

## Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission Oral History Interview

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Interviewer: Morgen Young  
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YOUNG: This is our interview with Tom Fujii on September 30, 2013. I want you to start by telling me a little bit about your early memories of life in Gresham, Troutdale area, before the war.

FUJII: Yeah we started out, that was our neighborhood and we grew up in the Troutdale, more or less a city because most of our classmates were in the city and our farm was only about a mile in a half from the school. And I grew up with two brothers, Jerry and Jack Matches. Jerry was my classmate and Jack was two years younger and ended up, I named our oldest son after Jerry and his name is Gerry. His name starts with a G instead of a J. We were very close and we still are very close. They are retired in Fort Worth, Texas but they have been living in Texas for some time. He was an agronomic researcher, anyway, his health isn't too well I heard at our recent reunion but I haven't been able to get in touch with him yet. His brother Jack has passed away because of Alzheimer's. But they both reached in their education, reached their Ph.D. and one of them had a doctorate in food tech from Oregon State. They are both from Oregon State so they really achieved their education after they graduated from Gresham High, and we all graduated from Gresham High School. And then we had a family during our berry season, the mother would be the field boss and I kind of grew up with their family in fact, one time when the rose festival was on none of her children wanted to go to it so I tagged along with the mother. We went down and saw the parade on the bus and took some time, she just kind of mothered me through to the early years. Because our family was big so for some reason that's just kind of the way it was.

YOUNG: Did you parents own or rent the farm?

FUJII: No, we owned it. My father was buying through the Federal Land Bank.

YOUNG: It was a truck farm? Truck farming mainly?

FUJII: Yeah it was vegetable, berries.

YOUNG: And did all the kids work on the farm growing up?

FUJII: Yeah growing up, yup we all worked on the farm.

YOUNG: How many Japanese families you think were in your general neighborhood?

FUJII: Oh there was quite a few, we were all pretty close. Yeah the Mishimas, the Tamaras, the Katos, a lot of people from the Gresham area, the Kinoshitas, Ouchidas, yeah I remember them the best.

YOUNG: What do you remember about the evacuation order? And the beginnings of the war?

FUJII: Yeah, well I remember when the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred because it almost stunned us. I remember exactly it was Sunday afternoon we got the news. Of course our news came over the radio, that was your only internet at the time. It was quite a shock. And, so that was, yeah that was a very eventful thing; we didn't really know what was really going to happen to us if anything. It was just something that happens, that happened and we just kind of fell in place and followed the instructions, we really were kind of in awe of everything that was going on. But once we got into camp, the assembly center it was kind of, you know, us kids kind of looked at it like a vacation because here you were with a bunch of people and we all look alike and we got to play baseball. It was baseball season so there was a lot of chances to play baseball and we had regular teams and so forth. But, yeah, that's kind of how we went through it.

YOUNG: What happened to the farm during the war?

FUJII: That was an interesting scenario, as I mentioned to you earlier we had a family where the mother was the field boss so my father who didn't speak English too well. He just, for some reason had a good way of being able to communicate with this lady, Mrs. Frances Cunningham. So he told her, he says, "You move your family into our house and I have ten acres of strawberries and you take care of them and harvest them and don't worry about the expenses, just use it as it was your home and rent out your own house while we're gone." And we didn't know, have no idea how long the war would last or when we would return or anything like that. And the neighbor to the west of us was the county farm, Multnomah County Poor Farm, he called it the Poor Farm but my dad was pretty friendly with the administrator there and he told, his name was Mr. Johnson I think and he told him, "Will you use the rest of the farm and grow alfalfa," because he knew it was a soil building crop and as long as he didn't charge any rent, he just wanted them to farm it to keep it farmed. So they, that's what they did and so when we returned, they returned it to us. The county kind of made a little bit difficult to get it back, my father said, "No! It's my land so get off of it! Close up the fences." And went on with our lives.

YOUNG: So, Fujii Farms is still operated on the same land?

FUJII: No.

YOUNG: Oh, okay different land.

FUJII: That's all sub-division now.

YOUNG: Oh really?

FUJII: Yeah, sub-division and the street and a roadway coming up from Troutdale, yeah.

YOUNG: So Mrs. Cunningham she also then watched all the families possessions? So the things you couldn't carry to the assembly center stayed with the farm?

FUJII: Yeah.

YOUNG: So you were lucky, some families lost everything and you were able to hold on to it.

FUJII: Yes.

YOUNG: So, you went to the assembly center, did you ever get a sense that your parents were scared about what was happening or angry?

