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John Nagao Tomita

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Interviews conducted by
David Dunham and Candice Fukumoto
in 2013

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John Nagao Tomita

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Interview 1: July 25, 2013

Begin Audio file

Fukumoto: So if you could state your full name, place of birth.

01-00:00:09

Tomita: Oh, yeah. Nagao John Tomita. Yeah, with the English name John, when we were in the fourth grade we were playing baseball and everybody started picking an English name for the fourth grade. I said, "Oh, I think I like John." So the John sort of stuck with me all the way. Yeah.

Dunham: And when and where were you born?

01-00:00:41

Tomita: Oh, I was born on August 10, 1920. Nineteen twenty, in a farm, at a farmhouse. My father was farming at that time, and he was getting ready to move into town, but I was born out there in the farm. There's Isleton Bridge. In our area, the Bureau of Reclamation went to the Sacramento Valley and San Joaquin Valley and started dredging all of the—well, it was a swampland, I guess. Then they made levee. So all around Isleton is island that the Bureau of Reclamation made the island out of it. So the river water is above our land, because they took the soil from the island, put it up on the riverbank to make the levee so the river could flow over here. So the river water was above. Along our house, I remember, all you have to dig a foot or so, the water comes out, because the water table was high. We're in the delta area.

Dunham: Could you tell us about your family and/or grandparents' background and how they migrated?

01-00:02:29

Tomita: Yeah, well, actually, our generation, the second generation, we didn't have grandparents. All the grandparents, they were in Japan. So I always thought that, now that I have my own children and I have my grandkids, we really missed the grandparents. But we grew up as such. But Isleton, it's country, it's a small town. There's actually nothing there. Nothing but farmland. But it was a good place to grow up, because oh, gosh, the whole summer, we spent our times at the river. My family had a restaurant, and they were busy keeping the store running. And the kids, we were roaming all over. During the summer, in the morning you'd just have breakfast and you leave home, and we don't come home till that evening because we were fishing and eating wild berries and whatnot.

Gosh, I remember a lot. It's a very rich soil. It used to be, they called around Isleton the asparagus center of the world. So every year, they have a asparagus festival there. But there was all kind of fruits the farmers were raising. I remember one of the fellows found out there's a cherry tree in that pear orchard about a mile from the town, so we all went there. We made sure nobody was there, and the cherries were ripe. Oh, we climbed the tree and just

eating away. Then we hear somebody hollering, and then a shot went up. I don't think he shot at us, but he just shot at the air. I know I was at the top of that tree eating the cherries, and when I heard that shot, boy, I just slid down the tree. All the guys that were around me, they were already ten yards ahead of me. But boy, I remember I just passed them up.

Dunham: You were fast.

01-00:05:31

Tomita: I passed them up and got to the—there was a big hole under the Isleton Bridge, and that's where we were going to hide in. Boy, I was the first one there. Boy, I didn't know I was that fast, but when I heard that shotgun, boy, nothing will stop me. Here I was, at the top of the tree, eating away. The cherries were good!

Dunham: Yeah. The group of friends that you were playing with and running around, was it mixed? Were they all Asian, or were there whites?

01-00:06:07

Tomita: All Japanese.

Dunham: All Japanese?

01-00:06:10

Tomita: Yeah, Japanese, right. I don't know, at least a dozen kids about my age group. Yeah, we used to hang out together. Then summertime, oh, we fished together. We don't go home for lunch or anything; we just eat the wild berries along the river. Oh, those blackberries were good! Yeah. During the summer, it's a striped bass, really, and during the summer, when the striped bass start hatching, then you see the whole river of fishing jumping up. That's the baby striped bass. It seemed like it's millions of them. Yeah. You're not supposed to catch any striped bass under twelve inches. Yeah. That was a law. It's against the law, to preserve the fish. But we used to catch it, and we'd just eat it right out there. We'd build the fire. But it was, I thought, a good place for a kid to grow up because we had all this opportunity.

Dunham: Oh, that sounds great. What was the school like?

01-00:07:46

Tomita: Oh, school came a lot later. I remember the first grade that we went to. Gosh, all the kids were crying. They want mommy, mommy. I was a tough kid, so I never showed my tears.

Dunham: And the school was segregated?

01-00:08:19

Tomita: Yeah, the school was segregated, yeah. Oh, at that time, as far as we were concerned, all public schools were that way.

Fukumoto: And your teachers were Caucasian? Or did you have any Japanese teachers while you were in school?

01-00:08:37

Tomita: No, it was all Caucasian, yeah. I still remember my first grade teacher. Oh, what was her name? Anyway, she was real nice.

Dunham: Aside from Japanese, what were the other students in your school?

01-00:08:56

Tomita: There's Chinese and Filipino.

Fukumoto: Did you all get along well?

01-00:09:01

Tomita: Oh, as far as I was concerned, yes, we did. In fact, in grade school, my best friend was Chinese. Lee Tim. He was my first race then, yeah. I kind of miss him now, but since I left Isleton to go to Berkeley, I lost contact with Lee Tim. Yeah.

Fukumoto: What was your relationship like with your parents?

01-00:09:33

Tomita: We didn't have any relationship. After elementary school, we walked to Japanese school. So we had Japanese school every day. Every day. So I didn't realize it, but when I went to Berkeley I was always curious why the elder Japanese always catered to us. Because we spoke Japanese so much. Then prewar days, Japanese movies used to come around, and I remember going to the movies. All the kids come to me. They want me to explain what's going on, because I understood and they didn't understand, because they spoke nothing but English, that's why. But I came from a community where we spoke nothing but the Japanese. I didn't realize it, but when I was in Cal, they thought I was a student from Japan, because I spoke English with a Japanese accent. So I said, "No way. I've never been to Japan."

At that time, see. I didn't visit Japan until after the war, when I was in my fifties. Yeah, fifties, 1970, when I was in my fifties. I wanted to go to Japan so bad that I helped organize a Boy Scout—my son was in the Boy Scouts, and the World Boy Scout Jamboree was held in Japan for the first time, in 1970. So I tried to get enough boys, and I requested BSA to sponsor a troop from America to go to Japan, because it would be the only chance that we have for our sons and kids to visit Japan. To be honest, when I think back at it, really, I was crazy. I went to different churches and tried to persuade the Boy Scouts to go to Japan. This was a real opportunity at that time. At that time, for one month's tour, I think it was only about \$70. One month, one month. That included your airplane and food and everything.

Fukumoto: Incredible.

01-00:12:59

Tomita:

Yeah. So I tried to encourage. So the troop that my son was in, they had about twenty boys signed up. As time goes, they started dropping out. My son was the only one that stuck it out. He was fifteen, and I'm still—. So we took forty boys to Japan. It was my first chance that I had to go to Japan, so I said, "I'm not going to go to the jamboree site. I'm going to leave you guys in camp and I'm going to take off." From the camp—it was near Fujiyama—from there, I went all by myself, back to Tokyo and took a flight to Hokkaido.

Fukumoto:

That's where your family is from? Are they from Hokkaido?

01-00:14:11

Tomita:

No. My father and mother came from Kyushu, the southern part of Japan. But I wanted to see. I read so much about the Ainus, and I wanted to visit their camp. And I was determined to do it. So it was my first trip to Japan. In those days, back in the seventies, no agents were handling any tours to the northern part of Japan, so I had to go on my own. I did all right. I had real good times up in the northern part of Japan.

