Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission Oral History Interview

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Interviewer: Morgen Young
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Transcribed by: Kimberly Haysom

YOUNG: This is our interview on April 17, 2013 at Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario, Oregon. Can we start with each of you saying your full names?

CORNMESSER: Janice Murakami Cornmesser.

MURAKAMI: David Murakami.

YOUNG: And what are your parents' names?

CORNMESSER: Sig and Mitsy Murakami.

YOUNG: And…

MURAKAMI: Shigeo.

CORNMESSER: He is Shigeo and her full name was Mitsuko.

YOUNG: What was her maiden name?

CORNMESSER: Yamaguchi.

YOUNG: And where were they living before they came to Treasure Valley?

CORNMESSER: Los Angeles, California.

MURAKAMI: Actually from Tujunga Canyon.

CORNMESSER: He knows more detail.

YOUNG: How did they meet?

CORNMESSER: Uh they met in Seattle…

MURAKAMI: Both from the Seattle area.

CORNMESSER: Yeah, Bellevue area and they met uh, after they both got out of school and got married and moved to Los Angeles to work for a carnation farmer.

YOUNG: And the evacuation order happened and what did they do?

MURAKAMI: Well, when December 7th happened, they were working for the nursery and uh, so there were allowed three more months because my mother was pregnant and she was due Christmas day.

YOUNG: Pregnant with you?

MURAKAMI: Mm hm in ‘41. And so, they evacuated, they left with two other families, I really don’t know, it was either two or three families. And, they could come to a free zone, which is outside the Pacific Time zone, uh if they had documentation, if they had a job and so, they did. They came with these other two families. And they uh, something Manzanar, the other families wanted to visit some people and people in Manzanar tried to tell them to stay and they decided to keep on going. So they had a police escort from Manzanar through Nevada, and the Nevada State Police asked, Boise, the Idaho State Police if they would escort them to Boise.

YOUNG: When they went to Manzanar did they have to talk through a fence?

MURAKAMI: Uh, no. No. I don’t know if they actually did or not, I never heard of that. I assume it’s open visits.

CORNMESSER: I wasn’t sure so, I would assume that they wouldn’t allow them in but, I don’t know that part.

YOUNG: And your mother used to talk about this trip often?

CORNMESSER: Oh, very often. Yeah, she was um, it was a very dramatic trip for the family and um, they felt safer with the police escort but um, it was, you know, during that time, it was a scary time and they weren’t allowed to take very with them, just what they could fit in the car for two people. And um, no flashlights, no cameras, just um, making it on their own so they could have their own life, so that they could start again and, my mom was very proud of that.

YOUNG: You mentioned, when were talking off camera about them trying to go to a restaurant.

CORNMESSER: Yes um, one of the police escorts asked them if they were hungry and they said yes and they said well, this particular town, I’m not sure the name of it, where they were at. They wanted American food or Chinese and my mother and everybody else said, “Oh Chinese food! Chinese food!” Because they were really missing that type of food and um, they went to this Chinese restaurant and there was a sign on the building or the door,

"No Japs Allowed." And they weren't allowed to eat there, so they were kind of disappointed and uh, I guess at the time, the hysteria, the Chinese didn't want to be associated with, being thought of being Japanese, so, they didn't you know, didn't want them associated with them.

YOUNG: Do you know what type of work your father had waiting for him to come out here?

MURAKAMI: Um, they didn't have, they came with these other two families.

YOUNG: So how did he get the documentation to be able to move out of…

MURAKAMI: Oh, they went with the other two families had some sort of documentation saying that they had jobs. So, just the, in those days it was just manual labor.

YOUNG: And where did they live when they first moved to the area?

MURAKAMI: They um, in the Cairo Junction area, which is south of Ontario, three miles and they lived in a couple of houses, one of the houses of the two, along the railroad tracks.

YOUNG: What are your earliest memories?

