

LANDMARKS SOCIETY ORAL HISTORY PROGRAM

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Transcription of Taped Oral History

Side A

This is an Oral History tape for the Landmarks Society Oral History Program. My name is Pat Bertrand and I am going to interview Nobe and Asano Kuwatani who will be the narrators. The interview is being conducted at the home of their daughter, Mitzi Kuwatani. The address is 2307 Spanish Trail, Tiburon. The date is March 17, 2001.

Nobe, it is well-known that you and your family have been long time residents of Tiburon - for four generations, I believe. You and Asano are home-owners here and one of your daughters, Mitzi, also lives here. Is that right?

Yes it is; it seems like a long time, but it is full of events. Some of the time has gone very fast, but, oh, some of it was pretty slow.

Can you tell us about your family first coming to Tiburon?

Yes, it was in early 1938 when my father, Ki Yoshi Kuwatani, brought his whole family over here from San Francisco. We sure didn't want to come. We were in grade school (Graton School) and all our friends were there. We lived at Sutter and Laguna where my father had a cleaning shop. We also lived later on Buchanan.

Nobe, may I ask where your father was born?

Yes, of course; he was born in Japan, on the Island of Shimoniseki. He was sixteen years old when he came to San Francisco. It was after the big earthquake and he was going to get a farming job. He did that but then worked for The Mercantile Co. in San Francisco before he bought a cleaning shop in San Francisco. He had that for five years when he happened to hear about a laundry business being for sale in Belvedere. Soooo - he ended up buying it and

my mother, me and brothers, Tad and Tok, all moved into the apartment above the laundry. We were able to move to the house next door in a couple of months.

Can you tell me more about that business? Hadn't it been there a long time?

Yes, this laundry was started way back in 1892 by the Tsukamoto family who later sold it to the Yamamoto family who sold it to my father in 1938. My father did the laundry and cleaning; my mother did the mending and, as we boys got older, we did the pick-ups and deliveries. There were three of us; me, Tad and Tak. My sister, Sharon, was born later - in the camp. I will tell you about that. My grandparents visited, too, especially in the summer.

Can you tell me about your life before that camp? Your school, friends and activities?

I went to the Belvedere School for the last half of my eighth grade. The teacher was Mrs. McCurdy, I'm pretty sure. She had grades 5 through 8. A Mrs. Hodge had K-4 until they got another teacher. When we graduated, there were 15 in the class, the largest ever before and after that time before Reed School.

Do you remember some of the others in your class?

Well, there was Aldo DiTomaso, Ruth Rakow, Sandy McLean, Bootie Rice, Bob Weeks and more.

How about Evan Pugh?

No, he was older. The Allen boys were younger, in my brothers' classes.

Did you go to Tam? [Tamalpais High School]

Yes. Getting there was hard sometimes. We could take a ferry to Sausalito and then a train to Mill Valley. Mostly, Bill Barr from the Tiburon Garage would fill his taxi and take all the kids to school and then come back and get us.

I remember Bill Barr very well. Did he charge you all to go?

Noooo - nothing. He also took us to movies.

He charged me ten cents to go up Beach Rd. He charged the men going to the little commute ferry, The Marin and twenty-five cents to go to the bigger ferry in Sausalito for San Francisco. He was really nice, but that "bucket of bolts" was something else. It did make it!

When I had a game or a track meet on a Saturday, I had to walk to Mill Valley - all the way over and back.

I've heard that David and Howard Allen also had to walk. That's quite a ways, especially for a meet coming up. What also did you do at Tam besides regular classes and sports?

Well, I took up the saxophone and played in the band. That's where I first met Hirano from Sausalito, the only other Japanese student at Tam High. At home in Belvedere (we had moved to the house next to the laundry about two months after we came here) I played baseball for the Junior Team. The Senior Team was really good. They played every Sunday in summer; everybody went and had a wonderful time.

Where was that playing field, Nobe?

Oh, it was just a big mud-flat. It was west of the railroad tracks where the road and some buildings are now. A gas station was built and that's where our laundry building was moved to after the war. Much later there was Judge Field on the other side of the railroad tracks. It's not a ball park now.

What was on Main Street, Nobe?

