they are all farmers and flower growers in the area. So there's a lot of Japanese and a lot of Mexicans and that was it... no---no other; I never... that's all it was---Japanese and Mexicans and Caucasians.

0:22:23.9

Interviewer:

Uh-huh; before you entered school, in your home were you speaking Japanese?

Omatsu:

No; we were talking just like we are here. We always talked English to each other ever since I was a kid. And then I never spoke Japanese you know and when I do talk to my mother, I--- it's kind of broken you know; mix it up. And she don't understand a lot of words, but it seemed like she understands

that when you say something that she's not supposed to hear; you know. [Laughs] Huh; that's how it goes huh?

Interviewer:

Yeah; so between your parents, they were speaking mostly in Japanese?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; they were speaking in Japanese and then we always had Japanese people come visiting or we would go visiting and they speak in Japanese among each other. But the Niseis and Sansei, well talk English see. And I remember New Years Day, my father would go take us to the neighborhood around there and we'd visit other families and they'd have sushi and everything there; you know. And in fact, my mom had sushi and everything and whenever they came over to our house, my mom was there and they'd greet each other and wish them a Happy New Year and everything. So I enjoyed all that you know. And then we used to go to Gardena. There was a Yamatoza Theatre and we used to go there a lot with our folks. And they had annual Fukuoka-ken_____ picnics and stuff at the Banning Park and we used to go there with you know... it was nice and they had... at the time, Banning Park running---a stream running under the bridge and everything and they had fish, minnow fish and crawdads and stuff. And it was fun in those days; you know. And then after someone got married, we'd go to the Nihonmachi and they have the....we go to San Kuo Low or Nikko or something like that

Interviewer:

You're talking about Little Tokyo?

Omatsu:

And then... and of course, the funerals, we always had to go to all the funerals with our folks. But that was part of the culture there; yeah. And when I used to go to funeral, I used to smell this gardenia all the time and they have a real strong fragrance.

0:24:50.4

Interviewer:

Did most people---were they buried at a certain cemetery?

Omatsu:

Mostly Japanese were buried at Boyle Heights---Evergreen Cemetery.

Interviewer:

Uh-huh.

Omatsu:

But today, well my father back in '54, he had cancer, and so I had to go to Flower Market---the minute I got out of the Air Force and go to Flower Market, and I was one of the youngest guys going to Flower Market. I met Frank Omatsu, he was working Sumitomo Bank. He had just started there as a young guy; I met him. And it was an experience working at the Flower Market. You know I meet all these florists and shippers and other growers from San Fernando and all over. And then....

0:25:41.4

Interviewer:

How did they conduct business at the Flower Market? I have not understanding of that.

Omatsu:

Well the Flower Market, why you go early in the morning and then they have a couple Japanese restaurants there.

Interviewer:

You're talking about 4 o'clock or...?

Omatsu:

Oh more like two in the morning before everybody gets there. And then they talk to the route men that delivers flowers to other flower shops and you---and then they buy them. Then the shippers like _San Lorenzo and then Kern and United and all these other shippers; they'd buy flowers because California was number one. They ship everything back east.

Interviewer:

Any particular types of flowers that...?

Omatsu:

Well our folks used to raise outdoor flower Stocks and Baby's Breath and all kinds---Snapdragons; you name it. And then after the war, my folks did the same thing---Snapdragons, Stocks, and

stuff. But they came back the right time when the price of flowers were... everything we picked, it was sold at the Market. But then as time went by, and then I was going to the Market in '54, we were selling outdoor flowers and then I said, "Let's do something different." So we started raising carnations and big mums and... indoors under plastic and we had a... right on Torrance Boulevard. And then we had one of these steam, you know like a locomotive you know. So with the steam pipes and everything, we'd heat all the flowers and then....

0:27:32.3

Interviewer:

This is outside though?

Omatsu:

Yeah; well we had a plastic house like a greenhouse.

Interviewer:

Oh okay.

Omatsu:

In which we could... and then we'd fumigate the ground with steam and then we went into that. And then later on, as time went by, my brother said, "Let's look on the ocean side and everything because Torrance is getting kind of crowded around there;" so.

Interviewer:

What do you mean crowded?

Omatsu:

Start building up homes and...?

Interviewer:

Housing projects?

Omatsu:

Torrance, you know like Torrance City Hall, they started building homes around it and then I remember a brand new house, my brother was almost going to buy one because he just got married; they wanted \$10,000 for that house---a brand new house on Torrance. They had homes there, Torrance Gardens.

0:28:17.3

Interviewer:

Uh-hm; was that an expensive price for a house at that time?

Omatsu:

Well that was so-so, but anyway my folks bought five acres out in Torrance Boulevard for... and back in '49 they paid \$20,000 for five acres of farm---you know like a house. That used to be a turkey ranch before the war. I remember before the war, my father used to go buy turkey there. It used to be Bell's Turkey Ranch and he would buy turkey there for Thanksgiving. But I never thought we would be living there some day. So anyway; then as time went by, I says, "No; I don't want to move to Orange County." Fountain Valley was just a celery field there before the San Diego Freeway went through. We was going to---we were looking at some acreage there because the Matsushita family used to raise flowers on Prospect and Redondo, and they bought 20 acres and they said, "Hey, why don't you guys buy some properties?" And we said, "Ah...." I told my brother, "I don't want... I'll be ending up going to the Market you know. I don't want to go to no market anymore." So we went to retail florists and we built a flower shop. We tore the house down and we built a flower shop and a liquor store right there on Torrance Boulevard. And we just sold that a couple years ago.

Interviewer:

Was that---these kinds of businesses require licenses don't they?

Omatsu:

Which... like what?

Interviewer:

Licenses, businesses licenses to do a liquor store?

Omatsu:

Oh yeah; you have to a liquor license. I think it's \$25,000 cash you have... just for license, and you have to have a good record---no criminal record.

Interviewer:

Uh-huh; was that difficult for Japanese business people to handle?

Omatsu:

No; because 1959 it was---the Korean War was over and then the Japanese war brides were able to start coming in. The Korean War you know... so it was '59 so we had no problem.

Interviewer:

I see.

0:30:17.3

Omatsu:

Then my dad bought the property in 1949 and he was a citizen; so he had no problem. But I'm sure there was a lot of prejudice around, but I never felt it because I was just... Torrance was always a good town. And in fact, when the war started, the City Council passed a resolution right after the war started that the Japanese Americans were citizens. Yeah; so Torrance was one of a very tolerant city. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

If their parents were still living, who were not citizens, was that an issue?

Omatsu:

Well they couldn't buy any property you know and while not only Torrance, but the whole California. Well as you know, the California was very prejudiced because a lot... I think there was a lot of jealousy involved you know because of the Japanese farmers and everything.

Interviewer:

Hmm.

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

I'm going to go back. You went to elementary school and then...?

Omatsu:

Yeah; Fern Avenue Elementary School.

Interviewer:

And then after that?

Omatsu:

And then what happened is I remember I went from... then I remember Miss Bateman, my 5th grade teacher; I still remember her. I was in class there and we took a nap. We had to bow our heads, and she said, "I want you guys to behave." So she went out to the bathroom and then while she was gone, this guy Bob ?Berry? or something---Wallace, Bob Wallace---he got her yardstick that was on the desk and started hitting people in the head. And he was laughing, and then Miss Bateman came back and she---and his back was to her, and then she had her hands on her hips and she took him in the closet, the big walk-in closet where we keep our jackets and lunch, and whack, whack, whack. But those days you could do that; yeah. And then also, when the war---when I was in 6th grade, the war started and while we were playing...

Interviewer:

Yeah; what was... where were you?

Omatsu:

December 7th we were playing out there in the plowed field--- fresh plowed field where we tackled; so you don't get hurt it's so nice and sandy.

Interviewer:

And you were about how old?

0:32:41.5

Omatsu:

I was about 12 or so. And then I was playing football, the neighbors and us, and then my sister came out to the field and say, "Hey, the Japanese they bombed Pearl Harbor," and we didn't know what Pearl Harbor was. But my dad knew because he was--- when he was in the Army, he was stationed in Scofield Barracks there. So we went home and we had a big old radio you know that was sitting on the floor and we listened to the---all the commotion. And then Monday we went to school; the bus picked us up and took us to school, and I was in the 6th grade. And my teacher was Miss Thomas, I remember. And then I was a bell monitor. You go in the office and I had to pull the switch up and then it rings the bell. So when I got off the bus, I went in

there and the teachers are all standing around, oh how they're talking among each other about the bombing, you know how terrible and everything, and I just walked in and I looked at the.... So I remember I was a bell monitor. And then as time went by, one of my friends, Haruta, he says---that we're in the hallway and he says, "I'm worried about the war." And I says, "Well....," because things were going you know... my folks were still raising flowers. And he said, "I'm worried about my folks you know," which made sense. And as time went by, I started to go to Torrance Junior High School/Torrance High School. So I went to Torrance High School Junior....

0:34:26.9

Interviewer:

That was in 1942?

Omatsu:

Forty---forty-two; yeah.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Omatsu:

February; yeah.

Interviewer:

Could I go back to Pearl Harbor a little bit?

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

How did your parents react to it; did they talk about it?

Omatsu:

My father, he's one of these exceptionally---a well behaved man--not like me, but anyway he you know he was in the Army. He was the Army and everything and he was proud; he was in the Commodore Prairie Post in Nihonmachi because there is a lot of Issei people that he knew from Hawaii. They were in the same outfit. We have a big picture of that group. I think Mr.---one of them lived in Gardena, OK Market, the Masai family; he was in that same outfit my dad was. And he was in the Commodore Prairie

Post in Nihonmachi and he had---he always wore an American Legion pin on this lapel, and he had a big on sticker on the flower truck and everything. He was proud. And like myself... no; I take that back. My father voted every time there was an election, which I did not. He was more American than I was; yeah. But he never complained; my folks never complained. And when the war started, we moved to Dinuba where my grandfather had a boarding house. We all moved there.

Interviewer:

Why do you think your father decided to voluntarily evacuate to Dinuba?

Omatsu:

Well what happened, he stayed here as long as he could to try to get rid of things. And we---he took---the family went to Dinuba and he was there at the last minute. And then he went you know.

Interviewer:

So what happened to the land and the house and all your belongings?

Omatsu:

Well he had to leave the house that he built, the equipment, the Caterpillar---left it all and then...