MURAKAMI: Probably their second move was on King Avenue, uh, a little camp there, a building that held three different families. There were like studio apartments you know, and which is gone now. I remember those days.

YOUNG: Did you ever hear of your parents talking about either of the two labor camps that were in the area? There was one in Garrison Corner and then one later at Cow Hollow?

MURAKAMI: Well in '46 my father had the opportunity to rent some ground by a fellow by the name, Len Wilson but the eighty acres he couldn't handle that so, his good friend at that time was Joe Kimoto, and he had a twenty-six acre farm, which there is a picture where that camp was on. And so, they traded farms. So my father farmed that twenty-six acres and Joe took over the eighty-acre farm. Joe, later on in the years farmed pretty big and he's also partnered on to produce.

YOUNG: Yeah, I'm staying with Janet Kimoto.

MURAKAMI: Hm?

YOUNG: I'm staying with Joe's daughter-in-law.

CORNMESSER: Oh, yeah.

MURAKAMI: Yeah.

YOUNG: So, your father, he eventually established Murakami Produce Company, when did that get started?

MURAKAMI: Um, it started in ‘69.

YOUNG: And before that was he leasing land or working?

MURAKAMI: Well he started farming in ‘46 and some years weren’t too good of income so, little by little. That picture you saw there, he was a labor contractor. In those days a labor contractor didn’t have to have a license. You just had to be an organizer and so, that’s his work crew.

YOUNG: Oh, okay, so his work crew was then from this Nyssa Tent Camp, probably.

MURAKAMI: Probably, yeah.

YOUNG: Okay and so what was his responsibilities as the head of a work crew?

MURAKAMI: Well as the head of a work crew you got to go and look for work, different farmers, then you go round up people. In those days, in the forties and fifties, he’d go to Nyssa or any town and pick up people at 6 o’clock in the morning; they’re standing on the streets. And with just, but there weren’t too many people on the streets then, most of these were in these camps. These camps were brought here by a fellow by the name of Larson and he visited the Minidoka camp, I’ve been told and um, promised people work, it was available. In this valley, to work in the sugar beet field and potatoes, it was all manual labor there and uh, a few onions, but mostly potatoes and sugar beets. And, uh, when they came here, the reason, there was about, I was told there was about 10,000 people. Up to, towards that direction, the whole valley, most of them came from the camp, eighty-five percent came from Minidoka, because they had no money, basically and so in order to go back home from where they came from, they can’t go empty handed. So, a lot of them came here. Worked during the summer. Most of them still had no money and stayed on a few more years.

YOUNG: And then some stayed permanently.

MURAKAMI: Some developed small business and, yes, that’s, I would say the Japanese people back in the late 40s, was probably it was only about twelve, fifteen families that were previously here. Hardly that.

YOUNG: Did you know um, Larson at Amalgamated Sugar?

MURAKAMI: Um, no. But we, his son became a manager of the sugar factory too, later on in the years, back in the fifties, sixties, during the sixties. And we farmed his farm, south of Nyssa about eight miles, a couple different times.

YOUNG: Do you know anything about other people in the community, like I've heard Elmo Smith was influential in bringing the Japanese laborers to the area.

MURAKAMI: Uh, I don't know anything about that. I heard that, yeah.

YOUNG: How would your father… would your father have to negotiate wages for his crew?

MURAKAMI: Mm hm.

YOUNG: And how do you ensure you are getting fair wages?

MURAKAMI: There was no such thing as fair wages, people were out of work, take what you can get.

CORNMESSER: Yeah.

YOUNG: I've heard from other people that um…

MURAKAMI: If you didn't pay enough, you couldn't get your people. So its.

YOUNG: Right. And some farmers would perhaps pay better wages and you would go to those farmers first?

MURAKAMI: Well yes in a way.

