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Congressman Mike Honda

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Interviews conducted by
Sam Redman in 2012

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Congressman Mike Honda

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Interview 1: February 22, 2012

Audio file 1

Redman: All right, my name is Sam Redman. Today is February 22, 2012, and I'm sitting down in Campbell, California with U. S. Representative Michael Mike Honda. Today Honda serves as a Democratic Representative from California's Fifteenth Congressional District, a seat that he's held for about a decade. Honda is known for his leadership on issues related to technology, his district being in the heart of Silicon Valley, but before his ascension into politics he was born in California and spent some of his earliest years in a war relocation camp in southeast Colorado. Representative Honda as we begin I'm wondering if you wouldn't mind just confirming the spelling of your name, your last name, and that you were born on June 27, 1941, is that correct?

1-00:00:40

Honda: Unfortunately, yes.

Redman: As far as you can recall.

1-00:00:44

Honda: Almost seventy-one years ago. My name is Mike Honda. For the record, we'll call it Hoonda instead of Honda. Hoonda is a full rice field—Honda is a half a rice field.

Redman: I see, okay.

1-00:00:59

Honda: So for those who are watching this, it'll be a teaching moment.

Redman: Excellent, great, thank you. But before we talk about some of your earliest memories, would you mind telling me a little bit about your parents? Who they were?

1-00:01:11

Honda: My parents are second generation Japanese Americans. My mom was born here in San Jose in 1916 in what we call now Japantown or Nihonmachi, which was Chinatown before that. The Chinese were living where the Fairmont Hotel is right now, but were interestingly burned out of that area and cleared them out where they could built what—you see some buildings right now—it used to be the Civic Center. I call that fire the first redevelopment project that the City of San Jose had embarked upon. Then the Japanese had moved in there also, so there was a mixture of populations. In that area, Jackson Street, that used to be the edge of town. So there was a farmer there that had some land, and he offered the land out there for them to settle—resettle and settle. So J-Town, or Nihonmachi, is where my mom was born. She was born with the aid of midwives, and they lived in the Kuwabara building where all the midwives lived. Across the street was a Victorian home that was converted into a doctor's office and a hospital because in those days

they didn't Japanese to be receiving services in the public hospitals, or even the private hospitals. So she was born there, and lived there for about two or three years and then was sent back to Japan to get further education—came back when she was about eleven to help her father run a tofu factory out in Milpitas. I call it the Tofu Triangle—Milpitas-Agnews-San Jose.

Redman: And how about your father? Can you talk about his background a little bit?

1-00:03:13

Honda: I was going to go to him next.

Redman: Great, that's great. You're anticipating where I'm going here.

1-00:03:19

Honda: I was just trying to thinking by the numbers. My father was born in a little steamboat town called Walnut Grove, not to be mistaken with Walnut Creek. Walnut Grove is just about fifteen-twenty miles outside of Sacramento on the riverbank of Sacramento River. The neighboring town is called Locke, and that was built by hand by the Chinese immigrants there. So in those two towns Chinese, Japanese, Filipino, Mexican workers lived there and worked the farms in that area. My father's family, the Hayashis, had a dry goods store and on the second floor they had what we call today SRO—single room occupancy. Mostly they were all bachelors working here because the immigration laws didn't allow folks to bring their families over here. So he was born in Walnut Grove in 1914 and grew up there, went to school there, went to high school, graduated, was a member of the scholarship club, the CSF—California Scholarship Federation.

Redman: So your parents would have been about in high school in the 1930s.

1-00:04:53

Honda: Well—see—thirties—yes.

Redman: I'm wondering if your parents expressed any strong opinions later on toward some of the political events that were taking place in the 1930s. You'd mentioned immigration. I'm wondering the neutrality acts of the 1930s. That was a big deal for the Asian American community in the 1930s—if they had any strong feelings about those immigration acts?

1-00:05:18

Honda: The neutrality acts?

Redman: The immigration acts that were from about the early twentieth century all the way through the 1930s.

