

NARRATOR: BOB FUKUHARA
INTERVIEWERS: Steve Holland and Benjamin Lee with Craig Roth
DATE: November 14, 2008
PROJECT: South County Historical Society's Japanese-American Oral History
TRANSCRIBER: CENTER FOR ORAL AND PUBLIC HISTORY, CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, FULLERTON, 2017

SH: Okay, now it's actively recording. So, Steve Holland and Benjamin Lee with the South County Historical Society Oral History Project interviewing Mr. Bob Fukuhara on November 14, 2008. Mr. Fukuhara, I'm just going to ask some simple questions at first about your family. When and where did they arrive in America?

BF: My parents?

SH: Yes sir.

BF: Boy, I'm not quite sure, about 1920 I thought it was.

SH: And where, where did they go before they came to AG?

BF: Well, they were first in upper Royal. My dad was farming up there. And then they were also in Guadalupe and I guess they moved in this area about 19 or before 1930. And I don't know too specific about all that.

SH: Okay.

BF: My brother would know more about that than I would.

SH: All righty, do you know what your parents did in Japan?

BF: Oh boy. I guess they were farmers?

SH: Farmers?

BF: Yeah, as far as I can.

SH: All righty, and when you were growing up, what was it like growing up Nisei in Arroyo Grande area?

BF: How was it?

SH: Yes.

BF: It's, it's, you know, yeah it was just like, everything was fine you know.

SH: Yeah.

BF: I went to grammar school in Arroyo Grande. And then to, up to the fifth grade and that's when we were evacuated then.

SH: Okay, and as far as, you know, we know that your family is very important in the Buddhist community here. And how, how was Buddhism part of your everyday life growing up?

BF: Well, for us when, in the younger days, we just have to go to Sunday School and things like that. So, as far as religious part was you know kind of secondary thing for us in the younger days. It got more important as we got older, but—

SH: What role did your family play in the local Buddhist community?

BF: Well, they were, I think my dad was part of the leaders, well the board member leaders, one of them yeah.

SH: Did you, how did you specifically participate in the Buddhist community?

BF: How did we? I mean—

SH: Did you, you personally—

BL: At an earlier age?

BF: Oh, I used to go to you know, they called it Dharma School. It's just like Sunday School. And I was involved in helping out being part of the younger superintendent at the time, then teaching.

SH: In the community, how were relations between the Buddhist community and the Christian community?

BF: They were fine.

SH: They were fine?

BF: We got along fine.

SH: And let's see, let's go down to some questions about internment. What was your family's reaction or your reaction to Pearl Harbor when it happened if you remember?

BF: Oh, it was, it was, it affected my parents a lot more than I did you know? It kind of affected the whole, everybody around here you know.

SH: What, how did it impact you aside from you know the—

BF: Well, at that age, you know it kind of affected me quite a bit because it affected my family, parents mainly.

SH: How did your family prepare to go to the camps? Did they go before the mandatory deadline or--?

BF: First we, in this area, everybody in the coast area would have to, unless you move to another area you're going to be evacuated to camp. So, we moved to the valley in '41 I think and then we stayed there for about six months and then eventually we were evacuated to camp after that. This is in '42 I think.

SH: Okay, did you go to a relocate or to an assembly center before the camp or--?

BF: No, we went right directly to, to called relocation camp in Poston, Arizona.

SH: Okay, now when I was, when we were doing our research we saw that your family went to Reedley.

BF: Yeah, right.

SH: Is that, is that—

BF: That's the valley, yeah.

SH: That's where you moved to, okay.

BF: Yeah, so I went to school there for six months.

SH: Yeah, we saw that but we couldn't, we just couldn't figure out what—

BF: Yeah, Reedley yeah, that's where we went.

BL: Can you recall any of the school experience in Reedley for six months?

BF: Oh, yeah, I mean I was in the what fifth grade or something? It was kind of hard for me because I was the only Japanese in that class. They were all Caucasian in that area. See, Reedley was split up. One half was all the Japanese was in the other area and where we moved to was all Caucasian. So, that's the school I went to. So, it was kind of hard for me for a while.

BL: What about your siblings? Did they attend the same school or—

BF: My sib, you mean after I, no, no. You mean after, you're talking about my kids?