YOUNG: Can you…

MURAKAMI: When we were farming I wouldn't pay the best, people would put strikes on me or just get on top of a truck and address everybody, it might be 200 people and I say, "Well if you don't like it, you can leave." Half of them would leave and I would tell my contractors, "You tell everyone they got all the work I can do." So the following year, I didn't have a problem, because I gave them, back in the early seventies, I gave may be twenty families, six hundred acres of onions to top by hand, I gave it all to them. They would work twenty-hour days, in those days you didn't have to track, nowadays you have to track hours and guarantee that they get minimum wage for every person that works. Then for a while you could

hire little kids, you can't do that now, but in those days you could hire little kids so the families, they would use the little kids working to help benefit them but its different now.

YOUNG: Could you explain or walk me through the process of what it used to take to harvest the sugar beets manually?

MURAKAMI: Well uh, I'm trying to see if there's any pictures here but there isn't. Um, in those days planters were not precision planters, there were just like uh, it would scatter in a single file and then you have to come through after there are in a two to three leaf stage and come through and thin them. And so you would use a hoe, a six-inch wide hoe, you just, a short handle so you could go faster, in those days it was called, stoop labor. And so, like my folks would do may be, two in a half acres a day. When you're young you could do that, because you're bent over. Uh, probably a ten-hour day, I would say.

YOUNG: Bent over the entire time?

MURAKAMI: Mm hm.

CORNMESSER: Wow.

YOUNG: And then what do you use the long hoe's for?

MURAKAMI: For old people. Literally because you can't cover enough ground with the long hoe, see, you can go so much faster bent over.

YOUNG: So you thin the beets and then, what's the next step after thinning?

MURAKAMI: Well, in those days you have horses like in that picture there, where it's kind a rough cultivator to stir the ground up, so you irrigate the ground. And then also follow up with irrigation. As tractors came to being like, '45 or '46 tractors came into being, they were a little bit more precision, but not much more. It's just you could work longer hours. The horses peter out in the middle of the day, even if you feed them, water, feed them, they can only do so much. But prior to that, prior to the mid-40's, that's all you had was horses.

YOUNG: What's the growing season for sugar beets? From when to when?

MURAKAMI: Well planting time is usually about mid-March; you have about a three-week period there. And you get irrigation water in the middle of April but if you get a freeze like we had a couple days ago, you might have to re-plant and if you have to re-plant you lose about five tons an acre on average. Because they are just that much smaller. Lighter tonnage at

harvest time. Harvest time is usually in September. Now they have different varieties where you can harvest in late August.

YOUNG: So I've seen newspaper articles from the Eastern Oregon Observer talking about the sugar beet crop of 1942 and it's seemed to be in early May, if they didn't have laborers come and thin the crop immediately then it was going to be lost that year. Was May around the time when you had to start thinning?

MURAKAMI: Well if they were planted late, you'd have to have them thinned by May. The reason why is you run out of fertilizer, see in those days you could fertilize with manure. You didn't have any banks that loaned any money to the farmers in those days, you had to borrow money from the packers that sold farmer, an ochre farmer would have to raise, borrow money from a packer to raise potatoes and a little bit of onions and you slide it over. The only thing you could get from these sugar factories, you get seed, uh you had to pay back the seed money at harvest time or they deducted it. But uh, not everybody, like nowadays everyone plants on time, they know what the time period is. In those days you didn't really have a time period, you're farming by the seat of your pants. And hope to have, things turn out alright, we had an Indian summer in the fall. If you did you look like a pretty good sensible farmer, a pretty smart farmer, if you didn't you got laughed at.

YOUNG: What was the relationship like with Amalgamated Sugar, that's who everyone was farming for, if you were farming sugar beets.

MURAKAMI: Um, it was pretty good, I never heard anything negative. When I was a little kid, growing up, even now you don't hear anything negative. It's a farmer-owned co-op now but then in those days, um the relationship was always kept pretty good with the growers. You always had a little dissention because the growers formed an association to always try to leverage a little more money. In those days you had to wait for a freeze to get your sugar levels up. But nowadays you don't have to do that, you got new varieties, you don't have to wait for a freeze. So, usually you had to wait for a freeze like in the middle of September before you harvest, now you get to harvest earlier.

