

NARRATOR: GILBERT TANJI

INTERVIEWER: SHERMAN KISHI

DATE: July 7, 1999

SK: Good morning, this is July 7, 1999, and we are having a interview with Gilbert Tanji. I am Sherman Kishi, the interviewer, and we are doing this under the auspices of the Livingston-Merced JACL, and this tape will be preserved in the archives of Fresno State University. This will be available for researchers in the future who want to hear oral histories of the individuals in the Livingston-Merced area. At this time we will proceed with our interview. Gilbert, would you give us your name and when you were born and where you were born and tell us a little bit about your family to start with?

GT: My name is Gilbert Tanji and I was born in Livingston, about two miles from here, and my dad bought this place in 1920, early, and so we moved right away and I've been living here seventy-nine years. My dad had—my dad and my mother had four children. My oldest sister was born in 1918 and I was born in 1920 and my brother was born in 1924 and my youngest brother was born in, Oscar was born in 1936.

SK: Do you recall something about your parents, if you could give me their names and where they came from in Japan and possibly your— Go ahead and tell us why your father came over here, if you have that information.

GT: Well, my mother graduated from Joshi Gakkuen English School in Japan. And my dad, he went to high school in Japan and he learned his English over there. My dad came in 1905, I think it was, and my mother came in 1916. My dad went back to Japan and brought my mother several years after in 1916 and then my sister was born.

SK: What ken did they come from in Japan? What prefecture in Japan?

GT: My mother came from Hokkaido and my dad came from Niigata-ken.

SK: Could you give us their names?

GT: My dad's name was Kuanzo Walter Tanji, my mother's name was Michi Eshizuka.

SK: Can you tell us a little bit about your life here in Cressey after you got to the point where you remembered things or even if you heard things about life here from your father and mother prior to the war, prior to the great war?

GT: I went to school in Cressey, grammar school eight years and then I went to Livingston High School four years and I stayed home two years and I went to Modesto Junior College. The second year at the Junior College, the war broke out and I wasn't able to finish.

SK: What kind of farming did you do—did your father do here in this area?

GT: Well, my dad, he just raised grapes and I helped him until I took over later and I planted almonds and peaches and grapes.

SK: Do you remember what kind of things you did in the vineyards, do you remember when you first got a tractor and before that, how did you—?

GT: We had horses and a mule really, one male and one female and that's how we cultivated at the first, and my dad had a (inaudible) track that he bought in 1922 but I think by the time I got old enough, about eight or so, I think the (inaudible) track kind of quit running.

SK: So you used horses?

GT: Horses and then later we got a tractor.

SK: Do you remember how difficult that life was, or was it difficult during those days and you know, we went through a lot of years of depression and I know it was difficult for everyone. But, do you recall some of that?

GT: Well, my family, my family, my mother and dad was very, very poor. I remember my mother used to make fire outside and she had a, like for breakfast, she made like waffles in an open fire. We had it pretty rough until we got older.

SK: What did your mother do, anything beside just being the housewife and working on the farm?

GT: Well, after we got a little older, she taught Japanese at Livingston to the young Niseis.

SK: Did you take some Japanese too at that time?

GT: Very little. (laughs)

SK: Very little, as I recall, later on, you used some of that in the service, didn't you?

GT: Yes.

SK: Do you remember some of your life in school here when you were going to school here? Was there any form of discrimination or anything like that, do you recall?

GT: Well, anybody that was born in 1920, there was very few Niseis born in that year. Born in 19—1918 and 1919, there were a lot of Niseis in class and also in '21, there was quite a few, but when I went to grammar school, I was the only Japanese, and I don't know why, but one class above me there was about eighteen or so and one class below me there was fourteen, but there were only four in our class.

SK: You talking about high school?

GT: No, that was grammar school.

SK: Oh, that's grammar school? Is that right? But you, so most of your friends were?

GT: Caucasian.

SK: Caucasian.

GT: Caucasian, Portuguese, or Mennonite.

SK: Do you recall some of that? Did they ever—they or the family show any discrimination towards you in any way?