BL: No, I mean when you're in Reedley, your brothers?

BF: Oh.

BL: Did they attend school as well?

BF: Let's see. No, they did, well they went into, they went to college. They were, I was the only one in grade school at the time because we were only there for six months. So,

some of them didn't even have to go to school you know at that time. My older brothers, they were, they went to college or, or—

BL: Once you arrived at the camp, what was your first reaction?

BF: It was pretty, pretty rough because it's hot, dusty and we got off the bus and there was this, you know in the middle of the desert and I remember the first thing they gave us was salt pill when we got off. And it was just burning hot you know? And then finally they shipped us over to where all the barracks and our locks.

BL: Daily activities. Your routine. How was life different there?

BF: In camp?

BL: Yeah.

BF: Well, everybody was in a community. So, we all stayed to ourselves until we got to know each other you know? So, it was like getting, it was more rougher on my folks than me because I was young yet and you know, just go along with it and everything.

BL: What about the bathrooms or the food or the living quarters that you were in? How were those?

BF: I was just, if you've ever been in the service, it's like barracks. You know, you have showers and bathroom all in one building. Until we got settled, everything was all together so it was kind of hectic there for a while.

BL: Was it any problem for you as a child back then?

BF: Well no, not really because I was only eleven or twelve then so.

BL: What about your sisters?

BF: Oh, I guess they had some hard times, you know.

BL: And the food?

BF: Food was all you know, whatever they cooked you know was, we went to what they called a mess hall just like if you were in the ser, you know a camp you know, so we all ate there. So, food was terrible at first, but after the cook got better, it got reasonably well.

BL: Was the cook one of the internees or?

BF: Yeah, they, all the workers were internees.

BL: Do you recall the specific kind of food you ate?

BF: Well, a lot of it was rice and Japanese kind of food you know and whatever, mix of— until the cooks got better it was you know just like if you've ever been in a camp you know, the food is—

BL: At least you were lucky enough to have rice back then though.

BF: Yeah, they had rice.

BL: When, when you were in the camp, was most of your time spent with your family or with friends you made in the camp?

BF: Yeah, after we started school yes. We spent most, a lot of time with our friends.

BL: Yeah.

BF: When school started.

BL: And if you can recall, the, the questionnaire, the loyalty questionnaire that, that was, was mandatory for camp attendees. Do you remember your family's reaction to that, your parent's reaction?

BF: No, they didn't communicate too much about things like that.

BL: What about the general camp mood when the questionnaire was going around? Did you—

- BF: Well, there's a lot, you know some of them I'm sure was you know, they didn't like it.
- BL: As far as, as far as your parents are concerned. Do you remember what life was like for them in the camp?
- BF: It was real tough for them.
- BL: Yeah, how so, do you recall?
- BF: Huh?
- BL: Do you recall why it was harder for them?
- BF: Well, you know they're uprooted and all of a sudden, they're in this, way out in the desert and you know? We're all together, so everybody was in the same boat. So, you got, so you got, you seemed to get along after a while.
- BL: Exactly, yeah.
- BF: It's not like you're the only one there. There's other families in the same boat and we're all living quarters right next to each other in all barracks, small place.
- BL: Once you, once you left the camp, did you speak, did you talk about the camp a lot afterwards when you got out or--?
- BF: To anybody else, no, not too much no.
- BL: And when, when you were affirmed for release, what was the first thing you did when you found out you were able to leave or your family?
- BF: Well, we left as a family you know? It was just good to get out you know actually.
- BL: Where did you guys, where did you return?
- BF: We returned here.
- BL: And when you were gone, who took care of the property and your farm?
- BF: Oh, this Lummis, Bart Lummis was in this building here.

BL: As one of the first Japanese families to return to Arroyo Grande, what was your experience like overall?

BF: It was, I mean at school? Well, I had more problem at school—

BL: Okay.

BF: --for us you know when we came back. We were just helping out on the ranch. It was all ranch work so. Then three months' school started, and that's when things got a little bit rough for us. There was four, four Japanese. They went to school, _____ High School so. For a while we were kind of discriminated but things got better. I went out for basketball, you know, sports and got to know everybody and then I guess they got to know us. And then we started to get along pretty good after that. And after that things got pretty good.

BL: What about, now that was the students. How did the faculty treat you?