1-00:05:26

Honda: Oh some of the exclusion acts?

Redman: Yes, that's right.

1-00:05:28

Honda: They were targeting Chinese, and they were targeting Asians in general. But more than that I think it's the media, the print media, that probably fanned the flames of racism. The flames of fear—distrust—misinformation among the general public.

Redman: Did your parents talk about that sentiment growing up? That's not something that was discussed very much?

1-00:05:57

Honda: No, we didn't get that academic. But my father did mention a couple times the newspapers. So he was a well-read educated guy. When he went to high school he graduated, and then went to Japan to study more. He spoke Japanese but he was only bilingual, not biliterate. So he went to school there and graduated from Meiji at the university there. So when he came back, he was bilingual— biliterate.

Redman: How did he meet your mother?

1-00:06:34

Honda: They actually met in the province that we're from, Kumamoto, on the island of Kyushu. When my mother was— I said that she was young—they sent her back to Kumamoto to be with the family and the family business there. I think it was a small store. My father happened to be in that town where his father was born. You know small towns, they talk, and so he heard that there was some lady in town that spoke English because she was born in the States. So he sought her out. He wanted to speak English—she wanted to speak Japanese. So I think that's where the sparks started. Then they met again in California. My father was part of the Pan American Fencing Team, and he was—out of a team of eight I think he was the ninth. But she read his name in the papers and sought him out. So from there it's history.

Redman: They reconnected.

1-00:07:39

Honda: And I came about.

Redman: All right. Okay. So were you the oldest sibling?

1-00:07:44

Honda: I'm the first child.

Redman: You're the first child, and how many children did your parents end up having?

1-00:07:50

Honda: My mom had two boys and two girls. She had one that miscarried just prior to the evacuation. We found that out when I was a little older, but she said that—we—my brother and I were younger in Chicago and we were arguing and my brother said, "It's not fair you can't have two boys because when you take a

vote it's a tie. Mom, you should have had another one." She said, "You would have except I lost one when I was trying to earn more money to go to camp that in the cold grounds and everything like that, I miscarried." And we thought, "Oh, how sad."

Redman: Yes, that's an interesting story. I'd like to hear a little bit about—if you could talk about what your parents' lives might have been like before Pearl Harbor? Just immediately before Pearl Harbor—what their lives were like here.

1-00:08:52

Honda: Yes. They were a young married couple—had a baby that was not even a year old. My father was working as a truck driver and going to community college—Sac Community College [Sacramento City College]. And my mom, she helped around the store and she said that she worked in the fields to make extra money in preparation of the evacuation. But I think basically she was raising me and helping with the family—family business.

Redman: Did your parents talk about what their reaction was when they heard the news that Pearl Harbor had been attacked?

1-00:09:29

Honda: Well, my father used to tell me stories about his father. His father had a fledgling gas station business on the levy of the Sacramento River, and when the authorities came by they took his radio. They took other things—flashlights and gadgets like that. Then they came back and got his guns, and my grandfather thought that he heard that they would come back and get his cars and everything else like that. So he took his brand new pickup—took the wheels off and pushed it into the Sacramento River.

Redman: Wow.

1-00:10:13

Honda: He says, "If I can't have it, they can't have it." He was quite angry.

Redman: My follow up question was going to be, "How did it make him feel?"—if he talked about the anger or resentment that that must have brought on—

1-00:10:32

Honda: Yes, I think my grandfather was the one that was angry. So much so that he must have been uncooperative because they sent him to Tule Lake where usually you sent dissenters, and community leaders and things like that. I don't think my grandfather was a community leader, but he certainly did speak his mind. And my father would tell me those stories.

Redman: But your father was a little less like that it sounds like in terms of personality?

1-00:10:59

Honda: I think he was more concerned about keeping the family together and making sure that he understood what the hell was going on. He knew that the

evacuation was coming because he tried to do what we call a voluntary evacuation where you try to gather up enough gas coupons so you can drive out of the Western zone—didn't have enough so—they remained.