YOUNG: And do you get paid based on the weight of the sugar beets or do you get paid based on the weight of the processed sugar?

MURAKAMI: No you get paid on, well yes, you get weight, you get paid on the process of the sugar but it back, it backs up a bit to where they go based on your sugar content. And your tonnage.

YOUNG: Sugar content meaning the sweeter the beets, the more sugar they can produce.

MURAKAMI: Yes.

YOUNG: Okay.

MURAKAMI: Like if they produce from sixteen to eighteen, well may be even twenty percent sugar, you'll get a pretty good price. Well now they, if they get thirty-five to forty tons of sugar beets to the acre. Eighteen to twenty percent sugar, you can make good money. But those kind of things were unheard of in the fifties. You'd have to wait for a freeze to get fourteen in a half, fifteen percent sugar and may be you got twenty… twenty to thirty tons to the acre. Thirty tons in those days would be unheard of but you might have a part of the field that yielded pretty good. But, it's not even, see, like that one picture there, they got a homemade wooden landplane and people first came here, they haven't leveled the ground. So every thing has been leveled here, except the hillside, it's still in tact. The hillside actually produce pretty good fields under drip irrigation because they haven't moved the tops up. Down at the bottom where it looks nice in the spring, uh, everything is still leveled so, there are some fields that are pretty but every farm has fields that are just average production.

YOUNG: What kind of man were, was your father like?

MURAKAMI: We're on camera so I can't say.

CORNMESSER: Ha! Well let's just say that he, as an employer farmer he fired and re-hired and fired and re-hired some of his people several times, he wasn't easy to work for, but um, from what my mother said the farmer he worked for in California, for the carnation farmer was quite unbearable too. If it wasn't, and my father was just like him but um, he was a, I know when he came to buying the produce company and he was very ferocious about making people that work for him had college degrees and um, that had um business backgrounds and um… and he handled himself that way in the produce business, he stood back and let them run the show. He oversaw everything but he was a lot of young farmers came in the office, I remember, they would try to take the, information of him and knowledge from him and he was very inspiring to a lot of people.

YOUNG: I'm sorry…

MURAKAMI: Oh no. Go ahead.

YOUNG: What was your mother like?

CORNMESSER: She's the opposite of my dad, she was very, she was, I remember her telling me when they came here from California, the war was ended, she was hoping to go back to California. You know, California at the time was so crazy as it is now and it was beautiful and the weather was perfect, she loved it there. And when she was here it was barren and the ground was all cracked, it wasn't as nice as it is now and she really didn't want to stay. But my dad was determined to make it here. So she helped my dad a lot, I mean, she was out in the field even when she was pregnant, working and then when she couldn't do that anymore she um, cooked for all my dad's laborers, she made meals and took them out there for lunch and um, the old time days, they did that a lot, back in those days. And uh, she was side-by-side with my dad even though their personalities conflicted a lot, they, my mom really believed what my dad, you know was doing and as far as business was concerned, she was always curious about you know, what's going on, what's the price of onions and she was always involved and she loved it.

MURAKAMI: My father first came to this country, first when he was growing up, I think he was twelve years old he quit school so he went to work for a family, the Hatami family. Which after the war, came to the Oregon Slope area, north of Ontario. But he used to ramrod about twenty-five to thirty Filipinos. So that's where he learned to ramrod, push people hard, hire and fire, because in those days you hire and fire a lot of people if you got people. So you know it's like in my case when we were farming, I hired and fired a lot of people. One of our secretaries said, "You know how many people you fired this year?" I said, "Over a thousand." Because we used large crews and uh, but people needed work, you can go re-hire the people you fire, you just had to fire them to keep them in line. Because a lot of people in those days, even during the seventies, a lot of laborers, they had no education, they had no discipline. It's that way in your auguries, surprisingly it's still that way. The only thing that keeps people in line is the police.

