

10-17-2010

Interview with Douglas Iwamoto

Douglas Iwamoto

California State University, Monterey Bay

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.csumb.edu/ohcma_chinatown

This Oral History is brought to you for free and open access by the Oral History and Community Memory Archive at Digital Commons @ CSUMB. It has been accepted for inclusion in Chinatown Renewal Project by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons @ CSUMB. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@csumb.edu.

CSUMB Oral History & Community Memory Archive
Chinatown Renewal Project
Interviewee: Douglas Iwamoto
Interviewers: Jennifer Magos and Jason Berring
Date of Interview: October 17, 2010
Duration of Interview: 01:00:35

Jason Berring 00:00

Today is October 17, 2010, and we're here today—if you can introduce yourself, sir.

Douglas Iwamoto 00:07

I'm Doug—Douglas Iwamoto.

Jason Berring 00:10

Okay. And just to let you know this will be recorded. We have both audio and visual recording, and we request your permission to record this.

Douglas Iwamoto 00:21

Yes.

Jason Berring 00:21

Okay. And towards the end of this, or at the end of this, we will go over a waiver with you. But for right now, we just request your permission to record this.

Douglas Iwamoto 00:29

Okay.

Jason Berring 00:29

Okay. So why don't we start off, if you can just tell us how your family came to the Salinas area?

Douglas Iwamoto 00:40

Oh, actually, Salinas was a large Japanese community. And this is before World War II. It was one of the large ones, and mainly because of agriculture. The Japanese, what you see with the Hispanics or Latinos now here in Salinas Valley, that's what the Japanese used to do—all the labor work for agriculture. And that's—a lot more Japanese were uneducated and did manual labor. And that's—they were here—a big portion from what I understand was just for, like, sugar beets and stuff like that. And as things started to grow, they became more and more involved in agriculture in the area and stuff. My dad was originally born in Soledad. And my mom was born in Watsonville. And they ended up being here in Salinas. Watsonville still has a large Japanese community. Actually, Castroville was pretty large at one time, but it migrated over to Salinas.

Jason Berring 02:07

Where were you born, sir?

Douglas Iwamoto 02:08

I was born here in Salinas. In fact, I was born only a block away from the church. And actually, the hospital I was born in doesn't exist in Salinas anymore. It was torn down later on.

Jennifer Magos 02:24

We might need to—

Douglas Iwamoto 02:25

Let me tell these guys—

Jason Berring 02:27

Okay, so let's go back. You were saying you were born in a hospital that doesn't exist here anymore. What was the name of the hospital, just out of curiosity?

Douglas Iwamoto 02:34

It called was Salinas Valley Hospital. It was actually on San Luis and Monterey Street. And then after that—there was a couple other hospitals. I can't remember, but Salinas Valley Memorial ended up becoming the hospital. But I grew up, like I said, about a block from here, and my dad early on worked in the sugar beet—driving a truck to deliver sugar beets. In fact, he had a trucking business before the war started, but because of the war, they got rid of—or had to sell all the trucks and stuff. But from what I understand, from what he tells me, he took out the second trucking license for Monterey County, to have a trucking business. And then after the war, most of the families that came back to Salinas after the war are families that own land. That was the basic reason why they came back. They had property here. And if they had property, they came back and it gave them a reason to come back. Both my parents and my uncles, they all had either a house here or something was here, so they came back. But it was a wild—compared to now, I think it was more of a wild time of growing up in what we call Chinatown. The area was quite different from now. I mean, there's—you still have drug dealing and prostitution, that's still in the area, but beforehand, it was a lot of bars. I mean, it was nightclubs, bars. There were a lot of—a few Chinese restaurants, liquor stores, but the bars were the big thing when growing up, of having people in the area. I mean, it'd be two o'clock in the morning sometimes, and you'd hear all the noise outside, just because people were leaving the bars at two o'clock in the morning. So, one of the big reasons was the Bracero program that the United States had. A lot of [unclear] labor. A lot of companies in Salinas had Braceros that were brought in. But there used to be a PET Milk company. I don't know if you know PET Milk—makes evaporated milk.

Jennifer Magos 05:33

Oh, okay.

Douglas Iwamoto 05:34

I think you'll see Carnation that has evaporated milk now. Well, PET Milk was a large—and they also had a natural gas plant here. And there are some cities that you still see the tank. There are large tanks that go—it travels up and down, and it has a circular frame around it. But the tank actually moves up and down with gas. Well, they had a—they were making natural gas from what I was told. And then later on, it was actually a storage facility. PG&E owned it.

Jennifer Magos 06:10

That was here in Chinatown?