Redman: So he wanted to voluntarily evacuate out of the zone rather than going to a camp.

1-00:11:41

Honda: What might have been an exclusion, yes.

Redman: That's very interesting. But they didn't have enough gas rationing coupons at the time?

1-00:11:48

Honda: That's what he told me.

Redman: So it sounds like you—are there some legends or lore in your family or is there— when your father tells you something do you think that that's usually a pretty accurate story?

1-00:12:04

Honda: Yes, it's pretty accurate except for times he talks about going to school in the snow using bamboo stilts uphill, and coming home using bamboo stilts walking through the snow, uphill.

Redman: He can exaggerate on some of those stories. My next question then—it seems like this would be obviously a major crossroads in the lives of many Japanese families. Did your parents talk about their sort of feelings about being at that obvious crossroads of what do we do next for this family? What's the right step? What's the right approach? Then the looming executive order that I understand comes in February, not that long after Pearl Harbor. What did your family think and feel at that time that you know of?

1-00:12:56

Honda: I'm not sure. I think if I can sort of extend comments that I heard as I was growing up, certainly there was a lot of preparation for evacuation because they were told that they could only take what they can carry. Having worked with different Nisei groups when I was younger, in group dynamics, there were many young people who were teenagers at the time who blanked out. They just don't remember. These people were sixteen at the time, who blanked out. Once they left the house under guard, they don't remember a thing until they got to camp. And that's a good three, four, six months of time. It's a big time to blank out. So when we work with some of these folks, they decided to retrace their steps to see if they can recall.

It was pretty traumatizing because when you see soldiers with M1s or rifles coming to your house, you probably have no doubt that they might shoot you. Prior to that happening people in the neighborhood used to come through the

doors while the families were having a meal, and people would come barging in and making offers about how much they would be willing to pay for different knick knacks or family heirlooms or things like that. A lot of the families burnt a lot of their documents for fear of it being misunderstood. So a lot of treasures were lost.

Redman: Can you talk maybe for a moment about Japanese language training? I understand that that was a very important component for growing up for a lot of young people. For people who would have been maybe a generation older than yourself, they would have learned Japanese in California, maybe at a special school in addition to their English training during the week.

1-00:15:07

Honda: Yes. I think in this country it's a phenomenon with newcomers—whether they're Italians, or Germans, or Jewish—Chinese—they have their own community—their enclaves—for special reasons: one-security, two language, and they train with each other in a language that they understand in a cultural context. Notwithstanding the racist attitudes of general society towards these new immigrants, whether they're from Asia or from Europe, and that phenomena was no different in the Japanese American community. One of the things that people want to do is maintain language and culture. So they would send their kids to language school whether it's after school or on weekends. That happened right up to the time I was growing up. But with the youngsters these days it's met with a lot of resistance, and we just tell them, "You'll thank us later."

But my father grew up in the community, and they had no choice, they had to speak Japanese. So they were bilingual, but not necessarily biliterate. So a lot of the kids became young adults or teenagers, and were caught up in the evacuation. The Japanese language was not looked upon as an asset as of yet by the military or the government until they realized after getting into the war that there's nobody in our units that know how to speak Japanese.

"Oh, let's recruit them from the camps."

We took their rights away and we reclassified them as 4C's—enemy aliens. When they wanted to volunteer for the military, they were denied that. Then the government came back and drafted them.

Redman: I'd love to ask more a couple of follow up questions about your father's military service, but let's get back for a moment if we can to your family's story. When you left your home, did you go first to the Merced Assembly Center or to the Pinedale Assembly Center? Were you taken to an assembly center, and I'm wondering if maybe you can talk a little bit about what that experience was like before being sent to a camp?1-00:17:36

Honda: Yes, well, that all comes back from stories from our parents. Yes, we were evacuated from the valley to Merced Fairgrounds where the fairgrounds has been dedicated and set aside for historical purposes also. The people of Merced in that area were very concerned that that history is not forgotten and that it's laid out there very openly and very publicly. In most places the communities were sent to fairgrounds where they had to clean out horse stalls and set up homes there. So a lot of old people and a lot of babies had died because of dysentery and the kinds of things that happen when you're in unsanitary conditions. I guess it was a matter of three, four, five months that people were in that situation.