0:36:30.5

Interviewer:

You didn't sell it?

Omatsu:

... it was about the time when you got the Easter and Mother's Day and everything, and as far as your eye could see, all bloomed flowers and other flowers coming up you know. He had to leave all that; yeah. So anyway, we went to Fresno and while we were in Fresno, we went to Dinuba School and my sister was a senior; so she continued and graduated with my aunt---they were both the same age---Dinuba High School. And then they---and then my brother-in-law, Lou, why he was---he came home on leave and his folks are grape growers in Fresno. He was a good friend of my Uncle Butch that lived in Dinuba. So they introduced each other and when we moved to... and then finally we had to move out of... and they were treating us good in Dinuba. I went to

Dinuba Junior High School there and everybody treated me good, and there was a lot of people that moved from Southern California and had relatives around that area. They were going to that school. And then I thought I was going to be here forever in Dinuba until the war ends; you know. And then, no; they had orders for everybody to move out of Central California and the rest of the state. So my uncle used to take us every week to Visalia and we used to take shots getting ready to go to camp. And I remember one time a nurse stuck a needle me and that thing came off, and the needle was still stuck in. I still remember that. But anyway finally, we were prepared to go to camp, and then they needed some workers at Idaho Sugar-Beet Company; so my folks volunteered for that. So I remember we boarded a train in Fresno. They had soldiers with bayonets, I remember. And we got on the special train and went to Sacramento and then went---headed to Utah. I remember that I was in that chair, that reclining chair of the train, and I looked out the window and we were right in the middle of Salt Lake you know and I thought it was the ocean; it looked like ocean you know. But finally we got to Utah---Ogden, Utah---and Army trucks took us out to---out to this Buddhist Church in Honeyville, Utah, and there was a lot of big shots there and they were Idaho---representing the Idaho Sugar-Beet Company. They were welcoming the family and then each family was gone to various farms over there. And I remember we went to this little house way out there by the Lake... a lot of mosquitoes, and we were living in this house, I remember; yeah.

0:39:09.3

Interviewer:

About how many families went?

Omatsu:

Well there was quite a few families that went.

Interviewer:

Like over 100 or...?

Omatsu:

Well I don't know; I don't remember. I was just a kid, but I know that there was a lot of families out there. And then we settled down in Utah, and then there was already Japanese farmers there in Utah. So all during the war we lived in Utah.

And, in fact, my Uncle Butch was on the train and when he was in Utah, he met Ruth Tazoye, the Tazoye family in Garland, Utah. And their older brother---son was Jim **Tazoye** and he won the Distinguished Service Cross, and they had a special auditorium at Garland High School in Utah where General Ripp presented the medal to him. But he, my Uncle Butch, married Ruth and.... So; but there was a lot of families in Utah. So....

Interviewer:

Well what would have been a typical day for these farmers in Utah? They had farming experience behind them, but now they're working in the beet fields; is that right?

Omatsu:

Yeah; in fact my sister used to... you know she just got out of high school so she was even working in the sugar-beet field. You know they were thinning sugar-beets---hard work you know. But us kids were still young; so we just sat around, playing around in the car or pickup or whatever. Then finally... well now the contract was over so we moved to a house in Harper Ward close by... there was a cemetery close by, and we had to get water from the well and everything.

Interviewer:

Was that contaminated water?

0:40:55.3

Omatsu:

No it was clean; Utah always had pure water. And then my sister was writing love letters to my future brother-in-law, Lou. So my sister just got out of high school.

Interviewer:

So was that in 19...?

Omatsu:

In Utah in 1942 see.

Interviewer:

Summer time?

Omatsu:

Well after summer, when were living in Harper Ward, this taxi cab and I still remember my brother---future brother-in-law, he's only about 22, he was coming up the hill and he stayed over our house. My mom liked him right away and then he came to visit his folks in camp in Colorado. So he came all the way to Utah to see my sister. And then the second time he came to visit my sister, his folks in Colorado---the camp in Colorado---they wanted to get married. So my mom took a train to Denver, Colorado and went to go see the Miyamoto family. You know how the old days they have to see what kind of family they are. So my mom had to get a special permit because if you're Issei or go to another state, you have to have a permit you see. So she---I remember she went and came back, and then finally my brother-in-law came to Utah. He was in the Army you know and then they got married in Ogden. And then my sister went with them with her husband, Lou Miyamoto and then went to Mississippi, Camp ?Shelby?. So my sister was their in Mississippi during the war. And then finally, the many times he was ready to go overseas with the 442nd, but then they promoted him to Sergeant and said, "We need more Sergeants." And then he was ready to go again, and they said, "You're going to go to Officers School in Fort Benning, Georgia." So he went to Fort Benning, Georgia, came back and became a Lieutenant. And these other officers and families and my sister used to hang around and they used to take.... And then they'd take pictures; so we used to get pictures of them. They finally... he was ready to go overseas again, and they said, "No; we're going to send him to Fort Snelling, Minnesota Intelligence School." So my sister went to St. Paul, Minnesota and lived there and Lou was going to be an Intelligence Officer there in the Japanese Language. And then finally, he---they decided to send him to Monterey. So they sent him to Monterey and he was about ready to go overseas to the Pacific and then the war ended. So that's how my sister met Lou, and then now my sister lives in Fresno; you know.

0:43:52.0

Interviewer:

So at this time while they are moving around then you were still in...?

Omatsu:

In Utah; yeah. And then my Uncle Butch married in the ?Tazoye? family and then he got drafted and went to 442 and he went to

Italy and he got---he was a big guy, my Uncle Butch; he just died last year at the Veterans Hospital. But he was a BAR man he got wounded at the... but yeah; but anyway he married a Utah girl---family, Tazoye family; yeah.

Interviewer:

So you graduated from high school?

Omatsu:

And then what happened is we lived in that... eventually--- sometimes as a point removed, we lived in a house---the Buddhist Church in Honeyville and there was other families, the Ishibashi's and Muranaka and then Muranaka family, one of the sons, his daughter is the one that was murdered in---at the marina. They found her body in the water just not too---a few years ago. Some guy murdered her because she had loaned him some money or something. But that was Mrs. Muranaka's daughter; yeah. But anyway, we lived in Utah there and then finally we moved to... then finally my father got a job at Brigham City Cannery in Brigham City; so we moved to a basement---it was a basement house and there was an orchard that belongs to the Brigham Cannery. So my dad took care of the orchard there and we lived in the house there. And then he got a job for my brother, Bob, at the Cannery. And then he even got a job for me; I was the youngest one.

Interviewer:

How old were you at that time?

Omatsu:

It was in 1945, the first part... the summer of '45. I just got out of 9th grade and then I was working in the cannery there. It was walking distance to downtown Torrance... I mean Brigham City. So and then they had... there was a lot of Japanese people working there you know. And then I was... like I said, I was the youngest one working in the cannery and then I was working at the warehouse and they had two busloads of German Prisoners of War that came from Ogden---POWs---and there was two armed soldiers guarding them. So they came to the cannery and then they were happy as heck because they're alive. And I mingled in with them and I worked with them. And then one time, he said... one of the prisoners said, "Are you going downtown?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Could you get a mirror when I shave?" I said, "Sure." So I went downtown and got a mirror at the drugstore and

brought it back that night because I was working night shift. And he said, "How much do I owe you?" I said, "You don't owe me nothing." But he used to show me pictures of his family and everything and I got along good with the Germans. I learned a lot of German words. In fact, my Uncle Butch came to visit us because we're---my mom and everybody is working at the Cannery and Uncle Butch was in the Europe war. The Germans, they'd look at him and then before you know it, my uncle was talking to them like they were old friends; you know. They said, "Oh I got captured in North Africa," and so forth. My Uncle Butch said he was in.... But yeah; I still remember those days.

Interviewer:

So when....?

0:47:36.9

Omatsu:

And then when the war---just when the war ended, I was working there all summer. And then they said the war ended; so the Cannery siren and everything went off and everything and then when I went back to _Boxeller High School in Brigham City, it was a different atmosphere. All these Niseis and Sanseis I knew, we... it was a little different. We---I liked it so much that in 1945 my dad decided, Mr. Masaki had five acres in Torrance. He was a haul-man and everything and he said, "I'm going to go see my house in Torrance." So he talked my dad into going with him. So they came to Torrance and looked at it and then they came back to Utah and my dad said, "We're moving to Torrance. I leased 10 acres on Delano Boulevard and Hawthorne Boulevard. We're going to start all over." So in 1945, we---my brother, Sam, and myself on this special train the government paid with a bunch of other Japanese families that were on it; I think Masaki's was one of the families... and we came back to the Union Station in L.A. and then Mr. Fukunaga, he used to live in Utah, he started a taxi, like a private taxi. He picked us up in his car and took us to Mr. Hata. So we stayed overnight there and then we went to Delano Boulevard house and my dad and older brother, Bob.... Bob just got out of high school. They drove that old '34 pickup from Utah with certain belongings to the Delano Boulevard home. And Sam and I went back to Torrance High School and we were treated well; you know. And Pete Samprini was my... I went out for track and he was my coach, and his brother is the one, Louis Samprini, the Olympic Champion; so. But

everybody treated us good; you know and then I... even before we moved there when the early Japanese came back to California we heard stories about Japanese barns blown up and stuff. So I expected worse. But surprisingly, they treated us pretty good. And then you know I graduated from Torrance High School and then I... we were living on Delano Boulevard, and I remember right after the war we---when we moved to Delano Boulevard, the mailbox was out there in the front on the street there and this mail lady came by and it was Mrs. O'Toole; you know because we knew the O'Toole family. And then she told Bob O'Toole, and Bob O'Toole and Jimmy O'Toole, they were in the Navy, they came out and then they says, "Hey, the Omatsu's are back; they live over there on Delano Boulevard." So Bob O'Toole and my brother, Bob, his friend---classmate---he came down and visited. "Hey Tuti; you're back huh? Good." It was good; you know. Then as time went by, my folks bought... four years later they bought five acres on Torrance Boulevard and paid cash, where the turkey ranch was; you know. So we came back the right time and Torrance... I talked to my friend, Richard, that lives in Bullhead, Arizona, and he was born in 1929, and I never met him until 1949. But he was born the other side of Delano Boulevard in a farmhouse or something. His parents moved to Huntington Beach when he was just a child---baby; so I never got to know him. But yeah; so anyway....