Douglas Iwamoto 06:12

Yeah, uh-huh, that was a block—it was right next—across the street from the PET Milk company. And early morning, five, six o'clock, you could hear the trucks coming in—the dairy trucks coming in with milk. And at that time, they were using milk cans. You know, in the late 50s, they were using milk cans. And you know how they're shaped—they're a steel can that looks like a milk bottle with a lid on top. And they would carry the milk, bring the milk in that, and it would be stacked up and you'd hear that clanging around of the milk cans. And then later on, in the '60s, they started actually bringing it in on tank trucks, but originally it was on milk cans. It's kind of interesting to—and you had that smell. When they would pasteurize the milk through heat, you had that smell of that—just kind of smelled like rotten milk. [Jennifer laughs] You know, it's kind of—when you cook milk, some people will drink warm milk. I don't know if you've ever done that, where you warm up some milk?

Jennifer Magos 07:30

Right.

Douglas Iwamoto 07:30

And if you warm it up too much you have a distinct odor. Well, that's what you smell. [Jennifer laughs] A couple other things that was kind of unique—Salinas used to have a fire horn that used to just be a real loud horn that would blow when the fire trucks went out. And they had it mounted on the natural gas tank for PG&E. It was mounted on there and it would go [makes horn noise], and it'd be in the middle of the night, and it would just wake everyone. There was no noise restriction as you have right now then. Friday nights—in the area, Friday nights—Friday and Saturday nights were the most bustling in the area. That's because everybody gets paid and they would come down to the bars and celebrate, but the rest of the week was fairly quiet. But Friday and Saturday nights, all the bars were open and stuff. There was a couple Chinese organizations. The Bing Kong building, which originally—Bing Kong sits next to Dorothy's, kind of down the street a little bit on Dorothy's side. And originally that building was on the corner of—I think it was California and—or Pajaro Street and Lake Street. It was a nice and it was, architecturally, it was a Chinese style architectural building, and then it burned down. It caught on fire, and then after it burned down, they built it on Soledad Street.

Jason Berring 09:21

Okay, if you would allow me to, for a second—can you take me back to your home life? What was home life like? You were born about a block away from here and if you can maybe go into details about, you know, how your house was, what it looked like and—

Douglas Iwamoto 09:38

Our house was a unique house because our house was a two-story house, but it didn't start out that way. By the time I was born, it was two story, but originally, part of our house sat on Main Street, and then when they put the underpass in and they widened Main Street, my dad ended up buying the house, moving it over onto Lake Street, and raising it up and building a story underneath it, so then it

became a two-story house. So the single story, the top story of the house, which still exists, is single wall. It's not a—it's not, like, a studded wall, and the bottom story is—they use two by four studs, and they built a story, but my dad is—was quite the handyman and stuff. He was very mechanically inclined and could build things and stuff. A lot of things that I do now is just because my dad taught me things. There were—the house was unique. Of all the earthquakes that we've had, it barely moved but always stayed together and never collapsed. And that was always—my dad always kind of laughed about being earthquake ready and stuff like that, and he says, with all the earthquakes the house has, even the Loma Prieta earthquake, he says, "The house is still standing, so it goes to show you—" He says, "I must have did something right." [Jennifer laughs]

Jason Berring 11:27

So, how many rooms were in the house, and—

Douglas Iwamoto 11:32

Our house is—this was the other thing. Originally when the house was built, we had a store in house, and my parents used to make tofu on the bottom story. So there was a kitchen where we ate and everything, but the kitchen was actually the back end of the house, and they made tofu. They would go—they would sell tofu, and pick up seaweed in the ocean and bring it back. You know how the Japanese use seaweed to make sushi and stuff, and soups and stuff. They used to have that, but the big thing was tofu. I never—I see remnants of the cooking pot they used, or some of the utensils and stuff. When I grew up, I'd say, "Oh, what's this?" I'd ask my parents what was it from. They said, "Oh, that's when we had the tofu shop." And that was the unique thing. The house started at that, then my uncle had a shoe repair shop also there. So, my uncle was repairing shoes. And then, after the war, there was a laundry unit there, and this lady would wash the clothes and fold them, and I can always remember—you know how when you iron sheets, that smell of linen being ironed? She had a big, rolling type, pressing machine, and when she would iron the slightly damp sheets, it'd have a particular smell to it. You always would smell that thing that—you'd smell it in the upstairs part of the house, because the upstairs is where we lived. We had five bedrooms upstairs.

Jennifer Magos 13:38

Do you remember the exact address of your house?