Fukumoto:

Oh, that sounds fantastic!

01-00:15:06

Tomita:

Yeah. Yeah.

Dunham:

It reminds me you were always a bit adventurous, because I'm thinking back now, to bring it back to when you first came to Berkeley as such a young man. What led you from Isleton to Berkeley?

01-00:15:20

Tomita:

I don't know. To this day, I don't know how my dad took me there. He just asked me, do I want to go to school in Berkeley? And I said yeah. Anyplace is better than Isleton. [laughs] I was ready to go. To this day, I don't know why I went. My dad took me to Berkeley, to his friend's place. I didn't even know the family, and I was supposed to stay with that family while I go to school. Gee, I didn't know there was a junior high school. In Isleton, there were no high schools, no nothing. It's just a grammar school. But in Berkeley, they had junior high school and high school.

Dunham:

So in order to continue your education at all, you would've had to have left Isleton.

01-00:16:19

Tomita:

Yeah, yeah. All the kids from Isleton, after they graduate grammar school, they go to the high school in the next town, Rio Vista. The high school was in Rio Vista. I was a pretty good athlete, and I noticed this coach, football coach from Rio Vista High School, during the summer he'd always come and see me in Isleton, and he'd want to talk to me. He always reminded me, "Be sure to come out for football from freshman year. You might not get to play much in freshman year," but by sophomore year, I'll get to play, "so be sure to come

out.” So I was all set to go to Rio Vista High School to play football. But a week before the school started, I went to Berkeley. I’d never been to Berkeley before, so it was my first venture out of town. I don’t know how my parents thought. I was only, what, fifteen, fourteen, fourteen and a half. Gee, when my kid was fourteen—I don’t see how my dad could’ve sent me over to Berkeley. Then he takes me out there, and he takes the family out to {China machee?}. It’s the typical Japanese. Yeah. Then after the dinner, he left. So I was all by myself out there.

Fukumoto: How often did you see your parents? Did you go back to Isleton to visit, or did they come out to Berkeley to visit, or was that it?

01-00:18:20

Tomita: Well, so during the break, during the spring breaks and summer vacations—but when I’d go home during the summer break and the summer breaks—I don’t know, I think my father had a lot to do with it; there’s always a job waiting for me. I was good with my hands. I’m driving a tractor in an asparagus field. I remember there was a job lined up for me. As soon as I get home, get back from Berkeley, the farmer’s ready to pick me up. So I go to the farm, and I’m working the whole week. Or the whole summer, I’m working. I never saw one paycheck. [laughter]

Fukumoto: So free labor.

01-00:19:23

Tomita: I often wondered when I’m going to get paid here. But my family used to send me \$15 or \$20, for my expenses at school. But that didn’t last long, \$15. Gee.

Dunham: Were you responsible for all your meals and everything, or the family you stayed with?

01-00:19:52

Tomita: Well, yeah, I was staying with a family. The first family that my father took me to, the friend’s place, they didn’t have the room, so they took me to another family’s place. They had a little cottage in the back, and I stayed there. But that was my loneliest time of my life. The thing that used to get me, I could hear the train whistle coming over the mountain, from the valley over the Berkeley Hills. I’d hear the train whistle at 9:15 or something. When I hear that train whistle, I couldn’t hold my tears back. I used to just jump in my bed and just—

Fukumoto: Cry?

01-00:20:50

Tomita: I cried. Yeah, and fell asleep that way.

Fukumoto: I would too.

01-00:21:01

Tomita:

A fourteen-year-old kid. I never left home. First time in my life I'm away from home. But I was determined to stick it out. I was just determined. "Somehow," I said. I learned to do my laundry. The lady showed me how to do the laundry, taught me how to iron the shirt. White shirt and corduroy were the fad of that time. Corduroy, we'd wash it and dry it. You always put that thing between your mattress, after you get it dry. That's how you don't have to press it. That lady there told me how to do that. And a white shirt, ironing a white shirt. I'd never done those things at home. My mother never—.

Dunham:

Well, what was school like in Berkeley? How was that adjustment from having been in Isleton?

01-00:22:13

Tomita:

Everything was new. I didn't know anybody. I just went there. I didn't know. But I look back at it now, Mrs. Harris, she was my algebra teacher, and she was my homeroom teacher. I look back at it now, she was my counselor in Berkeley for the first year. I didn't know. In Isleton, I never heard of all these courses they talk about. But somehow, I managed. Then Mrs. Harris, she was a really elderly lady, but she was very kind. She taught algebra there. She knew in the algebra class, I was one of the stop students in her class. So she guided me. She insists that I'm going to be an engineer. So you have to take this course and this course. So I thanked her and I took those courses. She went over to Berkeley High. She had all my courses set. I didn't do anything. I just followed what I have to take. I didn't even know I was going to go to Cal, in Berkeley. I didn't know I was going to go to Cal. I was just following Mrs. Harris.

Fukumoto:

But she knew exactly what you needed.

01-00:24:07

Tomita:

Yeah. Yeah. In fact, it never bothered me. It never bothered me. In the first semester, second semester, and on a spring break I worked out in the farm. And I drank the well water there. Then when I came back, I had typhoid fever. I never heard of typhoid fever. I couldn't go to school. I had to go to county hospital. I was out of school. They tell me I was out of school five weeks.

Fukumoto:

That's a long time.

01-00:24:56

Tomita:

Yeah. So when I came back, school was still going on. All the teachers, they were very kind. They knew I was sick, so they gave me the grade. Except this history teacher. I still remember Mrs. Green. She wouldn't give me that. She said all she could give me, at the best, is a D.

Fukumoto:

Oh, wow.

01-00:25:32

Tomita:

Yeah. But at first, she was going to give me an F. But the D. So I argued with her. I said, "It's not fair. Just because I was sick you can't put me down that far." Then she said, "Will you take a test now?" Take a history test. No preparation or anything, just take it. She said she'll give me the grade that I get on my test. So I took the test and I got 92 or something. But then Mrs. Green, she backs out. She says she can't give me an A. So I said, "At least give me an A-minus then." "No," she said, "no, you can't. You've been out too long." So I argued. Then she finally said, "Well, I'll give you a B-plus." That's all she could do. So I had to take B-plus.

Fukumoto:

Oh, man!

01-00:26:46

Tomita:

But it just happened that history and geography in grammar school, in Isleton Grammar School, was easy for me. I knew my history real well. So I wasn't afraid to take the test.

Fukumoto:

Wow. Well, that worked out.

Dunham:

What was the healthcare like at the time? What was your experience when you had typhoid fever? And did you see a doctor regularly?

01-00:27:14

Tomita:

Well, all I see, that doctor, I see him at the window. He'd just tap at the window and say hi, and so I'd say hi. I guess he could just look at the lab tests. Yeah. That's all I knew. That doctor, all he did was tap the window and say hi, and that's all. But I read a lot of books. They had a lot of books to read in the hospital. That's where I first read *Mutiny on the Bounty*. Was it *Bounty*? *Mutiny on the Bounty*, yeah. Yeah, I read that book twice, I enjoyed it so much. But I guess when I had the typhoid I read so many books. I really enjoyed reading. Yeah.

Dunham:

You mentioned being good at sports in Isleton. Were you able to play sports in Berkeley?

01-00:28:23

Tomita:

No. I wanted to play football at Berkeley High. You have to get a signature from your parents, because so many kids getting hurt, so you won't sue the school.

Dunham:

Oh, really?

