

NARRATOR: SADAWO YONAKI

INTERVIEWER: BOB NAGATANI

DATE: September 14, 1999

BN: September 14th, the interview is taking place at my home in Delano. Now would you please state your full name for us please? (telephone ringing)

SY: Sadawo Yonaki.

BN: Okay, where in Japan did your father come from?

SY: My father came from Okinawa.

BN: Okay, and when did he immigrate to the United States and what was his reason for coming here?

SY: Well, he came from Okinawa, I think the Mexican government paid their boat fare to work in the coal mines. He worked in the coal mines for a couple of years, I think, but the occupation was hazardous and there were cave-ins so a bunch of those boys, they came across the border to the United States and that was in 1905.

BN: Okay, so tell me now, you said, okay now where did you say you first settled in the United States?

SY: Well, the first time in the United States and they came across the border and I think they worked around Imperial Valley for a while and then he went to San Pedro.

BN: Okay, now what kind of work did he do in both places?

SY: Well, it was mostly farm work in Imperial Valley.

BN: Yeah.

SY: In San Pedro, he was in the fishing business.

BN: Okay now.

SY: And about that time he went back to Japan and got married and brought my mother back. That was in 1913 or early 1914.

BN: Okay.

SY: And he started farming after that around Gardena and then he moved to Baldwin Park about that time and we farmed there, oh, until 1913. We farmed vegetables, all kinds of vegetables.

BN: Under what circumstances did he get married?

SY: I don't know too much about his marriage. All I know is that it was his second marriage.

BN: Okay now. What was his bride or young mother, was she a picture bride?

SY: No, I really don't know.

BN: Oh.

SY: All I know is they came to the United States in January of 1914.

BN: So what became your father's permanent occupation?

SY: Well, he was a farmer.

BN: And your mother?

SY: My mother was a housewife and helped him on the farm.

BN: Now, where were your parents interned during WWII?

SY: Well, my father was interned at New Mexico. He was rounded up with all the rest of the Delano guys and they were interned in New Mexico. I think Lordsburg, New Mexico. And my mother, well, we went to camp first at Fresno Assembly Center and then to Jerome, Arkansas, and from Jerome, Arkansas, to Rohwer until she was—until she was discharged.

BN: There is some question as to when the fathers of all the families were taken away from— do you recall when your father was taken away? Where was he at the time?

SY: Well, we were farming in Earlimart. And I don't recall the exact instance but anyway, we were farming in Earlimart and all the Issei were rounded up.

BN: Now what would you say was the economic losses as a result of this evacuation as far as you were concerned and your family was concerned?

SY: Well, I think it was around 1942, we had cantaloupes and watermelons planted and we were just about ready to harvest in May so we lost everything. Well, we had tractors, horses, farm equipment, we just left it there. And we had a neighbor, haku-jin neighbor, he was farming cotton alongside of us and we left everything else to him and he took care of it.

BN: And what happened after you got back from the camp or wherever you were?

SY: Well, we had our own house there on that property, and when we got back, we had the house but it was—a during the wartime, my neighbors, he, his lease was up and he had to move and he was taking care of our house and he called me at the camp and said, "My lease is up and I got to move, what should I do with your house?" I said, "Well you do whatever you can." So he moved it to another place and after we got back after the war, we got our house back. And we moved it—we had to move it from there to another place. I got a job with an Italian grape grower. And I moved, I got permission to move my house on his property. That was in 1946.

BN: Now what kind of community activities were your parents involved in before and after?

SY: No, they were not involved in any community activities.

BN: Oh. And what would you say was your parents' greatest achievements and contributions to the greater community?

SY: Well, they just lived an ordinary life. I guess the greatest contribution to the community was raising five children. That would be all.

BN: Okay. Well, where then were you born?

SY: Where was I born?

BN: Yes, and when?

SY: I was born in Baldwin Park, California, which is about twenty miles east of Los Angeles, in 1917, May 8th, 1917.