Douglas Iwamoto 13:42

7 Lake Street. We still own it.

Jennifer Magos 13:44

Do you—

Douglas Iwamoto 13:45

We still own—we own the property 7 Lake, 108. There are four buildings on that lot. It's—there's a lot of homes. It's very dense in the amount of square footage on it, the property. But the building next door that—originally, the property was my dad and my uncle. My dad—my uncle owned a shoe repair. My dad and my uncle actually owned the property together originally, and then my uncle ended up going to Japan—moving to Japan after the war. And later on, he ended up giving the property back into the

family, his half. So, the 108 North Main Street is where there's a hair salon called Happy to be Nappy. If you go by there you'll see—

Jason Berring 13:46

Big sign on the window, painted on there.

Douglas Iwamoto 13:58

Yeah, there's a sign on the window.

Jason Berring 13:58

Yeah, I've seen it.

Jennifer Magos 14:17

And so were—was the tofu shop and the shoe repair shop, that was all in 7 Lake Street?

Douglas Iwamoto 14:59

All at 7 Lake.

Jennifer Magos 14:59

So it just changed as time went on?

Douglas Iwamoto 15:03

And now there's a family that rents that home. As time went on, and the shoe repair, the laundry shut down. And after the war, there was no shoe repair shop. Then my dad just converted it over and basically we lived in the whole bottom and top. By the time I graduated high school, we lived there, top and bottom of the whole structure.

Jason Berring 15:38

Okay, so how many people in your family were living in this address right here on 7 Lake Street?

Douglas Iwamoto 15:45

Our family was a family of six. I had three sisters, and I was the youngest, and I was the only boy of the family. And so, my sisters always told me that being the youngest and being the only boy, that I was spoiled the worst. [Jennifer laughs] And I would have to kind of tend to agree with that. My dad really did a lot of stuff. My oldest sister though had muscular dystrophy, and she died about 1988. But she graduated high school and everything, but she did college correspondent courses, and she basically stayed at the house and we—my mom and dad took care of her until she passed away in '88. And then after that my father died. So, it was quite a—she never—having muscular dystrophy as she got older, she could not walk up the stairs. So every night or during the day, we'd always have to carry her down from upstairs or carry her upstairs. And that was the big thing. Our house was unique in that it didn't have a regular sized bathroom. In fact, the bathtub was made out of redwood, and it was like a Japanese tub. I think the tub was only maybe about four by five feet—four by four, but it was very deep. It was about—I bet you it was about three feet deep. So you'd fill it up with water and you'd—it'd be like—when I was small it was like being in a swimming pool. [Jennifer laughs]

Jason Berring 17:52

Can you tell me about your other sisters?

Douglas Iwamoto 17:56

My oldest sister was named Elise, and she had muscular dystrophy. My sister below that, the second oldest, was named Carol, and she was pretty active in school. She was smart. She has her doctorate's degree in administration. She is—she was principal here at Washington Middle School for a while. She lives in Las Vegas now. She is still a principal in a alternative high school in Las Vegas with kids that just can't make it in regular school. They either have a behavioral problem, or something that's out of sync. And my other—the third oldest is my sister Barbara, and she lives up in Burlingame, and she is also a teacher, and she teaches special ed. But she comes down now and visits my mom every other week or every couple of weeks. And my sister from Las Vegas comes to Salinas once a month approximately.

Jennifer Magos 19:23

Can you tell us how—do your parents or your mom talk about what it was like to live in the area or what Soledad Street was like?

Douglas Iwamoto 19:33

They, you know, they talk about—they always talk about—the big thing was talking about, you know, saving, you know, going through the Depression, how hard it was. And they would also talk—never publicly, but they would talk about the war, about being in the relocation centers and being at the rodeo grounds for a year living in the stables. They would talk about that. My dad never talked about—my mom really talked about it quite a bit. I know my sister actually never had muscular dystrophy until she was—went to the relocation centers. She caught a fever, and it was about 105, and the doctors later on said that that probably was the incident that triggered the muscular dystrophy in her. And so, it was pretty hard. I mean, I—to take care of my sister and stuff, it's very hard because as her arms are—by the time when she passed away, she had no muscle mass left over. And so, my parents would, you know, tell about the stories of how they farmed and how they saved money. Everything was tied around, I think for most—most of the Japanese community was trying to get ahead. Plus after the war, the discrimination was pretty rampant, right after the war. There's people that my dad used to do business with before the war, but after the war, they wouldn't do business with him, you know, after he came back. So, you had to, you know, change who you did business with. Certain people, certain fabrication or blacksmith companies, like in the—since my dad was in agriculture—wouldn't fix things, so you'd have to find someone else to fix it. And I think that's why the Japanese community stayed fairly close-knit at that—in that second, what they call niseis—they stayed fairly close together, just because of that discrimination that's going on.

Jennifer Magos 22:13

What types of stories did they tell you about having to go to the camps at the rodeo grounds?