01-00:28:42

Tomita:

Yeah.

Dunham:

You had that back then? I thought that was more a recent phenomenon.

01-00:28:46

Tomita: No. Anyway, this was back in the thirties. My dad wouldn't sign. He said, "No, you can't play football."

Dunham: What position did you play before?

01-00:29:01

Tomita: On the outside, they had a Japanese football team that I used to be halfback. Yeah. I liked that banging. [laughter] Yeah. Yeah, I really enjoyed it. But come to think of it, in those days, everybody was so big. Yeah. I'll tell you. I know our varsity team was bigger than the football team at the University. They was just that big, the Berkeley High football varsity team. Yeah, the Cal varsity averaged around, oh, less than 180. Well, Berkeley High School football team averaged over 300 pounds. They were *big* guys.

Dunham: Were they mostly Caucasian or other?

01-00:30:14

Tomita: No, it was black students. Yeah, they were big guys. Yeah. But when you live by the river, I learned to swim. So I went out for the swimming team.

Dunham: Okay. How was that?

01-00:30:37

Tomita: Gosh, when I started swimming, gee, the guys, they're good because they had training. I didn't have any training. I just fell in the river and learned to swim. Yeah. Gee, they said there was about 500 kids out for swimming team. And every gym period, they have time trial. If you can't swim below a certain time, you're out. So I kept on swimming. I wasn't sure I was going to make the team, but I finally did make the team. Yeah. So learning to swim in the Sacramento River wasn't bad.

Dunham: What was the ethnic makeup at Berkeley, in the schools, and how was it different from Isleton and being in an integrated school?

01-00:31:44

Tomita: The swimming team was all white. Yeah, that didn't bother me. I loved the sport so much. Yeah, the guy that I swam with—there's five guys make the smaller team, Circle B, and the varsity. I think there was only four guys on the varsity. They were all good kids. All the swimmers, they had private lessons. I didn't know they had private lessons.

Dunham: So how did you learn to swim, aside from the river, once you were starting to do competition?

01-00:32:36

Tomita: That's all I learned. Mr. Gose was the coach. He was the football coach, too, but he was the swimming coach. I guess there was the Olympics in 1932, and the swimming team from Japan, they took most of the first place. He always

told me that my kick was really good, because, you kick just like the swimmers from Japan. So he encouraged me to stick it out. So I stuck it out, and I made the team. Then to get the Circle B, you have to place in the Alameda County final. At least come in second, or you don't get the letter. So we came in second. I came in second, so I got my Circle B.

Dunham: Do you remember what event it was, what swimming event?

01-00:33:48

Tomita: I swam in the fifty-yard. Yeah.

Dunham: Fifty freestyle.

01-00:33:52

Tomita: Fifty free, yeah. Oh, gosh. I don't know. I look back it now, I don't know how I did it, because gee, after school, we spent a couple hours swimming. We'd paddle for a while and stroke. Gee. But I know my coach insists that my kick was good, so I practiced my kick a lot.

Fukumoto: Did you form good friendships with your other teammates?

01-00:34:39

Tomita: Yeah. With our teammates, we were very close. Yeah, we were very close, the swimmers were, because there's only five in the B team and five in the varsity. So we're close. We travel in one car. Yeah, I really miss those guys. Then in the senior year, I wanted to get the varsity letter, so I joined the varsity. Varsity, gee, all the swimmers are six footers, and I'm only five-four. They were good. We had good swimmers. Our varsity could compete in any college team. Yeah. Their time was good. But fortunately for me, the senior year, all of a sudden towards the end of the season, I could feel that I'm really swimming good. I felt that always, when I really go freestyle, I could feel that I'm floating on the water. Anyway, the coach put me in the relay team, and our relay team came in second.

[brief break in recording]

01-00:36:27

Tomita: That's my varsity letter.

Fukumoto: That's wonderful.

01-00:36:33

Tomita: I don't know, some of the people in Berkeley were telling me I was the first Asian to get a varsity letter in Berkeley High at that time, because Asians were too small to be in the varsity. No Asian ever got to get in the varsity team. They told me I was the first. But I don't know how true it was.

Dunham: Well, speaking of that, as an Asian athlete and being in Berkeley during this time, did you experience any prejudice during the sports time or in the broader school or when you were competing and traveling to other places?

01-00:37:22

Tomita: No. I felt myself that I shouldn't participate in certain things because I was a Japanese American. But from the outside, they didn't bother me. Yeah. In Berkeley High, I never knew so many rich people. My classmates, they go to vacation in Europe. I never heard of anybody vacation in Europe. These kids were going to Europe, and they'd go to New York. Yeah, but boy, that's why all the more, I learned that you can't compete with them. They were over my—but I didn't realize till a little later, but in Berkeley High, they called it XYZ section. They rate it according to your IQ, I guess. So if you're in the X section, you're in with all the brainy guys, smart guys. So if you're in the Z section, then you don't have to study so hard.

Dunham: Which section were you in?

01-00:39:17

Tomita: I didn't realize, I was in the X section. I used to complain. I used to complain a lot, because I used to get around eighty-five in my chem test, and a friend of mine get eighty-five or something. They're A in their class, but I get a B or a C. I thought that wasn't fair. But I could remember every one of the high school teachers. They were excellent teachers. But the kids were all smart too. Like my chemistry class. Gosh, Mr. Post, man, he was a tough guy. I had the morning class. Every morning I would go to the chem class; he's reading the paper. When he put the paper down and looked up, it's the test time. He doesn't even let you know you're going to have a test. He said, "Test time." Okay? Then he give you a test where we haven't studied yet. So everybody flunks. Then someday he would say he's going to have a test, or he does experiments, and we have fun and no test. We never knew what's going on. But it made us study. Made us study. I enjoyed my physics class, my math class. Oh, the teachers were tough. So that's why—I didn't realize it, but—if you're in the X section, as long as you got your A or B average, you automatically go into Cal. I didn't know that. There was about twenty-five Japanese-American in that class. That was a pretty good group.

Fukumoto: That's huge.

01-00:41:58

Tomita: But about the twenty-five, only two of us Japanese Americans went to Cal. The rest of them had to go to junior college or—

Fukumoto: So you feel Berkeley High prepared you well for Cal?

01-00:42:12

Tomita: Yeah. But at that time, I didn't realize it. I thought everybody was going to go to that school. When I went to Berkeley, it never dawned on me that I'm

headed to Cal. I guess my junior high school teacher Mrs. Harris knew that she wanted me to go to Cal, but I didn't think—a country kid that comes from a country like Isleton and goes to Berkeley. I don't even know the town. And during the summer, I'm never there in Berkeley.

Dunham: You mentioned going to Berkeley High as an Asian American, you sort of excluded yourself from certain activities. I'm curious, what kind of things would you not do?

01-00:43:10

Tomita: I kind of miss it now, but I don't know why I did it. One of the gals, a student, classmate, she always invite me to their gatherings. But I never went. The family owned a yacht. During the semester, they would always have a party on the yacht and she invites certain people. But I never went. But I wish I did, now. But I felt that I shouldn't go.

Fukumoto: Because they were so different from you?

01-00:43:58

Tomita: Yeah. Those kids were smart, they were rich, they were in a different class.

Fukumoto: Were they Caucasian?

01-00:44:19

Tomita: Yeah.

Fukumoto: Was it because of race, or did you not feel worthy?