0:51:32.8

Interviewer:

Was your family able to save a lot of money because you were all working as a family in order to buy the property when he came back?

Omatsu:

Oh what happened is when I was working at the Cannery; I was just got out of 9th grade and then the older guys... I was disappointed because they were getting \$1.25 you know an hour and I was getting \$1.00 an hour. That's why I was disappointed; I wanted to get paid the same as them because I figured I was working just as hard as them. But no; that's not the case. So I had a few hundred dollars during the summer, and I put it in the bank. I was pretty thrifty. So when we moved to Torrance, my dad started from scratch. He had... this Basilio Reyes, I went to school with him. He had a tractor and everything and a trailer and he plowed our fields and everything, and you know disked it

and plowed it and everything. And then my father, the first time in his life, he started collecting Social Security because he worked at the Cannery and everything. And then my mother worked for Kings Flower Ranch where our ranch used to be; you know. He was a flower grower. And the Morse'?, the guy that worked for my dad, he was the foreman for Kings Ranch. And my mom was working there. As soon as the crops started coming in at Torrance, my mom quit Kings and then my dad started going to Market on that old '34 Chevy pickup with [REDACTED] and piled with flowers... and everything---my dad sold it. So when Sam and I went... and Bob just got out of high school so he was able to work on the ranch. And Sam and I, we worked after school and weekends, and we worked hard; you know. But it was rewarding because the first year tractors were scarce and there was a Japanese guy, sales--- insurance salesman, Hirahata is a good friend of my dad, but we bought---my dad bought some insurance because he told him, "If you could find a tractor for us, I'll buy insurance." And that guy found a tractor in Gardena and then... I think King owned that tractor---Ford Tractor place. So we bought a brand new tractor in '46, and then my brother started driving the tractor and everything. And then in '47 I know my dad bought a brand new truck. He paid cash for it. In '48 he bought a pickup and a Buick and everything for my brother in cash. And in '49 he bought five acres with a house on it---cash. Everything was cash, cash; and they were making good money because there weren't that many flower growers around back from after the war. So it was a good time. Today, you couldn't even rent a small lot. I guess the timing was right though.

0:54:48.4

Interviewer:

What were other changes? Did you---do you remember how---was the Torrance area changed in any way?

Omatsu:

Well when we were kids, we used to---our playground was from Delano Boulevard to Pacific Coast Highway and Crenshaw to Prospect was our playground; you know. And I remember we went over to Quantz Dairy on the other side of Sepulveda where the Quantz Dairy. I remember the daughter named Louise. But we used to go swimming in the cow pond area. You know they have minnow fish and stuff and there we had a raft. And there was a tree, you know a Eucalyptus shady---it was shady. We used to go

swimming there a lot. And we used to go through the empty field and we used to see owls or woodpeckers on the trees and stuff. And in the evening my dad said, "You guys went swimming." I said, "How do you know?" And we got all that old mud and stuff on us; you know. But of course we always took our ofuro---take a bath---those days.

Interviewer:

Yeah; how did you do that? I mean the other home, American families, didn't have an ofuro?

Omatsu:

Yeah; well if you go to Torrance, downtown Torrance, it's still the same and most of the homes are around---you know around that area. Then if you go to Redondo, most of your homes and stuff was on the other side of Prospect. And then if you want to go to Hawthorne, the main Hawthorne was down Hawthorne you know and in between was all countryside---even Mexican families---anybody in between had houses because there were no sewer line there; you know.

Interviewer:

This is the 1950s?

Omatsu:

No; I'm talking about....

0:56:38.4

Interviewer:

Well before the war?

Omatsu:

Well the house we bought in Torrance Boulevard, the turkey ranch, they had a cesspool. Yeah; then when we built our liquor store and everything then the sewer line just started to come into Torrance Boulevard... it was still country. I remember when my father used to come visit from Dinuba in his car; he always had a nice car; you know. I was envious about that. But he used to say, "Hop in and we'll got toward WALTERIA." There's nothing but farmland in WALTERIA. We'd get to Pacific Coast Highway and I remember there was a Tanaka Grocery Store in WALTERIA. And then we'd got toward Palos Verdes and all you see is hillside with sheep running around and everything. It was real country

then. I remember when Torrance, when we were farming in Torrance, I'd just look out and you could see PV and nothing in between. PV had no homes and in nighttime you would see one light there and you'd have to look for a light. Now it's all lit up like a Christmas tree. And you know we came when it was really hardly nothing. In fact, my Mom first came to Torrance, Torrance Boulevard was a dirt road and Hawthorne Boulevard was a concrete two-lane I remember. But there was no street. Well even Madison here used to be... after the war the Motoyasu and Kimuras and they all used to live around here and their farm---flower ranch is around here. And the Matsushitas used to raise flowers out toward Prospect and then....

0:58:20.6

Interviewer:

This is after the war or before the war?

Omatsu:

After the war.

Interviewer:

After the war.

Omatsu:

And then they finally moved to Fountain Valley; they bought 20 acres in Fountain Valley. Fountain Valley was still country---celery country. And the Mayor was Jimmy something at the time. And then after the freeway went---the San Diego Freeway went through, they started developing Fountain Valley. And I remember when we were kids in the '50s, Eiji Kobayashi, , and us---we'd all jump in the car and we'd go see some girls in Orange County. And even Orange County was nothing but orange groves you know back in the '50s; yeah. And then... yeah; so Gardena was one of the focal points for the Japanese American community. They had a Japanese Baptist Church in Gardena, a Buddhist Church, which is still there, and a community center; we used to go dancing and stuff. Now they've got the Ken Nakaoka Auditorium there. But Ken Nakaoka is from Torrance before the war incidentally; I'm just thinking about it. There's a lot of people from Torrance and there was farmers out there, Takaki family on Vermont and like I said the Tanouyes and Shmazus out there by Torrance High School. They were farming there.

Interviewer:

People who didn't come from this area who didn't know people or the land and stuff, were there---were they able to get housing when they you know left the camps?

0:59:55.5

Omatsu:

Well what happened is when I went to Torrance High School... when I came back from Torrance High School, I told you a ran out for track, but at the Torrance Airport that was considered... most of the people in that area used to go to Narbonne. It used to be Torrance... it used to be the L.A. School District before it became Torrance Unified School. So Narbonne had a lot of Japanese families---guys going out for track that they were living at the Torrance Airport. There was housing in over there---mobile homes, I guess, for Japanese families to live there. So I ran against people I knew and got to know later that went to Narbonne.

Interviewer:

Uh-hm; were there a lot of newcomers, new families?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; like the Shiroyama's and stuff. They all came later and then before the war they were at Terminal Island and stuff like that. But the newcomers....

Interviewer:

Would you say like you know 75 percent were newcomers or... I mean how many you know of the people who were there pre-war kind of came back?

Omatsu:

After the war, the Mutos, Kao Muto our neighbor, they started flowers on Dominguez Hill because there was still country in Domingos Hill. So they went there and there was a Miyazaki family that raised flowers in Torrance, out there by the old....

Interviewer:

These were new families---old families?

Omatsu:

Miyazaki was a good family friend. They were raising flowers out there by the Inglewood---out that way. I remember we went to visit their ranch out toward Manchester and all you saw was two modern buildings---two theaters, United, or something and then Miyazaki had a flower ranch there. But after the war, they started raising flowers near us at Delano Boulevard. Then they ended up raising flowers in their Kodairas over there by Mylar Street and Torrance.

1:02:05.1

Interviewer:

Now you have all these families that are growing flowers.

Omatsu:

Yes.

Interviewer:

They take them to the market and are they competing against each other because they're growing the same flowers? How did that work?

Omatsu:

Oh yeah; because after the war I started to go to the Flower Market and I was the youngest---one of the youngest guys, Nisei, you know Nisei... because there were older Nisei like Sato brothers and stuff; they were older Niseis of course. But I started going to the Market and then Mr. Kuwata used to raise flowers around here you know. And he's Issei and he'd be out the Market and he has a bunch of baby breath and he tells me, "Don't sell any _flowers___ under \$1.00." I says, "Okay; I'm selling my for \$1.25. I won't sell for under \$1.00." But I'm sure he did sell some for under \$1.00 without me knowing it; you know what I mean. **[Laughs]** But anyway, the Flower Market is interesting. I used to go to Flower Market and deal with the shippers that shipped flowers, and then I'd deal with the wholesalers and then later on I'd deal with my regular customers, the florists all over you know Santa Monica and Beverly Hills. They'd all come in and buy flowers. It was interesting.

Interviewer:

Did flower growers organize in any way, form an association?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; the Flower Growers Association, the Flower Market... they were very active. They had a lot of clout and everything you know.

Interviewer:

Were they... I mean why did they organize? What was their purpose of their organization?

1:03:45.7

Omatsu:

They organized because they had to have an outlet to sell their flowers for one because the early flower growers... I heard my mother tell stories that Mr. Nakao, I think he lives in Gardena, his---their father, Mr. Nakao used to catch the streetcar with a basket of flowers going to the market to sell flowers and everything; you know like way back the turn of the century. So anyway, the Flower Market has been real good to---for the Japanese American community. They were very active in many, many things; yeah.

1:04:28.9

Interviewer:

Well when... did they... I mean I'm trying to think, did they just get together for social reasons or... how did they help each other?

Omatsu:

Well I heard they used to socialize a lot, too; you know. They had the Japanese restaurants here and I remember when I used to go to the Market, I always used to order chashu and rice and stuff. It was only \$1.25 you could get chashu and rice.

Interviewer:

Did they have meetings where they shared new flower growing techniques or...?

Omatsu:

Well yeah, yeah; they did have meetings and in fact, when we decided to go into carnations and everything, there was a Kitty's Carnation Farm right here off of Sepulveda and Ocean. And I went there for a couple weeks just to learn how to raise carnations and everything. But the Kiti amily, they're noted for

their orchids and things. But... so you should... and then I went to **Sato's** place a few times and I got input on carnations and stuff. And then later on, like I said, we went into growing flowers under the plastic, like a greenhouse, and everything and then we grew carnations and mums_ and things like that.

Interviewer:

As far as non-Japanese flower growers, did they raise different kinds of flowers?

Omatsu:

Yes, uh-huh.