YOUNG: Yeah we're gonna pause while the helicopter lands.

(Pause)

CORNMESSER: Morgen, what is your background in all this?

YOUNG: Oh doing all this? I'm a historian in Portland.

CORNMESSER: Oh okay.

YOUNG: And um, these photographs were taken by the Farm Security Administration who ran the camp in Nyssa.

CORNMESSER: Okay.

YOUNG: My research focus is on Farm Security Administration photography was the largest federal documentary photography project, it started in 1935 and ran through 1944 and they produced about 180,000 photographs. Documenting the Great Depression primarily and then moving into the war. And so, I found these photographs and it seemed that most people weren't familiar that there was a labor camp in Malheur County that there is a strong Japanese population in Malheur County and that Oregon was the state to come up with a plan for internment.

CORNMESSER: Oh.

YOUNG: When they met in April of '42. And um, the person that developed that plan was George Aiken, that elementary school that's named after him.

CORNMESSER: Oh really?

YOUNG: Mm hm. Yeah he was from Ontario, so.

CORNMESSER: Oh! Well that's good to know.

YOUNG: Yeah.

MURAKAMI: In well, there weren't a lot of people that helped the Japanese settle up here.

YOUNG: There were or were not?

MURAKAMI: There were.

YOUNG: There were?

MURAKAMI: Yeah. Just like, during the war and after the war, uh, fellas like the Peterson family, they had a furniture store here and they lost a lot of business selling to the Japanese. And, a fellow named Cabel, at Cabel Chevrolet and people found out that he was selling cars to the Japanese. He lost a lot of business. And so, the Japanese people realized that and so they just felt obligated to keep doing business with them for a couple more decades, three decades. Still! And, there were other places around the valley too but there were a lot of places that did not care about the Japanese. There was one fellow that had an international harvester dealership, my father tried to make a trade, the guy didn't like it. He didn't want to pay retail for a farm tractor, he uh, he and a neighbor traded all their red internationals, you know for John Deere.

YOUNG: Did your parents ever discuss discrimination they faced living in the area? In addition to instances you just mentioned?

MURAKAMI: Um…

CORNMESSER: My mother did.

MURAKAMI: Yeah.

CORNMESSER: But I can't say the name, no.

YOUNG: No.

MURAKAMI: No.

YOUNG: Were they businesses or individuals?

CORNMESSER: Businesses.

MURAKAMI: No, they were more businesses.

CORNMESSER: I mean they totally changed after a period of years of us living there, they totally changed their views but I was kind of surprised that I was real little when all that happened right after the war and there was still some resentment of people but on the whole, I think most of the people were very kind and I know, you mentioned… or David mentioned there were a lot of businesses that did business with the Japanese. There was a lot of farmers that stepped up and really helped my dad when they didn't have to. When my dad wasn't financially able to farm, they helped him and he never forgot that. They were very, and um, I don't know how it affected them personally, but he never forgot the kindness of people trying to help him get a start in the valley.

MURAKAMI: Well the way our father looked at it, you got racism everywhere. And a lot of families carry it into their businesses.

CORNMESSER: Mm hm.

MURAKAMI: So, it's no big deal if they don't invite you home for dinner, it is what it is. Go on. You're just wasting your time. Uh thinking and talking about it.

CORNMESSER: I remember…

MURAKAMI: Just go on.

CORNMESSER: I remember going to, we went, the both of us for a period of time went to a Japanese American Church and I remember them showing films to us, right after War when I was in grade school about Japanese children fitting in with American children or American life and how we were supposed to react to it. Not to, not to overreact, jus to, like David says, it is what it is. But, they were, uh, one of the reasons why David and I don't speak Japanese is because the assimilation of the Japanese fitting into American life was so strong that a lot of families did not want us to speak Japanese in public in the schools and you know.

MURAKAMI: Or even at home.