BN: How many brothers and sister do you have and where do you fall into, the oldest, the youngest, or where do you?

SY: I have three brothers and one sister and I am the second one.

BN: Well, where are your brothers and sisters now and what do they do?

SY: My oldest brother is in Los Angeles and he's retired. He was working for the city of Los Angeles. And he has been retired several years now. And I'm the next one. I retired after forty-five years in the service station-garage business. And the next came my daughter, or my sister, and she lives in Los Angeles, and my next one is my brother, Joe, and he's still got the auto repair business in Delano, and then Tommy. He's retired, anyway, he got injured during the wartime and he's been retired ever since, every since the Korean War.

BN: So Tommy was in what, the 442nd?

SY: Not 442nd. He was in Korean War.

BN: Oh, oh I see. Now, what—how did you get your nickname Gooch?

SY: Well, when we moved from Baldwin Park to Delano in 1931, I started high school there, and there was a Japanese girl, I think one or two classes below me. But anyway, there is one Italian guy named Joe Gostali, he used to tease me all the time about Shizuko Setaguchi. Anyway, he couldn't pronounce the word Setaguchi so he used to call me Gooch and that's how I got the name and it stuck. He used to call me Gooch, Gooch.

BN: Okay now from kindergarten to senior year, what school did you attend?

SY: I started school in Baldwin Park and graduated from Baldwin Park grammar school and then started high school in Covina in 1931. I graduated from grammar school in mid-term 1931. And that was January and I started high school in Covina in 1931 but in March of 1931, we moved to Delano and I entered Delano High School and I completed four years high school in Delano.

BN: Okay now you had grade school and who were your playmates?

SY: In high school my playmates, oh, I had one Polish kid, I used to hang around with him mostly.

BN: Were there any Japanese families there?

SY: No, we lived in Earlimart on the farm and there were not too many close family around.

BN: Okay were you invited to any of the homes of the Caucasian children?

SY: No, never.

BN: Is that right, never?

SY: Never.

BN: And how were you treated by your teachers?

SY: Oh, we were treated okay. There was no prejudice.

BN: Now, as a child, did you consider yourself a Japanese, a Japanese-American, American or what?

SY: I guess I considered myself a Japanese-American.

BN: Okay.

SY: I know that we were different.

BN: Did you parents have any contact with school in any way at all?

SY: No.

BN: And what did they expect from you as far as your school work then?

SY: Well, the best we could do.

BN: Well, did you participate in any sports in school?

SY: No.

BN: None at all?

SY: None at all.

BN: Did you belong to any kind of clubs or did you hold any class office or any kind of student body offices?

SY: No.

BN: So we might assume that you were not involved in student politics then?

SY: Not in any.

BN: Okay. During your teenage years, what kinds of problems or joys did you experience?

SY: What kind of what?

BN: Problems or joys did you experience?

SY: Oh, I didn't have any problems. I belonged to a judo club in Delano but that is about all.

BN: Oh.

SY: And mostly farm work.

BN: Okay now when you were growing up in your younger days did you have any chores that you had to do to help out the family around the house?

SY: Oh, yeah. We worked on the farm out in the field all the time.

BN: Well, did you get paid for any of the work you did?

SY: Oh, no.

BN: No? Okay, how would you describe your childhood days and teenage years?

SY: In my teenage years I was just an ordinary teenager, I guess.

BN: Well, when you were going to school, there were quite a few Japanese kids though, weren't there?

SY: Yeah, there were a lot of Japanese kids. After, I think it was a little after my graduation.

BN: Oh, I see. Were you involved in any of these things, judo or kendo or anything like that?

SY: I was involved in judo.

BN: Okay. Now you went to Japanese school on the weekends also?

SY: Well, that was in Baldwin Park. We went to Japanese school on Saturday and Sunday for about a year. After we moved to Delano, I didn't attend Japanese school.