Interviewer:

Is that how it kind of worked out where the Japanese were growing carnations or whatever?

Omatsu:

Yeah; what... the other, like the Greeks and stuff, they grew Astors and things like that, the King Astors, and different kinds.

Interviewer:

Did the Japanese grow Astors also?

Omatsu:

Yeah; the Japanese did, too, but the Greeks were noted for getting into King Astors, and then Nick, this one guy, he grows Birds of Paradise. His parents were growing Birds of Paradise and Montebello; so. But anyway, the majority of the flower growers, just like the farmers, were Japanese in California; yeah so.

Interviewer:

Okay; we're going to take a break.

Omatsu:

Sure; okay.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Omatsu:

[Laughs]

[End Jack Takeshi Omatsu CD 1]

[Begin Jack Takeshi Omatsu CD 2]

Interviewer:

It is 11:45 on April 21, 2004. This is a continuation and the second CD of the interview of Jack Takeshi Omatsu on the same date being conducted by Dale Sato for the South Bay Oral History Project. The audio and catalog persons remain the same. All copyrights, title and any other rights arising out of this interview, whether in its entirety, part, or derivative form or whether in audio, written, or any other format, shall belong to the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. Copying of this interview recording whether in its entirety or part is strictly prohibited without a written authorization from the South Bay Chapter American Citizens League. Let's continue the interview.

All right; so you were working in the Flower Market because your dad had cancer, and that was in what year about?

Omatsu:

Nineteen fifty four is when I came out of the Air Force.

Interviewer:

Okay; maybe we should go back to talking about your---the Air Force.

Omatsu:

Oh the Air Force; yes.

Interviewer:

What happened?

Omatsu:

So what happened is my brother---my younger brother, Sam Sunao, he used to hang around with all kinds of guys in Torrance, Hakujin friends.

Interviewer:

Caucasians?

Omatsu:

Yeah; he used to hang around with Parnelli Jones; we used to call him Rufus. And then they used to always... Ted Hasegawa's garage on Hawthorne Boulevard, Rufus used to work on his hotrod over there a lot and they used to race around Torrance here, and the police would be chasing them around---Torrance police. And they were having a ball; you know. But anyway, in those days... then the Korean... then some of Sam's friends were in the Torrance National Guard and they'd get a paycheck you know. So my brother was hanging around with them so he joined Torrance National Guard.

Interviewer:

Is this your older brother?

Omatsu:

Younger brother.

Interviewer:

Younger brother?

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then when the Korea War started, they said they're going to mobilize the California National Guard, the 40th Division, which he was in. So they were one of the first ones to go, and then they took training at Camp Roberts, and they were almost ready to go overseas to Japan to Sendai, Japan, and the Commander called Sam in and told him, "We're going overseas; do you speak Japanese?" He says, "A little bit---not much." "Could you write Japanese?" "No." Well you're going to be my Jeep driver. So they sent him to Jeep school training and then when they got to Sendai, he was driving the Officer all over town. He dropped him off and he would be driving around. So he had it made. And then certain places were off limits. The MPs come and say, "You guys are not supposed to be here." And it was people I knew, Bill House and Russell and these guys. But they were having a ball in Sendai, Japan. Finally, they went to Korea and my brother was a Jeep driver all the time. And when I was in the... finally I joined the Air Force because they were drafting guys and then this guy, Junior Oye from Gardena, he says, "I'm going to join the Air Force." He said, "Jack, why don't you come in with me?" And I said, "Oh...;" I was kind of reluctant. Then we went to a recruit place in Gardena, Gardena Boulevard, and there was a Nisei recruiter. We signed up and we went to downtown Torrance to take our... or L.A. to take our physical

and it was on Washington Boulevard. So we were able to spend overnight in L.A. and Junior said, "Let's stay overnight in L.A." And I said, "Nah;" I was a home-boy. I wanted to go home. So he talked me into it; so we stayed at the Stillwell Hotel. It's still there yet off of 8th Street. And we spent the night there and then we took our physical the next day and then off I was---I went into the Air Force. And this guy Tom Tsubokawa I knew before the war---they used to live here in Sepulveda, across the street from the Japanese School, he joined the Air Force. So we were on the same train, and Junior wasn't with us. He was sent to a different training Air Force base. And then so I was with Tom at Texas. And there were two other L.A. Nisei boys... they were Sanseis actually, these L.A. guys. And half of the outfit was L.A., California group and the other half was Texas. And these Texas guys used to make comments; he'd say, "You and Tom is well behaved, but those two other guys are kind of rough," and they were from L.A. see... Toma and Inatomi from L.A.; so. Anyway, when we took off on leave in San Antonio, Tom used to tell me, "Hey, are we off limits?" We wanted to go eat some Chinese food. And then Bo and Shig said, "Come on; let's go," you know. But Tom was a worry person. But it was an experience. And then we went to the Alamo and everything. But later on, I got shipped out to Ohio and everybody split, and Junior Oye, he went to Gunnery School in Lowery Air Force Base in Colorado. And he became a gunner, and he got shipped to Korea. And he was a tail-gunner and he went on 20 some missions over North Korea. And he came back, and he was sent to a place in Mississippi. And he went home with his Hakujin friends on a weekend and they got it an automobile accident. He was sleeping in the back and he got killed. And he was only about 21 or something.

0:06:41.9

Interviewer:

Yeah; and what unit were you in?

Omatsu:

Oh I was in the....

Interviewer:

Yeah; it's okay if you can't remember.

Omatsu:

While I was in Texas going through the training, they were talking about they were going to send everybody you know to whatever you want to go---school or whatever, gunnery school or whatever---and then something came to my mind, "Maybe I'd like to be an interpreter," you know since I know a little Japanese. So I wrote home and my mom sent me a-i-u-e-o, you know Japanese kana, and I used to look at it every... in the spare time at the training camp---I used to read it... maybe I could be Intelligence some day; so. So finally they did put me in Intelligence and I went to Ohio, Wright-Patterson Field. So I was there and then finally they shipped---were going to ship me overseas. So I thought, "Oh boy; I'm going to go to Japan," you know a Japanese interpreter. But they made a mistake and sent me to Headquarters in Alaska. And I was there for two years in Alaska and never did go to Japan. I had a good chance of going to Japan because of my Intelligence in the Japanese language, you know.

Interviewer:

How long was that training that you went through?

Omatsu:

Well actually, the training... I never really got it like my brother-in-law. He went to the Military Intelligence School and everything in the Army. But I never was able to do that... they moved me around and everything. But they had me down in the files; that was one of my prime. Then they made me a draftsman at Air Intelligence Squadron Headquarters in Alaska. And then my immediate Sergeant was Paul Enser and he was in his 20s, and he got... he was in the U.S. Army and he got captured in the Philippines. And he was a Prisoner of War and he was in Fukuoka in the coalmines and that's where my folks are from, Fukuoka. Yeah; he was my Sergeant for two years and then... I still keep in touch with him and his wife.

0:08:56.1

Interviewer:

Did you have a certain unit number or a name or...?

Omatsu:

Yeah; I was at 5004th Air Intelligence Squadron Headquarters in Elmendorf Air Force Base in Anchorage, Alaska for two years.

Interviewer:

For two years; okay.

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then I came back and they tell you... before you come back they say, "Where would you like... what airbase would you like?" And I picked out March Air Force Base close to California. But I found out they do that and they send you to the opposite places. I landed in Mississippi---Biloxi, Mississippi. And I was there for... well there was a training school and everything and I was a draftsman there and they promoted me Sergeant right away. So; but then my dad had cancer. So I asked for early retirement. The Korean War just ended; so they wanted to get rid of some people anyway. So; I got early out---just a few months early out and then I came home. And as soon as I got home, I went to Flower Market right away.

Interviewer:

How was---how many years did you work at the Flower Market---the rest of your...?

Omatsu:

Well what happened is while I was working to the Flower Market, my dad was you know---had cancer; so he and---my mom and dad, they for the first time---they went to Japan together, which was great. And then my dad picked out a funeral---gravesite at Green Hills, and there weren't too many people there yet. So my dad picked a spot there and we purchased undeveloped plots for the rest of the family back in '55.

Interviewer:

Were... Japanese weren't restricted from being buried at Green Hills?

0:10:41.4

Omatsu:

No; Green Hills was always good. And now everybody I know, my uncle, my brother, my folks, they are all buried out there--- friends, even Hakujin friends in Torrance, they are all in Green Hill. Even Mrs. Ames, my neighbor in Madrona, up there in Green Hill; so I always that some day, you know not like Edwin, but I'll be probably buried sometime; you know in Green Hill.

[Laughs]

Interviewer:

Now you grew up in a Japanese American family and when the guys wanted to date or---and you have gotten married---tell me about that.

Omatsu:

Well to make...

Interviewer:

How did the---your parents talk about this?

Omatsu:

Well when I was in... before the war, you know... like my father, he was a very patriotic American, and I never heard my folks mention anything bad---even when we had to move out during the war and after the war. I never heard---once heard my father say anything negative about America. He'd always say, shikata ga nai and go on and you know do your best. But what happened, my mom was very---she was brought up in Japan see; my father I think is more liberal. But there is one case my dad wasn't liberal; my mom was liberal. She---in Utah when Lou Miyamoto, my future brother-in-law came on a furlough, they wanted to get married and my mom was all for it because she really liked Lou you know. And then my father was against it because... not because he didn't like him; he was an Army guy himself. He knew people got killed or wounded. He felt she would be a widow. So that's what---that's the reason why he was against it. Of course, my mother won out on that one. They got married and my niece, Joyce, got... she was born in Bushnell Hospital in Brigham City; it's an Army Hospital, and she was born there. My sister came home to have her there. And Bushnell Hospital, there was a bunch of Niseis there wounded and they would be at Bushnell Hospital, too. So a lot of Japanese people were around---they used to go visit the veterans that was there from Hawaii and everything there in Bushnell. So; and then today, I would never believe it, but they've got a Japanese American Sansei Mayor of Brigham City. Yeah; I went to a reunion and he was one of guest speakers there. So Utah---Utah... well most of my friends there like Frank Kobayashi and everything, they married Japanese girls, but they're kids... you know when we had a reunion, the kids are all mixed you know.

0:13:44.2

Interviewer:

How did you meet your wife---you future wife?

