

## Looking Back: An Oral History Project

Through two conversations, the task was to record an entire identity. These interviews reveal some of the accomplishments of one particular individual, a Japanese American Nisei at the East San Gabriel Valley Japanese Community Center. The interviewee's contribution is part of a wider effort to preserve the stories and histories of the San Gabriel Valley Japanese American residents to share with the public and future generations through the Keepers of the Flame: an Oral History Project.

According to the interviews, the resident was born in Gardena, California in 1927. His parents came from the Mie-ken Prefecture in the Kansai region of Honshu, Japan a region that at the time was mainly inhabited by farmers. His travels begin after he was taken out of Junior High School at the age of 15 or 16. When World War II broke out, he was temporarily held in the Santa Anita Racetrack, and then moved to the Rowher Arkansas Relocation Center over a long term.

In questioning the interviewee, there were two interviewers, Scout Lintner and Naomi Takeuchi. The distinction made between the two interviews via the interviewers seemed to take away from the centrality and focus of the interviewee's histories. This may also have been the source of some repeated topics such as the details and arrangement of the interviewee's internment. Overall, he seemed to really hear and connect well with the first interviewer. The second interview seemed helpful in gaining more insight into his relationships and his move from East LA to Hacienda Heights. These in-depth explanations in the second interview contrasted with the interviewee's appearance of discomfort with

certain topics that required discussing his emotions for example. It is as if his generation was not accustomed to answering questions on expression of deep feelings or of identity development.

A topic he visibly shied away from was education. When asked about his oldest granddaughter going to USC, he said, "Well, I'm not too good at education, because I didn't even graduate high school, you know?" The interviewee is depicted as self-conscious in regard to his lack of education that resulted from the war and the disruption of the internment. Therefore, he emphasizes the necessity of education to get further in life. His reactions seemed to correlate to his successes, including the pride in his achievements compared to his omissions, such as the struggle with his wife's death in the past year.

The resident spoke in the present tense as if his wife were still with him. He explained that the house they chose in Hacienda Heights was relatively secluded: "I mean, me and my wife, we like it real quiet. Neighbors are far away. So, just like we're living alone in a hill somewhere, huh." The interviewee and his wife had been married for a long time, nearly 65 years. The interviewee confessed that his wife's passing was tearing him apart. Perhaps, he was able to hold onto her memory through language.

The one topic the interviewee seemed very comfortable talking about was work. It had always been his dream to own a produce stand. So, when he took over Sierra Produce & Finer Foods 40 years ago, produce became his pride and joy. In expanding on his strategies of satisfying his customers he said, "I would get the best I could find: the best quality, the best tasting, the best everything. And each item, you know? And then that's how

I operated. Get the best you can get, and then sell it the least you could sell. Pricing is very important. They would always repeat, I mean they would always come twice a week or so to get my stuff, because they enjoy the taste and the quality and everything. And then pricing comes later, huh? And pricing is not extremely expensive, so that's the way I ran it. And everybody liked it.”

Much can be said about his responses through the application of Dorinne Kondo's work, *Crafting Selves*. The interviewee's tone changed when talking about his work. He was passionate and animated for his craft, going into great detail about his customers and the quality of his goods. Judging by the way he talked about it, his work had become a great source of identity and pride. His pride may be attributed to the way gender and work go hand and hand (241). His work seems to be a defining feature in his masculinity, especially in making up for the aspects that he feels like he lacks, like education. He focused on the joys and the rewarding nature of his work, whereas a woman's narrative of work may be more fragmented. Work may not be the center of their production of identity (259). The interviews provided an interesting perspective into his work postwar. Broadly, it gave a glimpse into the effect of World War II on a single generation, the male gender, and the Japanese American experience.

#### Works Cited

Kondo, Dorinne K. *Crafting Selves: Power, Gender, and Discourses of Identity in a Japanese Workplace*. Chicago: U of Chicago, 1990. Print.