BN: Oh, you didn't? Oh, I didn't know that. Okay, were you allowed to date while you were going to high school, or did you date at all?

SY: No, I didn't think about it.

BN: Was there any kind of racial prejudice?

SY: Not that I know of, no.

BN: Okay, so did you go to college?

SY: Well, I went one semester, to Cal Poly.

BN: And what was your major?

SY: Economics.

BN: Okay, so that was a short time.

SY: Yeah, just one semester and I quit.

BN: Okay, so you didn't belong to any kinds of organizations on the—

SY: No.

BN: So that was really a short time then. Okay, did you have any difficulty finding a job after you graduated from high school and college?

SY: No, after I graduated from high school I went right to work on a farm.

BN: Okay.

SY: I didn't look for no job.

BN: Okay.

SY: I had to help the old man, you know, with the farm work.

BN: So eventually, what was to become your permanent occupation? I think you mentioned it earlier.

SY: Well, I stayed on the farm until wartime and a, then after I came back from Chicago, I went to work for an Italian grape grower. I worked for him for about a year, and one day we got in an argument. I was doing some farming work for him and he was building a camp for a Filipino, and I was doing the plumbing work and he brought me a piece of pipe and asked me to thread the pipe, and as I was threading the pipe, it wouldn't thread. It wouldn't cut properly so he brought me another one and then he said, "Try this." And I started threading this and it wouldn't cut, and then he looked at me and he said, "You burned that dye." And I got mad and I told him, I picked it up and I said, "Here, take it

and shove it up,” I told him. And I walked out of the job. And I waited around for three days and I knew I was going to have to move. I had a house on his property but I knew I was going to have to move but I was just waiting around for three days and he came around and he said, “Well, Gooch, it looks like we can’t get along.” Anyway, I apologized and we got back together and I stayed a while, but at the same time, I was thinking that I knew I was going to have to move. So, I worked a while and I got—I asked permission from a Japanese-American association, that’s what (inaudible) Japanese (inaudible) to put our house on their property. They had a property in Delano so I got permission to just move the house there temporarily, and that’s how I moved the house from Earlimart to Delano where it stands right now. Eventually, I bought that property from the Japanese community.

BN: Okay, this is where the Gakuen was located? Is that the—

SY: Is what?

BN: The Gakuen?

SY: That was in 1946.

BN: Okay, but that property, was that where the old Gakuen was then?

SY: Yeah, the old Gakuen was on that property but right on the north end of the property.

BN: And can you tell us about your ups and downs in earning a living, a little bit about it?

SY: Well, I don’t remember too much about ups and downs but I know there was ups and downs because I went through the Depression and we had, I remember, in 1932 we had some watermelon, I think about five acres of watermelon. And we didn’t pick our melon. There was no market for it. We just had to let it rot in the fields. But ,you know, I was just about fourteen or fifteen years old so I wasn’t concerned too much.

BN: So when did you get married?

SY: I got married in camp in 1944.

BN: And to whom?

SY: To Eiko Kodawa, she was in camp. She was a Delano girl. She was also in camp and we met in camp but I knew her before the war. I didn't know her first name but I knew who she was but never spoke to her, but we met in camp, in Fresno Assembly Center, that is. But we got married in camp in Rohwer in 1944.

BN: Oh, so you went from Fresno Assembly Center to Jerome and for a spell, you were in Rohwer, too, then?

SY: Yeah, I wasn't in Rohwer very long.

BN: Okay.

SY: Because I left Jerome after about four or five months. A bunch of us young kids, and us guys went to Chicago and worked at a candy factory and I was there working in the candy factory. They put me on a job where they were packing dried egg for the army. They had a contract for the army and it was dried egg. I guess I worked there for about six months, and then one day some military guys came there and kind of hand me an envelope, and I asked them what it was and they told me to open it and read it. So I read it and it said, "For the duration of the war, you won't be allowed to work on this job and any wartime, war contract job." And I asked them why and they said all we're doing is delivering the mail. If you want to find out anything, write to Washington, which I did. I wrote to Washington and asked for a hearing and they give me a hearing. They called me to come to Chicago, one of the Chicago buildings there, and there were several, oh, there were about three or four military fellows and they questioned me for oh, quite a while.