Redman: Did your parents relate that living conditions were very bad at that time?

1-00:18:41

Honda: No, not until recently when my mom started to recall.

Redman: Interesting.

1-00:18:48

Honda: Yes.

Redman: When you finally go to a camp you're pretty young, and one of the things that you've written about your life at the relocation camp was that it taught you that being Japanese in America was bad. That there's a stigma associated with who you are as a person and this identity is your understanding as a very small child can possibly understand what's going on around you. Can you talk maybe a little bit about that?

1-00:19:21

Honda: Yes. When you're growing up—we ended up in Chicago. My father ended up teaching Japanese language to Naval Intelligence at Northwestern. So he was sent to Chicago—he called us over and it's about that time I started to having memories. There wasn't a day that went by that people would call you names or you end up in a fight for—only because of who you are. Well, for me it was like a matter of course. I didn't really pin it down to being Japanese. It's just that people call you names and you're not supposed to put up with that, and you fight.

Right about that time I think a movie came out called *Go for Broke*—no there was another movie with John Wayne—*The Battle Hymn of the Republic*. I saw that three times in the movie—my father had to come and get me. When he got us—marching out in a dark aisle towards the light of the door—marching to the tune of *The Battle Hymn of the Republic*.

So after that—we always play war. But this time we said, “We'll be the good guys, and you be the Japs.” My father heard that, and I could hear his voice from the third floor of the apartment that he was visiting and he called my name out. It was like the voice of God, and I immediately said, “I didn't do

anything.” He said, “Come up anyway,” and he explained to me what the word Jap meant and he said that those are not good words. So you know you have to—

Redman: Starting to get a little understanding there as a small child.

1-00:21:18

Honda: Yes. That’s when you start internalizing the negativity, and then you start to recognize that you are an Asian. You start to realize that some of your friends who are blacks are blacks. So those kinds of things start to become more conscious. So how you’re given information and misinformation starts to build up, and when you internalize these kinds of things that’s negative, you either fight it or you fight. We did both.

Redman: Can you talk to me a little bit about what the other kids were like in camp? What do you remember about the other children?

1-00:22:03

Honda: Don’t remember a thing. I don’t even remember having my diapers changed.

Redman: Yes, right.

1-00:22:09

Honda: If I were a national security risk, it would have been my diapers.

Redman: Let’s talk then for a moment about your father who I understand is drafted and then goes into the Military Intelligence Japanese Language Training Programs as an instructor. He goes to Boulder first, is that correct, to the University of Colorado?

1-00:22:32

Honda: Well, I think when the military and the government found out that they needed folks who could speak Japanese they said, “Of course, we know where they are.” So they went there to the camps and started to recruit folks with language skills. Most of them may not have been bi-literate, but my father was. So they would take the folks who had the strongest language skills and trained them in different training arenas, and use them overseas or as code breakers. Much like the novels were used as code breakers. But my father, since he was educated both in language, written and spoken, they recruited him. The MIS asked him if he wanted to work at the language center at the Boulder—University of Colorado Boulder. I guess they interviewed him, and they offered him a position there to teach Naval Intelligence at the University.

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I just recently found out that there was a little contract they gave him that he was compensated \$24—I think a month. In those days that was quite a bit of money because when you were in camp you were making sixteen to nineteen cents an hour.

Redman: So there were a few occupations that someone could have in camp, but they were very low paid, is that correct?

1-00:24:08

Honda: Oh, yes. It would have been better if you were indentured.