01-00:44:28

Tomita: I felt that I've got to stay away from it. Living alone during the high school days, I'm working in a domestic, with a family. I do the help in the kitchen and washing dishes and clean up the kitchen and all that. They always gave me a room.

Dunham: Was that from the beginning, the first family you stayed with, or was that later that you started working?

01-00:45:07

Tomita: Yeah. The first year, when I started going to Berkeley High, I was working domestic. Berkeley High School had a employment office. They were very good. Any kind of job that you want. I guess the people would call in, and they want kids to come and work for them. I worked in a nursery. I did a lot of painting.

Dunham: And that was to make enough money just to pay for your living expenses, basically?

01-00:45:52

Tomita:

Yeah. Yeah. The way you would do it, in the country, you only get twenty-five cents an hour. But in Berkeley, whenever I'd go out to work, they'd give me fifty cents. Like this painting that I was doing, they didn't cheat me. That family gave me almost a dollar an hour. So I felt rich.

Dunham:

The painting work. But the domestic work didn't pay so well?

01-00:46:24

Tomita:

No, domestic work, no, they weren't that good.

Dunham:

Did you stop doing the domestic work at a certain point in high school, in favor of the better-paying?

01-00:46:35

Tomita:

Well, no. Once I get in, that's it.

Fukumoto:

So what was UC Berkeley like for you? Did you enjoy going to UC Berkeley?

01-00:46:56

Tomita:

Oh, as far as my concern at Cal, I'm always snowed under. You're going from one test to another test. Gee, the finals week, I hardly slept. Gee, I remember one semester, I didn't sleep for about three days. I don't know how I did it. But I know when I get home, I just kept—my mother used to come and wake me up because I'm sleeping too much.

Dunham:

Were you still working while you were attending Cal, or were you able to be a full-time student?

01-00:47:52

Tomita:

No. When I started going to Cal, I didn't have time to get into domestic, so I found a dormitory. Yeah. Gee, for about, I think, around \$18 a month for room and board. That was real cheap.

Dunham:

Was it a mixed—?

01-00:48:20

Tomita:

Oh. Yeah, they had a dormitory at the Buddhist Church on Channing Way; I don't know if—near Shattuck. Yeah, there's a Buddhist church, and next door, they had a dormitory for men. Yeah. I got in through there.

Dunham:

So it was all Japanese there?

01-00:48:44

Tomita:

Yeah, it was all Japanese.

Dunham:

Yeah. Did you know about, also the Japanese Student Club or Euclid Hall?

01-00:48:49

Tomita:

Yeah. All the rich guys go there. Yeah, that's why, why you called me, when you know all the guys that go to Japanese Student Club? Their families were rich and they could support them.

Dunham:

Yeah, well, we want to interview all folks, and you are a great storyteller and have a really interesting experience. But did you interact with them at all, or interact with other folks of various races on campus?

01-00:49:23

Tomita:

Yeah. Not that much. When I was going to Cal, I really didn't have time to socialize. It's all study and work. Somehow, I get the job. Gardeners want help; they're making new lawns in Moraga. Moraga was just developing then. Yeah. They need help to make a new garden, so they needed hard workers.

Dunham:

Well, I know you were always so busy, but did you do any dating in high school or college?

01-00:50:05

Tomita:

No. That never thought came to my mind. In fact, when we were in camp, some person that I don't quite remember, telling me, "Why didn't you ask me for a date?" In camp. Yeah. But I don't even remember the gal.

Fukumoto:

They remember you, though.

01-00:50:39

Tomita:

Yeah, they remembered me. I spoke to them at the Berkeley Library. I used to go to the library a lot. But somehow, I didn't have time. Yeah. I remember I only went to I think one dance in all that time I was there. Yeah.

Dunham:

Did you enjoy the dance you went to?

01-00:51:08

Tomita:

Yeah. Yeah, the dance was fine, but I got—this kid was from the city and he was too sharp for me. Yeah. I was sitting down and we ordered hamburger and we enjoy. Then this couple came. Then that couple ate and everything, and he walked out and didn't pay the bill. I got stuck with the bill. Boy, after that, I said, "No more." I can't afford to do that.

But I was fortunate that since I was there from the junior high school and high school days—there's a girls club in Berkeley. It's {Sherame's?} or something. I don't know whether it's still there or not. But they used to sponsor dances. I knew the gals from high school, so they always called me. If you have time, come on down. So I used to go down. Those days, they had the stag line and all. But I never liked to stand on the stag line. I was a little different. When I go to a dance, I want to dance. So I danced all night. Yeah, I love dancing. I always just would go there to dance. And the ladies always invite me because I don't stand in the stag line.

Dunham: What was the music like? What kind of music?

01-00:53:09

Tomita: Well, it's the music of that time.

Fukumoto: So big band music?

01-00:53:15

Tomita: Do you know, the hometown Isleton, nobody danced. Yeah, that town wouldn't allow dancing.

Fukumoto: Oh, my goodness.

01-00:53:24

Tomita: Yeah. So no young guys and gals, they don't—

Dunham: So how did you learn to dance?

01-00:53:30

Tomita: Well, before I left for Berkeley, there was one family—yeah, they were from the city, and they liked to dance, too. Every so often, they'd have a little party. They knew I danced, so they used to invite me. So I learned to dance from this lady. They were a little older than I was, but they invited me to parties, so I used to go to that. So that's how I learned dancing. So when I went to Berkeley, a lot of Japanese Americans in high school, a lot of guys, they don't go to dances. But I was dancing already. So the ladies used to invite me, so I'd go and I'd just dance away.

Dunham: Is this a Japanese group?

01-00:54:35

Tomita: Yeah. Yeah, Japanese.

Dunham: But you just kind of socialized on the dance floor; you didn't date outside of that?

01-00:54:42

Tomita: No, no.

Dunham: You mentioned going to the movies. Was that in Berkeley?

01-00:54:49

Tomita: Yes.

Dunham: What theater was that, do you recall?

01-00:54:53

Tomita: I can't remember. There was a theater right on Shattuck. Gosh, what is that? It's right next to the library. Yeah. I don't know whether it's still there or not.

Dunham: Yeah, there are a couple theaters right there, but I think they've changed over time. There's several that have come and gone in the last couple decades. But yeah, I'm curious. I'm a bit of a theater and movie buff, so that's why I asked. Let's see. Well, we're near the end of the first tape. Maybe just a couple other questions about UC Berkeley, and then we'll break. You mentioned, of course, it was extremely hard and demanding. What other things changed when you got to UC Berkeley? Were there things you were kind of awakened to in your studies that were transformative? Or how was it?

01-00:55:56

Tomita: Well, actually, since I was raised in the country, I wasn't aware of a lot of the things that were going on. I thought I had enough to do, and I was always busy. I know I was always looking for a job, part-time job. Yeah. But the job was the only thing that kept me in Berkeley, actually. If I look back at it now, I don't know why I was so—I liked to work. After camp, I know, gosh, I walked the street in San Francisco, get the first paper out, the morning paper, the *Chronicle*, and go down the job list, and then go to the place where they had the job. Gosh, the personnel man was always nice, but you'd never hear from them. Gee, I walked. I did that in Oakland, in Berkeley.