Douglas Iwamoto 22:21

Oh, when they first—the smell wasn't that great. Like, my sister [unclear]—there was a fella by the name of Charlie Marcy. My sister [unclear] was born in July 1, and he brought a cake. And the first—my mom always mentioned it that she had a birthday in July there, and they thought there was contraband in the cake. And so when Charlie brought this cake for her to have, you know, they just poked it and shredded it apart, just with a knife, just to see what was in there. You know, they just kind of put the cake back together again.

Jennifer Magos 23:05

Do they talk about what it was like to have to leave their homes or what that whole process was?

Douglas Iwamoto 23:11

Yeah, because my uncle, who also had the shoe repair—they went through the house. The FBI had come in, and my uncle had—was a translator. He translated documents for people and stuff, so they always thought that he was working for Japan or he had something like that. And so my mom and dad would—more my mom—would tell us the night that they came in, just ransacked the house. Just took everything out of the closets, and the house was just upside down and stuff. And then being split up—my grandfather ended up being sent to a relocation center. After they had gone to the rodeo grounds here, he got split up, and he was sent to Missouri, I think, to a different one. And there were quite a bit of Germans at that one. And then my mom and dad, they were sent to Poston in Arizona, along with—quite a few other people were sent.

Jennifer Magos 24:32

Were your sisters born at that time?

Douglas Iwamoto 24:35

My oldest sister was, but my sister Carol was born in camp. She's the second, and then Barbara, my sister Barbara, was born right afterwards, and then in the year of 1949, when I was born, there was a huge population increase in the Japanese community. There was quite a few kids that were born, and we were all called the 49ers, because there were so many of us. I think, just Japanese boys alone, there were eight or nine of us, and there must have been as many girls, and for a Japanese community to have just an upsurge in kids—So, our class when I graduated Salinas High School, and [unclear] High School, had quite a few Japanese kids in class.

Jennifer Magos 25:30

So you said that when the FBI came into your home, your parents' home, is there—did they take things, or do you still have things from pre-war?

Douglas Iwamoto 25:40

They just were looking for evidence to whether you were doing things for Japan or not, and seeing if you were, you know, giving information over and being a spy and stuff, but it was, you know, we weren't the only family, but they would pick certain families that might have a situation where they would be spying and stuff. And it, you know, that part—and that was one thing—I know that was one thing coming back you look at the Japanese, how many of my age Japanese really can't speak Japanese, including myself. I mean, I understand Japanese fairly well, but to be able to speak it—because when

we came back, they wanted us to really, basically have immersion and integrate back into the American and live like Americans. So, like, from my age on, most of us have American first names, maybe middle Japanese names, but my sisters who were born before, they all had—their first names are all Japanese, and there's a lot of—see, even my mom's legal name was—is Toshiko. And her middle name was given to her. And actually, when you look on her birth certificate, it's Toshiko Saka Segawa. But her middle name of Mary that she uses now was actually given when she entered school, because the teachers could not speak, could not say Toshiko, so they'd say oh, you would be Mary or—and you would hear—I would hear that story quite a bit. Oh, yeah. You know, someone would say, "Oh, yeah, my parents got—" You know, his name is John, because the teachers or someone gave him John's name, you know.

Jennifer Magos 27:53

How did your mom feel about that?

Douglas Iwamoto 27:54

Never really said anything. Just said, "That's how she got her name Mary."

Jennifer Magos 28:00

[laughs] Wow.

Douglas Iwamoto 28:02

And my dad has the name of Eddie. And, you know, he—I could never remember how he ended up having the name Eddie. But he's very—he was—my dad was very short, about five feet, I think, and I can remember a lot of people in the ag business calling him Shortie, because he was so short.

Jennifer Magos 28:24

How did they decide to come back after the internment?

Douglas Iwamoto 28:29

After internment, mainly because they had property here. That was this reason why they came back was—my uncle came back, but because it was crowded and everything, they stayed in the house near us, but later on he got a job—actually, he ended up working for the United States government in Japan. He went to Japan. He worked for the Navy, and he was an intelligence translator for them in Japan. So he had moved to Japan, my aunt and him, and they were there for years. And they retired out of it and stuff. And it was kind of ironic, in that that was original reason, you know, they were ransacking the house to begin with.

Jennifer Magos 29:22

Right. [laughs]

Douglas Iwamoto 29:23

And he ends up, you know—it's just how I guess fate goes sometimes.

Jason Berring 29:34

He actually just touched on the question that I had [laughs]. I was just about to ask about his uncle. So, what types of documents would your uncle translate, and for what reasons?

Douglas Iwamoto 29:44

I couldn't tell you. I know someone might think—he never really talked about it. I know some of it was kind of classified. He also became a minister when he was in Japan too.

Jason Berring 29:56

I mean, the documents that he would translate, you were saying prior to—

Douglas Iwamoto 30:00

Oh, prior to when he was here before the war?