That's where we shopped. Beyries Grocery Store, Chapman's Meat Market and other buildings were there. Also some bars, but we didn't go in. There were some nice families in Tiburon, the Grants, the Grbacs, Assunta Yocchi, the DiTomasis and later the Oldags (he had the boat and hardware store over the

water. They were all our friends. Also did I tell you Mrs. Drejes from Belvedere would drive all the kids out to the highway if we needed to get to San Rafael? Also Mrs. Kipp was so good to everybody. Later many families did so much for us, as a family.

Did you graduate from Tam, Nobe?

Not really with my class, but the principal, Mr. Wood, mailed me my diploma - to the camp. I had to leave before graduation, a month later, in 1942.

Can we talk about that now, both you and Asano? It was a real hard time for all of you.

Yes, that was Roosevelt's order that all Japanese had to leave their homes and businesses by March. We were "lucky" Mr. Maurice Gale posted a bond for us so we could stay until May. Mr. Clement, on Beach Road, helped store some of our things and kept the building rented for us.

Could you take anything? Money?

Yes, what we could carry, but no radios. We could take money. My father took some money. I don't know how much.

Asano, did you know the Kuwatani family before the war?

Oh no. I lived in Santa Rosa with my family. My father was a nurseryman. My mother and father were born in Japan.

Did you have brothers and sisters?

[Asano speaks] Yes, there were ten of us. One brother lived in New York and was in the Merchant Marine. He didn't have to be relocated.

[Nobe speaks] Only Japanese people west of the Rocky Mountains were relocated. We were on the Pacific Coast; it was all called the Western Command area, I think; San Diego up through Washington and Oregon.

[Asano speaks] We met at the Merced Assembly Center where we had to stay about three months. Northern California went there

[Nobe speaks] We weren't allowed to cross the Golden Gate Bridge!

How old were you and do you remember how you felt, Asano?

[Asano speaks] I was fourteen and I was SCARED. We all were. I think Nobe was seventeen. We met, that was all then. At the Assembly Center.

Can you describe these Assembly Centers?

[Asano speaks] Yes. Ours was in Merced. I think there were sixteen or seventeen all together. They were all put together in a hurry at race-tracks, fair grounds, barracks, horse stalls, even at an old mill. What was there was used.

[Nobe speaks] Some tin and tar paper were used but they were only supposed to be temporary. We stayed three months. Groups left for the Relocation Centers as they were gotten ready. We were assigned to Camp Amache near the town of Granada in Colorado. We had to take the train and we had to pay our own way. Asano's family went there, too. Amache was really a "built town". Some Japanese volunteers helped to build them. I heard there were ten of these "towns" in the Western States.

Can you tell me more about Camp Amache? How big it was? What was there? What you did?

[Asano speaks] There were about 700-750 people when they were all there. Some left to work on farms or in towns.

[Nobe speaks] We lived in barracks; these were one-story frame buildings covered with tin and tar paper. Each barrack could hold about 200-250 people. Each barrack had, I think, six units. They called them apartments. Three people were supposed to get one room, 16' X 20'. Larger families got 20' X 24'. We got one room. Asano's family got two. Fourteen barracks made a unit called a block

- with other buildings. We had to walk. There was a dining room, recreation hall, men's and women's latrines and a laundry room.

[Asano speaks] I remember 18 wash tubs and 20 ironing boards.

[Nobe speaks] Later we had a hospital, school rooms, a canteen and things we were encouraged to build. Remember, everyone had to go. Doctors, lawyers, teachers, college professors, carpenters - they were encouraged by the government to practice their skills. My sister, Sharon, was born in the hospital in Granada in 1943. That's what we all called Amache; it was really like a town. We tried some self-government. Mr. Van Blaricom was in charge of the camp. He helped us and later helped our family in Tiburon. His daughter, Jane, went to the camp school with all of us. A real nice man; our camp was lucky for that.

Were you warm enough in these barracks? Did you get enough to eat - the right food?

[Asano speaks] Yes, we were warm enough but when we first got there we had to run - to each get three blankets and a mattress. They had straw in them. There were raised troughs to wash in and those latrines. . Always long lines. I remember a strike over food; sausages, sausages, too many sausages. But that was at the assembly center.

[Nobe speaks] We grew a lot of our own food at the camp - vegetables, meat too. They also brought in rice - lots of rice.

How was the weather there?

[Asano speaks] Warm in summer; cold in winter. I heard there were worse places and some better. We were OK.