So when I went back to Isleton, I said—well, this changed my idea about working as an engineer. I felt that I had a pretty good experience in camp, because I had to do—the first year in camp, there was a lot of seniors and engineers that'd been working outside. The first year, they all left because there was jobs for them outside. Then when they left, I don't know, somehow they select me to take over, to be the leader of the survey crew. I wasn't afraid to do it. And I always liked to study. I don't know why. They want me to teach trigonometry or something in high school, there in camp. But I thought that I didn't have time. I'm always the student, or that Dr. Oppenheimer—he was a teacher at Tule Lake High School—he had a night course in anthropology, and I really enjoyed his class. See, the first year, they expand the camp, because of the segregation and whatnot.

Dunham: John, we're just about out of the tape, so maybe we could take a break and either start again, or we could come back, too. I'm sorry to interrupt, but we're just about to end so I want to make sure we start that with a fresh tape, okay?

Begin Audio file 2

02-00:00:00

Tomita: —a sister, who's married to someone there in Hilo, back in 1860 or something. I know my father said he was in Hilo back in 1896. He was the only son of seven sisters or something. He was supposed to go back to Japan; but instead of going back to Japan he said he just got on the boat and he landed in Seattle. So from Seattle, he worked himself down to L.A. Yeah. He always tells me, "There was a lot of Indians down here." All through California. He was amazed how the Indians were treated. He always felt that

the Indians wasn't fairly treated. I don't know how true it is, but he was telling me they used to gather the Indians and get them on the barge, and then they'd take them over to Catalina and they'd dump them there. Yeah. So he always said, "If you go down to San Pedro, in the evening, when the ocean breeze starts coming in," he said, "You could hear the Indians crying from Catalina." I don't know how true it is. But he always felt sorry for the Indians.

Fukumoto: Wow. Yeah. Definitely.

Dunham: Well, we can continue. Before we talk about the camp, you told me a story about when you were in college, on the phone when we spoke, about trying to preregister for the draft. I thought that was a really important story. I wonder if you could share that with us.

02-00:02:23

Tomita: Yeah. Even before the war started, they started drafting students and whatnot. My fellow classmates, they said, if you enlist in the service now, you could finish your college. Yeah. So I thought, well, if they could get away from the draft, I thought maybe I should try, too. So I went to the enlisting office, yeah, recruiting place. Boy, the sergeant, I still remember his face. He points his finger at me, he says, "You Jap, get the hell out of here." Yeah. Boy, that hurt me. But my father had a lot of friends in Isleton, so they tried to help me get drafted. But I found out I was too young yet; I was not draft age, so they couldn't help me. So when we went in the camp, we had to register. Then when we registered, we were classified 4-F. 4-F is undesirable alien.

Fukumoto: Oh, wow.

02-00:04:04

Tomita: Yeah, undesirable alien. Then after a year, they classified me 1-A. But they never called me. I don't know why, but they never called me. I found out later that Judge Hamilton, who was a good friend of my father, I found out that he was one of the board members of the draft board. So maybe that's the reason they didn't call me. Mr. Hamilton knew that I tried to get in but they won't let me.

Dunham: You were speaking about your father's background, coming from Hawaii. I'm curious, when did your father and mother meet?

02-00:05:05

Tomita: Well, I understand my father—he never went back, actually, except in 1915 or something. All the young men over here were getting married, and there was a period of picture-bride time. My father was not interested in picture bride, so he went back to get married. That was around, let's see, 1918 or something, yeah. Then when he married my mother he was told he can't leave. Stay in the farm now, out there in {Komomoro?}. Yeah.

See, my father's parents owned land, so they never worked. All they do is they lease it out and the farmer works, and then they pay it back by the rice crops. So the family crest that they have—all Japanese have a family crest—my family Tomita crest is a shack and three bales of rice. Three bales of rice, yeah. If I tell that to people who are aware of family crests, they don't believe it. [laughter] Yeah. But they were farmers, so that was—. In 1970, when I took the Boy Scouts to Japan, the jamboree, I visit my father's family. So my father was the only son of the Tomita whatchamacallit, so he's supposed to have inherited that land and the property. So I'm the oldest son, so I'm supposed to inherit that land. So my father asked me if I'm going to go back to Japan, and I always told him no. So he says, well, he says he's going to get rid of it. Yeah, I think it's a good idea to get rid of it while you're alive. So he sent a letter to Japan, telling them to—there was, I think, three sisters or something left there and put the property in the sister's name so that they won't bother about—see, after the war, I understand [General Douglas] MacArthur made all the property owners distribute the land away. MacArthur didn't want one family to own too much property; he wanted to distribute. So he told the Japanese people that they have to. So my father, at the time—we were now in LA—he said, yeah, they told the family to distribute among the sisters.

But in 1970, when I went to Japan, they thought I came to take over the land. So all the male family of that area, they disappeared. They thought I came back to reclaim the land. But my father's youngest sister was still alive at that time, so I talked to her, and she insists that I've got to stay because my father never came back. Yeah. I don't know, I remember in 1970, when I first went there, all the male part of the family, they disappeared. But I felt it's good that my father did that, because I don't think I could live there.

Dunham: It would've been a big adjustment at that time.

Fukumoto: Right.

Dunham: All your life here. Well, I'm wondering back. You're a UC Berkeley student in the fall of '49. Do you remember—the fall of '41, excuse me—when you first heard of Pearl Harbor?

02-00:10:25

Tomita: Yeah. At that time, we couldn't believe it. It seemed like a movie or something. Yeah. The war seemed so unreal. But when my fellow students started saying that they better enlist because they're going to draft you before you get out of school, that's when I first realized I better. You know, it's funny; that summer before the war started, I went to the—and here the American soldier already knew. He's telling me, "You Jap, get the hell out of here." He was a mean sergeant. I felt like fighting there.

Fukumoto: So even at that time you're a student, and you then end up in Tule Lake. Is that right?

02-00:11:52

Tomita: Yeah.

Fukumoto: Can you tell us the story about that road to Tule Lake?

02-00:11:58

Tomita: Well, yes. After the war started, everybody that were out of this town, they all came back. Nobody knew what was going to go on. I remember they had a big meeting at the church. I was a student then yet. So I spoke up, and I said, "I'm not going to leave." Next thing I know, gosh, I don't know where these guys came from, but they came and picked me up and took me outside and threw me.

Dunham: Soldiers?

02-00:12:56

Tomita: No. No, Japanese American. Boy, they were big guys. I'd never seen those guys before. But boy, they came in and picked me out of the aisle and boy, they just yanked me out. Boy, I'd never seen so many big guys pulling on me. But they took me outside and—bang—threw me out in the—. They told me, "Don't come back in."

Dunham: Wow. From just having said you weren't going to leave?

02-00:13:33

Tomita: Yeah. Yeah.

Fukumoto: So they just maybe thought you were threatening? Or they were just fearful for their lives? Or they thought that you were too outspoken?

02-00:13:47

Tomita: They didn't say a word. They just picked me up. Boy, those guys were big. Most Japanese, they're not that big.

Fukumoto: Right.

02-00:13:59

Tomita: Well, these guys were *really* big. I don't know where they came from. But boy, they picked me up and took me out and threw me on the lawn and said, "Don't come in."

Fukumoto: Wow. So what happened after that?

02-00:14:15

Tomita: The reason I had to come home is that my dad, they said the Army's going to pick him up. So I couldn't believe it, but he started calling me often, so I went

back home. Then yeah, there was two guys in a car, parked across the street. They sat out there all day, watching our store.

Fukumoto: You don't know who those men were?

02-00:15:02

Tomita: No.

Dunham: Because your dad was a leader in the community?

