

MASAYOSHI SUGIMOTO

MRS. HASEGAWA: Today is July 30, 1980. I, Yoshino Hasegawa, am privileged to interview Mr. Masayoshi Sugimoto at the Fresno County Public Library, 2420 Mariposa Street, Fresno, California, 93721.

Before we get into the interview proper, please give us your full name, your place and date of birth, and your place of longest residence.

MR. SUGIMOTO: My name is Masayoshi Sugimoto, and I was born on January 2, 1902 in Kumamoto-ken, Yatsushiro-gun.

MR. SUGIMOTO: What is your present address?

MR. SUGIMOTO: My address is 10254 South Del Rey Avenue, Selma, California, 93662.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When did you come to America?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I came in the middle of August, on the 16th, in 1916.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What port did you ship dock when you arrived in America?

MR. SUGIMOTO: In San Francisco.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why did you decide to come here?

MR. SUGIMOTO: My father was here before I came, and he sent for me to join him.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What year did your father arrive?

MR. SUGIMOTO: He came in 1902.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was the year that you were born, so you must have been 14 years old when you came to this country.

With whom did you live in Japan, prior to coming here?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I lived with my mother, my older sister, and my grandfather.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your mother and sister come later?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No, they never came at all.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were you able to see your mother again?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. I was able to see her because I went back to Japan in 1940 just before the war. In 1940 I took my family back to Japan and when we returned to the United States, we left three of our children with my mother in Japan.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You left your children in Japan?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. Those were very hard years, economically, and so we only brought the youngest one back with us.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What happened to the three children that you left?

MR. SUGIMOTO: They were educated in Japan. They went through the elementary schools there.

MRS. HASEGAWA: That was just the year before the war with Japan began!

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I wonder how they survived the war years?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I am sure it must have been difficult for them.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How old were they?

MR. SUGIMOTO: The oldest was 10 years old, the next 8, and the youngest 6.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I am sure you must have worried a great deal about them.

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you go to school in Japan?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. I graduated from grammar school.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you have any childhood recollections you might like to share with us?

MR. SUGIMOTO: It is so long ago that I have forgotten!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you live on a farm in Japan?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. We operated a small farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of crop did they raise?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Mostly rice and iiyo.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What is iiyo?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Iiyo is straw that is used to make tatami (floor covering). There were two crops on the farm, after the iiyo was harvested, the rice was planted.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was the tatami actually woven on your farm?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you help with that work?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No, I was too young to do that kind of work.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What did your father do here in Selma?

MR. SUGIMOTO: By the time I came, he had rented a vineyard and had muscats and Thompsons planted on the farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your father come to Selma when he first arrived in this country?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No. He first worked for a few years on the railroad, and before that he had come to Hawaii and worked there for a while. He came here to Selma in 1906.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did he come alone?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Was there anyone else from your family here?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, my uncle was here. He came in 1899 and worked at the Kearney Ranch in Fresno. He picked grapes, and he was such a good worker that the boss really treated him very well and paid him better than the other employees. He worked there for four or five years, then he went to Denver.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did your father come here because your uncle was here?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No. My father had 80 acres of vineyard that he had rented when I arrived. In 1922 my father and I bought a 60-acre vineyard in Sanger, but it was a great mistake! The farm was on the corner of Bethel and North Avenue. We paid 50 percent down in cash on the place and lost it!

MR. HASEGAWA: Why did that happen?

MR. SUGIMOTO: When we bought the land, it was during the boom years, and the price of the farm was very expensive. But the following year we went into the Depression and grape prices hit bottom; first to 10 cents a pound then to 2 cents, then 1 cent!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Oh, my!

MR. SUGIMOTO: 1918 and 1919 were good years, but the 20's were bad. When we bought the farm, the cost of land was \$2,000 an acre. Then it went down to \$100 an acre!

MRS. HASEGAWA: From \$2,000 to \$100!

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. There was a big-time farmer, T.B. Michael, who lost all his lands, and the Valley Bank went bankrupt. In the same way, we couldn't keep up the payments, so we lost that farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I thought the Depression years were the worst in the 30's?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No. Land was the most expensive from 1920 to 1924. It was because Hoover was too conservative! But it was fortunate that we had kept the payments up on the 80-acre rented farm in Selma. We returned to that property and worked there until the war broke out, and we were interned at Gila Relocation Center.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you bought the Sanger ranch, did you live there?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. There was a house on the property. Our neighbors there were Mr. Mano and the Matsunagas. I put in four years of hard work there for nothing.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How sad that was!