Jason Berring 30:04

Right, right.

Douglas Iwamoto 30:04

He would help people translate, get stuff, like, if they had a bank account, and then everything was always in English. You know, now it's—there's somewhat bilingual situation, but before then—or if someone wanted to get a driver's license, and they had to study for the test, he'd help them do all that. He was fairly knowledgeable about, you know, the legal way of going through the process. So people would ask him to help them out.

Jason Berring 30:39

Do you know where he got his legal knowledge or his ability to read and interpret and understand—

Douglas Iwamoto 30:47

I'm not sure, but he was, out of all the uncles, the relatives on that side, he was the most intelligent. He had the ability to—he read a lot and stuff. He was a great debater. I mean, even when I get into high school, into college, politically, we would debate over every issue, and he was just that kind of a guy.

Jennifer Magos 31:18

Were there any—I'm just curious, because of the—you were saying the changes that were felt after the internment and everything within the community—was there an effort to preserve any customs or traditions, or was it—

Douglas Iwamoto 31:33

Publicly, no, I would say not. You know, we were basically taught to be as Americans just like everyone else, and so they never spoke—like, my dad in public always spoke English to me, but my friends would laugh because they would come over and my dad would talk to me in Japanese, and I'd talk to him in English. And some of my friends would just say, "How do you guys do that? You know, your dad's talking to you in Japanese and you answer back in English, you know. Why don't you guys talk one way or the other way." You know, but—and my mom always knew English, and she had to learn

Japanese because when she got married, my grandfather on my dad's side spoke only Japanese, and she took care of my grandfather. So that's how she learned her Japanese.

Jennifer Magos 32:36

So do you feel that there was, like, a loss? Do you feel a loss of culture or tradition or—

Douglas Iwamoto 32:43

Maybe somewhat I think about it, but not really. I mean, you pick up things along the way. We eat—you know, Japanese food I enjoy eating, but I enjoy eating any food that tastes good. [laughs] I can eat steak and potatoes and I can eat, you know, French food. It is a wide—that's one thing I think in growing up, I had a variety of different cultures, being where the neighbors around us were all black, then you'd get to eat, like, I got to eat—my neighbors had what people would call southern fried chicken. But boy, was it good chicken, and the ribs. I mean, this one lady could cook ribs. I mean, they were just outstanding ribs and stuff. And we had a couple of Mexican families that lived next door, so got to eat, you know, Mexican food. There was Chinese, you know. I would think that the least—the friends that I had the least contact were actually the white, Caucasian. Most of them were all—had some ethnic background and stuff. You know, and that was really the other thing—if you lived on this side of the tracks, you were—you know, a lot of kids would think that you were on the poorer side of the spectrum of society, which is probably so, but, you know, they would say you live on the other side of the tracks, and you had people that did that. And that's one thing a lot of Japanese in the 50s—late 50s and 60s—you'd see them starting to move from the older part of town, and they'd start—because originally—why Chinatown—Chinatown, really it was more of a commercial, industrial area, and it was on the edge of town. That's why it got started here, and you look in San Francisco also, where the Chinese who built the railroad was down where AT&T Baseball Park. That was called China Basin. So you look where the Chinese or Japanese originally first settled, it was always on the fringe of the town, and that's how Salinas—because we have pictures where across the street from the church was just empty farming ground.

Jason Berring 35:47

If I can take you back to—getting back to Chinatown, can you tell me about some of the, you know, your friends in the neighborhood and what you guys would do here in the area?

Douglas Iwamoto 36:00

We'd play, you know, like, during the summertime, we'd play to me 8:00, 8:30, 9 o'clock, but it's nowhere near like you have today, where you have to worry about gangs and stuff. We used to just ride our bikes all over the place and stuff. And early on they built what they call the projects, housing projects here, which was a half a block away from us. And some people didn't like to come down there because they [unclear], but I never had a fear for being in this area and stuff. You learn to know when something is risky, and you learn—right now my wife really says, you know, she doesn't like me to come down here in the evening, this and that. It was a different—I mean, there was a lot of wildness. You'd see a lot of drunks, winos that would be on the ground, and then you'd walk right past them and stuff. But it did not have the type of atmosphere that you have now, where you can't trust someone. Someone will pull a gun out. Guns were very rare at that time and stuff. In fact, when I grew up, there was a gang fight in Salinas. We used to have gang fights, but not like the gang fights where someone