GT: No, I think, you know. I was raised a little different from all the Niseis because my mother and dad both spoke fluent English. And I remember when we went to Merced Camp and at that time, I found out that a lot of Niseis ate rice and few other things for breakfast but, like my mother was taught by a lady from the United States, teaching her when she was young and so we had always cereal and no rice or things like that.

SK: Did your father own the property here? And, you know, there was an Alien Land Law that didn't allow aliens to hold land.

GT: Yes, when my dad bought this place, my, I had another uncle in Winton, and they formed a Eagle Farm, Number One and Number Two, and we were Number Two and we couldn't change the name until I was twenty-one.

SK: So it was changed into your name when you were twenty-one?

GT: Right.

SK: Can you tell us just a little about—you had relatives here, uncles here.

GT: Yes, I had in Livingston where I was born, Naokichi Tanji and his wife, and they had six children and he came to the United States the same time as my dad. And my dad had four children and the other Tomoshiro Tanji in Winton, I think they had a total of ten children but they lost three or four real, when they were babies.

SK: Did he come at the same time also?

GT: No, he came a couple years later.

SK: I see. Is there anything else? What kinds of things did you do as a kid? Do you remember playing games or things like that? Which church did you belong to?

GT: Well, we went to the Livingston Methodist Church. When I got a little older where I could play baseball, I really enjoyed baseball. And one time I was the catcher and the ball hit the batter's bat a little bit and hit me in the mouth and I lost three upper and two lower teeth and so I quit catching and I started to pitch.

SK: (laughing) In those days they didn't have masks?

GT: They had masks, but I don't know what happened. It's a funny deal. It just hit me right in the mouth.

SK: Oh, is that right? Is there anything else you did in sports and things?

GT: Well, when I was in high school, I played tennis and then made the boys' single and had a lot of fun playing tennis.

SK: A lot of the Niseis played basketball. Did you ever play basketball?

GT: No.

SK: Oh, you never played basketball?

GT: No basketball, only tennis and baseball.

SK: Baseball. Do you recall those days way back when you went to church and the families gathered there? The church was the social gathering place for the—

GT: Yes, yes.

SK: Do you remember games or anything that you played there?

GT: Gee, I don't know too much about before the baseball.

SK: Okay, let's get on with it. Before we go on, is there anything else you'd like to talk about in those years before WWII? Anything of interest?

GT: Well, not too much. We were so poor at the beginning, you can hardly do anything so.

SK: A lot of poor people at that time. Okay, let's go on. Do you remember when you heard about Pearl Harbor happening?

GT: Yes, I was at Modesto Junior College and right away, I heard it and then they put a curfew where we couldn't even come home of thirty miles. So we had to either stay there or get a permit to come home. And so finally, I had to quit before some of the people that didn't have anything to do with the parents, well, they were able to finish going to school until June but, or April for me. But anyway, I had to come home so I had to quit school.

SK: Is that right? Do you remember the specific date of Pearl Harbor and what were you doing? What were your reactions?

GT: Well, I don't know. I just heard that Pearl Harbor was struck but I don't know why the students didn't bother me any. I was studying economics at the time and then I was taking civil pilot training for flying and everything was all right. Until my draft, I was supposed to be drafted at that time and they cancelled it, and all my other friends that were in Modesto Junior College went to Sacramento to work, but they didn't let me go.

SK: By friends, are you talking about Caucasian friends, or?

GT: Caucasian friends, that was my classmates.

SK: That's mostly the war effort, was it?

GT: They went to McClellan Air Force.

SK: Oh, I see. Then do you recall when the first notices came out for evacuation? Do you remember some of that after you came home? When did you come home from Modesto?

GT: Maybe in January, January or February I think.

SK: Oh, I see, I see. Okay, so then the notice of evacuation came a little after that?

GT: That's right.

- SK: After you came home, then you just stayed home and worked on the farm?
- GT: Yes.
- SK: I see. Did—what kind of reaction did you have when the notice of the evacuation came out? Do you remember?
- GT: Well, we just found out that we all had to go and so nowadays, it would be a little different but at that time, we just all packed up and went to Merced and went into the assembly center in Merced.
- SK: Do you remember prior to that, you must have had some things that were rather Japanese. Did you people have any problems with that? Did you have to turn in radios or guns or anything like that?
- GT: Well, I don't think we had a gun or I don't remember a radio but I don't think we had to turn the radio in.
- SK: Some of the people during that period had to turn in a lot of the Japanese items. Your family didn't do that?
- GT: No, we didn't have too much so.
- SK: Is that right? That is interesting. And so you went into Merced Assembly Center?
- GT: Uh-huh.
- SK: And did you—what did you do there in Merced Assembly Center?
- GT: In Modesto, I took drafting so when I went over to the Assembly Center, they asked me, you know, what I did in school. So I said, well, I did a lot of drafting so they said how about working for the Assembly Center drafting department, so we worked at the big building that they had over there
- SK: Is that right? Do you recall some of that life there in camp?

GT: Oh, I had a real nice time there.

SK: (laughing)

GT: We had one of the best baseball diamond and also the bleachers were just perfect over there. And we had, I don't know, about nine or ten different teams from all over came over there: Sebastopol, Livingston, Cortez, and so we played ball all the time. We had a lot of people watching us play.

SK: Oh, that's great. That is one of the most--biggest memories of Merced Camp?

GT: Yeah.

SK: And then from there you went where?

GT: To Amache, Colorado, is the location.

SK: Do you recall the move that you did to Amache?

GT: Yes, we got into a train and I don't know how many days we traveled but they had police on every door watching us and—

SK: Police or soldiers?

GT: Soldiers. And they, it was kind of like we'd escape, but none of us tried, I don't think.

SK: And then how did you find Amache?

GT: Well, they took us to Amache and all of us over there and got into a truck and took us to a barrack and they said this is where you are going to live.

SK: And then so which barrack—which block were you in, in Amache? Do you remember?

GT: Nine H, I think.

SK: You don't remember the building itself, huh?

GT: I think it was B.

SK: Well okay. Do you remember in camp what did you do there in Amache and how long were you there?

GT: I wasn't there too long. Just as soon as we were able to go out, I went out to work on the farm cutting sugar beets and picking corn and all kinds of farm work, driving tractor and so since I was old enough to drive, I did a lot of everything on the farm.

SK: Do you remember where this was that you went?

GT: Rocky Fort, Colorado.

SK: Okay, were many others there that went with you?

GT: There was four of us. There were two that went maybe about a week before we did and then four of us went from Livingston and L.A. One from L.A.

SK: Do you remember their names?

GT: One was Arnold Oki and Mitobi.

SK: Which one, Roy or Hiroshi?

GT: Hiroshi Mitobe and George Wakayama from L.A. I think was four of them that went there.

SK: How long were you there at Rocky Fort?

GT: We were there maybe four months, then we moved to Amache and worked just a little bit and then I went back into camp and then they started talking about, they wanted volunteers for the service. And so being I didn't know too much Japanese at that time so they started a special school in Amache and spend I think two or three months before I went into service.

SK: Did you volunteer into service?

GT: Yes, I did.

SK: Do you remember the loyalty oath that came out?

GT: Well, I don't quite remember it, but I remember signing it.

SK: Oh, okay. That was that yes, yes or no, no.

GT: Yeah.

SK: You had no problem with anybody in the family being arrested by the FBI?

GT: No.

SK: Did you go in from Amache? Where were you inducted into?

GT: Colorado, Boulder Colorado. Boulder, Fort Logan.

SK: Fort Logan?

GT: Yeah, Fort Logan. And then from there they shipped us, Suma Kamiya, Cortez and I went together and we were the first ones that went direct from Amache Camp to Camp Savage language school.

SK: Do you remember when that was?

GT: '43.

SK: What month, do you remember?

GT: It was May.

SK: Was it summertime or before?

GT: Well, May or June, I suppose.

SK: And then, can you tell us a little bit about your military life that you had? What you did?