Omatsu:

Well what happened to me is I was... both of my brothers got married in their early 20s, like 21-22, and then I didn't get married until I was 32. And my mom was worried, you know because I... but I married a girl from Los Angeles. She worked for... her name was Alma Ishii, and her... she went to Dorsey High. She's a Sansei and they lived... excuse me for stuttering. They lived at a track home on Norton Avenue by Crenshaw Square, the Holiday Bowl and everything. And they live in that track as mostly Japanese. So I married her. She worked for a doctor, a Jewish doctor outfit in Beverly Hills. So she worked there and we got married. And eventually, I moved to Baldwin Hill, and we bought a condo up there. And as far as I know, she still lives there. But her folks died and so her and her brother inherited the house on Bronson and they still own it, I think. But anyway, I was married to her for about four years, and then we split. And then I was single for a long time. And then I met my present wife, who is Hakujin. My mom was against it... not that she didn't like; you know she just wanted her immediate son to marry you know a nihonjin. But so; when I took her to the house, my mom was saying, "You know you don't want to get married to Jack; he is like Onassis you know. Remember Kennedy there were 20 years age difference. She is 20 years younger than I; but she's older than my... well I just met her at that house. But I've been married with her for 35 years now and....

0:16:01.2

Interviewer:

You talked about you know getting married and your parents' attitude about it, and we're talking about family values that come from culture or they come from just individual attitudes; looking over your lifetime, what kinds of family values do you think became a part of your life?

Omatsu:

Well I always thought when I was brought up I always thought I was going to... because the Japanese did not have much opportunity you know. The older Niseis, they go to college, and then they can't get a job. They can't get an engineering job or

anything, and they work in the store, the produce departments, or something. And my folks worked hard in the farm and I thought I was going to end up in the farm and die on the farm. But it just so happened I did not, but that was my attitude. That's one of the reasons when I was a kid I wasn't interested in school because of all this things going on. But the Japanese... then the Japanese, there was a lot of prejudice before the war and I didn't see it because I was a kid; you know. And all the Hakujuin friends, they treated us good and I never heard anything. But my mom---folks new because after... when we had the liquor store and everything on Torrance Boulevard, I was looking for a house to invest in because we sold some property and I wanted to buy a house. So we went to buy a new tract home behind us, where my house is now in Madrona. I looked around and my mom said, "Maybe they don't sell to any Nihonjin and I says, "I don't know." But eventually, I bought a house in that tract you know. And then Ken Miller, he became a Mayor of Torrance; he is a realtor guy, and then Milton Isbel, he had an office in Crenshaw and I bought two houses from Milton Isbel. And one time, I was at the Flower Market and I was on the freeway and I heard on the radio, "Palos Verdes businessman...", him and a group went over to Apple Valley on his plane and they crashed. And they started naming the people and Milton Isbel was one of them. And one time I went to see Isbel and he told me that, "Do you know Paul Bannai? I said, "Oh yeah; I know Paul Bannai real good." He says, "Yeah...", he had met Paul Bannai and a real nice guy and everything. But yeah; so anyway Torrance and... and Ken Miller, the Mayor, he was born in a brick apartment building in downtown Torrance and that building is still located there; yeah so.

0:19:07.7

Interviewer:

You've had a wonderful interview and you gave us a lot of details and names. And is there anything else that you would like to add?

Omatsu:

And then the Yoshinobu family that lived on the hillside out there at Prospect farming, the wife was Nisei. I didn't mean... even Mr. Yoshinobu was an older Nisei, but he was in charge of all the rentals and stuff. But I know Mrs. Yoshinobu's brother, Koichi, he was like a playboy I remember. I was just a little kid, but we used to go there to play because the Yoshinobu

family always had nice toys and everything. We had makeshift toys; you know. My folks always did well. We had food on the table. But we didn't buy luxury stuff. But that Nisei family, the Ray and the daughter, they had toys and we played there. But the Uncle Koichi, he had a private plane parked out there that they towed over there and it was parked over there. It was one of these old bi-planes, I remember.

Interviewer:

This is 1950s-1960s?

Omatsu:

No; this is back in the '30s I'm talking about. So I guess there's a lot of things that happened in the old days; you know. You know we always used to say, "That Issei---old style, old-fashioned... they wear clothes---they were old-fashioned. They're not you know cool like us," and people would---Kibei, "They're old-fashioned," we'd say... "Old-fashioned; we're modern you know." But the Niseis were pretty---Isseis were pretty well cool themselves, but we didn't realize it. I look at old pictures of Isseis and Isseis had a lot of things going. Like Sesshu Hayakawa, the movie actor, I saw old pictures of Sesshu Hayakawa. I heard he was very prominent in the Hollywood circle and everything. And then I remember... I was reading an article about the Banning Park because we used to have picnic---annual picnics---at Banning Park and the history about Banning Park, and I read an article about this---one of the daughters, Banning, a Japanese Sumo wrestlers came to Los Angeles. They were wrestling and the daughter was there watching it and she got interested in him, and they were going around together. So when I went to take a tour at Banning Park, the lady was saying, "This is Lucy's room," and she is the one that was running around with the Japanese wrestler in the old days, back in the '20s or before; I don't know. But it was very interesting; you know. And I remember when we used to go to the picnic in Wilmington, there used to be a water... it's still there; there is a park there on 101 Harbor City, and around that area they used to have a seaplane they used to land and park out there and everything; you know. There was hardly nothing out there. But I don't want to... but I hate to say it, but they used to call it Nigger Slough you know but it's a different name now. But in those days, you know the Japanese were prejudice, but the blacks were prejudice or really prejudice south. When my sister was in Mississippi, she used to tell me all the experience with people

sitting on the back of the bus and this and that. And when I was stationed in the Air Force back in the '50s you know, they still had that; so I saw all that stuff.

0:22:43.4

Interviewer:

How did that make you feel?

Omatsu:

Oh like myself, I was there in Mississippi, and we'd got night-clubbing and then you know we'd go and then the black guy that's working there, he'd be sticking his head out listening to the band and the manager would say, "Go back where you belong out there." And then we used to---we used to have a standby inspection every Saturday and after it was over, we decided to go right out the gate to get our dry-cleaning stuff. There was a black guy from up north and he says... we told him, "Come with us." And then we step out and we go into the cleaners and the white lady behind the counter kept giving that black guy a dirty look... he shouldn't be in there. And then after we went back to the Base, we decided to go into town. And we said, "Come on;" and he said, "No I'm going to stay on the Base." So blacks were you know... and the one time we were on a taxi it was a bunch of guys and we dropped this black guy off in this black neighborhood and the taxi guy driver said, "That's where they belong," you know. But I seen all that prejudice, but they---you know for us it was okay; you know. And I was blessed that I seen all that and then I was blessed because when I was in Utah, I met all the German Prisoners of War. And then after the war, I was over going to the Flower Market and when I used to come home in my truck, this Jewish man, he says, "Are you going to Torrance?" I said, "Yeah." He said, "Could you give me a ride; my sister lives on Artesia Boulevard and then I work---I have a little concession at the Ranch Market on Hawthorne Boulevard." So I said, "Okay;" so I used to give him a ride home from the market and he said he was a prisoner at the concentration camp in Europe and he survived because he carried dead bodies and everything. So I met all kinds of people first hand in that experience; you know. So I met a lot of different people.

0:24:36.0

Interviewer:

When you talked to other Japanese Americans who were in the camps and yet your family...

Omatsu:

In Utah; yeah.

Interviewer:

... were in Utah, does that make you feel anything?

Omatsu:

Well like I said, I was... the Kishityo Ikezoe, I knew from before the war and he was in Arkansas camp and he used to always write to me. He said, "I'm in the Boy Scouts," and we'd go swimming in the river and lakes. And he said, "They have this Garfish that looks like an alligator, sharp teeth, and everything. He said, "Could you send me a funny book." You know we used to call comics "funny books." So I used to roll them up and then mail it to Kishito and I used to send him comic books to Utah... well from Utah to camp.

Interviewer:

What camp was it?

Omatsu:

Rohwer, Arkansas.

Interviewer:

Rohwer, I see; yeah, yeah.

Omatsu:

Yeah; so anyway I corresponded with those people you know that was in... and then toward the end of the war and everything, they started letting Japanese out of camp. A lot of them went to Chicago and then some---a lot of them came to Utah. James Kubota and... he started Bockseller High School with me and his younger brother Ralph, after the war they came to Compton and he's an all-star, all-city football player at Compton over here. But anyway, it was an experience; you know. Then after the war, I told you there was a trailer camp in Torrance airport and there was government housing in Long Beach and then a hostel in Santa Monica and Roscoe---San Fernando Valley, there was a trailer camp there housing people. And then I remember we used to go there dancing out there in Roscoe, and we used to go to a lot of dances in Long Beach in the Japanese community and then, of

course, Gardena and stuff. But a lot of these Japanese Americans never recovered because even when I came out of the Air Force and my dad was sick, he said, "Let's go visit the Tanaka family there in that Long Beach. And they were in the housing--- government housing in Long Beach, and they never recovered you know.

Interviewer:

What do you mean they never recovered?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; there were a lot of people that never recovered. Our folks is one of them that was fortunate; you know.

0:27:16.3

Interviewer:

You mean recovered economically?

Omatsu:

Yes, economically; yeah. So; but anyway the war did a lot. I mean my sister would never have met my brother-in-law, Dick Kudo would have never met my aunt; my Uncle Butch, he would never have met Faye Tazoe in Utah. So because of the war, and then my father-in-law that married to Diane now, her father was in the Navy and he went to the Pacific and her uncle was in the Pacific, but he would have---they would have never met. He came here to California see during the war see. So all the families you know something good happened.

Interviewer:

Okay; well thank you so much. We are really grateful that you have shared so much in so much detail. And we thank you.

Omatsu:

Yeah; sure.

Interviewer:

Okay.

[End Jack Takeshi Omatsu CD 2]

[Begin Jack Takeshi Omatsu CD 3]

Interviewer:

Okay all right; it' 12:35 on April 21, 2004. This is a continuation and the third CD of the interview of Jack Takeshi Omatsu on the same date being conducted by Dale Sato for the South Bay Oral History Project. The audio and catalog persons remain the same. All copyrights, title, and any other rights arising out of this interview, whether in its entirety, part, or derivative form and whether in audio, written, or any other format, shall belong to the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. Copying of this interview recording whether in its entirety or part is strictly prohibited without a written authorization from the South Bay Chapter of the Japanese American Citizens League. In this section of the CD, we are going to go over some of the news articles on the Omatsu family and also some references to photos and pictures, and.... Okay; sot he first magazine that your brought was from the Torrance People Magazine.