would shoot. They were actually physical fights. The carnival used to come into town during the rodeo, and the carnival used to be where the railroad station is in Salinas. Okay, where you come up the underpass on the right side? And that park used to be called Bataan Park, because there was a memorial for the Bataan March. And that was one thing why a lot of people didn't like the Japanese, because so many of Salinas's military was killed in that Bataan March. But the carnival was over there, and toward the end of the night, when the carnival was closed down, there was one year they had a big gang fight. Guys from Castroville and guys from Salinas just—I mean, it was knives and pipes and everything else, but I don't think anyone got shot. I remember we had just—I had just come home from there, and we look out, and we could see all the lights from the police cars flashing and everything. And someone came by and says, "Oh, there was a gang fight over there." My parents would say, "Well, you're not going out again." But, you know, we'd be—I think I'd be, like, twelve years old. And I'd run over to the carnival, stay there for a while, and come back. My cousins would come over since we lived real close to the carnival. They would come over and then, you know, the four or five of us would—six of us would run over to the carnival and have a good time and come back. And our parents would—all the parents would be in the house, at our house, and they'd let us go.

Jennifer Magos 39:15

Do you know—I know there was—we were talking a little bit about the different interactions with all the different cultures that were in this area. Can you tell us more about how—the Chinese we know were mainly on Soledad Street, and the Japanese on Lake Street from what we've learned.

Douglas Iwamoto 39:33

Right, yes.

Jennifer Magos 39:34

So were there any rivalries between the two?

Douglas Iwamoto 39:38

I didn't feel it. We always went over—the one Chinese restaurant where most of the Japanese ate was the Republic Cafe. I can remember that. And Mrs. Ahtye, she was a small lady, wore a Chinese dress that was always split. You know how the Chinese dresses, they're very long and they're split down the side? She was always with it. She always had her hair in a bun. And, in fact, from the church, there's a door on the back side of our fence that goes right into that restaurant, where that restaurant—the building exist is because we would have—they would have funeral services and memorial services here, and the one place they would go eat—they would go the Republic. So in that fence they left a doorway so people wouldn't have to walk around. They could walk through the back of the church ground and into the back of the restaurant and eat. But we—when our family wanted to go out and eat, we'd always go to a Chinese restaurant, and I would say all the time it would be the Republic.

Jennifer Magos 40:51

And what about the—we know there—you mentioned one of the Tongs that was on—Soledad Street, was it?

Douglas Iwamoto 40:59

Yeah, actually, there was two. There's Bing Kong and the Suey Sings. The big thing that they—what they did—they played mahjong. They had huge—I didn't know what the game was or the gambling was at the time. I learned it later on, because I learned to play mahjong. But, you know, the stories that my Chinese friends would tell me was, "Aw, yeah. There's big money in there."

Jennifer Magos 41:27

[laughs] Was it mainly where men gathered, or—

Douglas Iwamoto 41:32

Originally, but there—you would see women play that too. It's a fun game. [Jennifer laughs]

Jason Berring 41:42

So, can I ask you, what does this—our purpose here is basically to gain history and knowledge. What exactly does this mean to you and for your family with what we're doing here? Why is it important to you and your family to put this history out there?

Douglas Iwamoto 42:04

You get a different perspective of how Salinas was early on. It just wasn't agriculture. I mean, now you look at, you know, I would say the Japanese, most of the Japanese in Salinas now are middle income or higher. And you have families like the Tanimuras that own TNA. In fact, George Tanimura, who is basically the matriarch of the Tanimura family, who's ninety-five, he lived in—my dad rented a house, in the back of our house. He lived on Lake Street. George and Masaye, they lived there. And after that, they moved to North Salinas. But originally, you know, our families go—have a long history together and stuff. But you look to where that family was years ago. [unclear], but that family had a unit that stayed together, the five brothers stayed together. And it's kind of with a lot of the Japanese family—they stay together, and they build a business. My uncles, my mom's brother and my mom's brother-in-law, both had businesses here. One was a body shop. One owned a garage repair—a mechanic, serviced cars and stuff. And that's where I learned to work on cars and learned to paint cars, because I'd just run down, you know. I'd just tell my mom, "I'm going to go see Uncle Kei," and I'd run down the street and go see him, or I'd run over to—and then especially when I started to drive, I'd spent a lot of time at my uncle's garage, because I'd turn around and fix my car up.

Jason Berring 44:07

So, do you feel that the Chinese and the Japanese community, the older communities, have been forgotten here in the Salinas area?

