NARRATOR: RUTH OKUYE IHARA

INTERVIEWER: TOM NAKASHIMA

DATE: June 9, 1999

TN: This is an interview with Ruth Okuye Ihara, a Nisei woman, age seventy-seven. And this is taking place at the Livingston United Methodist Church, Livingston, California and today is June 9, 1999. The interviewer is Tom Nakashima and the organization is the local Livingston-Merced JACL. We are going to start now with her life before WWII and since Ruth is one of the descendants of one of the early, early pioneers I'd like to have her say quite a bit about that. So Ruth, would you like to start now?

RI: Well, according to my grandfather he arrived here in the United States twice. I think he said he came at first in 1905 or something and looked in Texas. He looked into rice growing but something about Texas he didn't like. Maybe it was the heat in that part or the mosquitoes. Anyway, he went back to Japan and then he came back here when he heard about the Yamato Colony I believe and that is how he started. He got some land here and he quit his job I believe as an engineer built bridges and rail—and made railroad tracks and decided to become a farmer because he thought farming was such a noble profession but I don't think he knew very much about farming, come to think of it. At any rate he brought my father who was in his teens at the time, I think around sixteen, and my aunt and later on after they became established they got my mother, who was a daughter of a very old close friend of my grandfather's to marry my father and so I was born and was the first born and I had three brothers and we were all brought up on the farm. And of course we didn't know very much about what was going on at that time and a lot of things that I recall are just the way kids would see things. We had a big place

where there was a big kitchen I remember where the workers ate their food and a big old bell that clanged which I thought was very interesting but I wasn't allowed to visit. Just once I remember when the bell clanged I managed to sneak in and climbed over the fence or something and I got into the kitchen and thought it was an amazing place. All these hurrying people and a lady that I later found out was Mrs. Okubo, who was the cook. All I saw was her because I was so little and I remember her big plow boots and the hem of her skirt and people bustling around and there were men coming in to be fed. I thought it was a very fascinating place but somebody scooped me up and took me out and that was it. So, those were my early recollections of the place. That it was like a little town where people working on the farm and they lived with their families in about three or four houses, maybe more and there was a bunk house. There was always somebody around but a big fence, chicken wire fence kept me out of the interesting part. But I do remember quite a few people coming in going constantly and there were wide open spaces all around us. And to this day I feel very cramped in the city because I think that is the way I was conditioned, you know. I like spaces. And that is where my entertainment. My earliest years that was my entertainment I thought it was great fun watching the people come and go and listening for the dinner bell. And there were all sorts of little crises coming up all the time which I thought was fascinating. The way the adults ran around madly then.

However, later on I discovered there were different rules. My brothers who were younger than I and always getting into trouble, I was supposed to look after. And grandpa explained to me that since I was the oldest in the family I had to set an example but not as a girl. I had to set it for the boys. I wasn't suppose to scream if I fell and

skinned my knee because what kind of example was I setting for my brothers. It seemed very unfair to me as I grew older but I just did as I was told until I reached my teens I believe.

TN: Kind of going back to grandpa now, my father worked for your grandpa and my father used to talk about your grandpa preaching every Wednesday night at the house. Do you have any recollections of that?

RI: No I don't. I don't remember any of that part. I think they probably shooed me off to bed or something.

TN: Okay.

RI: I just remember that there was a place in back of the house, another house and once in a while I was able to sneak in there and I was told that was the place where they had the meetings, the religious meetings and there were rolled up chairs and hymn books I believe but every time I managed to sneak in, somebody caught me and I wasn't allowed in there very often. So that is all I can remember of that.

TN: It was kind of humorous but I remember my dad talking about grandpa insisted that they all go to the prayer meeting and some of the men didn't want to go and played sick on him Wednesday night.

RI: Well—

TN: But your grandpa was determined to—

RI: Christianize everybody?

TN: Christianize all his help.

RI: Well grandpa was very strange to me and I liked him. At one time I used to like to watch from behind the curtains. There were heavy brown drapes drawn across between the

living room and the dining room and I'd hide behind the drapes when he had company and listen to what he was doing. And at one point I was amazed that he was roaring at his visitor so I peaked around and I don't know who this man was but he was bowing and scraping and grandpa was very annoyed with him and said, in Japanese, he said "You fool, aren't we both equal in the United States." And with the tone of voice in which he said it, it was so funny that I just laughed because he was speaking in a superior to an inferior with that tone of voice and the way he was in Japanese there is a way you address your inferiors and that is how he was addressing this poor guy.

TN: Well, your grandpa was a community leader and he was looked up to as a leader in the community so I guess they had to obey his rules.

RI: And because he was older too, he thought of himself maybe as the elder or something.

TN: Yes I'm sure he was older than most of the men's fathers, really.

RI: Yeah probably. I think my father was born rather late in this life because he was the child of his second wife, the first wife died. Probably from the poor conditions they had in Japan in those days and my grandmother also died early. I understand she died of cancer. And then grandpa had very strict ideas about how boys should be brought up. No mommy coddling or anything but as far as I can tell my grandmother never spoiled my father. I remember all the things he did and went around explaining to me the reason he did these thing was he was so spoiled as a little boy.

TN: Of course in the Japanese culture, the man is the king of the house.

RI: But he would also explain these things to me that George's mother had an idea and she was probably right, you know but it was rather strange to hear her call my father Kiyo-chan, it sounded like a girl's name you know.

TN: Yes, I remember my father we were talking about your father as Kiyo's son.

RI: And my father always called my aunt "Nei-san". He never called her by name.

TN: And "nei-san" is sister right?

RI: Sister, older sister.

TN: What kinds of values did your parents teach you?

RI: Well, let's see. There was of course being very proper, behaving properly at least in front of company. (laughing) And I got quite a scolding if I misbehaved but I was always scolded after the company left. And of course being too spoiled and taking responsibility and discipline and I thought it was pretty tiresome myself and table manners, that was the most tiresome of all. No elbows on the table and eat everything in front of your plate and you have to sit there until you finished which was, you know, a bore. There were things I hated, I remember, but we had to eat. And most of it was explained to me that I had to set an example for the boys. So, I don't know what kind of example I set.