BF: They're real good.

BL: The faculty?

BF: The principal was real, he said you just have to stick it out. He said, these people are just ignorant, so they don't know what's going on so, just, everything will turn out okay.

They were really good. All the principal, teachers were all, they understood what was going on so.

BL: Now what drew you, what drew you to basketball instead of like baseball or something else?

BF: Oh, I, we used to play basketball a lot and when we were in camp too, so.

BL: Okay.

BF: And then it was just, I was in the C team, that was the lowest team to start out with and my brothers were in the B team and then a couple of the others were, the older ones they were in the varsity. So, we all got together. Some of the other played football and I was, I was boxing and track.

BL: Now the people that didn't treat you so well in high school, are they still around in the community?

BF: Yeah, some of them are still around.

BL: Yeah, and have you spoke with them recently? Have their attitudes changed or--?

BF: No, not really.

BL: No? How many, sorry.

BF: Those things you kind of bite you and it's pretty hard to—

BL: Yeah.

BF: --you just ignore it, you know?

BL: Yeah, how many families actually returned to the area, do you know?

BF: In this area?

BL: Yeah.

BF: There's, first there was just two families, Kouvaras and us were the first two family, then gradually all the rest of them came back.

BL: Were there any community members who really helped you in the community?

BF: Oh yeah, there's.

BL: And how, how did they do so?

BF: Well, they told us you know they says, anyway we can help you, you know? Yeah, yeah, they went out to help you whatever, if you can't something or you know whatever.

BL: When you parents were free to become citizens, what, what were their reactions?

BF: Oh yeah, yes, yeah, they were really, I guess they were really happy that they were you know became citizens.

BL: Did they become citizens as soon as they got the chance?

BF: Oh yeah, I think so.

BL: And-uh.

SH: Could we stop here a second?

BL: Sure.

SH: Before you go on?

BL: Sure, sure.

SH: Go back a little bit, Bob, talk about what specific instances of discrimination when you returned to the high school about your tires being slashed--

BF: Oh yeah, when—

SH: --by the students?

BF: We, we took.

SH: Well wait a minute, wait.

BF: Okay.

BL: Can you do me a favor and just point that, can you point that microphone a little bit towards his direction please?

SH: And, he'll ask the question to you okay?

BF: Yeah, okay.

SH: So, the other question is they had a member of the 442nd come and talk to the student body about the problems that the discrimination that was happening. So, ask him about

that and how he felt. And then there was one question on this, the answer to that question is that there, the tires on their car were flattened when they would go to school and that kind of stuff. So, you'll talk a little bit about that. And the other thing was, what was your last two questions?

BL: The last two I asked?

SH: Yeah.

BL: About the families returning?

SH: Oh, the families returning. Bob, maybe you can talk a little bit about the families that tried to come back but because they leased their land, they couldn't stay and they had to go somewhere else.

BF: Yeah, right.

SH: Because only ten families or so came back.

BF: Only people that had property or something to come back to were able to come back. Others had to go other places to get a job or whatever.

SH: Okay, so why don't you retrace your steps a little bit and—

BL: Okay.

SH: And go ahead.

BL: Now, let's go back to your, the discrimination in high school. What were some specific acts that, that you had to deal with?

BF: Well, you know the cars. We took a car and all and there was four of us. And they used to flatten our tires and you know and they used to always bad mouth us for a while for you know. For a few months, it was kind of rough there.

BL: So, they tried to prevent you from going to school?

BF: No, there's just a few, there's not everybody, there's just a few that you know, most of them were you know, they didn't say anything ever. They would tolerate everything that was going on, but—

BL: About the member of the 442nd coming to visit?

BF: Yeah, I think one of the representatives from _____ came and we had a, you know, a meeting you know out in the audience, I mean at the gym where everybody, they spoke about you know how the 442 really you know serving the Army and helped out and should be more tolerant about the you know Japanese-American that are here you know?

BL: Did this change the attitudes of the students who discriminated against you?

BF: Oh, maybe some of them did. But I don't know. It was, I don't know if that, of course it helped, you know, some of them did you know, because at that age I don't think too many of them knew what the 442 service was anyway, you know in high school, because I was only a freshman in high school? So, people that knew yeah, maybe they might have felt it was—well anyway, the sports was the main thing that broke the ice I thought. Until then there's things kind of icy. And they get to know us and I guess, especially in sports you know, that really broke the ice I thought.