Douglas Iwamoto 44:18

In some respects they have, because [unclear] Salinas—like, in the ag, especially the Japanese, I think, to me had a fairly good influence on agriculture here. My dad would tell me that there was a German fella that was trying to grow celery and never could get the celery to grow very well until he hired a Japanese fella to—and they grew celery, strawberries. The strawberry business for a while there was predominantly Japanese, were the top notch strawberry growers. Green onions and mixed lettuce in Salinas Valley really had a heritage toward a family called Oshita. And Frank Oshita still lives—but he belongs to the temple, the church here. And he really grew both the green onion business

and he ended up at one time being the largest green onion shipper in the United States. So there, you know, there is history there on that. It's just, you know, if you ever wondered how Salinas got to the point to where it is now, you'd have to go back, and there was Asian influence. The Filipino community that was here also, you know, they were—my biggest impression when I was growing up was of the Filipino—they worked on the ranch farms with us. But they were great irrigators. They used to irrigate by furrow water, where you'd let the water go down the furrow, and they always had a knack of being able to water the lettuce fields correctly so they would not get overwatered, you know. If the ground was pretty flat, they would be able to control the water to make sure the water didn't overwater. If it had a slope on it, and water was flowing pretty fast, they'd know where to make the dams. [Jennifer and Jason laugh] They would know where to make the dams and stuff. And our family had a green onion bunching business. We would process green onions, and we would have—at times we'd have two or three hundred mostly Chinese and Filipinos working for us when we first started out. And that's how—in the green onion business—how our family was working with Frank Oshita and green onions.

Jennifer Magos 47:16

Just following up to Jason's question, so what do you see as the future of the Japanese community in this area or in Salinas in general?

Douglas Iwamoto 47:28

Oh, it's changing because the Japanese are—the Japanese now that are living here are so much more professional than—you see them either as more businessmen, attorneys, doctors, quite a few doctors. So that's why I say most of them are now, I would say, middle class or higher. One thing that our families—that the families then, and I still think now, is education. I mean, if I told my parents I didn't want to go to college, I'd get hammered across the back of the head, saying, "Oh, yeah, you're going to college." And that's one thing our—my parents, my uncles, my aunts, they all pushed their kids to go to college. They'd say if you didn't get an education, you weren't going to go nowhere. My dad was a little bit different too, because he believed in an education, but he also believed in common sense, because he always used to tell me, the best farmer is one who had good common sense, because no matter how much you learn in school, you never could offset Mother Nature. You really had to know what to do, and that—I have—to me there's a lot of credibility in just life in itself. If you have common sense, you could—

Jennifer Magos 48:57

Let me see.

Jason Berring 49:05

I'm gonna ask you, why in the Japanese community did you stress—was education stressed so much?

Douglas Iwamoto 49:19

Because they were downtrodden so much after the war, the discrimination, to get themselves above that. They always, you know, it was a big—it wasn't a joke, but it was a big thing. "Hey, why don't you become a doctor or a lawyer?" I mean, right now, lawyers are, to me, there seems to be quite a bit of attorneys. You'd have to—you couldn't be just a general attorney or, you know, become an accountant. Something other than being a field laborer. Even my aunts—there's quite a few women that used to

clean houses for a living, you know. They would clean houses in the morning. By the afternoon, when the kids come home, you know, they would be out and be home for when the kids come home. My mom used to work on the ranch. Since we had a green onion operation, she used to go out and help, and then by the time we come home, she would be home. And that was one thing with—the female side of the family usually raised the kids, and the husbands were always working. And that was pretty predominant among all my relatives—dads would go out. They had a work ethic that was pretty good.

Jennifer Magos 50:58

It's kind of off topic, but what would you like future generations to know about Chinatown or this area?

Douglas Iwamoto 51:11

The big—actually, what I'd really like them to remember is how large the community here was, and what discrimination did to the Japanese. You know, the church at one time—now, the Buddhist temple here in Salinas at one time was the largest one in the United States. It had well over—somewhere between two and 3000 members, which is huge. I mean, the largest one now has maybe 2000, and that's in the city of, I think, LA or—San Jose has a huge Japanese community. A lot of them moved from here. You go up—there are a lot of families that have memorials here in Salinas from San Jose, is because their original grandparents are buried here, the isseis. And, to my knowledge, there's only two Japanese cemeteries in the United States that are actually Japanese cemeteries and not intertwined with American cemeteries. And that's the one here in Salinas, and there's one in Colma city up by San Francisco. The one here in Salinas is fairly large.

Jennifer Magos 52:27

Where is that located?

Douglas Iwamoto 52:28

Right on Abbott street. When you go down Abbott street, you go down Abbott, and before you get to Harkins Road, you'll cross a railroad track. And if you're going out that way, look to the left just before you cross the railroad track, you'll see. And it was put there because they weren't able to buy land inside of Salinas, so they went all the way to the edge. And now that's, you know, it's where—it's right next to—Taylor Foods is right there.

Jason Berring 53:06

Wow, that's really interesting.

Jennifer Magos 53:07

That is.

