

David Lee
Mrs. Watson
Adv. Eng. 9
12/20/00

Interviewee (G): Ryo Tsai
Relation: Grandmother on my mother's side
Interviewer (D): David Lee

Interview

D: Do you have any family stories that have been past down over the years?

G: Well, I guess, mainly how my parents came to the United States from Japan, and what they had to do to make a living.

D: What did they do?

G: Well, my father first worked as a houseboy. That means that he was in the house and helped with all the heavy work for a widowed lady, an older woman, who needed somebody to help her around the house.

D: Kind of like a butler?

G: Not quite as formal as a butler, but he did do work that a butler would do. He'd do yard work and inside work, anything that she needed done.

D: And your mother?

G: My mother came to the United States later. She didn't come at the same time as my father, but they had known each other in Japan. In fact, I think they married in Japan. He came first to try and see if he could make a living over here. He said that after he established himself here and had work to do and money to pay for things, he would send for her. And that happened, but it took awhile, almost seven years. When my mother came over, of course, she couldn't speak English. She didn't know how to do house work because she was the daughter of a priest in Japan. So she led a simple and easy life.

D: Was her family wealthy?

G: Wasn't luxurious, just easy, because the village wasn't a very wealthy village, so no one was really well off. But a priest, of course, was in high regards. People would give him donations and stuff like that, so they did quite well.

D: So did your mom ever take a job?

G: No, she really just stayed around the house. She didn't really do very much, and she was pretty tiny too, only about 4' 10".

D: Which historical event affected you the most?

G: Umm, well, now the depression first, because there were so many people who were just sort of wandering around the country looking for work. I remember people coming to our kitchen door asking for food, so we'd always give them sandwiches or something like that. And they would just sit on the steps and eat, then go away. They weren't harmful to anyone. They just didn't have any money to feed themselves.

D: Was your father still working as a houseboy then?

G: No, by that time, he had his own nursery.

D: So did the depression not hit you as hard then?

G: Well, I think it did, in a sense, because there was less money, and less to buy. We didn't have as much money to buy things, but we always had enough food and enough clothing.

D: So you had the necessities?

G: Yeah, we definitely did not suffer terribly because of the depression, I don't think.

D: So you never were hungry, you had food?

G: Oh yes. Our father worked hard, and he just wanted to keep the family together. We managed to do all right.

D: And World War II, how did that affect you?

G: Well, all the Japanese in California had to leave, because the government said that they couldn't live along the West Coast. I think it was 200 miles from the coastline. No Japanese were allowed to live 200 miles from the coastline. Of course, we lived right in San Diego, which was right on the coast, so we had to move out.

D: Where did you go?

G: Well, my brother, George, was going to Cal Tech, so we picked him up. We drove to Pasadena and picked him up. And then we drove out of California to Barstow. Barstow... I can't remember if that's still in California or out in Arizona... But anyway we went inland to a place called Barstow. As long as it was 200 miles inland, from there on to the east, we were free to go wherever we wanted. Oh, except there was a restriction; we had to apply to go out. We had an address that had been given to us by a renter, someone from Texas who we had rented a house to. They said, "Well use our address and go ahead and live there as long as you need to, because we're renting a house from you in San Diego... and so they said we could rent their house in Texas.

D: So then you went to Texas?

G: We went to Texas. Wichita Falls, Texas.

D: Did you just stay in Texas?

G: We didn't want to stay there too long. George needed a job. He was an engineer, but there weren't many engineering jobs in this little town called Wichita Falls. So we thought that we should look in a place like Chicago or a larger city. George and I decided that we would take a trip and go to all these Midwestern towns to see which city would be the best for us to really settle down. We left the rest of the family in Texas and George and I drove to... I think we went to Minnesota first, then Wisconsin Illinois, Ohio, but then we decided that Chicago was such a large city that we could probably find work. In fact, he knew a friend from his Cal Tech days who encouraged him to stay and helped him get a job. So that's how we settled in Chicago.

D: Did your whole family move up from Texas?

G: Everyone, but my sister Anna. Anna stayed behind in San Diego, because we had this huge nursery with all these plants, and she had to take care of them... Well, actually she had to find somebody to take care of the plants and everything for us. So she stayed behind and talked to some nurserymen to see if they would help. And she did find one eventually. By the time we got to Chicago, we were able to call her, so she didn't have to go to camp. Because everyone else who didn't have a place to go went to camp.

D: So nobody in your family went to camp?

G: Nope, nobody did.

D: What was your favorite family tradition?

G: During the summer, we always took a trip somewhere. And I remember going to Yosemite. And Yosemite is a national park, it was about 300 miles from San Diego. We used to go there every summer.

D: To Yosemite or various places?

G: To various places, but mainly Yosemite. I think we went there more than any other place. My parents had friends in L. A., so we sometimes visited them. And sometimes Santa Barbara, San Francisco, and Imperial Valley.

D: What could you buy with ten dollars 40 years ago?

G: Oh, that would be hard to remember... a nickel could buy a candy bar... 5 cents would buy a candy bar, a nice big candy bar. I think bread was 10 cents a loaf. The children used to buy milk at school for 3 cents.

D: Describe a humorous experience involving you or one of your older relatives.