Redman: Right. It was not a pleasant productive system for—

1-00:24:18

Honda: One of the attitudes was that I think the young people, especially, wanted to get out of the camps, and they would do most anything. That area was mostly agriculture, so a lot of the folks had skills in truck farming. So they helped start an industry in and around Granada—Amache Camp [Colorado]—where they showed the farmers how to raise different vegetables. It became quite lucrative—

Redman: I understand your father is eventually transferred to Northwestern, and then you family follows him out to Chicago, is that correct?

1-00:24:58

Honda: Right.

Redman: But before we turn to that, do you have any memory at all of police or armed US Army guards patrolling or guarding the camps? Do you have memory of that?

1-00:25:10

Honda: Well, I used to have dreams, and a couple of dreams were of camp and I would share these visuals that I had when I was sleeping. My mother would just stop eating and look at my father and said, “Uh, what a strange kid.” What I shared was accurate. They remembered some of those incidences. I think I remember things because my father had described it well. When we were transferred from Merced to camp— we were put in trains—by the soldiers under rifles. When we got into the train they would pull the shades so you wouldn’t know where you were going. And if you’ve seen movies of the Holocaust it’s kind of similar, except we didn’t have gas chambers like they did. But it was still the sense like you didn’t know where you were going, and you’re in a train for a couple of days and then you end up in Colorado.

But the stories my father used to tell me was that, “If we were sent to internment camps for our own protection,” he used to say all the time, “Then you have to ask the question, why were there barbed wires with the machine gun posts pointing their machine guns inwards, and not outwards?” I don’t know. He told me stories about where they were playing baseball and the ball went out beyond the gates, and the guards would just yell at the person going after the baseball beyond the gates and were being told to come back or they’d be shot. Now I don’t know if this person was shot when my father was telling me this story, but there have been instances where there had been violence in

the camp. So it was not—a peaceful place. But for really old folks who worked all their lives on the farm, it was a time of respite. They didn't have to work very hard. Except maybe—beautify their own areas in the camp.

Redman: I get the sense that a lot of people used outlets then in art and music, and I'm wondering if—you would have been very young to remember, but maybe even things like encouraging kids to finger paint. Whether or not there would have been supplies to do something like that? Versus—or music in terms of group singing or anything like that, do you recall anything along those lines?

1-00:28:00

Honda: No.

Redman: You mentioned baseball, too.

1-00:28:05

Honda: I was one year old, then we were out of camp. Then I grew up two years, outside of camp, when my father called us to the university area. So you'd have to talk to people who were teachers or young teens at the time.

Redman: Then would you talk about what it was like then to arrive in Chicago—did you live in Chicago or Evanston near the University?

1-00:28:34

Honda: No, not near the Northwestern University, we lived about four blocks from Chicago—University of Chicago.

Redman: University of Chicago, I see.

1-00:28:43

Honda: Down in the Hyde Park area.

Redman: So down in the south end of the city. What was that like for a young kid then suddenly to be in a brand new city with your father teaching in this program? Was that confusing?

1-00:28:56

Honda: Well no, because—like I said that was probably the time of my first recollection of who I was—what was I doing. Sitting on the curb in Chicago looking at four or five Harley Davidsons, they were hogs, gear shifts on the side. Not wanting to tip them over because the guys are big monsters that owned them. But I do recall my father working at a co-op store first as a cashier, then as a bookkeeper, then the assistant manager there.

Redman: Did your father talk about any of his students and what they were learning and what they were like?

1-00:29:40

Honda:

Occasionally, but mostly he showed us pictures of his class—the officers in their uniforms—and my mother told me that during— while they were in Colorado, even in Chicago, that he would invite some of the students to come over to the house and practice Japanese with him and my mom. My mom would be cooking, and they would converse. But that's about it. He made some longtime friends through his work and through the teaching experience.

Redman:

Can you talk—now I'm asking you maybe to shift caps a little bit from your own personal experience to now someone who years later is known as a Japanese American [US] Representative. Do you have particular thoughts on the 442nd Regiment Combat Team, and if you could share some of what your father has maybe told you about what their war service was like in comparison to his own time in the service.