02-00:15:09

Tomita: No. The only thing I knew, that he was a leader in—in Isleton, we had a Sumo team, and he encouraged the Sumo team. He sponsored them. Financially, he sponsored the team.

Dunham: Did they ever come question or search your parents' property?

02-00:15:42

Tomita: No. They just stay out there and sit out there. I don't know how they could do it, but they parked the car every morning, and then just stare all day long. Yeah. So we expected that they'll pick up my father, so we better get ready. We started moving on. We had a restaurant, so we started moving all of our stuff into the one back room. We had it stored all the way up the ceiling, all the things in the family whatchamacallit. So we were expecting to go to camp or someplace, yeah.

Fukumoto: So do you remember where you were sent before Tule Lake?

02-00:16:54

Tomita: Yeah. We went to a assembly center near Sacramento. What did they call—? Walerga. Yeah, Walerga was a camp near Sacramento, assembly center. We got on the bus in Isleton. But there was time. Gee, I don't know how the sequence went, but I knew the time that I thought they were going to pick up my father—that's right, they picked up my uncle. I don't know why they picked him up. Yeah, they picked him up, that's right. Since they had that car parked across the street, we thought for sure, they're going to pick up my dad. But they never picked him up. Then the day came we have to get on the bus, and we went to Walerga, Camp Walerga. Yeah. At Camp Walerga, we have to make our own mattress. We have to put straw in, to make our own mattress. There was nothing to do. I remember the kitchen needed help. Since we had a restaurant, in the kitchen, they're always sharpening the knife on that steel thing. They go like this to sharpen the knife. I knew how they were doing that, so I went into this kitchen and I picked up the whatchamacallit and the knife and I started sharpening. He said, "You're hired." [laughter]

Dunham: This is at the assembly center?

02-00:19:26

Tomita:

Yeah. Yeah. So I had a job, kind of cutting up the meats. I didn't know, so I asked them, "Well, what size you want?" "Half an inch." I said, "Okay." I start slicing the meant half an inch. I didn't know if it was half an inch or what.

Fukumoto:

Do you remember how long you were in the assembly center?

02-00:19:52

Tomita:

Oh, gee, it seemed like we were there about two or three months. Yeah, we were there quite a while. Then Tule Lake was ready. So then when Tule got ready, then we all got on the train and went to Tule Lake.

Dunham:

So you're sleeping on a straw mat. How many of you? In a very small space?

02-00:20:13

Tomita:

Yeah. It was about this size, the bed was. So we had to make straw mats. But I don't know. I slept well.

Dunham:

Did your family have to leave behind all those belongings that they put in that room?

02-00:20:32

Tomita:

Yes.

Dunham:

And was there anyone protecting them, or what happened?

02-00:20:37

Tomita:

No. Yeah, when we came back, it was all gone. Yeah, my dad had took over a garage, too. He loaned money to this family and they couldn't pay, so he took over this garage. Gee, he put a lot of money into that place, buying new tools and whatnot. Yeah, my dad was quite a businessman. Boy, I don't know where he had the money, but he bought tools. Then he found a mechanic—I think it was a Hawaiian guy—and hired him.

Fukumoto:

So your whole family gets sent to Tule Lake?

02-00:21:34

Tomita:

Yeah.

Fukumoto:

Can you tell us about what that experience was like?

02-00:21:40

Tomita:

Actually, everything was new and looked like we were on some trip. We didn't know from day to day, what was going to happen. No one knew. They hardly gave you any information, so you had to find out for yourself. So we used to roam all over the place. I found the kitchen and they're cutting meat, so I went in there and just sharpened the knife on the steel hard. That's how I had a job.

Fukumoto: So at Tule Lake, too, you just started to work.

02-00:22:29

Tomita: Yeah, Tule Lake, after I sort of finished up making furniture and whatnot, I went to the employment office. They're looking for a surveyor that could handle the instruments, transit. I said, "Yeah, I'm familiar with it." So I was hired. The first job I had was with an engineer in Tule Lake. There was a lot of activity going on, as I remember.

Dunham: So as an engineer, you had done surveying; and then were you helping them build and design?

02-00:23:16

Tomita: Yeah. They didn't have a high school there, and they got the money to build a high school. So I was I was the head engineer that locate the building, how you're going to place it. We had to figure out. The gym we put in the center, and then from the gym there was hallways connecting all of the classrooms. And we've got to make sure to get the maximum sunlight. In Northern California, the sun changes, shifts, so we have to move those classrooms to get the maximum sunlight in that zone. So we figured it out. I was the chief engineer learning that thing. To this day, I don't know how I did it, but I did it. It was really crazy. I look back at it now, it seems ridiculous, the way I did it. But at that time, boy, they thought I was a great engineer. Yeah.

When all the surveying was done, then I wanted to change jobs, so I went into sanitation. That part of civil engineering job. I didn't know about e-coli bacteria. So in the lab, I have to take milk samples and make e-coli bacteria counts. Every week, I have to report to the medical staff, and they sent it in somewhere. But I have to make a report. It was fun for me. I was doing a lot of work. And then summertime, with all the mosquitoes. Because that Tule River flows so slowly, and the mosquito breeds along the side of it. So I read in the Army book, how to get rid of those mosquitoes.

Fukumoto: Oh. How do you get rid of it?

02-00:26:05

Tomita: Well, I go to the construction site and gather all the woodchips and put it in a sack, tie it up, and then load it up on the truck, put it in a barrel. And then go to the motor pool and get all the oil, old motor oil, and soak it in there and take it along the river. Then we lift it up with a crane and put them in the river and tie it onto the shore. Put a spike and then tie it. After I did that that summer, all the mosquitoes are gone.

Fukumoto: Unbelievable.

02-00:26:54

Tomita: Yeah, I found an old Army manual. People wondered what happened to the mosquitoes. Then the road is dusty. There's no oil to put on the road, so when

the trucks go by, all the dust spread. So sodium chloride is a salt. Calcium chloride is part of a salt where they make the salt. So it's not used; they kind of waste. So I said, "Okay, let's get that calcium chloride, and let's put it in the water truck." We put the calcium chloride, a couple gallons of calcium chloride into, oh, about 300 gallons of water, and then we spread that out on the road. See, the calcium chloride will absorb the moisture in the evening, and moisture from the air, and get the road wet. Then during the day it dries up again. But every evening, the road gets wet, so the next day, it isn't so dusty.

Fukumoto: Wow, you learned some really useful things.

02-00:28:28

Tomita: Yeah. Since I didn't know these things, I like to study, so—that's one thing I learned in Cal, to study. There's always books on it. I used to spend a lot of time at the library.

Dunham: So the library at the camp had all these books? Or did you sometimes have to order them?

02-00:28:54

Tomita: No, they had all these books. All you have to do is just look it up. Yeah. I don't know, somehow, I learned in Berkeley that all you have to do, everything you want to know, is in a book.

Dunham: Right, as long as the books are there.

02-00:29:15

Tomita: Yeah.

Dunham: Yeah. But so what was the management structure, I'm curious, where you're working? Are you working with other Japanese members of the camp? Are there Caucasian involved—?

02-00:29:26

Tomita: Yeah, that part, I'm not sure. But all I remember, the sanitation department was under the supervision of the hospital. Yeah, so I just reported to the supervisor of the hospital.

Dunham: Who was Japanese?

02-00:29:42

Tomita: Yeah, who was Japanese.