G: Well, you know, George and I used to fight a lot. And once I locked him out of the house. He couldn't get in, and he was so angry. I decided that I would let him in, but then I locked myself into the bathroom, so he couldn't get to me. I remember that so vividly, because we used to fight a lot, but that one fight is the one I really remember. And he used to punch me in the arm a lot. That kind of annoyed me too.

D: Briefly describe the home setting in which you grew up in.

G: Well, I had a sister, and two brothers and a father and mother. And the place that I remember living in was at the nursery. My father started this nursery of plants and flowers and stuff like that, that he sold. I guess it brought in enough income because Anna went to San Diego State College after she graduated from high school. And George went to Cal Tech, which is rather expensive. I think that, at first, my parents paid his tuition, but then he worked for it and eventually got scholarships or something, so he was able to keep attending Cal Tech. I started going to San Diego State College, but after a year, my mother said she wanted to go to Japan. She needed someone to go with, so I went with her. And I'm glad of that too, because it was really a wonderful experience to go to Japan.

D: So then did you start school again?

G: Well, I went to school in Japan for about a year. When I came back, I went to San Diego State again, but then the war broke out, and we went to Chicago.

D: So in Chicago, did you start college again?

G: No, actually I started working as a typist. My first job was with the international journal of religious education. It was a magazine publisher. I only stayed there for about a year. Then, I went to another job working for the Presbyterian Board of Foreign Missions, because they needed a clerk, and they paid more.

D: If you have one piece of advice about life what would it be?

G: Just one piece? Well, I guess, it would be to work hard and study hard.

D: What are your earliest memories of your mother and father?

G: Well, I remember my father. He was always in overalls, because he was always working with the plants. The only times he wore a suit were on Sundays to play Goh with his friends and to go to church. My mother used to sing a lot to us, because she used to know a lot of Japanese folk songs. Since we had the nursery when my father was busy, she would try and help the customers. Her English was very limited, but she made herself understood like she could give prices and how much things were. She really had a good head for figures. So if there were 5 cans of 1 plant that cost 35 cents each, she

would automatically just add them in her head, then another group of plants and add them all up. By the time all the plants were selected, she would already know the total price. And I remembered that customers wouldn't believe her and would get out a piece of paper and a pencil to start adding them up. That used to annoy her so much, because she was very good at math, and she could figure things out so fast.

D: Did any memorable event for better or for worse occur in the life of the family during your high school years?

G: Well, my father died, because he was standing behind a fish peddler buying some fish in front of our house. That was a highway between San Diego and L. A., and it was a fairly busy highway. Of course, there weren't that many cars in those days. It wasn't congested or anything, but there was a lot of traffic. One day, he was out buying some fish from a fish peddler standing in front of the truck. This car swerved and pinned him against the truck. The fish peddler saw the car and was able to jump out of the way. But my father had his back to the traffic. He didn't see anything, so his legs got pinned to the truck and were broken. They took him to the hospital, and he was in quite a bit of pain because of his leg injuries, but he died in 2 or 3 hours. So that was quite a shock to us, because it happened so suddenly.

D: Tell me about the first time you saw your husband. How did you meet him?

G: Actually, he came to meet us, because he was looking for people to come to his church; he had a church in Chicago. He was a student pastor, so he had a church and studied. In Chicago, at that time, there ~~was~~ only about 200 Japanese, maybe a little more than that. There were old timers, families that had been there for years and years, but after the evacuation of the West Coast, more Japanese started to come in. And so Grandpa had a church and invited everyone. Other members would invite their friends to come too, so the church started growing.

D: What were your beliefs about raising children and have any of them changed since then?

G: I think we were pretty strict. I think Grandpa was pretty strict, and we had to present a united front, so we were both pretty strict.

D: Overall, are you pleased with how you spent your life?

G: I think everything worked out well for me, because I was able to work before the children came so I had that experience. And after the children were born, of course, there was not too much money around since we were a minister's family. So I started working again, and Grandpa helped raise the kids too. He was a good cook and was very well organized, so I was lucky that I didn't have to do both.

D: Do you have any regrets about the level of education you pursued?

G: I'm happy with how it turned out. I eventually did get my degree. I went back quite a few years after the kids were born. I eventually got a B.A. in English and a master's degree in Librarianship.

D: What person do you think was the most influential about making important decisions in your life?

G: Well, that's hard to say, because I lost my father and my mother couldn't speak English, so we couldn't really talk about philosophical things.

D: So did you basically make your own decisions?

G: Well, my parents did give us guidance like going to school. That was very important. We had to go to school and do well in school. And at home, we were supposed to help

and the girls, I guess, would have to do the housework and do the dishes. George didn't do that much, because he went to Pasadena. I guess he would have if he was around, but he spent all his time in Pasadena. Even summers he worked to support himself, but he did all right...

D: What achievements in your life have given you the most pleasure and satisfaction?

G: My kids and grandkids

D: Okay Grandma, that's it, thanks for your time.

I learned a lot about my family during the course of this interview. I learned that my family is much more interesting than I originally thought. For example, I thought it was interesting how fate brought my grandparents together. If there never was a World War II, my grandparents probably would have never met. Also, I thought it was very interesting how my grandparents lived and the types of things they went through. I also learned a lot about myself during this interview. Hearing about my family's past gave me a sense of who I am and where I came from. It showed me how hard my relatives worked to make it here in the United States. If not for their hard work and perseverance, I wouldn't be here today. This interview has really given me a new sense of respect for my grandparents and a new outlook on life.