BL: Could you tell us about your experiences in boxing and track as well?

BF: Well, I went out for boxing and basketball. Yeah, that was you know, sports I really liked so, it was fine. I mean you could.

BL: How was boxing you know kind of different because you know, it's a little bit different from baseball or even basketball.

BF: Oh yeah, well see I was playing basketball at the time and this coach, the boxing coach, he was really good to me. He said, "Why don't you come out for boxing?" He said, "We

need some boxers.” I said, “Okay, I will.” So, I went out for boxing because I was a fly weight, so they needed a lot of, and we were traveling to a couple of other schools to box.

BL: And how did the other schools treat you?

BF: Oh fine, yeah.

BL: When, when the families were returning to AG, what type of problems did they face?

BF: What do you mean, the family?

BL: Yes.

BF: Well—

BL: Or other families in the community?

BF: Yeah, some of them were discriminated going to some of these stores. They didn’t want them to come you know for a while there.

BL: And what about actually returning to their property?

BF: Yeah, some of them had problem you know.

BL: Did any, like how Vard Lummis promised to hold onto your house while you were away?

BF: Yeah.

BL: Were there any other people who held onto Japanese property and—

BF: Oh yeah, I think yeah, like Kouvaros had—

BL: I actually forgot the name, but it was—

BF: Well, this kind of thing, you better ask my brother’s more familiar. I was too young to know what’s, that part was as far as the—there was a lot of, not a lot of. There were a few family that had people that took care of the farm and their property and their equipment. I know that.

- BL: Were there any instances where they you know failed to keep their promise and you know the property was returned and in not the same condition as they left it before they went to the internment camps?
- BF: I haven't heard anything like that really. There might have been, but I don't know.
- BL: When you returned to Arroyo Grande, how was it? What was the shape of the Buddhist community? Was it hard to get it back up and running or--?
- BF: Well, yeah, we had to, all the leaders they got together and brought it back up. Our church was in San Luis when we first came back you know. So, and after a while the freeway went in, so they built another Buddhist Church in Avila. But they were pretty active you know the older people were pretty active, so they, they all stuck together and got it going pretty good really.
- BL: When, when you first heard about the Redress Movement, what did you think about it?
- BF: Well, it was, I thought it was real, because I thought it was a real good deal for us because we were you know, they was going to you know help us get some of our things back you know.
- BL: Were you involved in it in any way?
- BF: My sisters were, but not me.
- BL: And do you know what they did?
- BF: You mean, we had a problem getting what they called a _____property thing. So, we had to go to court for that. Mainly my sister was in charge of things like that, so I don't know too much detail about that. But we were all kind of worried because we could lose our property you know, kind of rough for about six month there.
- BL: I, I read that you were a mechanic after?

BF: Yeah, yeah.

BL: What made you go into that line of work rather than the farming aspect?

BF: Well, I went to school to be a farmer. But then I went in the service. I was drafted in the Army for two years. And when I came back, well there was a lot of, my brothers were all going to farm and I said, I don't want to be a farmer. So, I went to trade school on the GI loan and went to trade school in LA for was it six-month course and then became a mechanic. So, I was a mechanic for about twenty years.

BL: What a, what year did you get drafted?

BF: Nineteen fifty.

BL: The early 1950's?

BF: Fifty-two, I was drafted in fifty-two. I was in the service for two years and I got out and then came back and said I'm going to be a mechanic. I went to trade school, then after that I went to work for Ford, a couple of agency and then, and a private garage in Pismo.

BL: How did you, oh I'm sorry, go ahead.

BF: And then I got.

BL: Go ahead.

BF: You go ahead.

BL: How did you spend your time in the Army because I believe the Korean War was around the early 1950's?

BF: Yeah, see after basic training I was, I got shipped to Fort Bliss and I was in communication. So, I went to the communication school there and then at that time the truce was signed in the Korean War, so I never got an order to go to, to Korea. So, I was stateside in Fort Bliss.