Douglas Iwamoto 53:08

Yeah, because when you go into LA and [unclear]—they have Japanese sections in American cemeteries. They're Japanese sections, but it's not just a cemetery in itself. And I say it's a Japanese cemetery—we would, you know, let anyone be buried there, but it's predominantly a Japanese—

Jason Berring 53:32

Well, I got something. What—how big of a role did the Buddhist community play in the Japanese community here?

Douglas Iwamoto 53:55

It was quite a bit. I mean, my parents made—my parents and uncle made suggestions—it was, when it first started, the Buddhist temple wasn't only a religion, but it was also the community center.

Jason Berring 54:14

Okay.

Douglas Iwamoto 54:15

That's the reason why—now, when people started going to Presbyterian or Methodist Church and stuff, it was really after the war, and some people went there just because they didn't want to be associated with—as a Japanese, they wanted to be associated as an American. So you do things like an American does and stuff. And I've read a couple studies where, you know, people are discriminated and they get—how well can they, in society, come back into society and not use it as a crutch and get ahead, and I know I read a couple of studies where, you know, the Japanese community is used as an example. You know, these people, you know, they were beat down and discriminated, but yet they're still able to work their way up, and it's really on—it's how much the parents, to me, really instills into the family life of getting ahead. That's really what—the Buddhist temple in itself, the religion is kind of unique, because it's based on the way of life, of living your life. And, like, for this temple here, I was president four or five times. I'm not really the most active person now, but for twenty-five or thirty years—over twenty-five years—I was on the board here. I was consistently doing things. It changes as time goes on and stuff.

Jennifer Magos 56:06

So how big of a part did the Buddhist temple play in your family growing up here?

Douglas Iwamoto 56:11

Quite a bit. I mean, my whole social life is based here at the church, you know, from youth. Because I was—grew up here and I went to what we call Dharma school, or Sunday school. Went here to the church, grew up in that. The youth group that was meeting here today—grew up there, was president of that, district president and stuff. Actually, I ended up being national president for the Buddhist churches of America for two years. And you see—the Buddhist temple is—the Buddhist churches of America is really going—trying to get out of having that stigma of being a Japanese religion. They really want to get out to have all nationalities come in. They're looking to really try to push that.

Jason Berring 57:11

So when you were growing up, what sorts of events would they have here—because you were saying it was a community center—what sorts of things would go on here?

Douglas Iwamoto 57:21

The biggest, and it still is the biggest, event here is our Obon Festival, which is in July and August. And it is a religious event about—the meaning is of people who have passed in your family. And that is—

actually the church uses it, and a lot of churches use it as a fundraiser to get the funds from the community. That's one of the—we have food sales, and we have other activities, but that is one of the only community one—that really the community comes out, and they look to raise funds from the community in that. They do well. But we're very—I'd say we're a very low-key type of church. But we try to have some influence in the Chinatown area—we've always had.

Jennifer Magos 58:28

What does the festival consist of, or what what type of activities does it have?

Douglas Iwamoto 58:32

Well, mainly food to eat. You come and you have sushi and teriyaki chicken and tempura, just—I don't know if you eat Japanese food or not.

Jennifer Magos 58:43

Mm-hmm. Of course. [laughs]

Douglas Iwamoto 58:46

It's becoming a pretty—it's surprising because it is becoming a pretty big staple of American society, you know. Most people will eat Japanese food.

Jennifer Magos 59:01

Anything else, or any other stories that you would like to tell us?

Douglas Iwamoto 59:06

A couple of things in the Chinese community—remembering about the Chinese community—was their New Year's parade that they would have. They would have the dragons and the firecrackers. That was a real big event.

Jason Berring 59:17

Would that go on here in Chinatown?

Douglas Iwamoto 59:19

Yeah, it'd be in here, in Chinatown, and it usually would be between the Suey Sing

Douglas Iwamoto 59:23

building and the

Douglas Iwamoto 59:29

Bing Kong building, in the front of it they would have. And it would be—it wouldn't be a community event. It would be for the Chinese community, but not for the city of Salinas. But, being on the same, you know—a block away.

Jason Berring 59:46

Everybody would show up?

Douglas Iwamoto 59:47

Yeah, my Chinese friends would say, "Hey, come on down. You know, we'll have a good time." Mainly we'd just come there to see the firecrackers when we were young, just to hear all the firecrackers. The Filipinos would have the Filipino church here, and then they built the community center. And most of that was—things that were going on were weddings and stuff. Especially when I got older, people I knew, they got married. They always have a reception at the Filipino Community Center.

Jason Berring 1:00:27

I think that's it.

Jennifer Magos 1:00:29

Thank you for—

Douglas Iwamoto 1:00:30

You're welcome.

Jennifer Magos 1:00:30

—sharing your stories with us. [laughs]

Jason Berring 1:00:33

Definitely, thank you.

Jennifer Magos 1:00:33

Learned a lot today.