CORNMESSER: Or even at home so we, my parents didn't speak a lot of Japanese once they got married and were on their own but they spoke only English. But, they knew Japanese growing up so, but they didn't teach us, no. We have a cousin who is our age, who grandmother lived with the entire time she was alive and she only knew Japanese and so they learned it because you know, but we weren't around that at all. We didn't have any Japanese relatives, I mean, we did have Japanese relatives but we didn't have Japanese-speaking relatives living with us. So, anyway that's how strong that was and important that we assimilate, being American's back then. I kind of wished we learned it, it would've been nice.

MURAKAMI: Well, most of the second generation, Nisei Japanese, they didn't say correctly to their children, it was just kind of understood that you speak English whenever you can. The assimilation was important. Less racism, better opportunities in life if you don't have an accent, but nowadays if you got a little accent it doesn't make no difference. If your employer wants to hire a smart person, you hire them regardless.

CORNMESSER: Right.

YOUNG: Well we have to wrap up. But I really appreciate you sitting down with us and I hope that you have a chance to look at those photographs.

CORNMESSER: Thank you.

YOUNG: Recognize anyone. And it's really, your father's story is the first I've heard of someone working as a crew member opposed to living in the camp and working as a laborer. A crew leader, sorry.

MURAKAMI: Well when they first came here they were laborers they used to sort carrots in the wintertime and sort potatoes in the wintertime in small cellars in different farms. So they didn't really have a steady job. The first two the winters were like that. They came here in April '42, this area.

CORNMESSER: I don't know what period of time exactly. But my mom was telling me that my dad um, was so ambitious, more ambitious, his dream was to own a Cadillac, he got that dream fulfilled but anyway, he not only, he contracted trucking for some other farmers, he farmed his own ground and got a job at a produce company. And was working three jobs to save enough money to buy trucks and the tractors, to open his own business.

MURAKAMI: Well I would say, the first thirty years that he farmed, he relied on contracts, harvesting, the income of contract harvesting paid for equipment and so, in a way it seemed like he was a big farmer but he really wasn't because he would always show me the neighbors had better crops.

CORNMESSER: But I'll tell you what, he had the straightest rows. His fields had the straightest rows of any farmer in the valley. Everybody said that, he was very proud to say that.

MURAKAMI: Well we were fortunate over the years to hire excellent employees.

CORNMESSER: Oh he had some people that worked for him for years. Um, Isabel, what was his last name? Fuentes. Was a hard, hard worker, like part of the family. He worked for my dad, very loyal.

MURAKAMI: Well we had a lot of loyal people.

CORNMESSER: Yeah we did.

MURAKAMI: You just have to, as time goes on, the only reward they look for is better wages, so, you have to pay, may be not quite the highest wage in the valley, as long as it's near, people are satisfied. Well, I should take that back, they're almost satisfied.

CORNMESSER: Well he gave Isabel a house on Garrison Corner to live in as part of you know, and uh, that you know, helped him financially a lot.

YOUNG: Where was the family farm? Your family farm?

MURAKAMI: Well that first picture I was looking at, that's looking to the east and uh, where that camp was, when we farmed it, the tents were all gone in '46. I think I was told that to me before, camp started there and moved to Cow Hollow.

YOUNG: Right.

MURAKAMI: They moved to Cow Hollow I think may be '43?

YOUNG: I think the end of ‘42, ‘43.

MURAKAMI: Yeah right in there.

YOUNG: But camp was only there for a few months but it got too cold to live in the tents. So then you farmed in that area, around Garrison Corner?

MURAKAMI: Yes around there and different places between there and Adrian.

YOUNG: Okay.

MURAKAMI: If they could, sometimes there was a lot of (inaudible) in those days. So they had a lot of pastures there. So if a farmer recycle a field out of pasture or out of alfalfa. You know you could grow alfalfa productively pretty good for six years in those days. Some would raise it longer but then you’d have a tonnage decline. So, there were fields here and there but uh my father would rent to raise potatoes and turkeys.

YOUNG: Okay, let’s stop there, let me see if…

END OF INTERVIEW

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