MASANOJO OKU

MRS. YAKUMO: Today is April 8, 1980. I, Kazuko Yakumo, am privileged to be in the home of Mr. and Mrs. Masanojo Oku at 22250 Avenue 256, Lindsay, California, 93247.

May I have your place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence?

MR. OKU: I was born in Wakayama prefecture in Kainan City, Shikone on January 13, 1890, which makes me 90 years of age at present. My wife was born in Wakayama prefecture, Shimotsu-cho on October 25, 1899. We have lived in Lindsay, California since 1916.

MRS. YAKUMO: When did you arrive in the United States, and what was the circumstance of your arrival?

MR. OKU: I was called by my father to join him in the United States. This was in 1908 when I was 18 years of age. When I arrived in Seattle, my eyes were bloodshot so I was placed in quarantine for a week until I passed the eye examination. I then went to Oakland where my father was living. I traveled by boat from Seattle to San Francisco, then to Oakland. At that time my father was employed at Domoto Nursery, a very large nursery.

MRS. YAKUMO: What did you do after that?

MR. OKU: I worked at this nursery for three months, and my salary was $15 a month; it also included room and board. There was a young man about my age named Shibuya who was working at the nursery and he had a brother in Dinuba who wrote to him saying that the grape season would be starting in August and that the salary was much better there, and why didn't he come down to work in Dinuba. I decided I would also go. When I told the foreman that I had decided to go pick grapes, he said that malaria was very prevalent in the Fresno area, and that many people died from contracting this illness; that the work of picking grapes was extremely hazardous, and that I should be prepared to work very hard.

The time being the beginning of August, the temperature frequently got above 100 degrees. The work was extremely difficult, and there were many times when I didn't think I would make it. But as time went on, my body adjusted to the conditions, and I was finally able to continue. We worked about 10 hours a day and sometimes 11 hours a day for which we were paid from $1.55 to $1.75 per day. The young men that I worked with were almost all around 20 years of age. Among them were university graduates who had come to the United States with visas to allow them to perform research, but they worked just as the rest of us did. I continued working as a migrant laborer for the next several years, going all the way up and down the State of California; picking grapes in Fresno area, oranges in Los Angeles, and asparagus in Stockton.

There were many Japanese in Fresno at that time, so there were several Japanese boardinghouses. Three or four people slept in a room, and the rent for one night's lodging was 25 cents and meals were 25 cents each. If we brought our own blankets with us, we could sleep in the basement for only 10 cents a night. At that time the boardinghouses acted as employment agencies, but sometimes there would be no work and we would have to stay at the boardinghouses and continue to pay for room and

board. I discovered that no matter how much I worked and how much I saved, I would eventually spend it all on supporting myself.

Finally, in 1916, I came to Lindsay and was employed by a very sympathetic farmer named Montgomery who grew oranges. Since I had a steady job, I began to think about getting married. My father had returned to Japan in 1911, so I wrote to ask him to find a suitable mate for me, and he selected a girl and sent me her photograph; a shashin-kekkon, a photograph wedding. In June of 1918, my wife arrived in America. I continued to work for Mr. Montgomery until 1920 when I decided to buy a restaurant in Lindsay from a man who was returning to Japan and wanted to sell out.

MRS. YAKUMO: Who were your customers in the restaurant? Were they primarily Japanese?

MR. OKU: No. Most of my customers were Caucasians. I did have Japanese customers, but were for the most part migrant laborers. Meals were very inexpensive then; two eggs, hotcakes, and coffee cost about 20 to 25 cents. My regular customers called me "Roy", and my wife "Mabel." It was during the Depression years, and the Caucasians lived the migrant laborers' life together with the Japanese and other racial groups. They followed the season and worked crops very d much like the Mexican laborers of today.

Since the majority of my customers were migrant workers, I was extremely busy during the harvest season, but had a great deal of leisure time in between. In 1928, I decided to do some farming. I leased land and began to grow watermelons and cantaloupes in between the harvest seasons. As time went on, I became too busy at my restaurant to farm, so I hired someone to take care of it for me. I began gradually to put more time into farming and less time into my restaurant until finally in 1935, I decided to quite the restaurant and farm full-time.

It was in 1930 when I purchased my own land. Because of the Alien Land Laws, I could not purchase the land in my own name, but borrowed someone else's name. There was a man named Kuroiwa who was teaching Japanese Language School in Lindsay, and his wife was a Nisei, a second-generation Japanese. I was allowed to use her name as the owner, and one paper, I was listed as being the supervisor of the land. When my son became 21 in 1941, the land was placed in his name. This was a very fortunate timing, because in February of 1942, all Japanese were evacuated from the West Coast and when the war was over our family had a place to return to.

MRS. YAKUMO: When and where were you relocated to during the war?

MR. OKU: I was interned in February of 1942 in Sharp Park, San Francisco, Buddhist ministers were also arrested in the very beginning. I joined my father in Poston, Arizona in August of 1942. There were three camps in Poston; Camp I, Camp II, and Camp III. We were placed in Camp II.

MRS. YAKUMO: What was your life In camp like?

MR. OKU: Since I had operated a restaurant, I was employed as a cook while I was in Poston. I worked every other day, and on many days off I would walk three miles to the Colorado River for bass fishing. With a

great deal of leisure time, the Isseis developed many different hobbies. Some men walked miles looking for petrified wood to make vases, canes, et cetera.

When the war ended, we returned to Lindsay and farmed with my son until his death in 1964. My eldest, a son, Minoru was taken back to Japan by my wife to be educated there. In 1937, my family and I returned to Japan to bring our son back to the United States. While there we were asked to sponsor three other young men, and they lived with us in Lindsay until 1942 evacuation.

MRS. YAKUMO: Going back to farming in the early days. It must have been very difficult to cultivate the land.

MR. OKU: Yes, it was very hard work. We used horses for power, and when it came to a particularly difficult place in the land where we could not plow it under with a horse, we would use dynamite.

MRS. YAKUMO: You purchased your land in 1930. Were there very many Japanese who owned land in those days? And did you have problems of water storage?

MR. OKU: Yes, there were quite a few Japanese who owned land, and we had water shortages just as we do now. In 1928, I grew 20 acres of watermelon and cantaloupes, and I was expecting a bumper crop. However, around June the people who contracted out the water said that I had already used up my allotment and that I could not get any more water. That year I ended up with just 15 acres of melons.

MRS. YAKUMO: Did you experience any discrimination during and after the war?

MR. OKU: It was just to be expected that there would be discrimination against the Japanese. In 1945 a neighbor Mr. Imoto and I left Camp Poston and returned to look at our farmland. My neighbor, a Caucasian farmer, was very kind to us and let us stay at his home, and he drove us around to wherever we wanted to go. My farm, at that time, had been leased to a Philippino man. I was treated very well by everyone that I knew, and there were only a few instances of discrimination.

MRS. YAKUMO: Were there very many Japanese in Lindsay before the war?

MR. OKU: There were about 30 families then. Since there were so many children born, we started a Japanese Language School in 1929 or '30. Our children attended school on
Saturday and Sunday and attended public school Monday through Friday--a seven-day school week.

MRS. YAKUMO: Do you belong to any organizations?

MR. OKU: There aren't too many organizations to belong to in this area, but we are members of the Japanese Buddhist Temple in Visalia, and my wife is a member of the Buddhist Women's Federation. Since acquiring my American citizenship, I am a member of the Japanese-American Citizens League.

MRS. YAKUMO: Why and when did you acquire American citizenship?

MR. OKU: Because I had many problems in the past trying to buy my own land. As soon as the law was enacted that would enable me to become a citizen, I' set about to study for it. In 1952 Mr. Akira Ebisu of Visalia was conducting class for Isseis and we met once a week to prepare for the citizenship examination. It took quite a long time, but both my wife and I successfully passed the examination in 1952.

MRS. YAKUMO: I would like to direct the next question to Mrs. Oku. Do you have any particular memories that you would like to have recorded?

MRS. OKU: I came to the United States not knowing what to expect. I was 19 years of age and as was the custom then, my marriage was arranged for by my father. Life in America was very hard for all the young Japanese women, not knowing the man you married and also not knowing the American language. However, with the help of my husband's employer, Mr. Montgomery, we built a home and settled down in Lindsay. In those days we didn't have any cars, so if we wanted to go anywhere we went by horse or horse and buggy. Just to buy something was an all-day affair. If we wanted to go any distance at all, we had to take a train. In 1920, when we started our restaurant (Mikado Restaurant), there were four other Japanese business establishments; Kaku Grocery/Rooming house, Shirakawa Chop Suey and two pool halls- operated by Kobata and Shinoda--one of the pool halls also rented out rooms. My husband told me when he first came to Lindsay around 1910 there used to be a tofu factory and a Chinese gambling house, which. later became the chop suey house. This is the only original building still standing and currently is the Lindsay Chop Suey House,, The only old business family remaining is Kaku's Save Center Market, and six of the pioneer farming families are still farming in Lindsay. The Issei’s life was not an easy one, but it has been a rewarding life for us, We have celebrated our 62nd wedding anniversary last June, we are in good health, and our children are nearby; two daughters and their husbands. We have seven grandchildren and so far, three great grandchildren. We are very thankful.