But then in the hearing I asked them if I could get my clearance and they said we don't decide that here. We send everything back to Washington and you'll hear from Washington in about two weeks. So I had to wait around, and about two weeks later I got a letter from Washington and all it said was, "After reviewing your case, we still find that you can't work, you are not allowed to work in any war department contract." So, anyway, I didn't care because they wouldn't take me into the army either. I tried to volunteer and they wouldn't take me into the army. I don't know why. They didn't give me no reason. I didn't know why because three of my brothers were in the service. My oldest brother was drafted before the war and then my younger brothers, they were drafted during the wartime. But they never came after me. I volunteered but they wouldn't take me.

BN: (inaudible) How many children do you have?

SY: I have five children, four girls and the last one was a boy, but I lost my one daughter about almost a year ago at the age of fifty-two. She had a heart attack. So I have four kids left now. The boy is the youngest. He lives in Los Angeles. He's married to a Mexican girl and they have three kids. My oldest daughter, first born, and her name is Joyce and she is married to a Japanese guy and they live in Quartz Hill. The second daughter, who died, she was married to a haku-jin guy who is a schoolteacher in Mojave. And then my third daughter is married to a Mexican fellow and they live in Bakersfield and they have three kids. And my other daughter, my youngest daughter is married to a Filipino and they have two kids and they live in Orinda.

BN: So now that would be how many grandchildren then?

SY: I have nine grandchildren.

BN: Nine grandchildren, any great-grandchildren?

SY: No.

BN: Now did you have any connection to a Japan town?

SY: No, I have no connection to Japan town.

BN: There was a J town here before the war?

SY: No, the only connection there was West Side Grocery. We used to buy groceries from West Side Grocery. They used to deliver once a week and that's the only connection we had.

BN: Oh, okay. Now how did you hear about Pearl Harbor? Do you remember?

SY: Yeah, I remember. I was driving a tractor on the field and one haku-jin guy came over to me and he said, "Did you hear the news?" And I said, "What?" Pearl Harbor was bombed. Man, I got, anyway, I stopped working and went home and listened to the radio that afternoon and that is how I found out.

BN: And how did you feel?

SY: Oh man. I didn't know what to do. I just listened to the radio.

BN: So did you think anything would happen to you or your family?

SY: Well, I didn't give it a thought as far as that goes. I was—let's see, at that time I was about twenty, I was about twenty-two years old. Well, I just kept on going.

BN: Okay, now I know we talked about you being in the Fresno Assembly Center and Jerome. Your parents stayed in Jerome for the duration of its?

SY: The old man was in Lordsburg. Eventually, he was released and joined my mother in Rohwer, and at the end of the war when the camp was dissolved, they came to Chicago, where I was living with my wife.

BN: Well, you mentioned Lordsburg.

SY: I went there to get married.

BN: Okay, but was your dad ever in Santa Fe?

SY: No, I don't think so. It was Lordsburg. As far as I know, it was Lordsburg.

BN: Okay, can you describe your family and your life in camp? Do you remember anything about that time?

SY: Well, life in camp, the Fresno Assembly Center, we were taken in 1942, around May. I stayed there until November and in the Fresno Assembly Center, I worked in a warehouse. And in November we were transferred to Jerome on a train, and in Jerome I worked in, oh, I was chopping wood and cutting down trees, chopping wood. And I think I stayed there about four months and then a bunch of us young fellows went out to Chicago.

BN: Do you recall anything about the loyalty oath, especially questions 27 and 28?

SY: No, I don't, all I know is that I answered yes, yes.

BN: Were you in camp at that time or were you out already? Do you?

SY: I don't know if I was out or what. But I remember the question and I remember answering yes, yes.