GT: From Camp Savage, we went to Fort a, Camp Blanding and we had a short basic training and then we came back to Camp Savage and then that was five of us that was already finished school and there were five that was going to school and picked up and we were put into army air force.

SK: By school?

GT: From the language school.

SK: Okay.

GT: We had to know something about aircraft. Anything about aircraft, and there were ten of us and we were actually the first ten men that was picked to go to the air force. There were quite a few, not quite a few, but some in the air force but they were probably there before the, before Japan struck Hawaii. And from, we went into a special school in Camp Savage—no, Fort Snelling. We went to Fort Snelling school. We stayed at the officers' quarters and we went to study all the aeronautic terms in Japanese. And then I think that was one month and then I got shipped to Washington D.C., ten of us did. And we went to Crash Inspector School for one month and I knew a little bit more than the nine than the ten. I knew a little bit more about aircraft overall, so they asked me to stay in Washington, D.C. And these nine boys would send aircraft that they captured to U.S. Naval Air Station in Anacostia in Washington there. And I had mechanics that would tear these things apart and I'd get the serial number and also if they are Army or Navy, and then I worked half the time with the Pentagon where we had a big map and they would say, well, this was made in a certain part of Japan and this was made in a certain part of Japan. And there were eight or nine boys, I think, at the Pentagon, and they had all the captured documents they would translate and they, between the numbers that I would get from the U.S. Naval Air Station, I'd take that to the Pentagon and we knew exactly how many aircraft they could build or where they are building. What they were building in a certain part and we would put a star on the place on the map and then we'd bomb that place. And then I worked there, I think for two years until WWII ended.

SK: Is that right? And so you spent most of your time right there in Washington, D.C., then?

GT: Oh, yes. I had a very good job. They promised us officers but since we were Japanese, there was one staff sergeant and the rest were buck sergeants.

SK: That was typical of the time, wasn't it?

GT: Yes.

SK: Then you were discharged when?

GT: '45.

SK: 1945, you were discharged?

GT: September, or something like that.

SK: And then what—

GT: I got married in '44 after I was taking classes at, you know, Fort Snelling. My wife, Mary Ushiyama Tanji, she was at the Mayo Clinic in Minnesota and we got married then in the fall in Washington, D.C.

SK: Where did you originally meet her there?

GT: I met her a little in Amache. When I went to work out on the farm, I went to their place but she was going to college and I never did get to see her.

SK: You mean, this is at Rocky Fort?

GT: Rocky Fort, right.

SK: So they were a Rocky Fort family.

GT: Uh-huh.

SK: And then, and then, I'm getting a little off the subject, but I thought you were involved in paratrooper training for a little bit.

GT: I was, but when we got—I wanted to get into the air force so anyway, but anyway, before I really got into the paratroopers, we got called to join the air force, so I was very, very happy. I took this other route.

SK: Okay, then after you were discharged, what did you do? Were you discharged back east?

GT: Yes, I was discharged in Arlington, Virginia, in government training, and my wife, Mary, was living with me there and so we drove to Rocky Fort and stayed there until we found out that our place was open over here in Cressey. And then we went and took another train then. We come to Cressey and I told the conductor I wanted to get off at Cressey and he said well, there is no place to stop there. So he said, pull that rope. So, I pulled that rope like crazy.

SK: Really?

GT: He let us off right there at the railroad track.

SK: Is that right? Were you in uniform at the time?

GT: Yes.

SK: Well, then what happened to the rest of your family, your father and your mother?

GT: My father and my mother and Oscar and Jim was in service. Oscar and my mother and my dad lived in Arcadian, Grisham Arcadian's place where Lena Hamaguchi lived for a while after Grisham sold it to Lena.

SK: They were there already when you came back?

GT: Yes.

SK: I see.

GT: They were there two or three weeks and when we came here, they were in that little house.

SK: Did you move directly into your home in Cressey when you came back?

GT: Yes, I did.

SK: It was open?

GT: Well, they just a few days before, they said they were going to open it, that's why we waited at the Colorado until it was open.

SK: Do you recall—do you recall any of the arrangements that were made on the farm for the farm itself?