- BL: And this in California or was it in another state?
- BF: It was Washington.
- BL: Okay, do you—
- BF: And then I got out in fifty-five, yeah, they started in fifty-five.
- BL: Do you have any specific stories that you can remember about being in the camp or once you got, once you returned that you think might be interesting?
- BF: Like, you mean, well we had a lot of friends in camp so, it's, you know when we left camp you know, you kind of lost contact with everybody. So, coming back was a you know, a new adjustment for me because this is all different here. No, I can't really think of specific anything unless you want to ask me something?
- BL: When, when, when you were leaving the camp, were you upset that you were leaving or because, in the research I've noticed that for the younger generation, it was, the camp experience was actually you know something they kind of enjoyed because they were able to hang out with their friends and not work and—
- BF: Yeah, yeah. Yeah, because they were all just, you know, just a freshman in high at that time, so we had a lot of friends, yeah. Yeah, that's true in a way you know. You kind of miss all the friends we left. But it still was good to get out, more for my folks you know, they had to come back to the ranch and start it up again. So, for us younger people it was like losing you know all those contacts you had.
- BL: Was it, was it hard to get the property started up again, the farm?
- BF: Well, you know it's harder for my folks to get things started again you know, hire workers and you know. Once they got it going, I guess you know, it's just all work you

know because at that time I just used to help out on the ranch. It was hard on my folks you know getting things going again.

BL: Going back to Reedley?

BF: Yeah.

BL: You said you've been there for school?

BF: Six months.

BL: Six months. Can you recall any specific occurrences or any memories of the school or--?

BF: Yeah, it was, what grade was that?

BL: Fifth or sixth grade I believe.

BF: Yeah. Yeah, it was fine. I mean you know you just had to make new friends you know, and that's the only hard part.

BL: And was it easy making new friends or was it particularly difficult?

BF: Yeah, just, it wasn't bad you know. Yeah, I made friends.

BL: And how did the faculty treat you there?

BF: Fine, they were good. The faculties were all good.

BL: I think that's all. Did you have any questions?

CR: Yeah, clarify that point about some people not being able to stay here because they didn't own their land. You never followed up with that question that I suggested because he answers at one point that everybody came back and stayed here. So, you should clarify that. Also, Bob, do you remember anything about you know the Kouvaros had some agents from the relocation authority stay in their driveway because of threats to their house or to their--?

BF: Oh yeah.

CR: --family? Did you guys experience any of those--

BF: Well, we had—

CR: --threats?

BF: --two motorcycle guys come through here all the time trying to harass us at night.

CR: Oh, you did?

BF: Yeah, at night.

CR: And what did you do about it?

BF: I don't know if we, we did anything or not. You know my folks would just—

CR: Did they just drive through the driveway?

BF: Yeah, just did a couple of nights and that was it. After that, they didn't do it. So, maybe they never followed it up.

CR: Okay, did they shout things?

BF: No, just made a lot of noise. You know, it was just.

CR: Yeah, do you remember your parents having to get their gasoline at night or anything like that because the merchants were afraid that they would be seen as supporting the Japanese?

BF: No, I don't know, not really.

CR: Okay, I think the Kouvaros remember.

BF: Yeah, Kouvaros, Ken had a lot more to say about that because he was really involved.

CR: Yeah, if you guys can just—

BF: I was too darn young to be knowing what's going on at that time. I was just—

CR: Okay, do you remember kids that were in your school that didn't come back to Arroyo Grande because they didn't own their land?

BF: Oh yeah.

CR: Any friends of yours?

BF: A few, yeah just a few.

CR: Okay, so most of your friends were families of land owners?

BF: Yeah.

CR: Okay.

BL: What, where did the people that were just leasing the land that couldn't get it back.

Where did they go?

BF: A lot of them went back east, some of them went to Utah you know, wherever they could find a job. Quite a few went back east and there was, let's see. Utah and well some of them just went back east to work for you know whatever they could find you know? But at a farmer, a lot of them went to work for somebody you know. The people that had land was lucky to come back to something you know, the others they had to go find something else. It's kind of tough for them, I'm sure.

BL: Okay, and going back to the camps. When the draft, when Japanese-Americans were being drafted in the camps, what was the, the initial attitude towards it in Poston?

BF: Well—

BL: Were there some that didn't want to be drafted or--?

BF: I'm sure, yeah. I didn't hear about it, but some of them did yeah, kind of raised heck about it. But most of them went though I think as far as I can remember.