1-00:30:53

Honda:

Yes, well, my father would tell me that he's not supposed to say anything about his experience for fifty years. That was a rule that was broken. But he would encourage us to learn other things. When the movie *Go for Broke* came out, I think in the late forties with Van Johnson and some of the Japanese actors that [were] in there, that was the first time I've ever seen Asian faces on the screen which was pretty cool. And there was a lot of humor in it in terms of stature, language, or intra-Italian fights between Hawaiians and the Mainland. But they also emphasized how they coalesced together when the Hawaiians found out that their parents, the Mainland parents, were in camps because they would take them to the camps and visit. To Hawaiians that was kind of a big shock because they didn't have camps that they knew of in Hawaii. So my uncles would come and visit us, and they had their uniforms on. I don't think they belonged to the 4-4-2 though—yeah. But they were in the armed services.

Redman:

This is something you've written about a number of times and very eloquently comparing the demonization of Muslim Americans in our society today to what the Japanese experienced during World War II. I'm wondering if we can use that maybe as a starting point for you to reflect on how this experience that you had as a very small child shaped your political world view that you have now today. How has it shaped you as a political figure, do you think?

1-00:32:51

Honda:

Well, when I think about the difficult times my parents had raising us and the frustration they must have felt in their lives, and not being able to pursue what I think what they had dreamed of doing, and having to survive and keep the family together— put food on the table and things like that. Having not really understanding the racism that they had to put up with—as an adult I think about it and I can sort of process that. But as an adult when 911 [September 11, 2001] happened, it's an immediate sense that we have to make sure that the kinds of reaction the government had in '42, '41 or '42, is not repeated. When we did the Reparations Act of 1988, many people felt that this will

never happen again, that America has learned its lesson. Some of us said, “Well, we’ll see.”

And having been in Congress now for my twelfth year—Congress has an interesting cycle of making mistakes, acknowledging them, sometimes apologizing, sometimes not. But since 9-11 Congress has made all kinds of efforts to look like they’re being patriotic. But there are special interests that use fear, race, religion as to achieve some of their own political ends. Many of them are not unlike McCarthy during the fifties where they would use that as political fodder, and to me that unconscionable—to vilify and victimize whole groups of people and whole religions like the Muslims. But in our country a lot of people don’t make a distinction between groups of people, and just racial stereotyping and profiling. We should know better as Congressional members. But then I guess we all come from different parts of the country, having different experiences, having different agendas and—

Redman: What was your viewpoint on the Redress Movement as that was happening? This would have been before you became a Congressman, but—

1-00:35:39

Honda: Sure. This happened in the mid-seventies, and there are five young people and a fellow by the name of Dr. Edison Uno, who used to teach at the Med Center in San Francisco on Parnassus. He led the five young people in the National Japanese American Citizens League [JACL] convention to start the debate on seeking redress from our government, not based on loss of monetary because that happened twice, but based upon the civil rights that were violated. It was a big battle in our community, and a big debate in our own community, but over time it caught on and by the end of that convention—three days—the decision was to make it an agenda item in the next biennium. During that time Edison had passed away, but the spark has been lit and the fire started. People had to be convinced in our own community that this was a righteous fight.

Redman: What role at this time were you playing at that stage? Were you observing this, or were you playing a role in this stage in the seventies and eighties?

1-00:36:57

Honda: I was one of the five young men.

Redman: All right. So you were part of this coalition to move that forward?

1-00:37:04

Honda: To create the first dialogue, the first debate, yes.

Redman: Okay. Tell me then your viewpoint on how that moved forward, how that was ultimately executed and the meaning of the redress movement as that came to pass.

1-00:37:21

Honda:

There are some people who just immediately got it and understood what it meant to get an apology based upon the violation of civil rights—communities in Seattle, in Portland, Northern California. There are other communities that just said, “Let the sleeping dog lie. Don’t wake him up again. It’s water under the bridge. It’s going to create too much attention to us again.” But over time people started getting convinced as the righteousness of the effort, but then they are overwhelmed about getting Congress to do this. So when we had people like Norm Mineta, who was a Congressman, Bob Matsui, Patsy Mink, Spark Matsunaga from Hawaii. We had Senators like Inouye. They helped move the agenda through with a lot of help from other Congressional members on both sides of the aisle. So they created a commission that held community meetings across the country that were pretty powerful. It moved the commission to recommend that they move forward with a bill for an apology and reparations. The commission concluded their study by saying, “The causation of the incarceration and evacuation was based upon racial, war hysteria, racial prejudice and the lack and the failure of our political leadership.”

And it’s that piece that sort of becomes my cornerstone. If I’m in Congress that I’ll be damned that this thing happens while I’m there, and that you can’t remain silent. So speaking up as quickly as possible, and being a spokesperson for those who don’t have a voice in Congress, is a necessity.

Redman:

I’d like to end with one last question. We just experienced a really important anniversary, and I notice that on the anniversary here of FDR signing of Executive Order 9066, that your father was recognized with a major award from Congress. In recognizing this Congressional Medal, it seems like that was an opportunity to reflect for you and your family on this experience, and I’m wondering if maybe we could sort of summarize or wrap up here by asking if you can talk about what those feelings were over the last few weeks.

1-00:40:25

Honda:

Sure. Well, there’s a Congressional Gold Medal that members of Congress can propose. Adam Schiff from LA [Los Angeles]—Pasadena area—had a group called the ‘Go for Broke Group’ who worked with them to initiate the Congressional Medal recognition for those who were in the 100th Battalion, the 442nd Combat Regiment and the MIS. The MIS was the last one to be recognized because it was very popular for the 4-4-2 to receive the most attention, and as they should. So it took about a year and a half, two years, for the resolution the bill to get through. President Obama signed it, and so that initiated the three Gold Medals to be hung and displayed in the Smithsonian.

There’s replicates for every surviving members of the 4-4-2, the 100th and MIS. So those members who are still alive received it—the spouses of the members that passed away or the next of kin—which would be me. I accepted on behalf of my mom and dad in DC [District of Columbia]. Here in San Jose

she'll receive it from Zoe Lofgren, and myself on behalf of her husband—my father. The significance is that a lot of the folks who have not seen each other for decades got to see each other for a while in DC. One gentleman passed away right after the Opening Ceremony—went to his room and he passed away, but his family said this is fine because he was with his comrades.

They gave them a place where they could relive their experience among themselves because they don't normally share what it is that they went through. They don't think that they're heroes, even though they were the most highly decorated combat regiment of that size that they received. But it just shows that I guess when communities are challenged to prove that they're Americans, many of them will step forward to do it.

There were some groups in camps, we call them no-no boys—draft resisters who said, "We will allow ourselves to be drafted only after you return our parents back to their homes and restore their constitutional rights. Otherwise, we resist the draft." Now they were as right as anybody, technically, and yet they need to be the next group to be recognized as to their steadfastness on their belief about the principles of the Constitution. They served hard time, and they don't make noise about it. But I think that as a community we need to bring people back together because there was a lot of tension and division between those who supported the draft resisters and those who supported the 4-4-2. They were both right. So we can't have our community slowly bleed with an unnecessary wound.

Redman: Can I ask—[do we have enough] time for one more question? Can I ask how you think that this history is either being remembered or not being remembered in terms of how we are today? In terms of historians talking about it or teaching about it to young children, and then also the efforts of the National Park Service to preserve [internment] camps as historical sites? You also mentioned that the Assembly Center was a historical monument. Can you talk about what our successes and failures are in that in terms of preserving memory?

1-00:44:48

Honda:

Yes. I think basic human contact is probably key. The reason we got the monies for the Park Service—it was a thirty-eight million dollar grant program that a fellow by the name of Bill Thompson—Bill Thomas who was the Chair of the Ways and Means [The Ways and Means Committee in Congress] a few years back. I mean, he was a tough guy. If he didn't get his way he was mean, and that was his reputation. But when he was an Assemblyman, his roommate was a fellow by the name of Floyd Mori, who eventually became head of JACL—Japanese American Citizens League. As Assembly people they roomed together, and he shared his story with Bill. It just affected him so much that all through those years by the time I got there there was a need to preserve whatever physical representation of camps, or relocations, or assembly centers—to preserve them and use them as

instructional material. They went to Bill and asked him if he would do this bill. Then they came to me and asked me and I said, “Yeah, that sounds good.” But the author is going to be Bill Thomas and I said, “Oh, of course, Chairman of Rules Committee, are you kidding me?” I mean Chairman of the Ways and Means Committee. Some of his own colleagues would try to take the money out of that bill, and rules, and people panicked and he says, “Let me take care of it.” He went in and in about ten minutes he came out. “It’s done.” And the bill passed.

And so our community has, and other communities who are currently living near those areas, have an opportunity to preserve using the grant money. So those are positive things. The other is an opportunity for our community members to teach. It’s an opportunity for our community members to recall, revisit, and reconstruct what it is that they went through because a lot of things went unsaid. So there’s a lot of material there for the American experience and what happens to people.

It didn’t only happen to Japanese Americans in this country. It happened to Italian Americans, but they weren’t wholesale evacuated. But they were victimized, and so were the German families—were made to come out in the middle of the night and pledge allegiance to the flag. Pretty humiliating stuff— only because of their ethnicity— and that has to stop. It’s a lesson that needs to be taught and retaught every generation because you skip a generation.

1-00:48:01

Honda:

Because when I have hearings in Congress on the Day of Remembrance, we do have a very soulful testimony from people who were German Americans who were deported with their families to Germany not knowing the language and also facing a lot of danger. So in terms of immigration, and refugees, and asylum, those things are really real. So as a policymaker, as a Congressional member, it’s easy to understand that quickly— to find ways to provide the refuge for these folks—places where they can feel safe. And it’s a constant battle among my own colleagues, and it will always be as long as there’s a gap in our instruction. We have bilingual education here and we talk about Latinos. But that battle was waged with the Italians and the Irish and the Jewish folks on the East Coast. But we never learned it. We never used that as instruction. But it’s buried in a lot of documents that you have to find. The same rhetoric—the same demands by parents for their kids.

Redman:

By way of conclusion, is there anything else that you’d like to add about your experiences during World War II and your earliest memories of your family’s experiences and what you’ve been told about your family’s story during World War II?

1-00:49:57

Honda:

Well, I think the lesson that needs to be applied is if we're truly going to be a country that lives up to the problems of the Constitution, one is that we always need to remember that we're not a perfect nation. The drafters of the Constitution knew there was imperfection, even among themselves, and the arguments they had about drafting a Constitution that would allow them to rule. It took them over ten-twelve years to get all of it ratified. But the proof of the pudding that, they understood, that it was imperfect. Even in its genesis.

They had that phrase in the Constitution that said, "In order to form a more perfect union, we hold these things to be self-evident, that there are inalienable rights, life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." And they threw in ten amendments, the Bill of Rights, and that became the genesis for this experiment of evolving a country with all its potholes and all its poxes.

The genocide of Indian country—the vilification of all new immigrants—the myth of an American has to be a certain prototype—and the effort of all minorities who tried to force themselves to look like that—to behave like that—to a more diverse understanding of that. Beauty, sexuality, leadership, could come in all forms. We just have to allow it to happen. The bottom line is to have the true equity for each child to get an education that really is self-motivating and nurturing. So that we become a country of citizens that will be knowledgeable, and have the strength of purpose to say no in spite of what the popular belief may be. I think that's key, being able to tack into the wind, and do the right thing.

Redman:

With that I'd like to thank you very much for sitting down and doing an oral history with us.

[End of interview]