0:01:13.5

Omatsu:

Torrance People Magazine.

Interviewer:

And that was Volume One, Issue Eight, October...

Omatsu:

October 1997.

Interviewer:

Uh-huh; and this is page twelve and thirteen.

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

What do we see here?

Omatsu:

Okay; on the wall there is Hawthorne Savings and Loan right there by Sumitomo Bank, the California Bank. There is the Hawthorne Savings and Loan and they have---see on the wall the Hawthorne Savings and Loan at Torrance is a 15-foot horizontal

blow-up of a 1927 photograph of the Omatsu family working at farming, which is this.

Interviewer:

Wow; that's terrific.

Omatsu:

Yeah; then....

Interviewer:

But we see oil derricks on the background.

Omatsu:

Yeah; oil derricks. Yeah; oil derricks and all that.

0:02:00.6

Interviewer:

And this location was?

Omatsu:

Hawthorne and Torrance... Hawthorne Boulevard... west of---just west of Hawthorne Boulevard where the California Trust Building is right now---Sumitomo Bank... and then California Savings and Loan is situated there today.

Interviewer:

Right; and we see oil derricks in the background.

Omatsu:

And our family home is over here, and this was...

Interviewer:

Yeah; it's on the right side.

Omatsu:

... this was the Murakami family.

Interviewer:

And the Murakami on the extreme right.

Omatsu:

Yeah; our neighbor.

Interviewer:

The home and barn buildings; uh-huh.

Omatsu:

Yeah; and the Ichiro Okada flower ranch used to be right around here and beyond...

Interviewer:

Okay; probably....

Omatsu:

... and then Torrance Boulevard in the photo just north of Torrance Boulevard here.

Interviewer:

North of Torrance; yeah.

Omatsu:

And then the Japanese School... this tree road here on the very end was a Japanese School in Sepulveda. It was Torrance; yeah that we all attended on Saturdays; yeah.

0:03:02.8

Interviewer:

That's on page twelve kind of just above the car.

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Are you in this picture? Who are these people?

Omatsu:

No; I was born in 1929 and this is taken in 1927. So it has my brother, Bob.

Interviewer:

He's right there in the center?

Omatsu:

He was born in '27. He's sitting on my mom's lap.

Interviewer:

Okay.

Omatsu:

Then my sister is sitting there right here---right there---right here by my dad.

Interviewer:

Yeah; she's in the fold. You can barely see her.

Omatsu:

I think my mother was about 25 years old there.

Interviewer:

Twenty five years old; yeah. Did she take the baby out in the field?

Omatsu:

Well just to take the picture they did.

Interviewer:

Just to take the picture? **[Laughs]**

Omatsu:

They don't keep the baby out there. But they took the... this is done by a professional photographer, probably one of those... see there's a lot of Japanese writing on the bottom. And then he probably sent a copy to his brother in Japan or something.

Interviewer:

This photographer, was that Ninomiya or - - - -

Omatsu:

Gee; that I don't know because there were---I know there were a lot of old photographs. There's Tanaka's and Toyo Miyatake's and stuff like that.

Interviewer:

I see.

Omatsu:

So anyway, and then...

Interviewer:

And there's a photo...

Omatsu:

Beyond---on this same street, you know Carson Street is around here, too and then Torrance Boulevard.

Interviewer:

On the left side.

Omatsu:

But if you follow this street where the oil company and the farmers, you would---it went all the way and ends where our folks is where the flowers in the '30s---the late '30s---early '30s rather further west; yeah. Thank you.

Interviewer:

Do you want to pause?

Omatsu:

[Cough] excuse me.

Interviewer:

That's okay.

Omatsu:

But it looked like this, you know _all over. You know you'd go all the way down to Pacific Coast Highway and Delano Boulevard.

Interviewer:

Just open field; uh-hm.

Omatsu:

Redondo... it's in between Redondo Beach and Torrance City it looked like is nothing but farmland---dairies.

Interviewer:

Because they had these oil derricks...

Omatsu:

The oil company owned all of that see. And I remember, they had a truck with an oil guy---workers on the back end of their truck and we used to wave them and they'd wave back; you know. They'd be going down the road; you know.

Interviewer:

Was it noisy?

0:05:29.4

Omatsu:

No, no; it's peaceful---real peaceful. Yeah so; and then I remember this farmhouse---we had a---you can't see it good. We had a horse, Rosy, and a corral, and then we had---my dad had chickens---you know chickens running around.

Interviewer:

In the distance?

Omatsu:

Yeah; things like that... so.

Interviewer:

Here's another photo here.

Omatsu:

Oh this one here is...

Interviewer:

This photo on page twelve.

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; just recently one... see 1997. My brother just died--the one that---Sam died in the liquor store. I'm in the liquor in the store and Bob's in the flower shop. See, we're all partners. But he's got the flowers because of the flower shop and I'm holding the bottle, but it wasn't my idea holding the bottle. That photographer said to hold the bottle.

Interviewer:

Because it was a bottle of whiskey or something.

Omatsu:

So I would want to impress people that it looked like I was drinking. You know not me; I'm not a drinker.

Interviewer:

You're not a drinker, huh? **[Laughs]**

Omatsu:

But it has an article about everything you know?

Interviewer:

Uh-hm.

Omatsu:

About the old days and everything. And let's see they were interviewing us and....

Interviewer:

This was written by Boots LeBaron?

Omatsu:

Yeah; it was written by him? Yeah; but then he had an article about everything.

Interviewer:

Okay; we'll make a copy.

Omatsu:

It said, "During the years of the Great Depression, Bob, Jack, their late brother Sam, and their sister, Mary Anne, were born and raised on a small strawberry farm where the Union Bank Building now stands on Hawthorne Boulevard in Torrance. On a wall at Hawthorne Savings and Loan in Torrance, there is a 15-foot horizontal blow-up of the 1927 photograph of the Omatsu family working their farms." And then, "From 1921 to 1937, recalls Jack, his parents grew mostly strawberries, some rhubarb, and blackberries. When I was a youngster, there were about 10,000 people living in this city and...." Let's see, continued on seventeen. 'They bought 10 percent where Japanese--of Japanese ancestry. Dad plowed the field with a horse and there were oil wells everywhere. Flower growers, dairies, vegetable farmers, horseranches, barn owls, skunks, jack rabbits, and chick hawks were all over the place. Especially during the rainy winters, there were an abundance of frogs.' 'It was a great place to raise kids,' recalls Jack, who with his wife, Diane, has four of his own. 'We had no indoor plumbing and like many Japanese farmers, we used the Japanese style metal bathtub heated by a log--log fire. Before getting into the tub, all the kids would soap up with cold water, rinse off, and then jump into this huge tub. In those days, you could look out and see columns of black smoke. Those were Japanese people taking baths,' he smiled. 'It looked like Indian smoke signals in the

old western movies. You could also see fields of beautiful flowers. In our childhood years, Torrance was country. You didn't lock your doors. People helped one another. You can't compare it to modern Torrance. This is a big city. Life is different.' Around 1937 their parents Sakamitsu & Hanayo Omatsu Hana, which means flower in Japanese, switched from farming strawberries to the more lucrative flower growing business. They replaced the horse with a tractor. They bought a new truck to transport flowers to the Japanese Flower Market in downtown Los Angeles. The Omatsu family worked hard. Their flower business flourished. In an effort to preserve their Japanese heritage, parents in the area had their children attending weekend school studying the language and the culture of the old country. 'We were proud to be Americans,' said Jack. 'My father and mother were born in Japan, but moved to Hawaii. After serving in the U.S. Army during World War I, he became an American citizen.' In Torrance, the Omatsu children attended Fern Avenue Elementary School and Torrance High School, which at the time was the only high school in the city. In fact, Bob was a member of the first kindergarten class at Fern, which he claims was the first earthquake proof school in Torrance. Shortly before World War II erupted, Bob remembers when Gene Autry came to Torrance to film his stagecoach chase along Hawthorne Boulevard, which was a two-lane road lined with palm trees. The landscapes he says looked like a carpet of brilliant colors with the sweet scent of flowers filling the air. On Sunday morning, December 7, 1941, Jack was playing tackle football on a plowed field. 'My sister Mary Anne comes running up. She heard on the radio that Japan had invaded Pearl Harbor in Honolulu. She was very upset because she thought we had relatives living in Hawaii, which we did. Like all of our friends, we went home and listened to the radio. It was shocking. We were American citizens. We went to movies, we collected baseball cards, we listened to Jack Armstrong, Captain Midnight, the Lone Ranger.' 'We had never even heard of Pearl Harbor.' At Torrance High School in 1942 the principal called all Japanese students to the auditorium. He told us, we hate to see you see this happen, but the government has ordered that all Japanese people must move out of California. Bob, with his wife Sylvia have five grown children, with some bitterness recalls, 'Since our father was a registered Democrat and voted for President Franklin Roosevelt, he wasn't too happy when Roosevelt issued the official order to put us in camps and move us out of state.'"

0:12:47.9

Interviewer:

Okay; that will be great. That was wonderful.

Omatsu:

[Laughs] But that was in the article in the Torrance.....

Interviewer:

Yeah; I'm glad you left some artifacts here. Okay; this is number two.

Omatsu:

Okay; this is Tuesday, October 8, 2002.

Interviewer:

The Daily Breeze.

Omatsu:

Daily Breeze; and then....

Interviewer:

What's this all about?

Omatsu:

This is about... let's see.

Interviewer:

This says, "Store...."

Omatsu:

"Store city grows---grow on each other." And then, "In my wildest dreams, I never thought Torrance would be this big." Bob Omatsu, one of three brothers who inherited Holiday Liquor and Flower Shop from their parents. Holiday Liquor and Flower Shop operated by the Omatsu family will close after 50 years in the community.

Interviewer:

Yeah; what do you remember about that closing? How did you feel about that?