BN: Well, chances are you were still in camp then?

SY: What's that?

BN: Chances are you were still in camp then?

SY: Yeah, yeah, I was still in camp.

BN: And so you left camp to go to work, not college then?

SY: No.

BN: You went to work, okay, you told us you went to work, candy, candy, where is it you went to?

SY: I went to Chicago.

BN: And what did you do there, you said?

SY: I went to Shotnall Candy Company.

BN: Okay.

SY: Yeah, worked there in the candy company and just like I said, I started packing dried eggs for the army.

BN: How—how long did they keep your dad in Lordsburg? How long was he separated from the family? You said he didn't join the family until Rohwer?

SY: I don't know how long it was. Anyway, after he was released, he joined my mother at Rohwer.

BN: That would be after June of 1944 then, they really held him then, didn't they? When did you and your family leave camp then?

SY: When did I leave camp?

BN: Yeah

SY: I left camp, I must have left camp Rohwer, not Jerome. I left Jerome, oh, let's see, we went to Jerome in November of 1942. And I think I stayed there four or five months and then we left there to go to Chicago.

BN: And when did you family leave Rohwer then?

- SY: Oh, when the camp closed, they joined us in Chicago.
- BN: Okay, okay. Did you—okay. Were there—were there any kinds of problems of leaving camp, as you recall?
- SY: No, no problem.
- BN: Did you receive any help in resettlement?
- SY: Well, I don't remember.
- BN: Okay, now if your parents joined you in Chicago, they eventually came back to Delano didn't they. You all came back, did you all come back together?
- SY: Yeah. So we were living in Chicago. All of us were living in Chicago and I bought a 1941 Oldsmobile and we piled everything in there. There was my dad and mother, my wife, Eiko, and I had one daughter, Joyce, and sister-in-law and my niece. All of us got in the car and we drove back to California. Yeah, it took us about five days.
- BN: Well, what happened to all your household goods then?
- SY: We didn't have any household. All the valuables, I guess we just put in the car. All the furniture and everything, we just left it there. Sada, my oldest brother, was there and he stayed there for a while after we left.
- BN: Well, in recent years, what would you say was the most important thing that happened to you, I'm saying in recent years?
- SY: In recent years, well not much happened to me. I've been retired a little over ten years now, and you know, after the war, I worked a year in the grape and then I started the service station-garage business and worked there for forty-five years. And I worked my butt off.

BN: Yeah, I know you did. Would you say the wartime experience affected you in any way at all?

SY: No, not doing a thing, found a wife and got married.

BN: Okay, have you been active in the Japanese-American community?

SY: No.

BN: You haven't? JACL and Japanese community.

SY: Well, I'm a member of the JACL and Japanese community.

BN: And so those clubs, that would be it and JACL and the Japanese community then?

SY: Yeah.

BN: Okay, now how did you feel about redress and reparation?

SY: Well, at first, I thought it was a crazy idea. I thought, well, we'll never get it. And I was really surprised when we finally got it.

BN: Oh, okay. Did you participate in any way?

SY: No.

BN: In the campaign for redress or?

SY: No.

BN: Okay, what kind of life do you see for your children and grandchildren?

SY: Well, you know I was always wondering about that. Most of them are happas and I don't know what's going to become of them.

BN: What do you think are the greatest contributions by the Nisei men?

SY: What contribution and you say, men? Well, I think JACL. Yeah, most the biggest contribution by Nisei was the JACL.

BN: And what about the achievement of the Nisei women?

SY: Well, women, the same thing.

BN: Well, what would you say were your greatest achievements then?

SY: I don't have any great achievements.

BN: Okay, we are just about at the end of this interview. Is there anything you would like to say? Do you have any questions?

SY: No, I can't think of anything.

BN: Okay, well, thank you for sharing your story with us. It is a good legacy to leave behind, you know, for the younger generation so thank you very much, we appreciate it very much. Thank you.

SY: Thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW