

## Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission Oral History Interview

Narrator: Alice Sumida

Interviewer: Morgen Young

Location: Portland, Oregon

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Transcribed by: Kimberly Haysom

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YOUNG: This is our interview with Alice Sumida on August 20, 2013. Can we start by you telling about your early life, where you were born and what your parents did for a living?

SUMIDA: Uh huh, well my parents, my father was a farmer and I was born in a little town called, Oso Flaco, California in Santa Barbara County and my father farmed there for a while and then moved to Pismo Beach, California and he was doing dry farming which means, you cannot irrigate your farm, so you have to wait for the rain to irrigate your plant. Which was very risky but, he stayed there for a while and then bought a farm in San Luis Obispo County and there he was able to get irrigation water to water his plants. At first he grew all kinds of flowers to make it into a seed and ship the flower seeds to Europe. That was a long, long time ago and then later, he planted row crops like uh, onion, and lets see what else, after the flower seed he planted vegetables, all kinds of like green peas, oh I forgot what he planted! It's a long time ago anyway, vegetable seeds, vegetables to send to Los Angeles market and those days, the truck took the vegetables to Los Angeles market and...

Young: When did you come to Oregon?

SUMIDA: Uh then, after I was married, I married a Portland man so I came to Oregon and my husband was in the business where he bought vegetable seeds from Ferry Morse Seed Company and then distributed the seed to the farmers so the farmers could grow them and, we were in the business, he was in the business quite a while when the war broke out and I happened to be in the Seattle hospital because we had an apartment there to live in. And I was in great pain and I rang the bell and I rang the bell and no nurse came to help me and shortly after my husband and my doctor walked in the room, they said, "Oh all the doctors and nurses are huddled around the radio listening to Pearl Harbor being bombed by the Japanese." And so, I was moved to the apartment where I hired a nurse to take care of me. Shortly after, we had a call from the FBI and they were going to come and interview my husband and my husband, we were very nervous, we waited for him and the FBI man stood by the door, looked all around the room and then he sat down and he asked my husband a few questions and then he looked at me, I was very nervous, he might be taken away. And uh, he looked at me and said, "Don't worry." And he just left the room, so I was relieved that he was gone. And then, we wanted to go to his office in Portland, he had an office there, but he said

there was an announcement, "No Japanese may travel." So, we asked for permission to go to Portland to his office, we waited and waited, and waited after two weeks, they said, "You may go." So we travelled to Portland and there were two FBI men standing, one in front of the office, one in back of the office and all the out going mail was checked and all the incoming mail was checked. Soon after, we received notice from the government saying, "All Japanese regardless whether you are a citizen or not, prepare to leave your home and you may have two weeks time to get ready. Also, you can only carry two suitcases with you or whatever you can carry. That's all you may take with you." And we had to leave everything and go. So, in two weeks was up, the bus came to take us. And we were taken to a stockyard where they quickly put up a building and, no doors, just a curtain for a door, no ceiling, and so you could hear everything next door. The infirmary that they built for sick people were all filled up, people were coughing, babies were crying and we, my husband and I thought, "Oh my goodness, I hope we don't get sick." In the meantime, the sugar beet company from Nyssa, Oregon came to recruit workers and so, about twenty young men volunteer, "Well go and work." And I was the only woman, I said, "I will go and work." And we were placed on the train that night, all the shades were pulled down and in the morning we arrived in Nyssa, Oregon and there we were given canvas tents to live in with a hot wood stove to cook on. And the hot weather of 110 degrees, but next day we were taken the hardware store and we were asked to buy a short handled hoe, a file, work pants, work shoes, work shirt, and straw hat, and just about bought up the hardware store with all the equipment. Then the farmer came for us to take to his farm, we hopped on the back of the pick up and away we went. And arrived to his farm, we were given, oh and we also bought a steal lunch bunch and the kitchen put some food in there for us and when you arrive at the farm, no shade, all... so we had to leave our lunch box in the hot sun. My husband and I had done no work like that, with the short handle hoe, the beets were supposed to be about six inches but they were about twelve inches high and we had to knock down about a foot of the plant, leave one plant and do this all the way down the road. And, we were working with the Uchiyama family. Father, mother, I think about four children, six of them working and they were very experienced workers, so they went up and down the row. They made lots of money because this was piecework. My husband and I, we had never done this kind of work, so we took a long time to finish one row. Then when we were finished with this farm, we were, came back to the camp and another farmer came after us, we rode on his pickup for a long, long time, we didn't know how far we were going, but we finally arrived at his farm and his beets were three feet high and the Uchiyama family said, no way we could work on this kind of plant, too far gone. And so, the farmer took us back to the camp and later, a few days later, we were all finished with the beet work and so, the man in charge said, "The work is done now, so you may go wherever you want to go, except don't go into to town." I said, "Okay." And we looked around and we found an old house without doors, without windows and that would be better than living in a tent, so we rented the house and a few days later the farmer who had the long, tall beets came and said, "Mark, you want to buy this farm? I'm seven years behind in my rent and the owner is getting very

angry.” And Mark said, “Oh, I’ve never farmed before.” And the younger man said, “Oh Mark, buy the farm, and we’ll work for you!” After thinking it over, well I’ll have to do something, I can’t just sit around until I die. And so, we went to one bank and asked if we could borrow some money and they said, “Oh, no way we could do that.” We went to Idaho First National Bank and they said, “Oh yeah, we’ll be glad to rent, loan you money.” So we put a down payment on this farm and the neighbor said, “Mark! You bought the worst farm on this area!” And uh, well, we bought it so we have to work on it. The place was full of rocks we couldn’t even level, and it was, we had to move all this great big rocks out before we could level. And so we did that and our neighbor looked and said, “What are you doing?!” And I said, “Oh we have to move these rocks out of here before we could farm it.” And they thought, oh my! They were so surprised that we were doing that kind of work. Well, we finally got the place all leveled and uh, we had to buy a great big pump to pump the water out of the Snake River to irrigate it. It was lots of work and my husband a faucet on each row so he could irrigate the land but weeds got stuck in the rows and it just didn’t work out. Water flooded the whole place, so he had all the pipes taken out and this time he was reading where you could put a big ditch in the middle of the field and use a syphon to use for irrigating your plant and that worked out much better. So, he started to use the siphons for irrigating his plants and the neighbors all come and said, “What is Mark doing?” And they thought, “Oh! That’s a pretty good idea!” So farmers all started to use the siphon also. Then, we were planting potatoes and onions and sugar beets, just like the rest of the farmers did there, well... before long there were too many potatoes, too many onions in the market, and we had to dump them, the great big beautiful sweet Spanish onion, beautiful potatoes. Well the potatoes we were able to keep in storage but the onions we had to dump. Beautiful onions. And, my husband was reading in Florida, they grew lots of gladiolas and shipped the bulbs away. They buy the bulbs, grow the bulbs and then they ship the plants, you know when their buds. They ship to the west coast where there were no flowers at the time. Well, there was a very kind farmer in Florida who told us, buy this, this, this, five different kinds of bulbs, bulblets, we had to buy the small bulblets that grow underneath the bulb and we were very thankful to get that information. They said to go to Medford, Oregon and buy the bulblet. So, my husband went there and bought the bulblet of five different kinds of variety. Then, my husband shipped these great big onions to Florida to let them know if we could grow beautiful onions like this, we could surely grow beautiful bulbs, uh gladiola bulbs. And the farmers in Florida got very excited and they came in the private plane to see us and give us an order. They wanted a thousand of this, a thousand of that, so many thousand of this variety; oh my we had a great big order! We didn’t know anything about growing gladiola, so the first year, he bought these bulblets and didn’t how to plant but he had to figure out how to plant them and the first year, we didn’t have any bulbs to sell. They were, we had to call them and tell the farmers that we’re very sorry but we are unable to fill your order. It took us five years before we were able to fill this farmer, great three big farmers gave us orders and we were unable to fill even one order, well, after about five years, we were able, not full order but adequate enough to fill their order.

After, well we were doing pretty well with gladiolas but um, our nephew who was our right hand man got married and his wife, she didn't want to stay out at the farm, so we thought, well, we were planning to give the farm to our nephew, but if they're not going to stay on the farm, no use staying. So, we went back to Portland and my husband said, "Well, I can't just sit around doing nothing." So he was reading and in Oregon and even the whole United States they don't know anything about koi, so he made arrangement to have some koi fish shipped over and we introduced the koi, we had to find a place to put the fish in. So we looked around in Woodburn and there was a farm, uh ponds that were not being used so we bought the koi ponds in Woodburn. And, at midnight we had a call, your fish has arrived, so we went to the airport to pick it up and at night, we couldn't, we had to look with a flashlight to see which fish was, we had the red and white, Kohaku, all red, three color, Sanke, red, white, and black, we had all gold, all silver, and then a blue, five different varieties. And we had to put them in different ponds, each variety in a different pond and at night, we had to look at the front where we will put this one, this one there, finally they were all in the pond and we were taking care of them until my husband got sick. He had a stroke and after about five years doing this work, I had to take care of myself. It was very hard work and so, I had to give it up after about five years and I sold the place, bought this condo here and what else I should tell you?

YOUNG: What's your maiden name?

SUMIDA: Alice Etsuko Eto.

YOUNG: Could you say it again?

SUMIDA: Alice Etsuko Eto. My father's name was Eto, ETO.

YOUNG: And your husband's first name was Mark?

SUMIDA: And I got married to Mark.

YOUNG: Mark. How long do you think you were in the Nyssa camp? A week? Or a month?

SUMIDA: Yes, about a week. About two weeks.

YOUNG: And when you said you had to buy supplies, did you have to use your own money to pay for the hoe and the...

SUMIDA: Yes. We used our own money.

YOUNG: What do you remember about that train ride? Because I heard that there were armed guards on the train.

SUMIDA: Yes, we couldn't see anything, the blinds was, the shade was pulled down, so we just sat there and just slept if we could. But we couldn't sleep so we stayed awake all night until we reached Nyssa camp.

YOUNG: And it was you and your husband and everyone else that volunteered? Were they bachelors?

SUMIDA: Were what?

YOUNG: Bachelors, young men.

SUMIDA: Yes, uh huh, all bachelors except my husband and me.

YOUNG: And you were the first group that went out there?

SUMIDA: Yes, we're the first group.

YOUNG: Wow. Was it scary going out there?

SUMIDA: No. Not scary. We just wondered where we were going.

YOUNG: Did you ever go into the town of Nyssa?

SUMIDA: No, this was my first time for me.

YOUNG: But when you were in the Nyssa camp, did you go visit town to go to the movies or...

SUMIDA: No, no, not at all.

YOUNG: And so you had one tent for you and your husband?

SUMIDA: Yes, uh huh and one wood stove.

YOUNG: What else can you remember the tent, the tent itself or how hot it was?

SUMIDA: Well, um, after two weeks, they said, we behaved well, so you may go anywhere you want and so that's why we found this old house, along the county road and fixed it up and lived there uh, not very long. Maybe about a month and then this farmer that had tall beets asked us to, asked us if we want to buy the farm, so we moved over there. And the house was very, very old, the walls were insulated with these great big rocks and so the house was so old, it was bulging. The walls were bulging out and every time the wind blew, the wind would go right through the house, very cold. And there was a great big wood stove there and I loved cooking on it, because it made very good food.

YOUNG: Would you cook in the Nyssa camp?

SUMIDA: No, I didn't cook at all there. We didn't stay there long enough.

YOUNG: So you ate in like a mess hall in the camp or?

SUMIDA: Uh, no, we moved into this house and I cooked on there.

YOUNG: You mentioned the Uchiyama ...

SUMIDA: Yes.

YOUNG: The family. What else do you remember about other families? Like the Morishita family?

SUMIDA: Oh, no, the Morishita family, were right next door to us after we bought the farm.

YOUNG: Do you remember any other families like the Kato family, the Kido family, Ouchida family; do any of those sound familiar?

SUMIDA: Yes, they bought a farm in Nyssa and so we were not in close contact with them. But the Itami family, oh I guess they were not in the Nyssa camp, they didn't volunteer there. But, they were from Washington and they were one of the neighbors after we bought the farm.

YOUNG: What about your parents? Did they go to an internment camp?

SUMIDA: Yes. My father was one of the first ones to be taken and put in concentration camp and my mother and brother, they tried to find where he was, but they moved, the people who are taken first were moved from one camp to another, one town to another. And they had a hard time keeping track of him and finally they lost complete track of him they wouldn't let them know where my father was. I was married, so I was in northwest and they were in California so they eventually moved to, see what was that name of that camp in Los Angeles, a big camp.

YOUNG: Topaz?

SUMIDA: No, Topaz is in Arizona, in California.

YOUNG: In California.

SUMIDA: Los Angeles.

YOUNG: There was Tule Lake was up north and Manzanar.

SUMIDA: Manzanar.

YOUNG: That's the one, you think?

SUMIDA: Yes, I think that was the one.

YOUNG: Okay. What about your husband's family, did they go to a concentration camp too?

SUMIDA: Well my husband's brother was taken into the concentration camp so his wife was crippled and she had four boys, they went into, uh, the northern camp, what is that name?

YOUNG: Minidoka?

SUMIDA: Minidoka.

YOUNG: Yeah? Or Heart Mountain is in Montana.

SUMIDA: Was Minidoka?

YOUNG: Minidoka was in Idaho, near Hunt, Idaho.

SUMIDA: That's the one, yes.

YOUNG: That's where they went.

SUMIDA: Yes, that's where they went. And, let's see, who took care of them?

YOUNG: Were you able to stay in contact with your families? Or not very much during the war?

SUMIDA: Yes we tried to but, we were in Idaho and yes, after my father was released, he and my mother and two sisters, we invited them to stay with us and uh, farm where we bought the farm in eastern Oregon.

YOUNG: The bank that you mentioned that would not give you a loan, was that because you were Japanese?

SUMIDA: No. Because, wartime, during the wartime, I think that's the reason. But, the Idaho First National Bank, in Idaho, people were very lenient with us and we even purchased a farm whereas otherwise, you know, I think they were, the manager was a German decent and the German people were also evacuated and the Italian and so, I think that's the reason. People there were not, but people, I read were they were also evacuated, not all but maybe special people.

YOUNG: And there were some P.O.W.s that came to eastern Oregon from Italy, German and Italian prisoners of war.

SUMIDA: Oh!

YOUNG: And they were living in some camps.

SUMIDA: Oh I see, ah ha!

YOUNG: So, when you owned the farm...

SUMIDA: Yes.

YOUNG: ... during the war, you had other Japanese working on the farm? That you hired or...

SUMIDA: Yes, they were all Japanese at that time because they are all evacuated into Eastern Oregon and first generation, you know, old people they wanted work. They didn't want to just sit around doing nothing, so we were very fortunate, they were very good workers.

YOUNG: What year did you move back to Portland?

SUMIDA: Um, what year?

YOUNG: Or a decade.

SUMIDA: Yes. Uh huh, we were there for twenty-two years, from 1941 the war started so 1965, I think we moved back to Portland.

YOUNG: When you were in Eastern Oregon, were you involved with the Japanese community there?

SUMIDA: Yes there was a few Japanese farmers living there and they just kept on working and they didn't seem to be affected at all. So busy farming I don't think they felt a war was going on there.

YOUNG: Yeah, there were some families who were already living in the area, right?

SUMIDA: Yes.

YOUNG: Like, did you know the Wada family?

SUMIDA: Yes.



YOUNG: Oh and the, did you know the Saito family? There were several Saito families?

SUMIDA: Yes, uh huh, yes.

YOUNG: So was there a community of Japanese after the war that of farmers that maybe went to Church together or have a community center did that exist?

SUMIDA: Yes, uh huh. Yes, there was a Buddhist temple and also a Methodist Church.

YOUNG: Anything else that we can touch upon about the Nyssa camp? Do you, the very first time you were thinning the sugar beets, you mentioned that was very hard work, wasn't it?

SUMIDA: Yes, very hard work because we had to be bent all the way from one field to the end of the field and then you know, working with our short handled hoe. And so, it was a very backbreaking job for people like us who have never done it before. But the Uchiyama family just went up and down the row as though they didn't feel anything. Very hard workers.

YOUNG: Do you remember how much you got paid?

SUMIDA: Uh, they, whatever amount they worked they got paid. Piece work they called it. My husband and me, I think they paid us about thirty-five cents an hour. Because we couldn't get anything done.

SUMIDA: Lunchtime.

YOUNG: We're going to pause for just a second.

SUMIDA: What they are they doing?

YOUNG: We'll get you out of here shortly.

SUMIDA: You know... lunchtime, the lunchbox in the hot sun.

YOUNG: Let's wait one second; yeah I want to hear about the lunchbox. So tell me about those metal lunch pails, what do you remember about those?

SUMIDA: Yeah the milk was sour, because it stayed in the hot sun all morning you know, until lunchtime. And, I think we had a sandwich, not very good but we had to eat it and then there was a fruit, I guess that was okay.

YOUNG: So in the camp, in the Nyssa tent camp, a white farmer would come and get workers or how would that work that you would, explain to me going from the tent camp to a farm

SUMIDA: Yes the farmer came for us on his pickup and so we all rode on the back of the pickup to go to his farm.

YOUNG: In the Uchiyama family, there were women and men working?

SUMIDA: Pardon me?

YOUNG: The Uchiyama family, they had women and men in the family were working?

SUMIDA: Mother, father, and the four, I think four children. Six of them, very good workers.

YOUNG: Do you remember Henry Kato in the camp at all?

SUMIDA: No, because they came much later and I didn't even see them.

YOUNG: Do for a while in the tent camp it was just the twenty people that had volunteered in your group?

SUMIDA: At first, yes. Then later, the other groups came.

YOUNG: Did you ever talk to any of the bachelors in the tent camp or get to know any of them?

SUMIDA: Um, we didn't have time to you know, socialize.

YOUNG: Do you remember any of the, a camp manager? Or anyone who worked in the camp who wasn't living in the camp?

SUMIDA: No. I don't remember.

YOUNG: Were there, was there a doctor at the camp?

SUMIDA: That, I don't...

YOUNG: If you needed medical attention.

SUMIDA: ... know that either.

YOUNG: Okay. We're just going to change the battery and then maybe just a couple more minutes if that's okay with you?

[Pause]

YOUNG: Could you tell me a little bit more about the assembly center, the livestock?

SUMIDA: Oh, we weren't there long um, I think we were only there a couple of weeks.

YOUNG: I've heard that there were horse stalls.

SUMIDA: Hm?

YOUNG: Or they were stalls where animals were kept, that's where you were sleeping?

SUMIDA: Well, they put a floor on, above it, that's why everybody got sick, yeah. They, I think cleaned the best they could but, just put a floor and walls you know, no ceiling, no door. Just a curtain and so, they all look alike, you don't know which is your room. No number, nothing. So people just walk, you know try to come in your room, not nothing it was not theirs. And um, the bathroom was all open, you know.

YOUNG: Did you husband first see the recruiter from the sugar beet company or did you both go and sign up together? Do you remember that at all?

SUMIDA: No, we just volunteered.

YOUNG: Because it was going to be better than being in the assembly center?

SUMIDA: Oh yes. Everybody was getting sick and we didn't want to stay there, we thought this would be an opportunity to get out of there because there were you know, we were all fenced in with a guard, with a gun. That's where we were at the assembly center. Just prisoners, we couldn't get out at all.

YOUNG: When you got off the train...

SUMIDA: Yes.

YOUNG: ... did, were you in Nyssa or did you take a bus?

SUMIDA: No, no, we were in Nyssa.

YOUNG: And what do you remember about the landscape, it must of looked very different from what you were used to in Portland and in Seattle.

SUMIDA: Yes. Very different.

YOUNG: Had you seen sugar beets before?

SUMIDA: Mm, yes I guess, well... not plants. First time. Oh! And this, first time I was working I go, "Oh gosh I gotta do more, I have to accomplish more." And so I was really determined to finish the row as quickly as possible and I raised my hoe

and I almost hit a great big bull snake was curled up! I almost hit him! And I just screamed and yelled and ran out of there as fast as I could! But, I was told later that bull snakes are very good snakes, they won't hurt you. But, nevertheless it was scary! It was just curled up so comfortably you know, under the big plant. I'll never forget that!

YOUNG: So you had, you talked a little bit about, you bought a straw hat, so you do you remember what you would wear in the sugar beet fields?

SUMIDA: Oh we had to buy a work pants and work shirt, and um, work shoes.

YOUNG: You must have gotten very tan, working out in the sun all the time.

SUMIDA: Yeah. Very, very hot. Hot sun, first experience and I thought, "Oh, I really appreciate the workers." You know, but they get used to it, I guess. Very hard work. I appreciate it all the work they did.

YOUNG: Well, I think that this is great, we got a lot of really wonderful descriptions of your experiences. Um, I really appreciate you sitting down with us.

SUMIDA: Well thank you so much!

YOUNG: Thank you, very, very much.

END OF INTERVIEW

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