Omatsu:

About selling it? Well I was living in Utah. I was still partners in it, but I was living in Utah, and... not Utah; I'm getting my towns mixed up. I was living in Bull Head City, Arizona, and my brother said that someone was interested in purchasing the property there because they wanted to build a hotel. And I told Bob---I told Bob, "Whatever you and Yuri...." Yuri took over the liquor store since my younger brother died; she was in charge of the liquor store. I said, "Whatever you and Yuri decide, I'll go along with it. If we keep it, we'll keep it. If you want to sell it, I'll go along with you." I says, "It's up to you guys." So my brother decided to sell it and of course it was in escrow for a year and then the September 11 bombing came along; so the buyers asked us if we would give them a year extension. So we gave them another year extension and finally my brother says, "You know after a year either buy it or we'll take it off the market." So they bought it and we closed escrow and then six months later my brother, Bob, passed away. So we did everything at the right time. The timing was right; yeah. And we didn't have to... you know it would have had a problem with all the going through the courts and everything. So we sold it at the right time and got everything settled before he passed away. And he was healthy at the time.

Interviewer:

Oh.

Omatsu:

Uh-hm; and then while I was in Bull-Head....

Interviewer:

This is Daily Breeze.

Omatsu:

Okay; I was in Bull Head and then my wife said, "Hey, a house in Torrance blew up." I said, "Torrance?" I was wondering if it was one of my houses in Torrance. I said, "Keep your ears open and find out whose house blew up in Torrance." And then a week later we came to Torrance... I had to come on business or whatever, and then I walked in the liquor store and my sister-in-law, Yuri says, "Hey, here's a paper." I says, "Why?" She said, "Look at the paper; it's Bob Mimura's house that blew up." I said, "Bob Mimuras house; I can't believe that." My brother, Bob, and Bob and I was... just went and delivered. I went with Bob and we delivered flowers to their house a few months ago.

Interviewer:

Now this August 14, 2002.

Omatsu:

Yeah; 2002---recently.

Interviewer:

On page one.

Omatsu:

And that's the Mimuras house. And Bob Mimura used to live---he's a native Utah, and I met him in Utah---Honeyville, Utah. And then he came out here---his mom and everything. His mother worked for Walteria Dry Cleaning and then later on Bob married the O'Hara family. But that was their---that's their house. I think they're going to be rebuilding it again.

Interviewer:

That house was tented for termites; right.

Omatsu:

Yeah; right off of prospect.

Interviewer:

And then it exploded.

Omatsu:

Yeah; it exploded.

Interviewer:

Because there is a huge picture showing all the debris.

Omatsu:

So was the Mimuras, Bob Mimura.

Interviewer:

Yeah; but it says they lost everything.

Omatsu:

Yeah; those you know like myself, I have all these old photographs and everything. Could you imagine; they lost everything. All their personal things are all gone---pictures and all of that. That's a shame, huh?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Omatsu:

So a lot of people, you know tragedy... so I have to look at the good part because I still have things you know like I'm showing you right now, and this is in the Torrance Breeze pertaining to business. And this was Sunday, June 23, 2002. I was still in Bull Head and then I came back here on business and I so happened to be in the store and they interviewed me. So; "Jack Omatsu chatting with---left with customer, Oscar Moran," and then---and it says, "His holiday, liquor, and florist store in Torrance gives good conversational service." I told him... see it's something to do with customer service.

0:18:21.7

Interviewer:

Yes; it says, "Customer service and then chaos?"

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then that's Yuri's brother working back there and then I know him real good. He used to work for Pittsburgh Paint over here on 190th and Madrona for 30 years or something. And then he knew Mr. Matsui; he's the father of my niece's husband.

Interviewer:

That was Oscar Moran?

Omatsu:

Yeah; Oscar Moran... he lives over here on 190th.

Interviewer:

Yeah; and this top picture?

Omatsu:

That's Yuri, my sister-in-law. Yeah; and then that's all... I used to collect antiques and that's one of the old cash registers I had there yeah. But....

Interviewer:

What happened to that?

Omatsu:

Huh? Well I sold to people you know. When we were ready to close the store, the people often say, "I want to buy this." I had a barber chair---old barber chair---I used to sit on. I sold it individually. So I sold a lot of things. But anyway, as the article goes on it says....

Interviewer:

Page C-2?

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then on the back part you know it had other people. But here's a deal---it says, "At the family-operated Holiday, Liquor, and Florist store in Torrance, Yuri Omatsu, brother-in-law, Jack Omatsu, and brother--- Yuri's brother Kawishiri, still offered the traditional luxury of ongoing conversation with customers who are mainly from the neighborhood," you know all around there. We knew a lot of people around the neighborhood. "We give good conversation service," Jack Omatsu said with a grin. "When our customers go elsewhere and say, 'Hello,' people just look at them funny like...." The store has been in the same location for 43 years and will be closing soon to make way for a large commercial venture. See and then... yeah; anyway something to do with service.

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Omatsu:

This article in here.

Interviewer:

It was a very friendly community so obviously....

0:20:33.3

Omatsu:

Then you know I worked in there and I spent a lot of hours. People asked me, "Aren't you bored?" I never got bored. We got a TV in there and then all the food I want and then people come in and visit and conversation. I learned a lot just being---by working in there. So it was opportunity; you know. Yeah; so it was really great working there.

Interviewer:

This is number five.

Omatsu:

Oh, number five is this Torrance Historical Calendar.

Interviewer:

Nineteen Eighty.

Omatsu:

Nineteen Eighty... dated 1980; my father-in-law, he had it and he passed away a few years ago. And then when we went to Georgia, it was there; so I brought it back with me. Otherwise, I wouldn't have this calendar. And it has a picture of the Torrance Historical Museum in the front and this used to be a civic center where they had dances and everything there. And I remember the O'Toole brothers, my friends, on the weekend they used to have dances there. I never went; you know I was too busy working. But they used to have a fight with the San Pedro boys and Monday at school they said, "The O'Toole brothers are in there fighting." Anyway, there's a lot of....

Interviewer:

That's 1345 Post Avenue in Torrance, 90501.

Omatsu:

Yeah; but anyway let's see. It's got a float here---the City of Torrance you know. That's interesting because we're interested in the floral market.

Interviewer:

Oh, that's right; did you see a lot of flowers when the Pasadena Rose Tournament...?

Omatsu:

Oh yeah; because we sold flowers Christmas, New Year's, Mother's Day, Valentine's Day, and the Rose Bowl Parade is a big day for the flower industry; you know locally.

Interviewer:

Yes; this is the Torrance float?

Omatsu:

Yeah; this is taken in 1914 yeah.

Interviewer:

Nineteen Fourteen, uh-huh.

Omatsu:

And let's see; then it has a picture of... let's see.

Interviewer:

This is number six?

Omatsu:

Back in... yeah. In 1937 when Torrance was an island... see the Torrance float of 1937, when it rained, do you see all that water accumulated?

Interviewer:

Totally.

Omatsu:

Torrance... because they didn't have that sewer system like today.

Interviewer:

Oh I see.

Omatsu:

So whenever it rained there was a lot of water all over.

Interviewer:

Did it get into the houses?

Omatsu:

That's why.... Gee my folks always had a house sitting up a little higher; yeah. I guess they're used to Hawaii and everything; they do that. But the Kita's family bought 100 acres over there on Pacific Coast Highway and Hawthorne Boulevard to raise strawberries and when they purchased that place we thought they were crazy because we used to call it Walteria Lake. But they made out okay though. But this is 1937, and then this one here... let's see. And this is high school in 1928---Torrance High School. I wasn't born yet. And my sister was going to grammar school yet at the time. And then there's a few Japanese in there, but... yeah. But anyway; and then they had....

Interviewer:

That's the Class of 1928.

Omatsu:

Yeah '28; and this is the strawberry....

Interviewer:

This is number seven.

Omatsu:

Number seven yeah; the strawberry....

0:23:59.6

Interviewer:

Uh-huh; is this a part of that larger photo?

Omatsu:

Yes; uh-huh.

Interviewer:

Oh I see more of a close-up.

Omatsu:

But I can see our house clearly.

Interviewer:

Yes; on the right-hand side.

Omatsu:

You can't see as well on the other photograph. So this is really blown up closer.

Interviewer:

Uh-huh.

Omatsu:

You can see more. The other one was more spread out.

Interviewer:

Right.

Omatsu:

You know smaller detail; yeah. And then this one here is the Torrance Hospital; it's not there anymore you know. But of course, we were all born at the ranch.

Interviewer:

Let's see; it says the....

Omatsu:

The Torrance Memorial; yeah.

Interviewer:

The Jared Sydney Torrance dream of building a fine hospital materialized when the Torrance Memorial...

Omatsu:

Nineteen Twenty Five.

Interviewer:

... opened in May 1925. The new Torrance Memorial was dedicated in May 1971. So this is the original building?

Omatsu:

Yeah; but my son was born there in '69.

Interviewer:

That was Curtis?

Omatsu:

Yeah; Curtis was born there in '69 yeah. So anyway it has a meaning there---'69.

Interviewer:

Yes definitely.

Omatsu:

And then this... you know I told you about the depot there. My grandfather used to send a ship---ship a crate of grape every year and my dad used to pick it up here at the depot.

Interviewer:

Oh; this is... what was it---a station?

Omatsu:

Electric---Pacific Electric Railroad station and you could see out toward Western. See how it looks?

Interviewer:

Oh Western is in the distance.

Omatsu:

You know Yohan in that?

Interviewer:

Uh-huh.

Omatsu:

It's out this way.

Interviewer:

I see.

0:25:35.8

Omatsu:

See how it looks? **[Laughs]** It's all country out there; yeah.

Interviewer:

Right; that's fantastic.

Omatsu:

And let's see; what else shall we talk about?

Interviewer:

Did you have some pictures in this...?

Omatsu:

Oh yeah; Saturday I went to the Flower Market and this writer, Naomi Hirahara, she wrote a book about the Flower Market, history of the Southern California Flower Market 1912 to the year 2004. It has pictures of the flower ranches and everything all over you know. And then I had Paul Bannai and all these people sign; yeah.

Interviewer:

Signatures---autographs.

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; so anyway and Naomi signed it April 17, 2004. But it has pictures of out in the San Fernando Valley and everything. And then it has a picture of the San Fernando Flower Growers Picnic they had out in the San Fernando area.

Interviewer:

It's huge... so many people. This is from page sixteen.

Omatsu:

Uh-huh.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Omatsu:

So it goes way back, huh?