BL: And concerning your participation in the Buddhist community. We've heard that you were a sound recorder or had to do something with the audio equipment?

BF: Oh, that's for, that's for the, when we have our Obon Festival every year, yeah, I used to help out with the PA system and things like that. And our Obon Festival the chairman's all the same every year. We haven't changed in twenty years. We have to get some younger ones in there, but all the old timers keep helping out so.

BL: And the, I'm particularly interested in the relationship between the Buddhists and the Christian communities? Now the Christian community is kind of like a minority to the Buddhist community, right? About like maybe—

BF: Yeah, we all get along. They, they do their things and we do our things. We never step on each, you know we just get along fine. And there's no, we don't get at each other because certain areas just Christians been all the time you know and certain one are Buddhist and we just go to each one and they have no problem.

BL: Now—

BF: In this area that is you know?

BL: Why do you think that's so? How did they, why do you think they got along?

BF: Well, this communities pretty close and everybody knows each other and they don't get into each other really.

BL: Do you think being Buddhist had anything to do with your overall camp experience? Do you think it would—

BF: No, because I was, my parents were all Buddhists. We were just had to go to the Buddhist Church and that's how we grew up. And in camp we had a Buddhist Church and a Christian Church. But we always went to the Buddhist Church you know. We just kind of grew up into it you know.

CR: Bob, you might mention that for example, Margaret grew up in the Methodist Church.

BF: Yeah.

CR: How did that happen?

BF: Because his father was a, was a strong Methodist.

CR: And so, he married your sister?

BF: My sister was a Buddhist, but they still got married though. But Saab was, the father was the strong Methodist, so they went to the Methodist Church.

BL: All right.

BF: Yeah, it's you know, whoever parents pushes their kid to whichever church they go to. And once they get out of school and on their own, they, some of them keep following them, some of them change you know, it depends on.

BL: How did you meet your wife by the way?

BF: Oh, they lived in, they lived in Arroyo.

BL: Arroyo? So, the same community, right?

BF: Yeah, we're same church and everything. So.

BL: And not that I can't really think of specific instances within Arroyo Grande or nearby. But there were very few instances of inter-racial marriage with Nisei, in, with Nisei and congregations?

BF: Yeah, _____, at first yes.

BL: How was—

BF: They saw the upbringing, the Japanese upbringing you know, you know unless you just, I guess you're brought up that way not you know mixed marriage wasn't you know. Of course, the younger generation has changed all that now.

BL: But back then it was kind of—

- BF: Yeah, you know, yeah.
- BL: --frowned upon?
- BF: Yeah, it was kind of a no-no.
- BL: What about association. Did you have friends that weren't Japanese growing up?
- BF: Oh yeah, oh yeah.
- BL: So, it wasn't a problem to—
- BF: Yeah, because I was a mechanic twenty years and you have to deal with the public and you meet all kind of people. So, so, I got along with everybody pretty well because when you work with the public, you have to get along you know? So, I had no problem.
- BL: But personal, personal relationships like marriages or girlfriends, that was generally considered taboo?
- BF: Well, yeah, everybody kind of kept it that way, so the younger kid's kind of stayed away. But some of them you know, they didn't though.
- BL: But the—
- BF: There's a few mixed marriages.
- BL: But what about the Sansei? What was there you know attitude towards mixed marriage because you know, it's kind of a new younger generation?
- BF: Well, they just know, they think they know about it. You know, mixed marriages, you know they felt it was okay. Parents is the only one that was against it most of the time.
- BL: And was this mostly the view of the Issei or did the Nisei kind of share the sentiments as well?
- BF: Yeah, some of the Nisei's did.
- BL: All right, I don't have any further questions.

CR: Now why don't you just identify me, Craig Roth, South County Historical Society as the third person on the, fourth person on the tape.

BL: Okay. We also have here Craig Roth from the South County Historical Society and Matthew Donovan as our cameraman. He's filming for a documentary which hopefully might or might not be on TV. Mr. Fukuhara kind of hopes it won't be. Well, Mr. Fukuhara, thank you very much for your time.

BF: Okay.

BL: It was very nice to meet you.

BF: Okay.

BL: Thank you very much.

BF: Okay.

BL: And that concludes it.

END OF INTERVIEW