GT: You mean?

SK: You owned it, I know.

GT: We owned it and we had a fellow named Gus Momberg manage all the Japanese farms in Livingston, Cressey, and Ballico. And actually, we didn't have any money left after they farmed it, but at least, we had the land.

SK: Do you recall, were you involved in any of the arrangements of that Momberg?

GT: No.

SK: You were not involved so you were not too familiar with it then? It just happened?

GT: Uh-huh.

SK: Okay then, tell us a little bit about your life you had after you came back to this area?

GT: Well, we came back here and then my first son was born and we lived in that little house with my mother and father and then we moved to neighbor's place which was vacant. And we lived there several years. And then we bought that forty acres so we had thirty-five here and we had forty acres so we didn't quite have eighty acres but the other piece was all in grapes and I put in twenty acres of peaches and twenty acres of almonds and we had a rough time but it must have been all right.

SK: You survived, huh?

GT: And while we were over there at the other house, Geraldine, my daughter was born. And then my younger son, Gary, was born over there.

SK: Do you recall any of the social life you might have had at that time?

GT: Well, it was pretty busy with three kids pretty fast. And so I suppose the only thing we did was play bridge and bowling.

SK: And bowling? Was there any baseball played after the war?

GT: No, we didn't. No, I suppose the last time I played baseball, I played a little bit in Amache. But after that, I haven't played.

SK: Did you go to the baseball honoring the Niseis?

GT: No, I did not go.

SK: You did not go to that? Yeah, I remember you as a very prominent pitcher before the war.

GT: That was a lot of fun.

SK: It was a lot of fun. Let me see now, do you recall some of the things your family went through when they came back from camp? Do you remember hearing any of that? Did they come back by train or—?

GT: Yes, my dad went out from Amache Camp to Chicago. And so my mother and Oscar, after my dad was there a little while, Oscar and my mother moved over to Chicago. So they came from Chicago all the way to Cressey.

SK: Is that right? That was in, just before you came back.

GT: Yes.

SK: So that was in—

GT: '45.

SK: '45. Did—what kind of—basically maybe you could give us a little detail about what kind of life you had here when you came back? It was probably mostly work, but—

GT: Well, I think, all my friends, Caucasian, especially Caucasian and Portuguese friends, were very nice to me. I heard some of the earlier Niseis that came back had a really hard time, but we were accepted real good and I remember my wife. We haven't had too much discrimination. I don't know why, but maybe we don't look like Japanese.

SK: You look about as Japanese as anybody. Have you—is, most of your family is living where now?

GT: My sister was living in Menlo Park and she passed away. She was eighty-one and she passed away May 21, and my brother passed away two years before that. Two years ago.

SK: That's your brother Jim?

GT: James Tanji passed away with a heart. My sister passed away with acute leukemia and the day after my sister passed away, my brother that was living in Washington. He had cancer. He was sixteen years younger than I am, but he had bad cancer and he passed away on the 22nd of May.

SK: Do you remember the year that your parents died, passed away?

GT: Yeah, I have it written down. My mother died in 1984 and my dad in 1971. They were both—my mother was ninety-one and my dad was eighty-eight.

SK: So they lived to be a pretty good age?

GT: Yeah.

SK: Well, that is good. Did you have any feelings about redress and reparations that were made?

GT: Well, I wish they would have given that to us way back in 1940 something instead of when they gave it to us.

SK: Did you have any reactions to that? Did you feel that you deserved it or?

GT: Well, I thought we deserved it.

SK: Yeah. And what are you doing these days?

GT: Well, I just don't have too many acres left now. Little by little I am selling it, and I think I have thirty acres left. I only got twenty-one of grapes and five acres of almonds and within one or two years, they will be all gone. And I'll sell five acres at a time, or two and a half acres at a time, but so. And I got a divorce from my wife Mary and then I met another lady, Marlene, which on October 22, 1998, we got married. And she's been living in this house that we built in 1953. And we're doing a little traveling here and there. Last year, we got a real nice car and were gone for one month into Oklahoma, Missouri. Missouri is where Marlene's sister and brother-in-law lives and we went to different places to visit her daughter. That was New Mexico. And we're going to do a lot of traveling, I think. Because we are pretty, we are both in real good health. So, we want, we won't get a motor home but we're traveling and stop at a motel or hotel or someplace and do some traveling.

