

NARRATOR:           GEORGE M. WAKIJI  
INTERVIEWER:       EVELYN TAYLOR  
DATE:                 October 17, 2003

ET:     It's October 17, 2003, this is the oral history interview of Mr. George M. as in Mary, Wakiji, W-a-k-i-j-i of Camarillo, California. This interview will be regarding Mr. Wakiji's family history and time spent in an internment camp during World War II. So George, lets' talk about your parents and their reasoning for coming to the United States. When was that?

GW:    I can't think of the exact date, but I know that my father came before the turn of the century. I'm talking about before, before 1900, late 1900's, late, late 1800's he came as a young man and he came to California unlike many Japanese who stopped off in Hawaii and maybe work there. But he came directly from Japan to America and he took mainland to San Francisco. And then from there, from what little of the history that I know of him he took odd jobs. He worked. He told me that he had worked on the railroad and going to work in Nevada and he was loading coal cars and things of that nature. And I think he said ten cents an hour, ten cents an hour maybe you know? It was some ridiculous figure.

          And from there he worked on a, worked on some farms in Northern California. I don't know too much about that. But then he, a short while later he came down to Southern California. In fact, I think he ended up in South Pasadena where he worked for a Mr. Bush and who ran a nursery. And so he learned by working at this nursey he learned a trade and then shortly thereafter he opened his own business. He took two partners, other two, two gentlemen from Japan also, people that he knew from his village

## WAKIJI

in Japan and they started this business. But the two other gentlemen after a short while after a year or so decided that they didn't want to stay here any longer and returned to Japan, so my father became the sole proprietor of the nursery in Pasadena.

ET: Now what prompted your father to come to America in the first place?

GW: Well you have to understand, he was the youngest son in the family. I don't know how many. I think they had three brothers. And in Japan the only the oldest son gets everything from the family. And so, as a \_\_\_\_\_ he knew that he would not get any inheritance in the family. So for economic opportunities he left Japan to come to America like most immigrants do for economic opportunity.

ET: And so your grandparents on both sides of the family did not come with him. They remained in Japan.

GW: No, exactly.

ET: They remained in Japan.

GW: Right.

ET: And your father spoke a little English at that time?

GW: Well he, he learned as he, as he was coming here. At the job here he learned on his job and so forth. And then as he started his own business I think he became more proficient because he had to use it, that's the only way you learn a language.

ET: That was quite brave of him?

GW: Oh yeah. It's, it's very interesting.

ET: That's very courageous.

## WAKIJI

GW: Most, it's interesting, the early Japanese-Americans, Japanese immigrants, you have to give them a lot of credit because I don't think I could go to a foreign country without enough language and then make a living you know.

ET: No, very impressive. Now so then your father was in the nursery business.

GW: Right.

ET: Okay, now when did he meet your mother? Well did he do anything significantly after the nursery business?

GW: No, that was his business. That was his life's business yeah.

ET: Okay.

GW: In fact, he, my mother came later. See she was from another village close by, so the families knew each other. So it was in a sense probably an arranged marriage in a way. I don't know if my, I don't think my mother. There were many Japanese, Japanese women who came to America as picture, what they called picture brides. In other words, they sent their pictures to America to, to eligible bachelors and the interesting thing that I've heard stories about how some of the bachelors used to get a picture of a better looking friend and the woman would come to America and then find out this is not really the person that she thought it was.

ET: They do that today but it's on the internet (laughs).

GW: Right, and so, but anyway, she came. It was probably in the early 1900's. I can't know exactly. But she came and then they were married. And then they settled in Pasadena, well he was already there. So they settled there. And where my father, my father interestingly enough was the second Japanese person to settle in Pasadena, California. So

## WAKIJI

there was a man named Mr. Kawaii who was a, well it's, it could have been either one of them were the first. But my father gave Mr. Kawaii the credit and, so he wouldn't.

Where we used to live, when he first settled in Pasadena it was just open area. I mean now of course Pasadena is a city that's already pretty well developed. And I mean developed completed, so there's very little land there. But he was able to acquire an acre of property in Pasadena where he started his own nursery.

Now you have to understand, Japanese immigrants were not allowed to become citizens until 1952. So he was not, being a non, non-citizen, he was an alien. He was not able to own property. So happened was the property was then put in the names of the American born children like my oldest sister, my older brother and so forth. And so the property was in their names. But that's helping with them because otherwise you couldn't, you couldn't get property so.

ET: Now you mentioned siblings. How many, how many brothers and sisters do you have?

GW: Okay, I had one, one brother and four sisters. My three, three of my sisters still are alive. They all, I'm the youngest in the family. And one, one sister died when she was I think about thirteen. So but I, being the youngest I had certain I think certain advantages. I didn't have to put up with a lot of the control that parents have over their children at the beginning. So by the time I came along they, they were too tired I guess (laughs), couldn't care less.

ET: They also had the other, other children to occupy there, their time.

GW: Right, exactly.

## WAKIJI

ET: Now what happened or when World War II came about? We're going to jump ahead a little bit to World War II because that's really when you, your family really experienced a traumatic change.

GW: Exactly.

ET: What, what were the influences that lead up to this or what happened?

GW: All right, well the—

ET: When did this happen?

GW: --this, well it all started in December of 1941 on December 7<sup>th</sup> when Pearl Harbor was attacked by Japan. And I have to explain here the difficulty that most Americans have about differentiating between people of like myself who were born in America, American citizens who were lumped together as, we became in the eyes of the government the enemy. And so, but anyway Japan bombed Pearl Harbor and the war was declared shortly thereafter, after by our President Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

And because of the—leading up to this point there had been a lot of anti-Asian prejudice in California. And, and basically in California because that's where most of the Asians lived, the largest percentage.

ET: Where do you think this started or what caused this?

GW: Well.

ET: Or is it just long term prejudice from the beginning?

GW: Yeah, it was long term. It didn't start just with the war. I mean there was a feeling that—see what happened is the Japanese came to America and they started. They worked for people for a while but then after a short while they, they went off on their own and then they developed their own farms and so forth. Many were in a sense like

## WAKIJI

sharecroppers in a sense, but they still were able to then save money and then buy their own, get, get their own property in the names of their children or whatever. But, but see what the interesting thing was, at the time of World War II in California, the Japanese from what I understand controlled probably about a third of the agricultural production. And so people were envious of this including groups like the American Grange and different farms groups were very, I think the word is \_\_\_\_\_.

ET: I know what you're saying.

GW: But anyway.

ET: Right.

GW: They didn't particularly appreciate the fact that—

ET: They're territorial?

GW: Yeah, yeah, exactly and they were interested in their own, you know, their own situations. And so they were rather envious that the Japanese became successful. And, and so this was an opportunity to maybe get, get them out of the way and this is what happened because there were many people who were involved in this of course, not only agricultural groups but there were groups like the American Legion and so forth which is an interesting group. They are all Veterans. That's why to this day I have not joined the American Legion. I'm a Veteran of the U.S. Army but I would not join the American Legion. I just have my particular prejudice against them.

ET: Now what did they do?

GW: What did they do? Oh, they, they, they were, they were among the people that were saying that the Japanese should be removed from the West Coast and, and put into camps.

WAKIJI

ET: Really?

GW: Oh yeah.

ET: Former Veterans?

GW: Huh?

ET: Former Veterans?

GW: Yeah, well members of the American Legion yeah, World War, World War I \_\_\_\_\_.

And then the groups like the Grange and the, I can't think of the other names but they are, they are all listed in a book called *American's Betrayed* by Morton Grodzins. He is one of the, that's one of the seminal studies at this time. And he, he listed all the groups in there that pressured the government and the President to remove us from the West Coast. And so—

ET: So it wasn't that they truly believed that there was a danger and there was going to be a revolt and, and the Capitol was going down in California? It was simply because of their own selfish beliefs?

GW: I think so. And well, you have to jump ahead. Later on, in 1980, 1988 there was the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1988 and at that time they determined after a study that the Japanese were put in the past because of racial prejudice, political, the, the figure of the government and all, let's see. Well anyway, these were some of the things, the forces that they understood were responsible for our being incarcerated.

And the, so anyway, the, the, also the media played a role in this. At that time there was no television, but there was radio and the newspapers were very strong at that time. People like William Randolph Hearst of the *Hearst* Newspapers also the Bee newspapers were very influential like in the Central Valley there's the *Fresno Bee*'s,

*Sacramento Bee* and so forth. I don't know who owned them but they, they were also saying, oh, and they published very negative stories.

And what the, in the rational they tried to use to put us, to incarcerate us or remove us from the West Coast was that it was for our safety. To me that's sort of a false argument because what, what is our, then what is our police force you know, what is our security supposed to be doing, allowing people to attack people? I mean, that, that's what they said at that time.

And there are people who are still interestingly enough, there is a Congressman by the name of Coble from North Carolina, not to be, not too long ago. It was in the last six months came out, put his ass on a radio program that they should be the, incarcerate the Muslims and Arabs because of this you know the problems that we're having. And they said, "No" but because and he said that the reason why in World War II they incarcerated the Japanese is because of this was for their own safety. This was you know, foolish aside, foolish as argument for this.

But there was a lot of feeling, anti-, there was a man by, a very influential man by the name of Walter Lippmann who was a commentator and so forth. And he, he said that we've got to get rid of the Japanese. We've got to take them away from the West Coast and so forth.

And so, and there were people like, oh interestingly enough at that time, there was an Attorney General of California by the name of Earl Warren who later became the Chief Justice of the U.S. Supreme Court. He was one of those that, I must say at this point that Earl Warren later in a biography wrote, apologized for what he did at that time. I mean he said it was not a polite thing to do. But you know he was part of that group



## WAKIJI

that—there was a mayor of Los Angeles by the name of Fletcher Bowron, Mr. Bowron was one of those that said, “Oh yeah, we just round them up and get them out of here.”

You know, and so there was, there was a lot of pressure going on.

And what happened was, but interestingly enough there, the head of the FBI, Mr. Hoover, J. Edgar Hoover said that the Japanese were not a risk to our country at that time.

And there was, there was—

ET: Anybody would have said anything. That is completely opposite of what of his personality. He was against everyone.

GW: Exactly, exactly.

ET: So that’s amazing.

GW: But he did from the records that he said that it wasn’t necessary. But he was, they overrode him, his opinion. And it got to, there were people that advised the President at that time, Roosevelt and they told him that yes, let’s do this. And so then he, then President Roosevelt signed an executive order 9066, it was February 19, 1942. And this is the order that said, “Okay, we will remove all Japanese and, and Japanese-Americans living on the West Coast, that includes Washington, Oregon, California and just a small part of Arizona. And we’re going to remove all these people and bring them inland into camps and different places.

And so, so what they had to do they first, since after this order was issued then they began rounding us up and putting us into what the term was assembly centers. And they used fairgrounds. They used racetracks and mostly places like that, that had some standing facilities, and we were taken there.

## WAKIJI

For example, our family was in a group that went to Santa Anita which was located in Arcadia, California which was actually very close to Pasadena. So we went a very short trip to go to Santa Anita to Arcadia. But we were there from, we were told to go on, in May of 1942 and we were there until October of 1942.

Now the reason why they had these assembly centers was that, that the camps were, they were building in different places, in the most God awful places, in deserts and places that no one inhabited, Wyoming, Utah, Colorado, Idaho, two, two of them in Arkansas and two in Arizona and there were two in California. So one, one place in California is a place called Manzanar which was up near Bishop, just south of Bishop, California.

And so they were building these camps. Now Manzanar was being built also at that time so that there was a lot of people, they were earlier than us. There were people taken from a place called San Pedro. There was an area called Terminal Island where there was a large group of Japanese fisherman there. And they were among the first runners up. And the interesting thing with those folks, they were only given two to three days' notice that they would be going to this camp.

And so they had to sell their belongings or store them or do something with them. And most people were taken advantage of by unscrupulous people who came and said, "Oh, I'll buy your new car for—." I don't know at that time in 1943 maybe a car cost five hundred dollars. So I'm going to offer them fifty dollars or something or a new, brand new refrigerator offers five dollars or ten dollars or some ridiculous price.

## WAKIJI

And, and there was a story that I still remember hearing that one woman, a Japanese woman became so angry at this. She had these expensive dishes that she just broke the dishes all up rather than sell them or give them to anyone.

ET: Now how old were you when your family moved into to Santa Anita?

GW: Okay, when we left for the camp in Santa Anita at the racetrack I was thirteen years old at that time. I had not finished, quite finished eighth grade at Marshal Junior High School in Pasadena.

ET: That's what I was going to ask you was you were going to a public school?

GW: Oh yeah.

ET: And you were being, so you were being educated by the United States Government.

Now were your other, were other siblings, had they been also in public schools as well?

GW: Oh yeah. They went to, except for my oldest sister. As a young person, she was sent to Japan to be educated. And so, she lived with my grandmother, my maternal grandmother. And so she spent, she spent the whole time until she was probably a high school senior and returned back from Japan. But the rest of us were all educated in the school system in Pasadena.

ET: Now because you were born here, did they consider you then citizens?

GW: You mean when we, this business about incarcerating us?

ET: Uh-huh, I'm trying to create, yes, it's real confusing because did they incarcerate, they incarcerated citizens?

GW: Oh yes, in fact—

ET: You were considered a citizen? If you were born on American soil, soil you were considered a citizen?

## WAKIJI

GW: I was a citizen. But, but for the purposes of this exercise that we were put in camp. They gave us, what was the name they gave us? We were not aliens. That was our parents because they were not citizens but they were called aliens. But they had another term for us. It escapes me at this time. But we were, when we went, it somehow got around that we were citizens, so that they wanted to mask that yeah. But then, then they, there were a hundred and, they were abducting a hundred and twenty thousand Japanese-Americans that were taken from the West Coast and, and incarcerated.

ET: Now what happened to your family's business?

GW: Well, what happened, my father's nursery business, what happened was in the short time that we had to, we had to get rid of it so or find somebody to take care of it. And so we found a man by the name of Mr. Macluan, M-a-c-l-u-a-n, Macluan. And Mr. Macluan said, "okay, I'll take it over." We had a house there on the property, nursery property. And he said that we signed an agreement with him you know, that, that he would take over the nursery stock and everything and would pay us a certain amount of money.

Well, six months into our going into the camps we received word from him that he was no longer wanted to do it any longer. So he actually broke his contract. But we were, we were, there wasn't much we could do. We're sitting in a, in a camp in Arizona. And we're trying to you know, we're, we're, what are we going to do? We can't hire a lawyer. We had no money then, by then you know.

And so, we just, so what happened, when we came back afterwards, in July of 1945 my, one of my brother-in-law's and myself came early from camp before the rest of the family. We came back to the property in Pasadena and that's when we just, we learned that all the nursery stock is dead. I mean that's probably dead pretty soon

## WAKIJI

because it has to be watered at all times. Then the nursery portion, we a glass, two glass houses and then we had some area called \_\_\_\_\_ houses, it has \_\_\_\_\_ glass over it to shade the glass. And anything like that was all in disarray, I mean it was in shambles.

ET: Was the house a mess or it had been locked up?

GW: Well, the house, well we had, we had stuff stored in the basement in the cellar. But the house was, was just empty. I think he did lock the house, but that wasn't damaged. But, but no it was not, not a happy time. I mean, but see what, we had no, no recourse. What could we do? We, we complain to court no. I mean we just couldn't leave the camps anyway.

ET: Now did, did, was there a sense do you remember in the, in the Japanese-American community that something was going down? I mean did you kind of have a sense that this was going to happen, that, that, your fate had been so, sort of sealed once we had Pearl Harbor? Did you feel that, that sort of a premonition that something was going to happen? It was. It was going to be directed towards the community here in, in the United States particularly California?

GW: No, we really didn't.

ET: Did it just come as a surprise?

GW: Yeah, it was a surprise. We really did. We didn't expect to be taken away and put in, essentially we were jailed, jailed, jail birds. I mean we were incarcerated in the camps and different places. So after Santa Anita then we were, by then the camp was built up in the desert in Arizona. It was just about fifty miles south of Phoenix. It was on an Indian reservation. It took the government to go over Indian property, the Pima Indians had

## WAKIJI

lived there and they took over land there and then built our camps there, two camps there, out in the desert and that's where we were put.

ET: Now how did they transport you to the various places?

GW: By train. They used some very old trains that they had found somewhere and we were put in these trains and we were all the shades were drawn of course so that people couldn't see us or we couldn't see anybody. And then we had military guards. There was military police accompanying all the trains and so forth.

ET: Now I'm sure that while you were going through this experience you must have or your family must have talked to other people who were going through the similar experience. Did anybody have their property confiscated by the government or what did you do with the—what happened to the money that you had? Were you allowed to take any personal belongings with you?

GW: We were allowed to take only what we could carry which amounted to about two suitcases. And so, but as far as the money, now a lot of people were dependent, a lot of Japanese and Japanese-Americans had put their money in a Japanese, Japanese bank in Los Angeles or up and down the coast of San Francisco. There was a bank I recall called Sunitomo Bank. And what happened immediately is the government impounded the money so that no one could even get the money you know?

So, so the, and then rather situations varied for different families. There are some families that lost everything. There was, there was I mean, when they came back they had nothing. And now there are stories like that here of the Takatsuki family here in Oxnard who had a store. And what happened was they used to have some employees,

## WAKIJI

Mexican employees, and the Mexican family said, “We will take care of your property and keep it.” And so that’s what they did.

So when they came back they were set. But they were probably among the fortunate few. There were a few farmers who lost everything and they lost their equipment, they lost their property, they lost. And what happened was a lot of families they had stored their goods on, on \_\_\_\_\_ rather than some people went in, broke in there and stole things from them and, and so they lost everything you know. But everybody had a different story.

Now we didn’t lose everything fortunately. When we came back we lost the nursery, the stock and the, and the situation with the physical aspects of the nursery. But at least when we got back we had a house. We had to start over from scratch and that was a very difficult thing for most families.

Now when we came back see we at least had a place to go. Many Japanese-Americans were not, didn’t have a place to go so they ended up in places like, in Burbank they had a large trailer camp. But, but a lot of churches came back, churches opened up again where the Japanese had had used for services before. They opened them up again and they used them as like hostiles you know and they came back and they were able to stay there and work for, and then find jobs. And then once they started making some money then they went out and found a place to live, rent or whatever, and then they saved their money again and then—

ET: Reestablished?

GW: --yeah established again and buy a home.

## WAKIJI

ET: So now the government did not, when they brought you back. We were jumping ahead a little bit. But when allowed you out of the camps, they did not supply anyone with money or funds or did they even take you back to your house?

GW: They gave you. They gave you either a train ticket or a bus ticket to leave the camp to return plus twenty-five dollars per person. That's kind of interesting because I think that's what they give people that were incarcerated in jail. They give you twenty-five dollars to live in a home you know. But I think even they still do that today. I mean I'm not, not that I know anybody who's been in jail or something. It strikes me is that's what happened.

And, so everybody like I had two older brothers-in-law's they, they had businesses, they were involved in businesses. My brother, one brother-in-law used to run a produce market, in fact it was in Glendale. And it was, no he was in San Pedro at that time. But then my brother-in-law who is from San Diego, he and his father used to run a store where they sell Japanese food and so forth. And when they came back they had nothing so what they had to do was they started out—and this is why so many Japanese became gardeners. Gardening was, you know, it is a person who takes care of your yard you know? He cuts your lawn. He trims your bushes and so forth. And this, you could do this very easily because you could buy, find a cheap car someplace and then you buy, then you get a lawnmower and some equipment and that's how you started. And that's how these people start from scratch again.

And so, I must give credit to these people, the older ones that came back. And my father did the same thing. He was up in his age then. Is it going like what you want?



## WAKIJI

ET: Perfect. So now your, so let's talk a little about, before we, before we deal with coming back, let's talk a little bit about Manzanar. Now Santa Anita they had you all, did they have, how did they separate the families out? Did you have any sort of privacy at all? Did you have cots? Did they give you food?

GW: Oh yes, okay.

ET: How was that?

GW: Well, in the camps now, Santa Anita was an unusual place. Now they had many people had to live in the horse stables. These were places where the race horses were kept. And so you can imagine what it smelled like because isn't that, you can clean up these places but there's still the smell of horse manure was there.

Fortunately for us, we were among those that lived in the temporary erected barracks. They made wood barracks and each barrack had maybe, they divided it up into four, plus four units. And family, a family would be in one unit. So there would be maybe four families in one barrack. And sometimes they, even depending on the size of the family, generally they tried to give you four people in a unit.

But now, and then what happens is we slept on, if I recall we had Army cots. I mean these, these metal with, well some people had, we, I remember I think we had the regular mattresses that they issue you know for the military or whatever. But some people in some certain situations, they were told, they were given large white sacks and told to go out and fill them with straw to make their own mattresses. And this happened in places like Heart Mountain and so forth in Wyoming and different places. I think it could have happened in Arizona also when we went there.

WAKIJI

But this was—and then oh, getting back to the food. Now there's no facilities in the barracks. It's, it's just a place to sleep. And so, to go to the bathroom you have to go to a toilet you know, they're erected. There's a building erected.

ET: An outhouse?

GW: Well, it was a little better than an outhouse maybe you know. They had running water and so forth.

ET: Okay, and shower facilities?

GW: Yeah, they had shower facilities too. But these are very crude.

ET: Primitive?

GW: Yeah, primitive right, a good way to put it. And, and then what we had to do to go to eat our three meals. They had, they put, developed mess halls in different parts of the camp. And depending on where you lived you're assigned and they called them by different colors. They called it the yellow mess, the blue mess, the red mess and so forth. And I remember we were assigned to go to the blue mess. And so, yeah if I recall it was in the, it was built into the stands of the race course at Santa Anita. In other words, they just took over part of the stands and made it part of the kitchen there. And so that's where our, our mess hall was. That's where we ate our meals.

And, and it was not easy because people we, there's nothing to do in the camps so you just basically you're waiting in line all the time for meals you know. So (laughs)—

ET: How long was a normal wait?

GW: For a meal? It could, probably depending on, depending on where you were in the line, but it could depend on anywhere from fifteen minutes to an hour probably so.

## WAKIJI

ET: Now your father and your mother and you and all of your siblings went except for your sister in Japan?

GW: Oh, she was back here.

ET: Okay, she came back okay.

GW: So she, she was already married and had two children.

ET: Did they all come as well?

GW: Oh yeah.

ET: So it was everyone?

GW: Yeah.

ET: Now were you all able to, to stay together?

GW: Except my sister-in-law, my sister, older sister's husband and her father, her father-in-law. They were among the group that was the group that was picked up early by the FBI. There was a group of probably about two thousand.

ET: Oh by the FBI?

GW: FBI.

ET: Over Hoover's objections?

GW: Oh yeah, yeah, but see, they, the government had thought that these people might be somebody who had, would do some, might do some harm for the government, I guess our government.

ET: Maybe spy?

GW: Yeah right, or do something, and because of their allegiance. The only thing I can think of, what they did was they took people in that group that were martial arts instructors. I used to, when I was a kid I used to study something called Kendo. It's with fencing with

## WAKIJI

wooden, wooden pole. And our, my instructor Mr. Hamasaki was taken away in that first group too. But when the war broke out, the FBI came to homes, they had the names already and people like my brother-in-law. My brother-in-law and his father, they ran the store, the Japanese food store. So they naturally they had an association with Japan because they had to get their products from Japan okay?

And so they, they were immediately rounded up and then they ended up, my brother-in-law ended up in a detention center in, right near Pasadena. It was near La Pinata. And he was held there for just a short time. And then a lot of them, and then from there they were sent to Montana to, to, now these were different kinds of camps. They were operated by the Justice Department see, so they were considered to be not only people like my brother-in-law who had some association with Japan too. And then there were people who were considered community leaders, also Buddhist ministers, also there were Japanese language instructors who were also included in this group of people who were rounded up. They were mostly men. But there were only about two-thousands of them and they were taken away.

ET: Out of all of California?

GW: Yeah, out of the whole group of a hundred and twenty thousand. There may have been a few from Washington, a few from Oregon. But, but and they were, they were considered suspect. But the, the, it's really kind of fascinating in that they found out later that there was no known case of sabotage or espionage performed by any Japanese or Japanese-American so. It was a, so anyway, they, they, but they were released later. My brother-in-law and his father were released later and they came to Arizona to join us, join my, my—

WAKIJI

ET: Really?

GW: --my yeah, join my sister, her two kids and she was with her mother-in-law. Then, then, in the camp also I had another older sister who was married and had two kids. And so they were, we all were able to stay in the same barrack in a different unit. And then my older brother was there and he had one child, and I think one child was born in the camp there.

ET: Now Arizona gets pretty hot. I can imagine that that camp could not have possibly been a paradise?

GW: No.

ET: Tell me a little bit about the camp, the simple structure?

GW: Well, these were wooden barracks of course and, and interestingly enough they were built by, I later learned by Del Webb, this is how Mr. Webb became very wealthy. He got a government contract to build this camp out in the desert. Later he, he had places in Las Vegas and he became part owner of the New York Yankee baseball team. But anyway, Mr. Del Webb was the one who built our camp. And when they built these camps they used a lot of unseasoned wood.

And so what happened was when the wood, wood shrinks as it dries. And when it's, especially when it's wet wood you know when it's unseasoned wood. It's, it's wet so in the desert it's hot, so it starts drying. And what happens, the floor would become, would it would become spaces between the boards. And so what happened, we, a dust was a problem in the camp.

ET: Separate?

## WAKIJI

GW: Yeah, dust storms were constant there. And then we also, during, during the summer months it was just intolerable. It was, the weather, the temperatures got up sometimes from what I remember a hundred and twenty degrees there. And this is, this is hot. And so you can't go out. And so, but one of the questions when I go out and speak to groups, high school groups and, and college group kids and I tell them about my experience. And they, they always want to know, "Did some people try to escape?" And I try to tell them you know when you're out in the desert, there's not too many places you can go. I mean even if you wanted to go. I mean you know if you don't have water or equipment or whatever, you're not going to live very long. So there were not too many cases of people even trying. I'm sure there were a few cases you know of, of thousands of people that were in these camps.

But, but anyway, we were in Arizona. We were sent to Gila. It was called. The camp was called the Gila River Relocation Center and that's a euphemism for I say concentration camp and that's what it was because we had barbed wire fences all around and then we had guard towers spaced periodically and there were soldiers there watching us all the time, and search, we had search lights going most of the time too you know to keep track of us. And where are we going to, where were we going to go you know? But they were there to watch, watch over us.

And so we were there from, I was there from October of 1942 until July of 1945, so I, my time spent in camps including Santa Anita was over three years.

ET: Did they have activities for the children?

GW: Oh yeah, we, we even had schools.

ET: Okay—

## WAKIJI

GW: They even developed. I was, see I was in the eighth grade when I left. So when I got to the camp I would have been, I became a freshman in the ninth grade, tenth grade and eleventh. I went three years in the camp, camp schools. Now the schools were very substandard. I mean the facility. We had no, we, we seldom had books. I mean the books that we had were old books that somebody scrounged up some place.

The teachers, they're not very good. Some of the teachers were the evacuees, that's the term for people like us that were put in, evacuated to these camps. They were people, a few people, some who had graduated college and they were pressed into becoming teachers, so they really had no good experience as being teachers. But they, they did their best. And then what happened, they also recruited Caucasian teachers from outside and these were people unfortunately most of them were people that probably couldn't make it outside in the regular system, so but they came and they did their best. There were some exceptional good ones. But on average the education we got was I would say substandard.

And so it put us at a very disadvantage. Now there were young people, the government to its credit tried to, there were a few thousand that were allowed to leave of college age and then go back East or to the Midwest and go to college and finish college. But it, it's interesting that not all colleges and universities would accept us. Some, some major universities said, "Oh no, we don't want any Japs coming to our school." You know we're the enemy kind of thing which, which is you know totally fallacious but that's, that's what they thought.

And but there were good schools that some of them accepted, accepted these young people and they went, and went on and went to college. Now one of my sisters,

## WAKIJI

the youngest sister, my younger sister, but she's older than I am, but she was a few years older. She, she was able to leave the camp after about a year. What happens is they gave these people, if you had an opportunity for a job, my sister went to New York City and to this day she still lives there. But she first she went there and worked for a family taking care of kids. The term they used was school \_\_\_\_\_. You, by allowing you to go to school you, you, you provide for the housing and then food and shelter, you have to perform some duties. You likely take care of the kids, you cook, you do laundry or whatever. Many of the people went out and that's what they do.

So my sister did that for a while and then she later finished her college education in New York at Hunter College. And then, then she was able to get a job working for a health center. And then later she worked for a bank and it's amazing. She's a, how old is she? She's eighty-four years old now and still working as the Vice-President of a bank at Amalgamated Bank in New York.

ET: Oh my, goodness!

GW: Yeah.

ET: Oh my, goodness!

GW: Yeah, but she's unusual.

ET: Now where did the, since you're out in the middle of nowhere. Where did the other teachers that they brought out, where did they stay? Where, where did the guards live? Where did all the people that were watching you?

GW: Oh okay, they had sections, near the camp or in the camp, but not with us. You know they were isolated from us. They had facilities built for them too, a lot better than what we had. For example, the teachers that came would be given places to stay and work.



## WAKIJI

But it was not fancy but it was a lot better than what we had. They had toilets in their own, in their own building. Now what, we had, another thing we should remember is that when we lived in these barracks we had to leave, if you had to go to the bathroom or take a shower or go in and use the toilet, you had to leave your building and go to the center of the block. We lived in areas called blocks. And in each block had all these buildings, okay, barracks we called it. And then there were, there were something like fourteen barracks. Then there was a mess hall here at the end like where we had our meals. And then we had here a washroom, a laundry room and we had, there was some, yeah a room for ironing or whatever, whatever we would do with ironing at that time. But then they had a women's toilet and showers in the middle of this.

So we used to live over here at the end here, so if I had to go to the bathroom I had to go out of the building, I'd walk this way and then I'd go to the entrance and the toilets were here you know or whatever.

ET: Did they segregate out the women and the men?

GW: You mean in the living quarters?

ET: Uh-huh.

GW: No, just in the toilets there was a shower.

ET: Now what if you were a single person and you didn't have a family or was that unusual, was that an unusual situation?

GW: Well—

ET: How did they lump you in?

## WAKJI

GW: Okay, what they did was, we had some people like that in that situation. In the next barrack there were, they would put, put four, maybe four single men together and they would, they would bunk together and live together.

ET: Now what did they do with your parents and people like your parents or even say older than that as far as daily activities? Did they, did they give them any chores or just simply have them look after their own families? Or was it?

GW: Well really, really what, there were certain jobs became available in the camp. Now my two, two of my older sisters, they worked at the mess hall as waitresses. My father had a job. He took care of the men's toilet here, you know, somebody had to clean it. So that was his job. And for doing this labor, that was the lowest paying job you would get, twelve dollars a month because that's considered unskilled or whatever.

If were, then the next one you got, I think the doctor, if you were a doctor and worked at the hospital for example, you got nineteen dollars a month. And then there was an intermediate pay scale too.

ET: So in other words, they took what you call professionals as well and interned them. So it didn't have to do with business or skill or education, everybody went?

GW: Everybody, we were all equal in the camp. I mean, so we all, we had people who were you know business people living with us. And—

ET: Like you said professionals, doctors?

GW: --right, right and so, and a few lawyers were around. But these, these were people that we, this, with people everything was equal at that time. No one was better than so, I mean how do you? How can you be better than somebody else when you have the same kind of living quarters? I mean, how, in our society how you show your wealth is by

WAKIJI

having a bigger house, bigger property, bigger car, whatever. But you don't have cars, you don't—

ET: Everybody is reduced to the same.

GW: Right.

ET: Now did you, were you kept apprised of the situation with the war? Did you have any news services to come? Did anybody talk to you about what's happening?

GW: No, we, we, we could, there was a paper that we used, were able to get. It was called the *Pacific Citizen*. And this was published and they moved it to Salt Lake City. And it was a Japanese, it was for the Japanese-American Citizens League. And they used to publish that and they'd send it to the camp and try to give us news that was going on as far as the war. And it talked about the Japanese-Americans that served in the military and so forth.

But we, we weren't allowed to, I don't recall seeing outside newspapers or getting, even getting the Phoenix paper or whatever. So, and we, later on maybe a few people were able to get radios. But—

ET: Well, you earned money or your parents could earn money. What could they do with that money?

GW: Well, we, we, we, they had a, a, like a store in the camp. It was called a co-op and they sold things there. They sold candy, a few things, not a lot. Now—

ET: Clothing?

GW: Well, clothing we, most of the clothing people got from the catalogs, Sears and Montgomery Ward catalogs. Now we were given, the government gave us while we were in the camp, each of us three dollars a month clothing allowance. So what

WAKIJI

happened is if, if somebody needed something they pool the money and somebody this month could buy something and then—

ET: What would three dollars get you?

GW: Not very much. I can't think of too many things that—

ET: Even then?

GW: Yeah, yeah.

ET: Now do the commissary or the mess hall, the food worked pretty much the same as it did at Santa Anita? Did you have to stand in line for food or was it a little bit more open?

GW: Well, it was a little more organized because there were less people. See people were not segregated into blocks.

ET: Okay, so-

GW: So each block had maybe two, a little over, around two hundred people. And so, you, and then people, they, they opt their own rhythm. Some people went early and some people went later and so they weren't, but sometimes you could wait a little longer yeah, five or ten minutes or something.

ET: Were you allowed to, what's the word I'm looking for, join or meet other people that weren't in your particular area in another block or in another community?

GW: Oh yeah.

ET: You were able to co-mingle?

GW: Yeah, yeah, in fact, within the confines of the camp, inside the barbed wire we could go anywhere in the compound. And so you could go visit friends in another part of the camp or whatever. Then they had some entertainment. We used to see old movies. Now in the desert where we were they built, we used to call it the amphitheater. It was on the side of

## WAKIJI

a hill. And what they did was on Saturday nights they had a stage there and they had a screen and we would all go and take blankets and things and sit on the side, side of the mountain, small mountain there and, and view movies and things. That was part of the entertainment.

We also, not that we're crazy. We played a lot of sports in camp because we, we made ball diamonds, baseball fields, softball fields. Most every block had a basketball court. And so we played basketball on a dirt court of course. But—

ET: You talking this way, it makes me realize just how large in acreage this camp must have been.

GW: Oh yeah.

ET: In order to have—

GW: You remember, you remember there's a, in our camp there must have been maybe ten thousand people in Arizona. There were two camps there. One was Camp One which was Canal Camp, camp two was Butte Camp and our camp Butte Camp, camp two was much larger. And it probably had about ten thousand people. And camp one had about three thousand people.

And so, you know it—

ET: So you kept yourself occupied with sports?

GW: Yeah, yeah, as a young person yeah.

ET: As a young, did they, did any of the, of the people, the guards or any of the other workers who were there to look after you, did they ever talk to you or talk to you about plans or what was happening? Were they generally in a good mood or positive as opposed to mean people?

## WAKIJI

GW: Well we, we had very little contact with. I mean we might have, you might have limited contact if there was, if you had a teacher you know? But I don't recall have too much conversation with anybody. So especially with the military. They wouldn't even talk to you, you know so.

ET: Now, when you, when you were here for almost for three years. What happened when you found out that, or your parents found out and everybody found out that you could go home? How did that occur? Did they, did somebody come up and make a speech or how, how did that get known that they could go home?

GW: Well—

ET: What was the reaction?

GW: Yeah, well let's say this. There was some people looked forward to it. Some people who found, they had difficulties or had, had no place to return to. They weren't interested in leaving yet, but you know. And so there were some people that stayed to the very end until the government said, "You've got to leave." You know, and so it was that kind of situation.

So it varied according to families and about how they treated us news now. How did we get the news now? What happened was each block had, they had a person who was sort of the administrative leader. He was called the block manager. And he, he's the one that, that you know, the camp authorities would deal with the block managers. In other words, they would attend meetings and get the information then they'd bring it back to us. So that's how they communicated.

But in a camp situation where everybody confined, news got around very quickly. I mean so if somebody heard that they were going to be releasing us, that news came very

## WAKIJI

fast. I mean I don't know what, what, what the term would be. But I know later on when I worked in the South Pacific they used to call it the Coconut wireless (laughs). Maybe we would probably call it was bamboo wireless (laughs).

ET: Now what, what did your parents think about all of this? Did you ever, I mean did they ever, did you hear them talking about their situation and, and their feelings on it and, and what they, what they were going through emotionally?

GW: Now, I think for most of us, see our parents as I say, early on when I said this, they didn't speak much English. So it was, it was a difficult thing for them to communicate with us who had very little knowledge of Japanese although before I went to the camp I had attended a Japanese school as a youngster. I went to a certain grade. I went, well I went to the time that we left for the camp. And so I had a basic working knowledge of Japanese speaking. But not much, you don't have a vocabulary. You don't—

ET: Now where did you learn and your siblings learn to speak English so well if your parents only spoke primarily Japanese?

GW: We went to American school.

ET: My goodness you were smart.

GW: Well we went, when I was growing up I went to an elementary school in Pasadena called Jefferson Elementary School. And that's where I learned my English. And then when I finished there I went to junior high school and then I learned more stuff there.

ET: So it's kind of hard. Did you ever feel? Now did you speak Japanese at home with your parents?

GW: Yeah, a little, a little you know?

WAKIJI

ET: Did you ever feel that was going to be a barrier or it kind of would have been nice if, if you were able to—

GW: Oh yeah, yeah, it was always a barrier. I mean let's say for example that something went on at the school and you know how parents come for different events? Well, I felt kind of almost ashamed to have them come because they couldn't communicate well. And so, that, that, it, it, no we were in a sense not, not, not deprived but we were really deficient in a lot of things. And, so it made things difficult later on in life you know as you go on and you go to college and so forth.

ET: Did you, now I know there's a point in time where the United States would take a lot of Native American children and put them into schools in Phoenix so to take away from their own, their own members and require them only to speak English. Did you find that problem when you were attending school? Was there pressure for you to only speak English?

GW: No, no.

ET: Okay.

GW: No.

ET: Okay, so now, so it was kind of hard for you then to, well I would see it was a distressing time. Did your parents seem? Were they, were they the kind of people that just coped?

GW: Yeah.

ET: And that was just what they did and they would move on?

GW: You just, you just made the best of the situation. The Japanese are very philosophical that way. They have a word that describes this, this situation. It's called Shikata ga nai. I mean really you can't do anything about it. So what, you just make the best of it kind of



## WAKIJI

situation. So they, they just coped as best they could. And you know I, I wish I could have spoken to them or them or they communicate with me. But since we had that barrier in a sense, I didn't. And this is true for most people like myself growing up in America you know is that when you have immigrant parents who are not fluent in a language then you, you learn to cope otherwise you know? You go to school and you practice your English. Then, then other times you have to use your Japanese as best you can to communicate with them.

ET: Then you heard when the community heard that the war was over. I'm assuming when the war was over that was when you were released?

GW: Well, the war hadn't officially ended I don't think when, when they started releasing people. But we always knew that we'd go back to California because that's where home is, that's where we had a place. And so, it was just the timing for us, our family. Now there were other people who had lost everything and they had no home to come back to. Well, they, they, a lot of people were very reluctant to leave the camps because you know where are they going to go?

So you come back and you meet people who are not too happy to have you there and so, so I can recall coming back to Pasadena for my senior high school year. And what we did, there was a bunch of us that went to Pasadena High School and what we did is we kind of segregated ourselves because you know we didn't know how the others were going to treat us or whatever.

ET: So now you and your friends who had been in the camps segregated yourself from your former high school mates?

WAKIJI

GW: Right, right, because well my friends that I had gone through junior high school with you know, well you know, you lose a lot—

ET: Uncomfortable?

GW: Huh?

ET: Uncomfortable?

GW: Yeah, yeah we didn't know how they were going to treat us or how they felt about us or whatever. So it took a lot of adjustment. There was an adjustment period. I remember for at least a year or so all we did is we would hang together you know. There were a number of us so that we had our own little group, but we were all the, the people had left the camps and returned and so.

ET: How do the people treat you when you went back to school?

GW: Well, it was kind of, they didn't treat us badly, but they didn't treat us wrongly either. It was kind of a—

ET: They didn't, didn't know what to make of you?

GW: Yeah probably, they, they didn't know you know what we were about you know.

Although we had some good friends that I don't recall really getting back together with any of the people I went to junior high school with until, which is interesting up until I went much later, I guess they had a Fiftieth Anniversary or something at this junior high school that I was supposed to have attended. Oh no, actually it was a Fifty-Fifth Anniversary of my eighth grade class I went to. And they held it in a place called Monrovia which was not near the camp. And so when I got there they asked me to speak and I said, "You know, it's really interesting that I'm only a few miles away from the camp but I, I," Santa Anita was just right down the road a few miles. And with, with I

WAKIJI

went to this camp in Santa Anita and that's where we parted company and I hadn't seen you folks for so many years. Now it's over fifty years.

ET: Yeah, wow. Now how did the community treat your family coming back in? Was there just a sense of adjustment or was there a little hostility or was everybody kind of sheepish or—

GW: I'll, I'll say this for the people of Pasadena. There, there are several people and, for most, for the most part I think they, they, there was no hostile people there. But they didn't manifest it and try to hurt us you know? Like in some cases like in Central California there, there are people that came by to report the Japanese had returned to their farm home and they would shoot at them. The night riders would come by with their guns and fire at them you know and try and kill them.

So I mean, so we were fortunate in that respect that we were among civil people in Pasadena. So I, I attribute that to the kind of people that live there. So—

ET: Now your father came back and, well you actually mentioned that you and your brother came back early?

GW: Brother-in-law.

ET: Brother-in-law came back early. Now what did you do? You came home and—

GW: Well, well, we had to clean up the house. In other words, and try and make it livable again so that when the family came a few months later, I think they were another three months or so after us. So they came. We left in July, August, September, so they might have returned in October or so, a few months later. So by then, so by then my brother-in-law had a car, he had an old. He picked up an old Chevrolet some place and then he

## WAKIJI

started to work again as a gardener. And so he made a little money. And so we were able to get started again.

And then my father came back and after a little while we started working on the nursery again you know.

ET: And was he able to build that up?

GW: Yeah again, to a certain point. Then he was getting too old later, so my, I had an older brother who was a fisherman, commercial fisherman who lived on these fishing boats. So but then the fishing business went bad. So he, he left that and in the fifties after we left the camp came back and then he took over the commercial business for my father.

ET: So now you came back, went to high school, graduated high school.

GW: Right.

ET: Then what happened? When was this when you graduated?

GW: I graduated high school in 1946, Pasadena High School. And then what I did was, well a bunch of us then continued on for our education. We went to Pasadena City College and which is a community college there. And I, I went there and what they call it, an Associate of Arts Degree and then, my plan was to go to you know continue again.

But what happened was in 1950 then the Korean War broke out. And then I was draft age so I got drafted. And so I was up going to \_\_\_\_\_ near Monterey, California for my basic training. And then after about a year there I was shipped overseas to Korea, the war was going on so.

ET: And what was your specialty in Korea?

GW: Well I was in the infantry. I was assigned, when I first got there I was assigned to the, the 1st Calvary Division, 5th Infantry, 5th Calvary Regiment of the 1st Calvary Division.

## WAKIJI

And then what happened was a few months later they were replaced by the 45<sup>th</sup> Division which was the Oklahoma National Guard which had been in Northern Japan. And they just kind of switched positions. And so since I had not spent enough time there they just transferred me to the 45<sup>th</sup> Division of the Oklahoma National Guard Unit and I served with them the rest of my time there.

ET: Now and it was here that you were able to go to Japan and visit your grandma?

GW: Yeah, during that time, we were in Korea for a while. They gave us what they call R and R, Rest and Recuperation so they shipped us off and we could take a flight to Japan and but it is five days. And so I would leave, I, I got to Osaka and then I had to take a train. And in those days the trains weren't so fast. It took me about I think about eight hours to get to where my grandmother lived and my cousins and so, and uncles and aunts. So I spent a few days with them. I think I even got to Tokyo at that time during the last couple days and then I had to go back to Korea again.

It's, it's similar to what happened in Vietnam or whatever. In fact, I was just reading about in the paper that during this war that's going on now, the war's over but it's still going on. The people in Iraq there, they're shipping them, giving them leaves to either go to Germany or even come home if they want to pay their way back. But, but see they are allowed to go to Germany\_\_\_\_\_and they set up some sort of rest, rest area for them and then they can go to\_\_\_\_\_cities or whatever and get some good food or whatever.

ET: Have some fun?

GW: Right.

ET: Now so you were in Korea how long? You were actually in Korea, South Korea?

WAKIJI

GW: Oh yeah, well you know the last year I was both the 38th Parallel with my unit. We were above the, we were in an area called Chorwoan, C-h-o-r-w-o-a-n and we were above the 38<sup>th</sup> Parallel.

ET: So you saw some heavy duty fighting then?

GW: Well I, we saw, we were always in a situation fighting area and so we didn't see a lot, but we did see some action around there so.

ET: And so now how long were you in Korea or \_\_\_\_\_?

GW: Well, I served, see when you're overseas and in a combat zone, you get points for each one, if you're up front you get four points a month. And so you add these points up. I was there, I think I had to get thirty-six points to return home. And so I was there nine months and all the time I was in the front area so, I get. In the nine months I was able to return home. So, so it was more than half, but a little less than a year I was there. Then I came back. And then, what did I do? Then I--

ET: Came back to California?

GW: Yeah, came back to Pasadena.

ET: And you received an honorable discharge?

GW: Yes.

ET: What was your rank?

GW: I ended up with corporal which is not too good. You know, but so then I, then I worked for a while. And then my intention was to go back to college and enrolled at UCLA.

ET: And when was this?

GW: This was in 1953. I got my degree in '57.

ET: And what was your major?

WAKIJI

GW: I was. I was in a field called Pre-Social Welfare. It was, my, my idea was to become possibly a social worker. But after I got into my study, then I saw the people that were doing the social work and I said, "I don't think I want to do social work." (Laughs) so I changed. So later I changed my, I went back to school again. I went back to Cal State Los Angeles and then got a, in three I got another Bachelor's Degree in Journalism.

ET: And now where did that take you?

GW: Well, that took me, after I finished my degree I was looking for work in public relations. And so, what I did was, well I was working while I was going to school. I worked for the airlines. I worked for TWA which is now defunct, no longer exists. And I worked for TWA.

ET: What did you do?

GW: I was a, well I did many things. I was, basically I was a reservations sales agent. When the people call in and you know make their reservations and plan their itineraries and so forth. And I worked for TWA in Los Angeles from, for about three years I guess. And then my plan was to go to New York and then try to get into, involved with TWA in public relations in New York.

So I did get, I did get an interview with the vice-president of TWA Public Relations with a man by the name of Gordon Gilmore. But in those days, we don't have the strict rules about discrimination. Now when I went to see Mr. Gilmore he said, "Well George." He said, "I think you didn't attend the right school and you're not the right." He didn't say the right color. But I wasn't Irish, see all the people I noticed.

ET: Notre Dame?

## WAKIJI

GW: No, no Boston College, so you had to be from Boston College and so forth and be Irish and all that. And so, I, I gave that up. And I left shortly thereafter I worked, I worked in sales training in New York too at the airport at Kennedy Airport for TWA. Then a friend of mine who lived in Chicago had some businesses. So he asked me if I would like to come to Chicago and work in public relations work. And I said, "Why not." So I went there and got started with that. And then I worked \_\_\_\_\_ group for a while.

And then in 1952, no 1950, I was in, when I was in Wash, New York, I was, I was there until '63 and then in '63 I went to Chicago and I worked, sixty, it gets a little fuzzy here. But I, I, I was there. I worked in public relations for a while.

And then, then I worked for a job working for the government. A friend of mine was a recruiter for the government. So he, he said there was an opportunity to work in Chicago. So I worked for an agency called Action which was the federal volunteer agency. It had the Vista, Volunteering service to America, the Foster Grandparent Program, RSVP and so I was a regional, became a regional public information officer. So my job was to cover six Midwestern states. I covered Michigan, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Ohio and Indiana which is a big, big area.

ET: You ended up becoming a social worker after all.

GW: (Laughs)

ET: In a way. Now when did you meet your wife?

GW: In Chicago.

ET: Okay, and when did you? When did you marry?

GW: Oh, if I go back further. This is the wife that I mentioned, New York I got married.

ET: Okay.



WAKIJI

GW: And then I had a child. Then we moved to Chicago and then we got a divorce there. And then shortly thereafter I met my current wife.

ET: Your current wife?

GW: Yeah.

ET: And so now you're in Chicago. Now how long were you with the government?

GW: Let's see. I joined in 1960, I joined the government in 1972. And I, and then in 1975 an opportunity came for me to, a promotion, so I applied for a job in Washington D.C. for the same agency. And my boss later told me that I had been one of a hundred and twenty-five applicants for this job. It was like the press officer for this agency. So I, I lucked out.

But the good thing was that I, when I was in Chicago I worked in contact with, with my boss, my later boss in Washington. So he knew me. And he said that the other candidate that he was considering was man who was the, he said he had a lot of pressure for, pressure from, he was the Speaker of the House. Anyway, it was his nephew. And so he said, that he knew since he knew me that he chose me and I went to Washington. Then I worked in Washington from 1975 and I was there until the year 2000.

ET: Now did you and your current wife have any children?

GW: No.

ET: But I didn't ask you. How did you meet her?

GW: Oh, well I ended up meeting her in a Japanese language course in Chicago so. But I did have, I have a daughter from my first marriage who is works in Detroit. And she's a sports reporter which is kind of unusual for a woman.

ET: For a television?

WAKIJI

GW: No, she's a writer. She covers—

ET: Wow!

GW: --all the you know the Detroit teams. She works—

ET: Good for her.

GW: --the Red Wings, the Lions, the Pistons.

ET: Tigers yeah. Now, so now you were in Washington D.C. up until 2000?

GW: Yeah.

ET: And then you retired?

GW: Yes, and then I came here.

ET: Now what brought you back to California? It's funny how you come back around?

GW: Yeah, well I, we decided. We knew we would come west because you know, weather conditions are a lot different back there. In the wintertime you get snow. And you get tired of shoveling snow. So, during, and putting up with these climatic changes all the time.

So then I came out here early and, while we were living there. I came out here and did my tour. I did a search here. I went. I, I knew I wouldn't want to live in Pasadena because Pasadena is too hot. And I came out here and I had a friend in Oxnard that I had met in the camp. We were in the same class in camp. And so, I, I got reacquainted with him and then he said, I asked him, "Show me around, tell me about this area." And he showed me Camarillo and, and he explained how the weather is here. You know in the afternoon you get the winds from the ocean and all that, and they were cooling winds. So I said, "Gee, that's pretty good."

WAKIJI

And I also looked at San Luis Obispo. San Luis Obispo is a little louder, slower thing you know. It's kind of country. It's country here too, but it's—

ET: Not so much. We're so close to LA.

GW: Right, and then I looked at Orange County. And then I looked at all the freeways and I said, "Oh no, I don't want to get involved in that." And so, and I talked to one of my friends who lives in Santa Barbara and I said, "What about the freeways there?" And he said, "Well." He said, three years ago, five years ago he said, "Well, it's not as bad as you know in LA, but in ten or fifteen years it's going to get to be like that. It's getting to be like that but it's still you know it's still manageable yet."

ET: You still had ten years, still think about five more years.

GW: Yeah.

ET: Now one thing I didn't ask you, I just thought about this. In your last position, what exactly were your duties?

GW: What, in working where?

ET: When you were working in Washington D.C.?

GW: Oh, I was a public information officer.

ET: Well what did that entitle?

GW: Oh well, dealing with the media.

ET: Okay.

GW: So when people, reporters call and they want to talk to someone or get information about a program. See I must tell you that also when I was in Washington, I worked with the Peace Corps too. And I went overseas and I worked in the South Pacific for three years as a, as a country director for Peace Corps.

WAKIJI

ET: What countries did you deal with?

GW: I served in a country called Tonga, it's a Polynesian country. And so that was interesting, the three years we were there.

ET: You and your wife?

GW: Yeah.

ET: Wow!

GW: And then we came back and I worked for the Peace Corps for a little while longer. Just, we came back in 1990, that was a time when. Yeah, you don't work forever for the Peace Corps. You just work a certain time. And so my time was just about up. So I had to leave. And then I looked for a job. And that was a time when there was, was a, it

ET: Recession?

GW: Yeah, recession and so anyway I, I lived for a year on severance pay and then unemployment for a while. And then I found a job working for the Department of Labor in public information again. And I worked for them for about three years. And then I got another job. I was asked to join this a foundation in Washington D.C. to help build a memorial for Japanese-Americans. And so I worked there two years. And then I left and then I came out here.

ET: Now is the memorial up now that they have created?

GW: Yeah, it's been created. My successor is going to finish the job.

ET: That's quite an honor that you had a part in this?

GW: Oh yeah, yeah.

ET: How impressive. Now, so now you moved, moved to California. Now tell me a little bit about the JACL?

## WAKIJI

GW: Okay, the Japanese American Citizens League is the oldest actually Asian American Civil Rights Organization. And they, they've been around since 1929. And what they do, they have chapters all over the country, a little over a hundred chapters in different cities. And they have chapters all over this area. But we are the chapter for Ventura County. And we, are members are from all the cities of Simi Valley, Thousand Oaks, Oxnard, Ventura County, \_\_\_\_\_. And so what we do, we try to, we support the national organization which is based in San Francisco.

But we, we run our own program here. So we do, we try to get involved with the community like we got involved with \_\_\_\_\_. And try to do things that interest our, the people who are our members. See some groups who their chapters like in Honolulu and in Washington D.C. or maybe Chicago. They get more involved in politics. We tend not to do that because the interest of our membership is a little different. Where they are more, that's not their primary—

ET: Community oriented maybe?

GW: Yeah, yeah, right. They are more interested in community kind of things.

ET: And, and—

GW: Local community.

ET: --and the local community, not just the Japanese-American community?

GW: No, no well, well got for example, let's just on last Sunday we had a Cultural Festival at Camarillo, the Community Center. And it was, it's called the Japanese Cultural Culture Day. And it was opened to the community. So we want to let other Americans know about our, our heritage. And so we expose them to Japanese entertainment, Japanese

WAKIJI

dancing, Martial Arts, music and so forth and also food available for purchase and so forth.

ET: So I would imagine you had a big turnout?

GW: Yeah, it was not, we had a fairly size lot and we estimated it to be four to five hundred.

Last year we had a big one. We had over seven hundred.

ET: Maybe we should have, we should publish it next year more on campus?

GW: Yeah, yeah.

ET: Because I don't remember seeing anything about it on campus.

GW: Okay, next year we'll.

ET: We need to really promote that especially when we get freshman on campus because they need things to do. So now, what do you do now during your days?

GW: My days? Sometimes—

ET: That's such a big\_\_\_\_\_.

GW: I, I, I also do some part-time work. I work for Pepperdine Law School. I'm the proctor.

When they give, have their finals. I have two weeks of final, usually just before summer and in December. So, I, I go to Malibu and give kids their final exams. I'm one of the small group, corps of people that do that.

ET: That will keep you busy for a little while right?

GW: Yeah, it's, Pepperdine is you know it's thirty-four miles from here. But-uh—

ET: The location is great.

GW: Yeah, it's, I do that. And I used to do, I don't do it anymore. But I used to do some writing for a Japanese-American newspaper. And then, then I do other things. I get involved with the JAACL activities. I go to speaking engagements. And next, in fact next

## WAKIJI

Tuesday I will go to Thousand Oaks High School and speak to two history classes. And in November, the 11<sup>th</sup> or 13<sup>th</sup>, I have to decide which day. I'm going to Cal Lutheran University to speak to some students there.

ET: Now how do these people know to contact you?

GW: Well, the JACL we have a person, a membership person who puts out a letter and sends it to high school and college history teachers and says that we have this person that when you're studying about American History at that time, we have this speaker available so.

ET: Now, I lost my train of thought. Now how did you become acquainted with Cal State Channel Islands?

GW: Well, let's see. Oh, the way we did was, the JACL every year we have our, we have an installation luncheon there. And when, so for that event we find a speaker. So one day, I remember I had, I read the paper. I read about Channel Islands. In fact, I have a file on Channel Islands. And then I saw that there was a professor there by the name of Dennis Rioka. And Rioka that's a Japanese name. And so, one day I called him and I just had a conversation with him. And I got to know him a little bit.

And then, and so when our time, every year we have to find a speaker for the event. So I suggested to the group, I said, "Well, we have a Japanese, half, half Japanese-American professor at Cal State University Channel Islands. And would you like to have him as a speaker?" So, they said, "Okay." And so I called him and he said, "Fine." And we set it up for, it was, our installation is done in early February. So he came and spoke to us and told everybody the whole group about Channel Islands and what it offers and so forth and so we learned about that.

WAKIJI

And then through that exposure I, I, I mentioned to him one time, I said, “Geez, you know I have some books that I, maybe I’d like to donate.” And so he said, “Well I’ll put you in touch with, let me talk to the librarian.” So he talked to Paul.

ET: Adalian?

GW: Yeah, and then he called and told me and said, “Yeah we’re interested.” And so, I, I still have other books I’m going to give you know on Japan that I have to sort out. And, by the way I have found another lady in Santa Barbara that wants to donate some books, Japanese-American. Has she contacted you yet?

ET: Not that I know of, but she might have contacted Paul.

GW: Okay, so that’s how our association. And then he offered to have, let us use the facilities for the meeting one time, so we went there. And then just the other day he invited me to come to a meeting of, for a history project there. They want to do a project, in 1903 here in Oxnard there was a strike. And what happened was Japanese farmworkers and Mexican farmworkers got together and they went against the management and they won. So there, they want to do a documentary about that, a video thing, on CD’s or whatever and then make it available for schools.

So I went to that meeting and, and I, Paul didn’t explain it too well to me. He, I, I thought it was just students but it turned out to be all the biggies were there. You know Barbara \_\_\_\_\_ and Frank Roth, Marty—

ET: Deloskovos?

GW: Yeah, yeah Deloskovis, and then Marty, there was another Marty there. She’s going to do the writing with—

ET: Oh okay.



WAKIJI

GW: And then there was a lady from the publisher of the *Broadcaster Magazine*, so she was there. And then George Sandoval was there.

ET: I have to meet him. I have, he's down on one of my contacts for Oxnard history. Yeah, pretty knowledgeable.

GW: Yeah, yeah, so that's how the thing is going. And so, and then I remember Paul asking about, he mentioned you were doing a history, oral history, so I've been supplying names to you. And so that's the situation.

ET: Now, going back to the, to the JACL, how many members do you have now currently?

GW: We have approximately two hundred in this area.

ET: That's pretty impressive.

GW: Yeah.

ET: And is there a particular age group or is it sort of spread around?

GW: No, it's, it's a particular age group. They're older. I would say most of the members are forty and up and there may be a few younger, but not too many. And the majority are probably in their sixties and seventies.

ET: Could you, is there a reason why you think that is? Just older people tend to want to congregate more than younger people?

GW: See the younger people have other, other interests now and this is not a prime thing for them. But it's very interesting that they should be aware of what goes on. Here, this is a, this is our publication for, for Japanese-American citizens. And here, I know this young man. He got, he lives in New Jersey. And he wants to run for City Council there in Summit, New Jersey and then he got this hate mail saying, the man said, the letter said, part of the letter said, "People like you sneak into the United States knowing how to

speaking two words of English, Political Asylum. Your political agenda is fabricated just like your personal facade. Underneath is an Asian, broken English among peers. Kindly return to your Asian nation to seek leadership. Your people need you.”

So, but it’s interesting. It’s even a problem here. JoAnn Van Reenan who is a member of our chapter.

ET: Oxnard Library.

GW: Yeah. She’s, she’s our, she got a letter, a hate letter. Well not, yeah a hate letter and a phone call from some man who said he’s from the Pearl Harbor Survivors. And the point I was trying to make is that most, many Americans cannot distinguish between us who are Americans born and raised here, educated here as opposed to the people that are from Japan you know. I mean we, we look like the enemy, so that’s how we got involved in this whole thing about being incarcerated.

And so it’s not a pleasant thing sometimes. And she said, “Gee, I didn’t realize things like this still go on you know.” But see, that didn’t surprise me one bit. She called me after it happened and I said, “No, look JoAnn, there is always going to be people that don’t particularly like people for whatever reason. They have their own reasons.” But, so you just have to be on guard. I mean I, when I got any place, especially if I go into the South, my antenna goes up very quickly. I am more aware of what people or how they’re behaving because they, more Japanese from Japan get into problems in the South than any place else.

Do you remember this case where a young boy was here as a student? And at Halloween time he, he got involved with some of his friends going you know around the neighborhood and trick or treating or whatever. And he went to a neighborhood, in

## WAKIJI

where was it, it was in Baton Rouge or some place. It was in a \_\_\_\_\_. And the man had a gun and I guess he was upset at these kids coming around doing things. And he told the kid, "Freeze." And the kid didn't understand it the slang and just kept going forward and the guy just killed him.

And so, so, there, there, you know there's a lot of people here and there are a lot of people in this area here who I would consider Red Neck types. And I would not be too, I would be very careful around them because you don't know how they're going to react. See, see they don't, if I were to do something. I can generally tell by what they're saying or what's going on. See I always try to, to figure out what's going on in the environment around me, otherwise you get into situations where you get hurt.

ET: You learn that as a young, as a youngster?

GW: Yeah, see we learned that very quickly here growing up in California. It's interesting, I would like, I should talk about, a little bit about the Hawaiian Jap. See they weren't incarcerated.

ET: Oh!

GW: Well, the reason is that the people that were in charge in Hawaii were a little smarter. They realized that if they were to take the hundred and forty thousand Japanese and put, and where are you going to ship them? Are you going to ship them to the mainland? And, and the whole economy would have collapsed there. And so they said, "Oh no, we're not going to you know put these people camp." They did take a few, less than two thousand people and brought them here. And remember like the FBI went around at the beginning here? The same situation there.

Well, now the rest of them were just left alone. They were. There was martial law there during the war, but they agreed, they realized that, well people. Interestingly enough, the man who later became governor of Hawaii named John Burns was a detective on the Honolulu Police Force at that time and he lived with the Japanese. He lived in their community. And he spoke up and he said, “Look, these, these are my friends. They’re not going to do anything you know.” And so they listened to people like him.

Well see, on the mainland here people didn’t listen. And they just went ahead and Roosevelt just said, “Okay, we’re going to—” then he had a general. His name was DeWitt and DeWitt just relished in this idea and he, his famous line was, “A Jap is a Jap.” Kind of thing you know, in other words, we’re all just like them see. And he, he fell into the same trap of making that assumption.

And so he, he was gung ho about putting us in a camp. So his, so he became the head, head guy to do this.

ET: Now did anybody, and this is a little bit out of, out of the area of internment. But did anybody that you were aware of defected and went back to Japan?

GW: Yeah. There were people, a small number of them, they were given an option of going back to Japan. And so they, they were sent to this camp in California, Northern California, Oregon border called Tule Lake. And they, they, and some people who worked, the young kids went with their parents. They didn’t want, probably want to go. But they were forced to go because their parents decided well we’re going to go. I think there were a few thousands of those kind of folks.

## WAKIJI

And that, that's not unusual. There were even a group in the camp, many of the people, young males that were draftees served in the military.

ET: That's something that I wanted to ask you that you had mentioned earlier. So they weren't, they needed. They had to be interned but if they were of age they were used in the military?

GW: Right. Well they—

ET: It sort of seems to be a double edged sword?

GW: Oh yeah, yeah, well that's—

ET: It's like, oh well then give them a gun.

GW: Yeah, yeah.

ET: If they're such a danger.

GW: Exactly, that's the, that's the irony.

ET: Give them the opportunity of really performing sabotage if that's what you think. That makes really—

GW: Well then, then, then the, one of the things that helped change the opinion of many of American's tour guys was the fact that the Japanese-Americans from Hawaii and the mainland from the camps and served overseas and in a segregated unit. It was called the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regiment Combat Team. And they were outstanding. They did so many, they were so good that the generals asked for them.

In other words, they, in fact there was a, the famous story is the Lost Battalion of Texas of the Texas 34<sup>th</sup> Division. It was trapped in, and they were being sur, they were surrounded by Germans. And so this general said, "Let's get the 442<sup>nd</sup> which they did." There were two hundred soldiers in this force, this area being bombarded and surrounded.

And so, they, they sent the 442<sup>nd</sup> Regimental Combat Team into rescue them. And to save two hundred, the 442<sup>nd</sup> suffered eight hundred, more than eight hundred casualties. In other words, that, that doesn't mean all of them killed, but they're all wounded, some either wounded or killed to rescue these two hundred.

So what happened was the Texans were very grateful naturally. So they, they, they said that the 442<sup>nd</sup> were honorary Texans you know so, but those were the guys in this group you know. So, but they did some, they were outstanding. And they were such a cohesive unit you know. And they, and so they did. They were the most decorated unit of its size in World War II. In other words, they had thousands of Purple Hearts. You know they only got one Purple Heart, they got, some of them got three or more or whatever.

And they would call, some guys from Hawaii came up with the expression, it was called. You see it in the vernacular now because they said, "Go for broke." Which means shoot the works. And that was there slogan. And so they, they would go out there and even if they were getting, their buddies were getting killed they would, they went ahead and took their objective. And so, they, they, they were, they were given a lot of acclamation. And so because of that people said, "Oh, well they can't be bad Americans you know."

But there was a group, a small group in one of the camps in Heart Mountain who said, they were asked you know to go join the Army you know after they were taken away. And they said, "No, I don't think so unless you, you release us, you release our parents and stuff. We don't think we want to go." And so, it was a small number. I mean less than a hundred. But they said no, we won't go. They, they went to serve their

## WAKIJI

time in jail. But they had their principals. So that was one of the things in our community that some people got very upset about. So they said, some of these guys are traitors and I don't think about it. I think if you are, if that's the way you feel and you're going to, you are willing to serve prison time for that, that's okay with me you know. I mean that's, that's allowed you know. Why, why condemn them? I don't think, I think they were pretty brave to do that.

I, I doubt if I would have done that. But that's, that's you know each individual's choice so. That's, that's the way it goes.

ET: Now how many people were in this, this league, this small military battalion?

GW: Uh—

ET: You said they lost eight hundred. It must have been a pretty good size?

GW: Oh well, a regiment at that time, see in a division at that time they had three regiments. And in a division could be from fifteen to twenty thousand men. And so, a regiment could be up, at least five thousand men or more, plus supporting units. See there's a, they, they have what they call an artillery battalion that's attached. They have an engineering group that's attached, a medical unit that's attached. And so that beefs it up. They, there are probably about eight thousand people involved in this thing.

ET: That's quite huge.

GW: And it's interesting. One of the things that a unit of the 442, the field artillery battalion, the, they were among the group that rescued the Jewish from Dachau. And—

ET: Oh really?

GW: --yeah, yeah, in fact it was a, maybe it wasn't in this one. It was in another one but, there's a man actually from this area, Mr. Fujisaki that was in that group and there were

WAKIJI

five hundred and twenty-second killed, killing at that time of the 422<sup>nd</sup> Infantry Regiment.

ET: Now did they ever send the regiment to Japan to these things?

GW: They, they didn't send the regiment see—

ET: To New York?

GW: --but there was a group of six thousand other Japanese-American soldiers who served in the military intelligence, Military Intelligence Service, MIS. By the way, there is going to be, JoAnn is showing a movie this coming November 9<sup>th</sup> at the library about the exploits of this group.

ET: Oh, I'll talk to her.

GW: It's called *Uncommon Courage*. It's, it's going to be at two o'clock on November 9<sup>th</sup>.

ET: Okay, okay.

GW: But there were, see what happens is in the fight against Japan they needed people who understood the language. So what they did was, they would, there were a number of Japanese-American males who had been sent to Japan, like my sister for example \_\_\_\_\_ or whatever. One of the reasons they went though was because of the pledges of those here, they couldn't go to certain schools or whatever. So their parents said, well if that's the case then we'll send them to an education over in Japan.

Well these people who then were there, they learned the language. They became fluent. And so they were, the Army said, "Oh wow, we, we can use these guys." And so what they did was they set up military language school for the people and they were trained then and they were sent overseas with combat units who were assigned to the Marine Corps. They were assigned to the Army and they served as interpreters and so



## WAKIJI

forth, interpreters, translators. And so what, the man who was a second, was in General MacArthur's command over there. I can't remember his name now. But he said that the fact that these people, military intelligence people were involved shortened the war by two years at least he said.

ET: Really?

GW: World War II yeah, a, a famous general. I don't know how famous he is, but a general that served under MacArthur said that. And it's documented so. And so they, it will probably be interesting that movie we're going to see, we're going to go. I've seen it before but I'll see it again.

ET: This concludes the oral history interview with Mr. George Wakiji of the Japanese-American League.

END OF INTERVIEW