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Omatsu:

But unfortunately, I was supposed to be interviewed by Naomi and I would have given her a lot of pictures of our flower ranch, but I never met with her until after---when the book come out. So most of these pictures are all growers from San Fernando, Whittier, and stuff, but not Torrance and Redondo unfortunately. But here's a float just before the war started in 1941 and it's all Japanese Americans on the float there; yeah.

Interviewer:

Was that sponsored by Torrance?

Omatsu:

No, no; this is Cherry Blossom in Washington. It was sponsored by probably a flower market or whatever.

Interviewer:

That's number eleven. Interesting that was in 1940.

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then this is September 1941 see. This is at the Japanese Flower Market.

Interviewer:

That's number twelve.

Omatsu:

Yeah; Flower Market yeah.

Interviewer:

Page 105?

Omatsu:

Yeah; just before the war started and then....

Interviewer:

So they were having a convention of the flowers?

Omatsu:

Yeah; FTD and all that.

Interviewer:

That was just before the war, Pearl Harbor, in September?

Omatsu:

Yeah; 1941. Those were happy days of 1941. But of course there was a war in Europe and everything, and they were already drafting. I think Ted Tanouye... I mean Tanouye was already drafted during the summer. This guy Ted Iwata, they were raising flowers up there in the Whittier Blue Hill area.

Interviewer:

That's 13?

Omatsu:

Yeah; in the Blue Hill area and I worked part-time. He quit raising flowers and he started working for Bill Yokoyama, and I used to work with him back in the 80s, just before I retired. And then he is---he told me that he got drafted just before the war and his parents got sent to the camp in Arkansas. And while he was in the Army, he came back to Whittier to pick up his car that the Hakujin neighbors kept in a barn. So he drove that car back to Arkansas, and he never... but that's the car. I know his story; that's a car in the Arkansas camp. See that Arkansas camp?

Interviewer:

Jerome or Rohwer?

Omatsu:

I forget; it's one of those camps. But he told me he came to Whittier to get his car and then the Japanese not supposed to be around here. But he came though; he came.

Interviewer:

Yeah; that's amazing.

Omatsu:

It's amazing. And then when he was in Italy, he went to Germany and then he---his outfit freed the Jewish prisoners in the concentration camp---Dachau or something like that. So there's... I learned a lot of history about him.

Interviewer:

That's page 107.

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; so anyway it's very interesting yeah.

0:29:56.9

Interviewer:

Yes.

Omatsu:

Oh and then this one here is Councilman Lindsey meeting and then it's got Frank O'Hara and then---and Johnny Milano, he's Italian. His folks were immigrants and they had---they got a market. He raised flowers on the ocean side and he has an outlet at the Flower Market, the Milano family. And then there's an article in here about the Milano family. His mother was born in Italy; so when the war started, they came and started harassing her. Yeah; so the Italians and everything... well it tells you all this. It's interesting.

Interviewer:

Uh-hm; and this is where your flower stall was?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; flower stall.

Interviewer:

This is 1952 table assignments?

Omatsu:

Yeah; 102 it says....

Interviewer:

One oh two is the Omatsu?

Omatsu:

Yeah; 102 is right here.

Interviewer:

Page 136.

Omatsu:

And they tell you what the rents was... \$804 a year.

Interviewer:

For stall 102?

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah.

Interviewer:

Wow.

Omatsu:

And the better location you're in, the higher the rent was.

Interviewer:

Where was the better location?

Omatsu:

Where here's the Wall Street entry way and they have a gate there and it doesn't open until six in the morning for the florists. But earlier, the shippers and everything come, and they holler at the people; "Hey save me this; save me that." That's why I said a good location.

Interviewer:

Oh, right in front of the entrance?

Omatsu:

Yeah; so there's a lot of things to it---to the market you know.

Interviewer:

Oh yeah.

0:31:32.2

Omatsu:

And there was a couple of Japanese restaurants there and I used to---I used to order chashu and rice mostly there; yeah.

Interviewer:

[Laughs] That was number seven?

Omatsu:

Yeah; so that was interesting you know. Oh, and it has a picture of my father back here I think---back here. Well that's Joe Kimura. He is from Tayama Orchids in Los Angeles and he raised orchids out toward the ocean side by Paul Iki's poinsettia farm. But he married into the Tayama family... his only daughter.

Interviewer:

That was number 16, page 172.

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then... yeah; and then I believe there's a picture of my father. God, it's in here someplace. It goes way back. Yeah; got time left. Is it okay if it's a little pause? There's a little pause in between.

Interviewer:

That's okay.

Omatsu:

Oh, well here's a committee for the...

Interviewer:

That's 18?

Omatsu:

... yeah; for the Flower Market for completing the Market deal here.

Interviewer:

That says, Gongoro Endo standing with other Flower Market leaders at a celebration of the completed renovation..."

Omatsu:

Of the new Flower Market---the new Flower Market.

Interviewer:

Uh-hm; "... on October 12, 1963." This is page 158.

Omatsu:

Yeah, yeah; okay.

Interviewer:

Okay; that's... anymore? Did you find your father's picture?

Omatsu:

It's here someplace. Oh and then they---they used to fish alot you know, the flower growers, and they had a bowling league and stuff you know. But they did a lot of activities; you know. Oh that's something else there. Yeah; here it is.

Interviewer:

Okay; this is page 135?

Omatsu:

One thirty five.

Interviewer:

This is number 19.

Omatsu:

"Honoring the pioneer of the Flower Market, Keiro Kai on June 25, 1949." And then it has a picture of the growers.

Interviewer:

Yeah; so where is your dad?

Omatsu:

My dad is right here.

Interviewer:

He's on the second row?

Omatsu:

See I put---I highlighted it in yellow.

Interviewer:

One, two, three, four---fourth... uh-hm; fourth from the right.

Omatsu:

Yeah; I highlighted it in yellow.

Interviewer:

And they're wearing the kanreki.

Omatsu:

The red hat with the red... I still remember that.

Interviewer:

Yes.

Omatsu:

It was in 1949 when my folks bought the property on Torrance Boulevard in 1949; yeah. So I recognize some of these growers in here, Mr. Miyazaki and stuff like that.

Interviewer:

He's one, two, three, four, fifth person from the left in this row?

Omatsu:

Yeah; Mr. Miyazaki yeah.

Interviewer:

Uh-hm.

Omatsu:

Mr. Miazaki; that's Frank O'Hara that was the general manager later on.

Interviewer:

Uh-hm; he's in the top row; the first person on the right.

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

That's page 135.

0:35:08.7

Omatsu:

And that's Mr. Nakao, James Nakao's dad.

Interviewer:

Mr. Nakao

Omatsu:

Nakao; they used to raise flowers. They used to raise flowers right after the war on Hawthorne Boulevard, too. But they live in Gardena... you know James Nakao lives in Gardena; yeah.

Interviewer:

Nakao; third from the right in the front.

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

Wow; that's great.

Omatsu:

But anyway; so it goes way back. [Laughs]

Interviewer:

Yeah.

Omatsu:

Yeah; but after the market closed, especially my dad used to you know go to the Flower Market on Saturdays and stuff and they would go Nihonmachi and stuff like Japanese towns and stuff like that you know. They had their social thing going to you know.

[Laughs]

Interviewer:

[Laughs] Okay.

Omatsu:

Just like everybody else you know.

Interviewer:

Thank you so much.

Omatsu:

Yeah.

Interviewer:

We appreciate that you brought all these newspaper articles and the calendar and the flower book, and....

0:36:04.5

Omatsu:

See I was sort of getting some of the flower pictures ready to go interview with Naomi, but made it to the deal because.... I don't care; it's just that I wish they would have spoke more flowers in the Torrance South Bay area instead of other areas you know.

Interviewer:

Yeah; their contribution.

Omatsu:

Contribution; yeah.

Interviewer:

So.

0:36:27.2

Omatsu:

Yeah; but I noticed most of it is guys that was interviewed got all their big pictures spread out. But that's okay; it's interesting regardless, you know---regardless. And then it says, "Telephone interviews and conversations...." I talked to Naomi over the phone; so I got my name on there---Jack Takeshi Omatsu.

Interviewer:

Uh-hm.

Omatsu:

And it seemed like they interviewed Frank Mizufuka; they never did recover. They never raised flowers after the war, but they used to be a flower---big flower growers in Whittier Blue Hill they'd call it. And there's a picture of Mr. Mizufuka... did I already tell you?

Interviewer:

I think we did.

Omatsu:

Yeah; here it is, the Mizufuka family.

Interviewer:

Oh that's page... what page... 55.

Omatsu:

Yeah; and then the Mizufuka family and that's Mrs. Mizufuka at the---before the war at Blue Hill. My mom used to always talk about Blue Hill, the Nakamura family and everything and Mizufuka. But the funny part is I used to date her daughter.

Interviewer:

[Laughs] Okay; that's fantastic.

Omatsu:

[Laughs]

Interviewer:

I think we're going to bring it to a close. You sound a little tired and we....

Omatsu:

No; I'm not tired. I told you; you know people are surprised at especially my age that I got a lot of stamina. You know I could do this until tonight if I have to. You know I have---see I have a lot of patience and I enjoy what I do whether you're working or playing or sleeping or whatever. I just enjoy things. I just enjoy life. You know I'm blessed because I have that attitude. Yeah; I have that attitude.

Interviewer:

But where do you think you got that attitude?

Omatsu:

I don't know where I got it; I got I think from my folks and my friends and everything---from all over. And not only... I was born here in Torrance; that's part of it. If I was just born in Bull Head, I probably wouldn't have this attitude.

Interviewer:

Why is that?

0:38:40.9

Omatsu:

Oh... a different environment.

Interviewer:

What do you mean a different environment?

Omatsu:

If I was born in Bull Head, could you imagine what kind of things ? Not much; just a river and a desert---Lofland wasn't even there. Could you imagine? I was born here in Torrance. Anybody that lives in Torrance is lucky... Palos Verdes, Torrance, and Gardena... the South Bay area. My dad lived here for 15 years and he said, "This is the best place in wherever," and he lived in Hawaii for 15 years. But he hit it right on the nail; this is the best place in the world. That's why anybody that lives in Torrance is good; yeah. They should be appreciating more so.

Interviewer:

Okay.

[End of Jack Takeshi Omatsu CD 3]