TN: Well I don't know how good a job you did because I played with your brothers and they were rascals.

RI: But I do remember my cousins coming to play with us and the one time that my father really became angry with my cousin was when he tripped me and I fell. He tripped me on purpose and he was always tripping us anyway. That was Willie. And I thought I might as well capitalize on it and I screamed bloody murder and my father came out and yelled at Willie which annoyed my aunt who sheltered her son and yelled at my father was always quite a show as I'm concerned I think we all had quite a good time as kids all in all in spite of the petty differences like that and quarrels and all that. And we were quite sheltered considering what kids have to put up with nowadays.

TN: Well you consider yourself sheltered by in those days your family was one of the families that weren't sheltered that much. They got around much more than other people in the community.

RI: Oh could be.

TN: Yeah, since grandpa was a leader and your father kind of followed and you know.

RI: It seemed to me my father was always going to meetings at night and coming home late and there was no such thing as a babysitter so in retrospect I feel sorry for my mother. She was stuck babysitting us. But once in a while my father did take on a lot of responsibility. When my mother was sick I remember she had to go to bed and couldn't get up and my father had to cook and all he knew how to cook well partly because unfortunately somebody sent us a huge crate of Sato-imo I think they called it (inaudible) or something and it looks like taro, the potato, I think and sort of slimy and somehow he knew how to cook that. And as long as we had that thing left and we had it for breakfast, lunch and dinner. And I was thoroughly tired of it when finally my mother got up and came out and the first thing I said to my mother was "Let's not have Sato-imo today."

TN: Well you didn't starve.

RI: That is just one thing we never did. There was always something to eat and I guess we were lucky that way.

TN: Going on from the—was your family part of—well there was no Japan town down here but definitely your family was part of the local community here and what did you participate in in your child early years?

RI: My early years? I loved that I participated in anything. You know we all went to church every Sunday and the social life revolved around the church and when we were teenagers

there was the I think Young People's Christian Fellowship which was just about the only social outlet we had I think. And as for dating my goodness I never heard of such a thing. I know I went to the movies with some of the boys at that time. And I still remember us being flattered to death because somebody asked me to go to the movies with him and he was a lot older than I was and because he was older and my mother felt responsible, she let me go to the matinee with him.

TN: Well I heard a story where some of you went with some older fellow and you took your little brother Paul along to put him in the middle.

RI: Well I took him because I liked Paul. I just lugged him around (laughs). Even today he will mention that every so often but I guess he doesn't understand that (inaudible) he couldn't see certain movies with me if I ever went and it always seemed to be a movie that he wanted to see that I was asked to go and see so I just never thought about it. I took him with me (laughing).

TN: Did you go to Japanese language school?

RI: Just for a few years. I think we got to book five before I got to quit. There was a lot of trouble, you know there was a lot of trouble for them because not that many people could teach the language the way it should have been taught because not a lot of people were that well educated in those days. And so that left I guess Gilbert Tanji's mother and Bob Ohki's mother, my mother and maybe a couple of other ladies. I don't quite remember but they are the ones who did it and of course it was quite a burden for them because they to run the household and all the work they used to do they didn't have labor saving devices. So they did the best they could and considering the handicap that we only had Saturdays, we did quite well but then we couldn't keep it up and they needed me at home

too so we ended up not doing anything and not going beyond book five whatever that is. I kind of think that must be about third grade level.

TN: Well I think at least that. How did you feel about it?

RI: Well I thought it was interesting. And the thing that impressed me about those years was looking back is the thing—is a book called "Shushing." And I believe that was ethics and that taught me an awful lot about the way one conducts one's life, morality really. They were stories about being kind to animals and which I took much to heart. And being truthful and thing like that that have stayed with me the rest of my life.

TN: Did you take classes in Japanese cultural arts?

RI: No.

TN: Of course you didn't. You did—

RI: I didn't take anything like that.

TN: You did take Kendo right?

RI: Yes, I did take Kendo because my father was interested in it and the Kendo teacher stayed at our house including Mr. Nakamura who had I remember a really funny mustache that fascinated me and curled up at the end. Well looking back on it now I think he looked ridiculous. At that time I thought it was interesting.

TN: Did Kendo influence your life to any degree?

RI: Yes, I guess so. It was discipline. It made us-well we had to sit on that cold floor in our bare feet and our feet went to sleep and we had to sit there and listen to Mr. Nakamura preach to us usually about courage and stamina and whatever.

TN: I didn't participate at the time but I remember the other people who did had to get up real early in the morning before school and come to the church here and practice.

RI: It was cold and our feet were cold and I remember we were bare footed and that was supposed to be good for us and he told us we were sissies because in Manchuria where he taught there were icicles all hanging off the doorknobs and we didn't have any icicles. What were we complaining about? I remember that part very well.

TN: I remember hearing stories about him driving in the fog and getting lost just to get here for practice. What school did you go to?

RI: I went to kindergarten, the old kindergarten which is not where it is now. We had to set apart the elementary school, the very elementary school in another part of town from where it is now. And I know the Yamato High School, the Yamato Elementary school isn't it now across the street from where—near where the old kindergarten used to be.

TN: Yeah it's probably half a mile down the road.

RI: Yeah and that I can remember and I think it was kindergarten and first grade there. And then we had to walk across because the busses only went to that part and we got to our next class which was second or third grade and we had to walk across town to get to the other elementary school when we got a little older. I didn't mind it. I thought it was interesting.

TN: Another thing that we found out—I found out later in life is the first kindergarten that was in Livingston was financed by the Yamato Colony Issei parents and that was a surprise to me.

RI: I didn't know that.

TN: How did you feel about school?

RI: I loved it. I thought it was awfully fun. I can hardly—after the summer was over I can hardly wait to go back to school again just to see my friends and do all kinds of interesting things.

TN: Of course I remember you were a good student all the time so usually good students have a good time in school.

RI: Is that right? Well I just enjoyed myself is all I remember.

TN: How were you treated?

RI: Quite well I thought.

TN: And your playmates?

RI: Huh?

TN: Who were you playmates in those days?

RI: Well the thing was I still see Eunice and Esther and Francis Tashima, do you know Francis Tashima?

TN: Uh-huh.

RI: She was my best friend and still is and of course the boys. Well I didn't play much with the boys. I had plenty of boys in my family and I was sick of them.

TN: Where you invited to homes of Caucasian children?

RI: Yes, but I wasn't allowed to go for some reason. I think I was invited to somebody's birthday party and I wasn't allowed to go because they didn't think I should be running around that much and that went on right on through high school.

TN: Yes, I think that was pretty much Issei thinking.

RI: Really, I was asked to join the Queen Ester club and my mother said that is too much running around and then once in a while there would be a group going to Yosemite or something and I wasn't allowed to go there either.

TN: I think some of the boys probably got around a little bit more than the girls in those days.

RI: It could be. I wouldn't know because we were sort of isolated out there.

TN: How about your teachers?

RI: They were very good. Some of my teachers were very, very nice teachers. And they left a lasting impression on me. And one person that really influenced me was Mr. Scott in high school, the high school principal who was ousted for political reasons. He used to call an assembly every time he thought of something that he thought we should know and mostly about taking responsibility or not doing. One of them that I remember very well was not joining any mob. He said if you see a crowd collecting, remember to cross the street and go to the other side and if you think somebody is picking on you think what you are doing. All kinds of interesting things that I wish I could see him now and thank him for having thought of so much.

TN: Yes, I think that in today, in today's world that is sort of unheard of isn't it?

RI: That's right.

TN: Did you consider yourself Japanese, Japanese-American or American or how did you feel about your?

RI: I don't think I thought about it at all really until I reached high school and every once in a while boys especially would come up to me and say something like Chicamocaho(??)? I know that term and I didn't know what that meant and I still don't know. But most

people did not in those days in my childhood did not treat us any differently that I remember.

TN: Yes, Livingston was well there were quite a few Japanese for one thing.

RI: I think that is the reason too. But I do know that my mother said always warned us that if we misbehaved because we looked different everybody would believe that all Japanese behaved or misbehaved the way we did. And so we had better watch it and I thought that was very unfair because why should I represent everybody who is Japanese? And I don't think until that point that until I got into my very early teens or maybe pre-teens that she started telling us that.

TN: Yes, I think that is kind of you know the Japanese culture coming out.

RI: It could be.

TN: You don't dishonor your family, your friends.

RI: It could be.

TN: Did your parents have any contact with the schools?

RI: Yes. I think well we had teachers who were very helpful. If they felt we were having any not just school problems but just a problem they would send a note home to our parents. And so then my mother or father would go, usually my mother. And I'm not sure exactly how much she understood of what the teacher said but she was usually quite pleased with whatever the teacher said so. I have no idea what they talked about.

TN: I do remember seeing your mother on the school grounds at one time and that is probably the only Issei lady that I ever saw on the grammar school grounds. I don't know if you were having problems or what but I remember seeing her there at school.

RI: Well she thought that teachers and the parents should get together and her only regret that she wasn't quite sure what they were saying, not always.

TN: And she was—she understood a lot more English than most of the Issei mothers did.

RI: Yes, she had studied English in Japan and she went to a girls—equivalent of a girl's junior college I believe. And there she studied English so I think she understood more than most Issei women.

TN: What did they expect regarding your school work? I am speaking about your parents now.

RI: They expected me to excel at all times. It is awfully difficult to me because you are not good at—unless you are very unusual you are not good at everything. And some things are a bore to study you know.

TN: As I recall you were a good student from way back so that is probably one of the reasons why they didn't have to bug you so much. During your years at home what kind of dinner table conversation did you have?

RI: We had to speak in Japanese. And we had to use the correct words and not use the rough language. My mother was very, very fussy. She would—I think she would have appreciated that G.B. Shaw's play about "Pygmalion" which became a movie "My Fair Lady" because she was very conscious of pronunciation and words the proper words to use and if you couldn't use them you were to shut up. So we—so we had to speak properly at the table and mind our manners and usually they asked us questions about school and friends and we were expected to answer slowly and—

TN: How were you seated?

RI: Huh?

TN: How were you seated at the table?

RI: Oh, let's see. My mother and father—my mother at the end which was closest to the stove because we ate in the kitchen unless we had company. And my father on her right and then Ben and then at the other end was grandpa and then my brother Paul and then me next to my mother where she could glare at me if necessary. And my youngest brother Paul was little so he was in the high chair right next to mom.

TN: Okay, how about your teenage years, problems, joys?

RI: Well the problems were what you'd expect. I wasn't allowed to go out very much.

TN: And I suppose interracial dating was a no, no wasn't it?

RI: We never thought of it anyway. But I don't-well let's see. I was allowed to go out once in a while as I told you to a matinee. And looking back I am not at all sure like I say it never occurred to me not to take my brother, my little brother. I guess I couldn't have gone if I didn't take him because I never could take him any other way.

TN: Maybe your mother had this thing set up.

RI: I don't know.

TN: How about—what did you think about racism or injustice in those years?

RI: Never thought about it actually. I don't think I thought of injustice or racism and actually I don't think I saw much of it.

TN: What about your relations with your parents?

RI: Well let me see. My father had a very quick temper and a nasty one so I did not cross him often unless I was very, very provoked. My mother was easier to talk to. I could talk to her while we washed dishes we spent many of those—we had many alone conversations about different things that we used to speak about.

TN: Oh I think that is pretty much Issei style.

RI: Could be. Now grandpa was something else. He was so mean but he just told me what he wanted to tell me and that was it.

TN: But you were lucky in some respect because almost none of us growing up had our grandparents you know with us.

RI: That's right. Yeah, I think I was fortunate looking back although at times I thought I wasn't because he was there. For instance I came down with my hair in curlers one morning because I wanted to look nice at school and I didn't have time to comb my hair before my mother called me down to help. And set the table and all that for breakfast and he had already sat down and saw me coming down not quite dressed and my hair in curlers and he said very sternly "A woman should always be presentable."

TN: As I recall as a little boy going to your house, your grandpa was always very proper and very neat.

RI: Yes.

TN: Well dressed and the thing I remember mostly is your two brothers always teasing him.

RI: Well he put up with a lot when I look back on it. But he did think that people should not complain if they are treated like dirt and if they look like dirt and act like it. And he said it was up to us to behave ourselves and prove that we are worthy of respect.

TN: You know that was pretty good advice to carry to take yet. Then going on what were your thoughts about marriage in those days?

RI: Oh, well I didn't think about marriage actually. I thought about having a glamorous career and having some kind of a career where I—I thought advertising sounded glamorous and in those days I really didn't think about those things very much deeply or

I would have realized I have two different—very different ambitions. One was this glamorous advertising. I thought of myself as an executive or something. The other was I'd be a missionary and go out and save people who were living in the wilderness and I don't have any idea of how I thought I would ever do such a thing but—

TN: Well, your grandpa had very strong convictions and maybe some of that rubbed off on you.

RI: It could be.

TN: Now who did you talk to when you had problems in those early years?

RI: Well mostly my mother and it was a lady I thought, was a lady but turned out in retrospect I realized she wasn't that old but I thought she was and that is the Okubo sisters, Maki and Matsu. Now Matsu I thought when I was a little girl I could talk to because she was our Sunday school teacher and she listened nicely. But then about the time I would have needed her most she had already getting married and left, I do recall.

TN: Yes, I can remember Matsu particularly she was raised in Japan and was called over probably after high school.

RI: She was very nice. And Maki was a social butterfly. Not often available to chat with and anyway she married Horace and left before my problems really started, I think.

TN: Now how would you describe your childhood and teenage years in your home, in school and community?

RI: Well I think I enjoyed living with my in my community with all the people around us that we knew. But I also felt that I'd like to see the big wide world but I believe in retrospect that living in the community is something that really helps develop you. I know bringing up my own kids I often recall my own childhood when I couldn't misbehave even when I

was away from home because somebody was sure to notice it and they would tell me right then and there I was doing the wrong thing or they would say "Maybe your parents should hear about this?" Now in the present world I think in the case of my own children there was nobody that cared that much and that was a great disadvantage if you compare the two worlds. Because in our community everybody cared about everybody else was behaving which can be a bore because you always had to mind your P's and Q's. But on the other hand, they really keep you going in the direction you ought to go you know.

TN: That is interesting. Did you encounter any racial prejudice at any time when you were growing up?

RI: I may have but I don't remember. It must have bounced right off me or I didn't catch the point or something. I don't—

TN: Going on—what type of work did you do?

RI: At home?

TN: This is after school.

RI: Oh after school? Well we had to help on the farm of course and only the city kids didn't have to do all that. So we had to depending on the season we had to help on the farm. If it was pruning season we pruned. If it was picking season we helped with some aspect of it that we could do.

TN: Yes I recall when I was growing up as a child working for your dad in the peach cutting shed for many years. He helped the local Japanese kids in the community.

RI: It was a way to earn money and kind of a boring job. I suppose only kids could stand it you know.

TN: Well the rate of pay was kid's rate of pay.

RI: The rate of pay was terrible. In retrospect I thought it was lot of money then.

TN: Well it was for us. It was you know.

RI: It was eight cents a box for cutting a box of apricots.

TN: Yes I think it was like three cents for peaches or something like that.

RI: Something like that.

TN: If we made forty cents a day we thought we were getting rich.

RI: Oh yeah we did.

TN: Now going on did you attend college?

RI: Yes.

TN: And what were some of your experiences?

RI: I went to Modesto Junior College for one year and then I transferred to University of California and then the war broke out and I was almost through my third year there. I mean the second year at the University of California and it would be my third year of college and that is where I met Hide. [note: short for Hideyo]

TN: Your present husband?

RI: Yes.

TN: And then getting on to WWII. How did you hear about Pearl Harbor?

RI: Oh, well I was working for my room and board for Mrs. Parsons here a very nice woman an artist and author of a couple of books. One of my chores was to make breakfast for her. One morning I went up to make breakfast for her and there she was already in the kitchen and she said "did you hear, did you know that Japan has bombed Pearl Harbor?" And I said, "Pearl Harbor, where is that?" She said, "It's in Hawaii." She said, "That is terrible isn't it?" And I said, "Why did they do such a thing as that?" I could not

understand it and I had no idea that things were so bad. And she said, "I don't know why they did it but we are at war now."

TN: And how did you feel at the time?

RI: Well shocked and disbelief and the full significance of the act did not hit me until sometime later. It was like being hit on the head.

TN: What did you think would happen to you and your family at that time?

RI: I don't think I even thought. I just sat there stunned for hours after and that is when Hide called and said, "Have you heard the news?"

TN: Well we talked about your rights as a citizen at this time.

RI: My life as what?

TN: What are your thoughts of your rights as a citizen?

RI: I never thought about my rights. It never occurred to me.

TN: I think all of us felt pretty much the same. It was such a blow.

RI: It was really a shock you know. It stops your thinking and it stops everything.

TN: Tell me what happened to you and your family? Did you go to camp?

RI: Yes we went to camp. We were—we decided to get married so we got married.

TN: Before camp?

RI: Yes. By a Justice of the Peace with a friend of mine who is still a friend of ours witnessed and my friend and her friend as witnesses.

TN: Was this in Merced?

RI: And then we went to camp and because there was a one mile limit we had to get special permission to go home from Berkeley.

TN: Yes I think I kind of vaguely remember now as a child you and your husband had to spend your honeymoon in camp.

RI: (Laughing) Yes. So in camp we couldn't even quarrel if we had a difference of opinion.

TN: I remember the Assembly Center the walls were eight feet high and between the eight feet and the roof there was a vacant space in the barrack and you could hear what was happening on the other end of the barrack.

RI: Right.

TN: Just kind of describe your daily life in camp?

RI: Well it was very depressing. The Assembly Center especially in Merced was very depressing. We hung out some I think bedspreads or something to make a partition because at that time for some reason my brother Ben was staying with us. It could be it got too crowded with my mother and father and three brothers there so Ben decided to move out maybe.

TN: Ben shared your honeymoon cottage?

RI: Yes, he was on one side of the curtain and we were on the other. (laughing) So, but we got along fine. Ben, in those days was not as cantankerous as he became later.

TN: Going on some more how did this loyalty questions 27 and 28 affect you? This was the loyalty yes, this was about in forty-two I think or forty-three, 1943. Or were you affected at all?

RI: Well I was—I think we were surprised that anybody questioned it, you see. It's a shock. It never occurred to us that we weren't Americans. And to be declared almost an enemy you know is like having your own parents reject you. It stuns you. You really don't know how to take it.

TN: Now how did camp life affect your family relationships?

RI: I think it was kind of strained. In Amache, Colorado Hide and I finally had a place of our own and when we were quite well set up because only two of us were in that space where some families had to occupy and for some reason we were fortunate. And once in a while, once or twice we had to bring Paul home, Paul with us and let him sleep on a cot in our place because he was having difficulties of being bossed around by his older brothers. And so he stayed with us. But mostly we managed. It was difficult but we managed.

TN: How did you feel about being put into camp because of your Japanese ancestry?

RI: Well like I said it was like being rejected by your own parents. You wondered what in the world did you do to deserve this?

TN: Do you recall any problems? What kinds of problems arose in camp?

RI: Just the closeness of everybody. That was rather hard and then we had to do our laundry in the common laundry room. We had to bath in a common place and people were adjusting I think. And I realized and it was a shock that not everybody and all these Nisei and Issei in camp were the same as the community in Livingston. Do you remember in Livingston most people were pretty high-bound type. What do you call it? Very correct and here were these people from the city and most of—and some of the boys were really what we used to call Loose Suiters, the ones from the city. They were real scary. They made a point of being rough looking. I was quite surprised that we had Nisei like that.

TN: Yes, we kind of learned what the world was all about, didn't we? Well what types of activities did you participate in, in camp?

RI: In camp, they needed people to teach English to the Issei and so they asked me if I would be camp director and asked me if I would be interested in teaching English so I did. There were some Issei mothers and oh about maybe ten Kibei who were citizens of, United States citizens but they grew up in Japan so their Japanese was much, much better than their English and it was broken and hard to understand and I was one of the teachers who tried to help them. It was kind of an interesting time in my life, I thought.

TN: I also recall in camp your father was Chief of Police in Amache I believe.

RI: He became Chief of Police. He started as a common policeman. Yes he told me that that was an eye opener for him too. He found that we had criminals (laughing) in the community there and he didn't know there were any criminals among us Japanese and Japanese-Americans.

TN: It must have been kind of hard on your brothers to have their father as a policeman.

RI: It probably made them behave better than they would have.

TN: Now did you stay in touch with friends on the outside?

RI: Yes, this woman I used to work with, she continued to write to us and then the woman who was still a girl then, she was one of the witnesses at our wedding, wrote to us quite frequently and sent us a subscription to magazines and things like that and wrote every so often and once in a while she'd send me a box of clothes donated by her friend. So we really appreciated the help just to know that they still thought about us.

TN: Yes, I think all of us really, really appreciated those few people that did think about us after we went into camp. What about recreation?

RI: I don't remember taking part in much recreation. This is the time I was quite busy teaching the class, these classes. And then for a time I was helping out with the teacher,

the diabetics, a dietician because I had a few courses which was really not enough but I guess they were very desperate, they didn't have anybody else. And another girl and I were asked to help out with the kitchen and at least prescribe menus for people who had things like diabetes. And that kept us quite busy so we didn't even think about recreations. And then after a while I was pregnant and I was miserable. I couldn't think (laughing) about fooling around with anything.

TN: This was in camp?

RI: Yes.

TN: Now you married before camp. And how did your parents feel about it at the time?

RI: They were very upset and they thought I was too young and I probably was because I married the wrong person. Because it turned out that Hideyo's father was known as somewhat of a prank and I think he probably was. But he was an interesting man.

TN: What kinds of problems did you face?

RI: Huh?

TN: What kinds of problems did you face at that time as newlyweds?

RI: Well I didn't know very much about anything frankly so that was a problem. I had no idea. In some ways it was good because it taught me on a small scale that how to keep house. I had no idea how to keep house. At home I had done what my mother had told me to do but here I was responsible for this, I forgot how big it was. Was it eight by twelve or something like this room? I had to learn that if you put something down you have to pick it up again and if there is dust you are the one that has to clean it up or there it stayed. And there was a lot of dust, believe me. Up on the window sills and by the

doors and so it was learning to keep house, not that I'm much of a housekeeper now but still I get the basics.

TN: What are the worst remembrances you have of this period?

RI: The worst?

TN: Correct or maybe you don't have any?

RI: Leaving camp I think was the most difficult time because I had not met the outside world after the war began so I was. Hide had volunteered and he was in the camp in Minnesota, training camp so I was allowed to go, leave camp and join him. I was on the train on the way to Minneapolis. Looking back, I think I was pretty brave because I was all by myself and I had no idea where I was going and what I was doing but I knew it was some place in Minneapolis. I stopped at, the train stopped somewhere and we were told we could get off and get some food because this was during war time and they didn't have any kind of a kitchen. We got off and there was a little eating place, you couldn't even call it a diner. There was a long booth served some kind of food. Well all of the passengers got their food and sat at tables and ate while I was waiting and waiting and waiting to be served and this girl waiting on everybody else and didn't wait on me and I couldn't figure out why she didn't. Then all of a sudden the man next to me said, noticed that I wasn't being served and he said, "You haven't served this lady." To the girl and she said, "I ain't serving no Jap." And that was on of the first time I really go it full force.

TN: You know, maybe it is kind of interesting to reminisce a little bit about this time , when Hide volunteered out of camp. Do you want to say a few words about that?

RI: Well it caused a commotion but then my father saw a reason and you know at the same time, my brother Ben did too. And after my father calmed down he conceded that we are

citizens. We were born here and we were proud of this land and so the boys owed it to their country. So they owed it to their country to serve it even though they had treated them badly. So that was resolved, thank goodness.

TN: And Hide went on to language school did he not?

RI: Yes he did. And he was military intelligence training I think it was called. Later on it was Military Intelligence Service, he was I think he was overseas for about a year or so.

TN: In Japan?

RI: No, he was in Lake (inaudible) and then he was with the group that went slightly ahead of McArthur to prepare the ground for McArthur to land so that nobody, I guess so nobody would shoot at McArthur when he landed.

TN: And as I recall Ben went on to fight with the 442.

RI: Yes he did.

TN: It Italy and France and was one of the very few that didn't get hurt or lose his life.

RI: I suspected because he was so small and skinny that the bullets missed him (laughing). Some of them say it was so very harrowing, how there were shells and after the shelling was over, his clothes were in shreds and I said, "Well it was lucky you were so skinny." And he said, "I guess I am."

TN: Kind of going into resettlement now when did you leave camp?

RI: I left camp when I was in 1944, forty-three, later forty-three, yeah late forty-three because Randy was born in February of forty-four. And that was in Minneapolis.

TN: Where did you go and what did you do?

RI: Well I went to a place set up by the, I think the WRA, the War Relocation Authority. I think they had set up a place where people could go to see if they could get housing and

all that. And there was a couple, Mr. and Mrs. Clem who had said that they would like somebody to help them out with the housework and in return, would give me a place to stay. So I went and found my way over there and got a job with, got a job there and this was after I tried many places to live and found that they would not take me. They'd take one look at me and slam the door in my face.

TN: Now this was while Hide was—

RI: He was still at the Camp (inaudible).

TN: Back in the military camp.

RI: Yes he was. The Clem's felt they were very good Christian people and they felt that they should do something to make up for what their government was doing so they took me in and I worked for my room and board. They gave me a very nice room upstairs and that's where I learned at least theoretically to keep house because she gave me a book on maid service which was how to be a—how to train your maid or how to be your own maid and so that was the sub-title, how to clean the house and all this stuff. She had a big house and she was a very nice lady and I really enjoyed working for her because most of the time it wasn't like work. It was a sunny, pleasant house. And when it was time to go to the hospital, she was the one that took me to the hospital and she drove me to the doctors and in a way she was like a second mother, you see.

TN: Wonderful. And those are the experiences that you will never forget. So you did—you were a student at that time after you were married, were you?

RI: Yes and I tried going to the University of Minnesota for one year and then I had to give it up because at that time Randy was still a baby and although the people at the welfare were willing to place him for me, I realized I not only missed him but I would miss some

of the best years of his life and I had better stay with him and hope that things would turn out right. At first I was worried about after the war you know not having any, any skills, that I needed more education. If I was going to make a go of it and if Hide didn't come back, how was I going to raise the kid? But later I decided being separated from him at that age was a little too hard on both of us especially on him so even though he had a very nice foster home, temporary foster home I decided to stay home and wait for Hide to come back.

TN: So that kind of ended your student status for that time then? How were you treated by other students?

RI: Students? Oh the students were wonderful. They were the—a lot of the people I met except for the friends and their friends who were very nice people, I never experienced anything nasty. The students were almost all that I met—of course there were very few men there remember, they were all very helpful and they didn't treat me any differently from anybody else.

TN: How about your teachers?

RI: The teachers were great too. I think the better educated people were much better than the so-called common people.

TN: What was your major and did you ever follow through on your career?

RI: Well, later on after we got to Washington, I had to wait until Hide got his—finished his education because his was interrupted too. So he had a job with what later became part of CIA and then at night he would go to the university, Georgetown—George Washington University and finally go this degree and after he got his degree, I went. I could only go at night too so it took me four years to finish the one year I had left. But I

managed to do it and part of the time I was working too. I had most of that—three of the years I was working full time for the state department.

TN: While you were going to school and keeping house?

RI: Uh-huh, but it was quite a bit later while my kids were in school.

TN: Did you have difficulty getting work after getting out of school?

RI: No, because I applied for civil service which Washington is the place, to well the government is the biggest, was the biggest employer at that time. Now it isn't you know. But in those days it was the US Government. So I applied and the only thing I could do at that point was—well I couldn't really even type. Fortunately they did not review my typing but the two part test was one was on vocabulary and one was on typing. My typing was terrible but on vocabulary I got one hundred percent so they said we are sending you to the State Department and see what you can do over there so that is where I went.

TN: Did you feel there was any on-the-job discrimination?

RI: No. That was strange but there wasn't any at that—as far as I could tell.

TN: Well many Niseis moved many times after leaving camp. If you did move what—

RI: Well we ended up first in the hostel because the Japanese-American hostel in Washington which took in people coming in from the camps as well as ex-military. They had to have some place to go and they knew we had trouble finding housing. So the Quakers had set up this one house and it was at that time not a very good part of town but on the other hand it was a very convenient place because it was easy to get the cars and busses and all that. So we stayed there for in the hostel for about a year and then the hostel split up and we stayed on there. The hostel was terrible in itself because it was right on a busy street

and it was impossible to keep clean. Everything had black soot all over it. It was just grim living there but we stayed there until Hide got his degree and because the rent was so low there we could afford it. Then when he got his job we started looking for a better place and we found another place and there again we rented from very nice people who had rented us the bottom half of their house which was quite roomy and pleasant. Later on we moved again to another part of that same area but in a new, newly redone house that used to be a slave quarters and was a very, very tiny place. But that is where we lived for like twenty years, thirty years, twenty years I guess. Well the kids grew up and we learned, it is very funny when I look back on it. We had only one bathroom so we had a very strict schedule of who went to the bathroom first in the morning. Me first and then Hide and then the kids and if anybody loused up that schedule we were in trouble because we couldn't get out of there fast enough to get to work on time or something. But it was sort of fun.

TN: In terms of your children were they part of an extended family?

RI: My relatives?

TN: Yeah.

RI: Well an extended family, yes and no. It was tremendous. It is quite interesting. Our oldest grandson just got married and his mother is a girl from North Carolina, was a girl from North Carolina. My son is now living in Virginia and he is remarried. His former wife is remarried. And the girl that my grandson married is—has no grandparents that I saw but on my grandson's side, there were three grandparents. Because my son's second wife's father and mother have always treated Christopher as if he was one of their own

grandchildren so it was sort of nice for him to have so much family solidarity you know. They were all behind him you know.

TN: Now apparently they didn't grow up in a Japanese (inaudible) community did they?

RI: No, I missed that very much. I wish they had because there were times when I wished that I could consult their parents. When my son was growing up, he was a teenager he was very popular and he was very sociable and in the morning I would have to look into his crowded room and count the number of feet to know how many people there would be with us on weekends. How many people I'd have to make breakfast for. They were all over the floor and everything and his little tiny room and I would say, "Do your parents know you spent the night here?" And one kid would say, "Well I don't know." I would say, "You had better call them and tell them." So he'd go over and call his parents and every once in a while one of them would say they don't know and they don't care which is astonishing to me. And on one occasion a boy was very late coming home with my son. They had gone to New York together when they were teenagers and so I called his mother to see if maybe they had stopped at his place first and she was furious with me. She said you woke me up. It is ten thirty and you woke me up. Now I'll have—I'll have trouble going to sleep. I said, "Do you know your son and mine are not home yet?" She said, "Oh is that all you wanted to tell me?" And she slammed the phone and that is when I appreciated the community where I came from because I don't think any parent when I was growing up would have had that attitude.

TN: Did they learn Japanese, your children we are speaking of now?

RI: No, when they speak—when they say any word in Japanese they sound just like a haku-jin which is very ridiculous.

TN: So apparently they did not go to Japanese school?

RI: There were no Japanese schools there. The Chinese were better set up you know. They had people that would teach them. And others that were willing to set up time to set up a little school for them but we didn't find any Japanese people like that there.

TN: Did they take any lessons in Japanese cultural arts?

RI: No, no.

TN: How did they do in school?

RI: I think my son learned guitar in high school (laughing) which is not taught in high school. He was really something but he went on to get a Ph.D. He got a Ford Scholarship in college and went on to get his Ph.D. so I guess in the end he did all right. But my daughter went to Sidwell Friends School and did quite well and she graduated cum laude from Cornell and then she went on to get her masters in science and that is the field she is in right now.

TN: Well apparently at the end they did very well.

RI: I don't know if it was very well but they seem to be quite happy. My son seems to be quite content with his life. He is busy of course, traveling a lot.

TN: What part did you play in their education?

RI: Well in his education while we were trying to do something about his education I don't think we played any part except maybe in a negative way because at one point a neighbor of ours pointed out where he had just discovered that if a parent and child have different levels of education, they are not even in the same social stratum and I repeated this to my son who seemed to not hear me but evidently it struck home somewhere.

TN: Have you discussed the war experiences with your children?

RI: Well they weren't interested.

TN: They were not?

RI: No. It was too far removed. It was like talking about the civil war I think.

TN: But you mentioned that recently now there seems to be an interest.

RI: Well my oldest, my son is the older one has become very interested in things Japanese. Very belatedly I could not interest him at all in anything like that when he was growing up but now he wants books on Japanese art and Japanese gardens, Bonsai, history. He told me he was reading I forgot--several volume study of Japanese history so maybe belatedly he became interested.

TN: Do you think you have passed down some of the so called "Nisei traits" The inhibition, lack of spontaneity, difficulty articulating, push for education, sense of responsibility, working hard, et cetera? That is a mouth full.

RI: Well we tried hard but at the time they were growing up we didn't think we got anything into them. At this point I would say my son has learned to be—he doesn't have difficulty articulating. He has never had that difficulty (laughing). He speaks out and he is very outgoing and friendly and he has never I don't think had any trouble that way. But he has learned the value of education some where along the way when I didn't think he did. I thought we weren't having any affect on him at all. And I do remember one thing that he astounded me when he was still a student. We had this thing about him being responsibly, a responsible citizen. Well he was still a student and he was teaching—what do you call it—teacher's assistant—teaching assistant I guess in the college where he was studying for his Ph.D. He said he asked us if we would like to sit in his class and I said sure. So we went over there and we sat there and it was a class on citizenship or

something like that. And so they were discussing democracy and at one point some student made some remark and his response was, "You must realize that democracy entails personal responsibility." Well my husband and I we looked at each other and said "Gee, is that our son talking?

TN: We will pause for a minute now. Going on—do you—if you encountered racism in school or in your community, how did you deal with it?

RI: Well—

TN: Or did you encounter any racism in school?

RI: In school I hardly—I don't think in encountered much.

TN: This is in speaking about your children again.

RI: Oh the children?

TN: Yes.

RI: Oh the children. Well I'm not sure. I don't know if they did encounter at school from their fellow students as much as they did from the student's parents. I remember my son coming home bitter because he had struck up a friendship with a girl and the girl had invited him to her house and the mother was furious with her daughter for bringing a Jap into the house. Right in front of him, well he was very, very upset I remember that. My daughter had—I don't think she encountered racism because she was in a private school and I don't think that was allowed. But there may have been some prejudice behind the actions of one of her teachers at school. She would not admit that of course but I'm sure she had a big problem with one of her teachers at that school. At Sidwell Friend's School at that time but he is no longer there and I'm sure they got rid of him if they ever found out how he was treating her.

TN: How about after she got out of school?

RI: She was at Cornell and at Cornell I don't think they had very much of that. Maybe an occasional one at—not at school but at the—from the people who lived around the school. I remember that she bitterly complained about how ignorant people behaved towards her but she did not tell me exactly specifically what it was that they had said or done.

TN: Do you feel a part of the Japanese-American community?

RI: I feel I was part of it but I'm not really a part of if now because we don't live there. We don't live among Japanese-Americans and haven't for a long time.

TN: Do your children?

RI: No, my daughter may be more than others because she works with a lot of post doctoral students, researchers actually at the University of Charlotte, Virginia at Charlottesville and many of them are from Japan. So from them she learned about their cultural attitudes and one of course she tells me about their attitudes towards women which she disapproves of highly. So does her boss.

TN: Okay, now we're getting into the recent years. What are the most important things that have happened to you in recent years?

RI: In recent years?

TN: Yes.

RI: Well we moved out of the city which was very important to me because I was going crazy in the city with neighbors right smack next door. And we moved out to the country in Virginia. Now there we have even less contact with Japanese-American society

because we are surrounded by haku-jins really. All of them, the nearest ones are artists and so they are very interesting people, very creative.

TN: Is your family living near you?

RI: Yes, personally Charlottesville is about two hours, especially the way that young people drive is about two hours away. So for us it is about two and a half hour away.

TN: That is where your daughter lives?

RI: That's where our daughter lives. And the other lives about a half an hour way, for them it is twenty minutes. So they are quite close actually and we see them fairly often. My daughter-in-law to her credit makes sure that we see them and they see us through the children's growing years she made sure we spent at least one of the big holidays together. But normally we spent Thanksgiving and Christmas together.

TN: What is your biggest worry?

RI: My biggest worry? Is I suppose the way the drug culture is affecting the youngest generation, the grandchildren. One of them seems to be completely untouched where as, it has touched two of them. And that is the worry.

TN: Well what makes you happy?

RI: Oh just seeing life around me and people behaving as they should (inaudible) and now that I am in the country I am more aware of what is going on around in the world of nature and that is what my biggest interest is right now because I realize that if the environment goes so does the human race and that is a very, very big problem right now.

TN: How did the war experience affect you and your life?

RI: It's affected us, I guess all of our lives but in sort of an insidious way. You don't really know how much until you reflect upon it. Of course we appreciate life and freedom more than other people because we experienced something else.

TN: But you really don't know until you lose it do you?

RI: Right.

TN: What helped you the most during those hard times?

RI: I suppose family, family backing.

TN: And what did you learn from that experience?

RI: To try not to repeat it. And try not to do it to somebody else.

TN: And then how do you feel about redress and reparations?

RI: Well I believe that that was just but in some cases perhaps unjust because some people lost a whole lot more than we did. For us it was even though we lost material things it was a whole new beginning for us. You see, we had to start over. It was like a second chance at life instead of going on the way we were. But I feel the strongest about the people from South America, people of Japanese decent in South America who have still not received any reparation and that was a very gross miscarriage of justice there.

TN: Has the redress movement affected you?

RI: Yes I suppose a little but not a whole lot.

TN: How are you spending your time now?

RI: Well my interest is in, like I said, the environment and in my gardening and learning about the things that go on in nature and—

TN: Are you active in the Japanese-American community?

RI: No, we are far removed from anybody in that community.

TN: How about on political and social issues?

RI: We are not very political. I think our son is political enough for all of us actually.

TN: What do you do for recreation now?

RI: Well we like to travel but not very far. Because my husband hates to travel. He had to travel so much when he was working but he just doesn't want to do anything like that anymore. And we go to plays when we feel like it and we have a place in Washington, near Washington where we can stay over night if we want to see a play or something.

TN: Would you—

RI: Our life is centered around where we live.

TN: If you can imagine that there was no WWII, what would your life be like?

RI: I think it would be very different. We would probably still be in California. And I think our lives would be very different but I don't really know in what ways specifically.

TN: If you can imagine there was another eviction order, what would you do?

RI: Well if it happened right now I think I would join the crowd and the people who were protesting it much more vociferously than we—we would be protesting it, we just wouldn't go there. The second time around you are more prepared of what the kinds of things the people do during wartime and I think we would be more actively trying to educate the public.

TN: Of course you were; we are all much more mature at this time comparing to 1942. Now after redress what kinds of roles do you think that Japanese-Americans should play in society?

RI: I think they should—well they are doing, at least, where we are about what I expected is blending in. And I noticed that my grandson has married a Caucasian woman and maybe

all of my grandchildren will marry outside of the Japanese-American community. So maybe we will just disappear—I don't know.

TN: What kind of life do you see for your children and grandchildren?

RI: Well I hope that they have a better life than we did. That they will be more enlightened. That they will be more responsible for themselves and their environment and towards other people and society in general.

TN: What do you think were the greatest contributions of our Nisei men and women?

RI: I really can't say. I think some of them the ones that were more prominent have showed them that we are capable of more than just plain existing and I think by setting an example many of the Nisei have shown that hard work and persistence and integrity is very important if only to the immediate surroundings, people immediately around them. Even so that people can spread you know.

TN: How do you feel about what you feel are your greatest achievements?

RI: I don't think I've achieved very much actually (laughing).

TN: I know that is a tough question.

RI: I wish I could say I have but—

TN: I'm sure you have but not many people like to brag. If you were giving advice to young people today what would you tell them?

RI: Well to always do what you think is right and to remember that it is very important to preserve our environment and I mean earth, air, water and everything if we are to survive as a nation or as a people, as even as genus or something. I have big doubts about the way things are going and all this development and people are multiplying like there is no tomorrow. That something terrible might happen not just to the Japanese-Americans but

I mean to all of humanity. If we aren't careful something could happen and nobody will be aware of it until it is too late to reverse what has happened.

TN: You are speaking primarily about the environment are you?

RI: Yes, the environment and I mean air, water and everything.

TN: Well we are nearing the end of the interview. Is there anything else you would like to say?

RI: I think I've just about said it. I might think of something afterwards but I can't think of anything now.

TN: Do you have any questions for me at this time?

RI: No.

TN: Well I thank you very much Ruth Okuye Ihara for sharing your story with us and this is the end of the interview. Thank you very much.