Dunham: Yeah, so it was all internal.

02-00:29:45

Tomita: When I was the engineer, most of the time, I had to report to a Caucasian supervisor. In fact, one time, one winter, they didn't have a road to the water

tank. The Caucasian engineer came to our office, said, “Go out and survey a road up that mountain.” I said, “No, we’re not going out there in the snow.” It was really snowing hard, and I wasn’t going to go out there, and I wasn’t going to take my crew out there. So I told my crew, “Let’s walk out.” I was ready to walk out of that place. Yeah. But the crew, they didn’t want to. They wanted to do their work. So I said, “Okay, then. If you guys are going to do the work, then I’ll stick around.” So I still remember. Man, it’s snowing so hard. You can’t even see. But we’re out there.

Fukumoto: Wow. Dangerous.

Dunham: Were there other moments of tension or conflict between your supervisors, in things they wanted you to do, or other things that came up?

Fukumoto: Or even peers?

02-00:31:12

Tomita: Yeah. I don’t know, I always was arguing. But the thing is, I went ahead and did it, after consultation. They wanted to make a landing field so the Caucasians could, instead of driving up to Tule Lake, they could fly into the place. So they wanted me to find a place for a landing strip. So I went out to the field there. Saw a lot of rattlesnakes. We took several rattlesnakes back to the camp. There was a guy that likes to cook it. So we took it and give it to him, and after he cooked it, we tried it. Pretty good.

Dunham: Did you kill the rattlesnakes yourself?

02-00:32:24

Tomita: No, we’d give it to this guy here.

Dunham: Captured them live?

02-00:32:27

Tomita: Yeah, we captured them live. Put it in the sack.

Dunham: Had you ever done that before?

02-00:32:32

Tomita: No. No, never done that before.

Dunham: Okay. But nobody got bit?

02-00:32:38

Tomita: Yeah, nobody got bitten. Yeah, as survey crew chief, we did a lot of things—I had a lot of opportunity to these things, and I’m glad I did, because—I don’t know. Since we claim so much land, the land is very rich with plants. Potatoes and daikon and all that. Then we had so much, so that we start shipping it to other camps. Yeah. So they had to make a big warehouse, and they had to bring the railroad from outside into the camp. That building was a big

building. I had to survey the building. It was really curved. Our railroad has to come so many inches to the—so they could load on and unload from the railroad right into the—. The railroad curves are different from highway curves. At least I could read the books. It was really kind of funny, in a way. Every assignment that I get, I go to the library and study and then plan how to do it. The next day, we're doing it.

Dunham: So you were having a big say, kind of, in the shape and design of the camp. I'm curious, of camp members were there sort of leadership groups or that would have input into how things were determined?

02-00:34:41

Tomita: Well, that part I'm not sure of, because we were not in the administration part of it. We were just a branch of an engineering department. Yeah, and we would tell the—in the engineering stuff, the chief engineer would just tell us, "Get out there and do this work." So we'd just go out there and do it.

Dunham: What was life like in the rest of the camp, for your family members and for others and yourself, when you weren't working, or they weren't?

02-00:35:14

Tomita: Since I'd been away in Berkeley, when we went to camp, it was the first time in my life that I was together with my family. So I felt kind of strange, because I had two brothers and three sisters, but I never—from eighth grade there, when I left Isleton, I never lived with them. So when I went to camp, I'm living with them. So I thought it was sort of a strange feeling, that even though we're one family, if you haven't lived with—. And my sister was a nurse. Gosh, that poor gal. She's never home. The ambulance is always coming back to pick her up, middle of the night. She is operating. She's in the operating room. And she was telling her friend the nurse—she was a big lady with some Washington or something. She'd always pass out in the surgery. \

Fukumoto: Just exhausted?

02-00:36:41

Tomita: Yeah, because when they start cutting up, I guess she can't take it. She used to pass out, and then they'd have a hard time picking her up and all that.

Dunham: Was she a nurse, this woman?

02-00:36:54

Tomita: Yeah, she was a nurse.

Dunham: But not really equipped to deal with that.

02-00:36:57

Tomita: Yeah, she was not equipped. Can't see the blood, I guess. Yeah. But they used to come after my sister. Yeah, she had a hard time, too because she goes to St. Luke Hospital; she was a nurse training at St. Luke Hospital in San Francisco.

When she went into camp, no St. Luke Hospital in United States would take her as a third-year student. So she didn't want to start all over again, so she was sort of stuck there for a while.

Dunham: Did she ultimately resume nursing?

02-00:37:43

Tomita: Yeah, but I think she worked as a nurse's aide or something.

Dunham: Never got to finish her nursing degree?

02-00:37:51

Tomita: Yeah, never got to finish, yeah.

Dunham: Wow. Well, back at the camp, did she relay about the healthcare—obviously, they had limited staffing, if she was being called constantly, and staffing that was passing out. Do you know what the sort of makeup of the doctors and nurses were, if there even—?

02-00:38:11

Tomita: Oh, that, I really don't know. When I got into the sanitation department, they used to tell me a lot of stories about that. I was never involved in it.

Dunham: About injuries or sicknesses?

02-00:39:26

Tomita: Yeah. Yeah, they were having a lot of babies and whatnot. I remember I had to survey a plot for the cemetery. I figured a cemetery should be on the higher ground, so that water won't come down to it. I just wonder what happened to those cemeteries. I think it was on the northeast corner of the camp.

Fukumoto: The weather was pretty harsh over there, too, right? Very hot.

02-00:39:11

Tomita: Yeah. Yes, during the summer it was very hot, yeah.

Fukumoto: Do you remember when folks started to be sent to Tule Lake because of being a No-No Boy or how they answered the surveys, [Questions] 27, 28? Was there any tension with new folks coming in?

02-00:39:37

Tomita: Yeah. It was funny. There was guys who agitate that. They was called the {washogun?}. They exercised in the middle of the morning. They {washo, washo?}. Oh, I used to laugh about it, but they were serious. But the funny part of it, those big troublemakers were agitators that were pushing the Japan movement. When the war was over, they were the first ones to move up. Yeah. Yeah. They didn't try to move back to Japan. They left for some city in California or someplace. Yeah. You know what Kibe is?

Fukumoto: Mm-hm.

02-00:40:43

Tomita: Yeah. They're kids that went to Japan to get educated. They were a very aggressive bunch.

Dunham: So how did that play out, their being aggressive? Was there violence or fights?

02-00:41:00

Tomita: Yeah, there was some violence. But my father always said, "Stay away. Stay away." I stayed away from them.

Dunham: You mentioned your father earlier, the terrible atrocities towards the Native Americans that he saw. What was the feeling now, with the US government having incarcerated you, having done nothing wrong in this situation?

02-00:41:31

Tomita: Well, he was a businessman. I didn't realize he was a businessman until we came out of camp. He was always looking for some business. A lot of the places that he wanted to swing a deal, but we just didn't have enough financing, that he couldn't swing. But some of the places, if he could've swung it, we would've been real in good situation. But he just couldn't do it. Because after the war, financially, we were wiped out. We were just penniless, actually, when we came out of the camp. We were just penniless. When I look back at it, it's amazing that I have a place like this now. Seventy years ago, when I came out of the camp, we were just penniless. We couldn't even find a job. We were competing against the soldiers that were coming back. Gosh, I walked the street in San Francisco, Oakland, Berkeley, trying to get a job. So I ended up in a government job.