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. We lost about \$50,000 of hard-earned money that my father had saved!

MRS. HASEGAWA: You arrived at age 14 and had to work so hard in the hot valley sun. What are your recollections of that time?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I only thought-of working hard, making money, and going back to Japan with my father.

MRS. HASEGAWA: So that was your main objective?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. I went to school for about six months in this country.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where did you go to school?

MR. SUGIMOTO: In Del Rey there was a school on the corner of McCall and Washington. I went there for about a month and then I went to school in Selma for about half a year. After that I just worked!

My father managed a 100-acre farm for a widowed Caucasian woman on the corner of McCall and Lincoln, a grain farm. He had bad luck with that farm, too, and lost the crop! The grapes all rotted because there was so much rain that year.

MRS. HASEGAWA: My, it seems your father had suffered a lot of hardships.

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, he tried everything. He was not too successful, though he did make money before he lost it on the Sanger farm! Fortunately, he held onto the 80 acres that he rented.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is that where your home is now?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No. After the war we bought the land that was next to that farm.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How did you cultivate your farm in those days?

MR. SUGIMOTO: We used horses. In those days we only irrigated about twice in the summer, so we did not require many hands to farm the property.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Why is it that more irrigation is required now?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Long ago, the water table was only about 2 to 20 feet, so Papa did not irrigate. Because of this our crop was light, about one ton an acre.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What has happened to the water now? Why is more

irrigation required?

MR. SUGIMOTO: There was much more open land which did not need irrigation at that time, and people did not pump water. But, now, that so much pumping is done, the water table has gone way down. There was only ditch water then . Even in the 30's, there were some people who didn't have their own wells.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you think the climate has changed?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Not so much. It may have been much hotter in those days.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What about the winters?

MR. SUGIMOTO: The ponds around here were full of water in those days, so we had much more fog!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where were the ponds?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Most of the low land around here was ponds. That was why the water table was so high. Hanford was even worse in the amount of fog that covered the area.

In 1916 there was water puddles almost all year round.

MRS. HASEGAWA: There must have been lots of mosquitoes?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, there were many mosquitoes. I was literally eaten up by them! At home in the evenings we used katori senko (mosquito repellent incense), but during the day there was nothing we could do.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Who did the cooking for you and your father?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I did. I had to go shopping on my bicycle, since we did not have a car. So I would buy lots of canned food. There were no refrigerators then, you know.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How far did you have to go?

MR. SUGIMOTO: About a mile and a half. It was close to town.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you go to a Caucasian store?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No. There were two or three Japanese stores; there was the Kamikawa branch store, the Kajitanis had a store, and the Tories did, too.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How long did it take you to go to the store on your bicycle?

MR. SUGIMOTO: About 30 minutes, one way.

MRS. HASEGAWA: You and your father worked so hard. What did you do for recreation?

MR. SUGIMOTO: My father was intent on making a fortune and going back to Japan, so we did not have time for recreation. We just worked all the time! We never went anywhere, we just worked! All my life I've done

nothing but work!

MRS. HASEGAWA: You don't need to work so hard now, do you?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No. I only farm my own 40 acres now.

MRS. HASEGAWA: It seems to me that you've really had a hard life!

MR. SUGIMOTO: Well, yes, the life of an Issei was very rough.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Mr. Sugimoto, when were you married?

MR. SUGIMOTO: My wife is Kimiko Misaki, and I knew her from the time she was a young girl. She was educated in Japan. She went to Japan when she was 10 years old and returned to America when she was 19 years old. We were married soon after she returned.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have a baishaku kekkon (arranged marriage) even though you knew Kimiko-san before your marriage?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, for the sake of formality.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many children do you have?

MR. SUGIMOTO: We have six daughters.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Are some of your children still in Japan?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No, we called them back in 1961.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What a wonderful reunion that must have been! Are all your children married?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, all but the oldest one Teruko, who works at Alma's Beauty Shop in Fresno.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where do your children live?

MR. SUGIMOTO: The second Sumiko is married to Ebisuda, the manager of Central Bank in Parlier. She is a beautician and worked at Lillie's Beauty Shop in Fresno, but she is now a housewife. The third is Yukiko who is married to Hiroyasu in Fresno. The next Miyoko is married to a Caucasian and lives in San Francisco. They have a bar. Number five is Yoshiye who is a stewardess for United Airlines and is married to Ronago Bell. The six is Mariko Yonede, she is also a stewardess and works for Trans-World Airlines.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Does your family get together very often?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, all the time! Especially during the New Year's holidays.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you have grandchildren?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, six. And the last one was a boy!

MRS. HASEGAWA: When the war began with Japan, how did you get the news?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I was at home and heard it over the radio.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What was your reaction?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I was very concerned.

MRS. HASEGAWA: I am sure you must have been, especially with your children in Japan!

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were there any discrimination directed at you at that time?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. I remember some people came on their cars at night and shined their lights on our house to intimidate us. Our Caucasian neighbors were very nice.

MRS. HASEGAWA: When you were sent to Relocation Center, what kind of work did you do?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I was a carpet layer. I laid linoleum on the floors of the barracks. The living quarters of the inmates were so bad that there were spaces between the boards on the floor where the sand and dust would seep up during the frequent dust storms. So that was my job for two years. After that, we moved out to Grandby, Colorado in the mountains to raise lettuce and spinach with my uncle.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Farming in Colorado must have been quite different to the farming here in our area?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes. For one thing the elevation there was 8,000 feet, and it was hard to breathe. Lettuce and spinach grow better in colder weather. Of course, the method of farming is quite different. Because of the elevation, we were never able to have rice cooked the way we wanted; the water did not boil! There was an advantage to living there, since we were able to go fishing whenever we could, and there were lots of trout to be caught!

MRS. HASEGAWA: Were there many racial discriminations there in Colorado?

MR. SUGIMOTO: When we were on our way to the farm there from camp, we were denied service at a restaurant in Grand Junction.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you have trouble getting gasoline?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No, farmers didn't have trouble with purchasing gasoline.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many children did you have with you at that time?

MR. SUGIMOTO: We had two.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many years were you in Colorado?

MR. SUGIMOTO: We were there for two years.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Did you return to California by train?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No, we drove back in an automobile in 1947.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where did you return to?

MR. SUGIMOTO: We first came to Kingsburg and rented a farm on Rose Avenue between Smith and Zediker. We stayed there on the peach and grape farm, then we moved to a farm on the corner of DeWolf and Nebraska where I worked as a farmhand. After that, I bought and moved to this farm in Selma.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What kind of crops do you raise on this farm?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Mostly Thompson grapes which we make into raisins or send to the winery. In recent years, I have been sending them to the winery since raisin drying is so much work.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you returned to Japan since the war?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Oh, yes, four or five times.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you have family there?

MR. SUGIMOTO: Yes, I have a sister.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Have you noticed changes in the treatment of Japanese people in your community over the years?

MR. SUGIMOTO: No, I don't see too much difference. I feel that I have been pretty fairly treated.

MRS. HASEGAWA: What social and economic changes have you seen in your community over the years?

MR. SUGIMOTO: There are many wealthy Japanese neighbors in my area now. They have beautiful home, and many have packinghouses.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Do you belong to any organizations?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I belong to the Selma Buddhist Church and to the Kumamoto Kenjinkai.

MRS. HASEGAWA: How many members are there in the kenjinkai?

MR. SUGIMOTO: About 70 members. The organization was formed after the war to help each other out. The membership covers from the south, Bakersfield; to Madera in the north.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Where do you meet?

MR. SUGIMOTO: At the Buddhist church. We used to meet in a restaurant across from the Buddhist church in Fresno, but now we meet at the church and find that that is better. We have our dinner catered.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Mr. Sugimoto, do you still observe any traditional Japanese customs?

MR. SUGIMOTO: The food we eat is still mostly traditional Japanese cooking.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Is there something else you would like to add to this interview?

MR. SUGIMOTO: I hope that the younger Japanese descendants in this country will continue to uphold the good Japanese teachings and continue to be honorable.

MRS. HASEGAWA: Thank you, Mr. Sugimoto, for coming in for this interview for the Japanese History Project.