[Nobe] I didn't stay in the camp very long. I went outside to work; we were allowed to do that. It was called the "share system". We earned some money and some people earned some crops - 60-40 - they called it; 60% for the owner and 40% for us was how it was supposed to work. My father arranged a deal for

me to go to Chicago to work for a German man; he was 90 years old. I think I got fifty cents an hour.

[Asano speaks] are you sure? I thought less.

[Nobe speaks] Yes; 50 cents. Others, a lot of them, worked around Denver. The German was nice, a very alert man. Some Japanese didn't understand all this, wouldn't leave camp or would not cooperate. Some like that were sent to Tule Lake, I heard, or Santa Anita. At Granada (Amache) we really didn't have much trouble.

How long were you gone from here, in this strange, forced new life?

[Nobe speaks] It was three years, maybe a few months more. Then we came back to Belvedere and soon, Tiburon.

Asano, did you come back, too? To Santa Rosa?

[Asano speaks] No, we scattered. I was sent to New York because my older brother lived there. He was in the Merchant Marine. I stayed with his in-laws. People in the East were not relocated.

Did you stay there long? Work or go to school? You were 17 then, I think.

[Asano speaks] No. Pretty soon, I came back to Richmond where more barracks were put up for returning Japanese. They were like Marin City.

Were you friends with Nobe then or back in the camp?

[Asano speaks] Oh no. I just knew of him and his family.

How did you later get acquainted and then marry?

[Nobe speaks] Well, I had a dance band; it was called the *Music Maker*. I played sax; we were all Japanese, twelve of us. We played in Richmond, San Francisco, all over. Asano had a girl friend in Richmond who was a singer in our

band and knew us both, so she introduced us and that's how we really got to know each other.

[Asano speaks] Then we were married in 1947. I came to Tiburon - a nice place.

Nobe, let's go back to the fall of 1945 and your family's return to Tiburon. I remember things weren't all that easy at first.

[Nobe speaks] No, things weren't good and it was pretty confusing at first. First, Mr. Clements had died. When the people in our house heard we were coming back, a Japanese family, they tried to wreck the place.

[Asano speaks] They took an axe to the furniture and then to walls - really wrecked it.

[Nobe speaks] They tore out the furnace and finally left. When we got back and tried to get possession again and cleaned it up, we heard (kind of by the grapevine) that some people didn't want us back.

There was trouble with the title to the house because my father was not a citizen and the house was on an easement owned by the Belvedere Land Co. a building inspector told us he had been pressured to condemn the building.

We were so lucky to have many friends and old customers. When we told Mr. Weihe (Ernest), an architect, what was happening, he said, "Leave it to me. I will help you." When the building inspector came back, he said, "Mr. Weihe is big; how do you know him?" When I explained, "Old friends", he admitted to outside pressures. He did not condemn the building; he approved it.

Then we had the easement trouble. Mr. McClung (Harrison) another old customer, said he knew a Belvedere lawyer, Mr. Ellis (Howard); we didn't know him. Mr. Gale and all those people helped us. Mr. Ellis worked out the trade where we would be given a lot at 1550 Tiburon Blvd. and the house would be moved over there. It took a few months and then the move started - across the mud. Slowly. We lived in it the whole time it was being moved. All of those wives helped us too - Nell Weihe, Mrs. McClung, many people. We had our house and business. Mr. Ellis got us title to the building. We were there many years. Vogue Cleaners owns it now.

You had a really fearful four years, but I'm glad it ended the way it did - for you.

[Nobe speaks] Yes, we were much luckier than most Japanese who lost everything.

[Asano speaks] Yes, they lost things from Japan - furniture, paintings, art work, everything. And then their businesses here. Bad.

When did you, Nobe and Asano, move up to your ark on Esperanza? Was it an original ark?

[Nobe speaks] Oh yes, it was; a lot of people wanted the arks. We moved up there six years after we were married and still own it. We live at Donner Lake, Truckee, now, but will come back some time.

There were reparations eventually, weren't there? As compensation and apology?

[Nobe speaks] Yes, all those from the camps who were still alive received \$20,000 each. This was maybe 12 or 13 years ago.

Could you say that was enough?

[Nobe and Asano] NO!

[Nobe speaks] No, our whole lives were changed and many were not as lucky as we were. I don't like to talk about it with some of the others who had such hard times.

It was an unfair, unnecessary, experience. Let's hope it never happens again. Nobe and Asano, thank you so much for sharing this.

[Nobe and Asano] Thank you. Maybe we can talk again sometime.

Yes, a good idea.