SK: Sounds good. How about your children? Where are they and what are they doing?

GT: My oldest son, Dean, he's in right close to Disneyland on top of a hill where all the military lives. He's got a real good business and he's got two boys and his wife works at this company called Abra Cadabra Advertising. And right now the two boys are old enough to work with Dean. So the four of them work and they have about six or eight other people working for them and he's doing real great. I think right now, as of today,

he's in—no, this weekend, he's going to Florida to put on a show, but he is like, he goes to Hawaii, Los Angeles, or Texas, or New York. He's putting a show on all the time. And then my daughter, she is married to a fellow, his name is Carey. Larry Carey from Kansas and they have three children. The oldest one is a girl, the second one is a boy, and then the third one is a girl. The oldest one is about ready to get married but not quite. They live in Washington, Issaquah, California, and my youngest son, he is also in Issaquah and he's married to a Canadian girl and they have a boy and girl. Their two children is fairly young yet so they will have to wait quite a while before they get married. But he's in microscope and he sells and services microscopes so he works, he does a lot of traveling. He works from Washington all the way to L.A. So he's making a real nice living.

SK: So your children are doing fine. What do you think that—what do you—have you ever thought about what the future might hold for your grandchildren?

GT: Well, I think just as good I think. They are all—all three of my children married Caucasian and I don't know, the kids seem to be doing real good and I think like these boys will probably take over there. And I don't know about the ones in Washington, but I think they will be doing good.

SK: You think there will be much Japanese traits left among your grandchildren or their children?

GT: Not very much, no. See, I have one great-granddaughter right now in L.A., Colleen is married to another Caucasian so the baby is not very much Japanese in there.

SK: What do you think might be some of the contributions that Nisei men and women made to society over the years?

GT: You know, well, I think it's been wonderful. I wish I had enough money to help it more.
We live comfortably but not too much that we can help, you know.

SK: Well that, but in other areas, there another areas, there are other contributions.

GT: I know, very good, yeah.

SK: Overall, you are pretty impressed with what the Niseis have done?

GT: That's right.

SK: If you had an opportunity to tell the young people something, some items of wisdom,
what do you think you might tell them?

GT: Get a lot of schooling.

SK: Get a lot of schooling. Do you remember your parents sort of indicating that?

GT: Yes, uh-huh. I know like my folks really think of education, like my dad, he even went
to UCLA one year.

SK: Is that right?

GT: But the two brothers that were living, were in Livingston, they both, you know, didn't
know English. And my grandmother was here and told my dad to come back, otherwise I
don't think my dad would be on the farm.

SK: Your grandmother was here at one time?

GT: Oh, yes. She was here I don't know how many years but maybe six years or so.

SK: Is that right? But she went back to Japan?

GT: Yes.

SK: We're getting rather close, I guess, to what we need to cover mostly and things we need
to cover. Is there anything else you'd like to say, anything that you'd like to talk about?

GT: Boy, I don't know. You know, like when we were about eighteen or so, we really loved sports. But the third generation, I don't know why, but we haven't had a baseball team or nothing. In fact, I suppose they are all, mostly all of third generation left so maybe that's why we couldn't do it. But like our baseball team. Gee, we had a real good baseball team.

SK: Yeah, I remember very well.

GT: Also, basketball was good. Softball was good, you know. Everything was good. But third generation, I don't know. They don't seem to be too much in sports.

SK: But they have other interests though.

GT: Yeah.

SK: Well, we certainly thank you for integrating with us Gilbert, and it was a very interesting chat. I guess this will just about conclude the interview. Nothing else, huh?

GT: I don't think so.

SK: That should do it. Okay, well, thank you very much, Gilbert, and we'll get this into the archives at Fresno State University. Thank you.

GT: All right. You're welcome.

END OF INTERVIEW