Dunham: How did you get that job?

02-00:43:12

Tomita: Oh, I have to take a test. Yeah. Civil service, you have to take a test. But every time I applied, I don't have a college degree, so I have to take a lower—. Even though I feel that I could qualify, because I did the work. For three years. But when you take the civil service—state, federal, county—I'd have to go about two classifications lower, to get into that.

Dunham: Were you ever able to get referrals or letters from recommendation from the administrators of the camp who recognized your contribution?

02-00:43:54

Tomita: No. No.

Dunham: So you had to start much lower.

02-00:44:01

Tomita:

Yeah. Like I say. Then you get to a certain level, you not only take the written, but you have to take the oral. Yeah. And always, when you get to the oral exam, you're out. Japanese American, well, you're out. I fought the California State personnel board, two times. In fact, the board said I'm the first guy that ever fought them twice. Because nobody, nobody fights that personnel board. It's just a regular court. Dean from SC, dean from Caltech, dean from Stanford, dean from Cal—they're judges up there. Then they have an engineer that's questioning you, finally, and you have to argue with them.

Fukumoto:

You're American-born, Japanese, this is the only country you know. This is your home. You're a hard worker, dedicated your life. How did you keep going, knowing that this was the situation, that you were incarcerated? You know that you're qualified to do this work. Was it just your heart, your determination, the will to just keep going? What was it?

02-00:45:51

Tomita:

Yeah, that's about it. I always thought that I don't want my children to go [through] what I was going through. When we first came to LA, my wife was working for the city. She was getting chased out of there. I was fighting the state. But somehow, we managed. Yeah. They tried to fire my wife. They shifted her job from downtown all the way to San Pedro. Well, she finally quit. But that was tough. But somehow it worked out, though. Yeah. We had a hard time. My wife had a hard time. But we managed. It was hard, even for white engineers to get this thing. But I took this exam about seven times.

Dunham:

Wow. When you were fighting the board, the state board, were you doing that on your own? Did you have legal representation? Did you contact the JACL [Japanese American Citizens League] ever?

02-00:48:01

Tomita:

No. I was on my own. Even the personnel board here, the first time I went up, they said they would give me time to fight the commission. But when the time came, they tried to back out. They said no, they can't do it. I had to fight with the personnel over here, just to go up to Sacramento to fight them. But I'm glad I did. But it was not that easy for us.

Fukumoto:

I think it's amazing, though, how you always pushed through and worked hard and believed. That's, I think, amazing.

02-00:49:54

Tomita:

Yeah. But gee, here I work in design four years, and I went on to construction. When I went onto construction— Everybody likes to work in different departments and get their knowledge and experience. They sent me to the farthest construction site, way out to Ventura. But I had a good experience out there in Ventura. We were dynamiting the hills down. Yeah. But the fact that I worked out there, did the work. Then gradually, I got closer to town. Since I had that experience out there, when I came in the job in here was simple.

Yeah. Being Japanese, you always get the dirty job. But the thing is, I think after many years of that, I think I got my recognition, because the president of engineers started recognizing me. Then I had a small job on my own and that's when the personnel board in Sacramento turned me down and I fought them. Yeah.

Dunham: When you finally succeeded against them, how did that play out?

02-00:51:03

Tomita: Well, I give credit to my supervisor that was working. I never said anything to the supervisor I worked for. But he found out, and then he kept on fighting above. Then, well, when I got to a certain position, I knew I was going to pass because the head of the district would call me. He wants to know what time I'm going to the oral board. So I knew that they're keeping track of me. I never complained up to the board. But one thing, though. You wouldn't believe the things that we did. Have you ever heard of Dale Carnegie?

Dunham: Mm-hm.

02-00:52:09

Tomita: Well, I would never [have] taken this course if I wasn't going through what was happening to me. I went to City College and took a diction course, because my English wasn't that well. That's why I thought I was getting knocked off in the orals. Yeah.

Dunham: Did they ultimately acknowledge that it was discriminatory?

02-00:52:40

Tomita: No.

Dunham: They never?

02-00:52:41

Tomita: They never did, no. Yeah. But I knew. The guys that wasn't qualified passed me up.

Fukumoto: Right.

02-00:52:58

Tomita: That used to hurt me. It got to be natural. I kind of expect things, expect it to happen that way.

Dunham: Did you ever consider legal action, like a lawsuit?

02-00:53:17

Tomita: No. No, never did. But I kept on saying, "I have to try harder." Yeah. But I think one thing, Cal made me struggle. Cal taught me how to study. That's one thing I'm very appreciative. Even though I didn't graduate. Told me to

study harder. I went to Cal with these brainy guys, and I didn't have that advantage. But they were real brain[s]. You know those brainy guys?

Dunham: I'm pretty sure I'm talking to one right now. [laughs]

Fukumoto: Right.

Dunham: Pretty sure.

02-00:54:16

Tomita: [laughs] They were real brains. But you know Guy Bradshaw? Man, he was a brilliant student. But sophomore year, yeah, he had a problem with a gal, and he made his own poison and swallowed it. Yeah. And who's that guy? He put a gun in his mouth and shot himself.

Fukumoto: Oh, my goodness.

02-00:55:03

Tomita: Yeah. To me, it was a good lesson; that even [if] you have everything, it doesn't mean that you've got everything. You yourself have to be strong. That's one thing they taught me at Cal. So I consider myself real lucky. Even to get this license. I tell you, so many guys tried to get this. Yeah. It took me seven years, but to me, it was worth it because I feel that my life has been really a fortunate life, because I had opportunity.

Head of our department. He used to send me to the city to be inspector of the oral board of engineering classification. I'd go to Sacramento. Every month, I was up in Sacramento. I didn't think I was qualified, but I had to conduct classes for a couple of weeks. The unfortunate part is at the time, I was sort of a expert witness in right-of-way engineering work. There was no engineer in the state that—I had the civil engineering license, and I had a real estate license. I gave up my real estate license. But the thing is, Sacramento right-of-way section called. They want me to conduct classes for right-of-way engineering. I didn't think I could do it; but since they called me, I went up there and conduct classes. All the engineers from various districts comes up to Sacramento, and I conduct classes. I didn't think I could. Outside lawyer fighting at the county law office, they're fighting on property line damage. I don't know why, but they call me. I just go over there for half an hour or so, and they put me on the stand as a expert witness on property line. Yeah. I didn't realize it, but the title company, Los Angeles Title Company—they're one of the biggest title companies in California—they recommended me to the lawyers. So I go to court just for half an hour or so. Gee, I get paid a couple hundred dollars. Most I got is \$350. I didn't know they would consider that. I didn't think I would be doing those kind of things, conducting class for the whole state and all that.

Fukumoto: Wow. That's such an amazing experience.

Dunham: Yeah, a lot more than luck; a lot of hard work and perseverance in the face of a lot of challenge, I think.

Fukumoto: Yes, absolutely.

Dunham: Well, we're just about done with the tape so I wanted to wrap up. But I just want to know if you had any final thoughts, in reflecting back on the incarceration experience. Just anything else you wanted to share with us about your vast experiences.

02-00:59:35

Tomita: Well, one thing, for sure; that you have to persevere. Yeah, that's one thing I learned in Cal. You just have to persevere. To me, I'm very thankful to Cal for that. Yeah.

Dunham: Well, thank you.

Fukumoto: Thank you.

Dunham: Thank you very much. We really appreciate your time.

[End of interview]