FUJII: No, I think it was pretty much mixed emotions and mixed emotions along with other families, parents and families. Especially probably the parents were probably more confused than anything but they kind of had a good way of being able to communicate with each other and I'm sure that there was a lot of information being you know, relayed between them and so I think that's kind of how they made an interpretation of what was going on.

YOUNG: Did you grow up speaking Japanese at home?

FUJII: Well we had to, to communicate with our parents. They spoke mainly in Japanese, yeah.

YOUNG: When they got married, did they meet in the U.S.?

FUJII: I think it was primarily on the basis of typical, what I ...

YOUNG: Picture gram.

FUJII: Yeah, picture gram, yeah the picture writing process.

YOUNG: Do you have any idea of how your parents learned about the Nyssa tent camp and the opportunity to go out east?

FUJII: I think that, yeah, I think most of that kind of coagulated to our kind of formed by the fact that most of the family is going to the Nyssa tent camp was that we're

former farmers. So they knew what to expect and also I think my father was more interested in it because the family, you know, there was five boys and a sister and he wanted to make sure they went to public school and that was the opportunity that presented itself there. Along with the freedom of being able to do as you please without being in a fenced in place. So I think that's how they kind of made a decision to go to the Nyssa tent camp. You know I think it was a good move, a very good move, even though we had to endure a lot of hardships and you know, limited living area and so forth.

YOUNG: Did you have friends from the assembly center from the Troutdale area that went to Minidoka? Have you heard about their experiences later on?

FUJII: Uh, yes. Yes, we knew that a lot of people, a lot of our friends were going there, they were pretty well-restricted for awhile, maybe a couple of years until they got pretty well settled in there. They were able, in fact my father took my youngest brother down there one time to visit some of his close friends to Minidoka from Nyssa and we drove down there. So it was kind of like, life in the assembly center. Everybody was pretty close, living in close quarters and so forth.

YOUNG: Did you have a family car there? How did you get?

FUJII: Yeah, my father did a pretty good job of being able to plan for having various, you know, he retained various equipment and the family car. He had a mechanic friend in Troutdale that did all his mechanic'ing and that was Al Espanel. He wanted the car brought out, Al would get in the car and bring it out to him and get on the bus and get back to Troutdale again. And then when my father decided to, he also had a Caterpillar tractor and he had that brought out and he did a lot of plowing for farmers of the area during the winter. Most of the time a lot of the farmers out in that area didn't have Caterpillar tractors they usually plowed with tired tractors. In the wintertime they can't do that very well because of the frozen ground and so forth. So, my father had a pretty good thing going during the winter. But it was cold, you know but he was still having plenty of work to do.

YOUNG: Do you remember at the assembly center there being a fence and guards?

FUJII: Yes, you couldn't get in and out of there without showing your permits and things like that. You couldn't travel without a permit. So, yeah, you had to check out through the guard gate and so forth but that was a pretty large camp. So once you're in there it was quite an area to cover, yeah.

YOUNG: Uh, you took the train I believe from Portland to Nyssa?

FUJII: Yes.

YOUNG: Do you recall that train ride at all?

FUJII: Yeah I recall it because I remember it was a steam train, steam loco motive rather, powered by a coal locomotive and I got a piece of cinder my eye and that irritated through the whole trip and that's what I remember most about that. Because it was really painful to have that cinder in my eye. Eventually I got it out but...

YOUNG: So you arrived at Nyssa, at the camp and what do you remember about that camp?

FUJII: Gee, the only think I really remember is that we were all out here camping. Camping in a tent camp. Yeah.

YOUNG: Do you remember how many tents you might have had for you family? Your family was quite large.

FUJII: Yeah, well I think we had two. Yeah, even though we had a large family, I think we only had two.

YOUNG: And, would your mother cook for the family?

FUJII: Yeah, yeah. That's why I never knew that there was a mess hall, because we always ate together as a family.

YOUNG: Do you remember the types of food she would cook in the tent camp?

FUJII: Oh yeah! It was regular Japanese food with a lot of vegetables and meat and my dad would barter with a butcher in town about getting more meat. He says, "You know, I have a big family and I can't very well on the, from the wartime ration books that we had to use for buying meat," he says, "I can't very well feed my family on this small amount of meat we can get through the ration books." So he always use to barter with the butcher to get more meat.

YOUNG: What do you think he would barter with? What would he have to trade?

FUJII: I don't know.

YOUNG: He sounds very resourceful.

FUJII: Yeah he was! He was a very resourceful person.

YOUNG: Yeah.

FUJII: I think he came over, when he immigrated to the United States he kind of immigrated as a pioneer. He kind of considered himself as a pioneer and he worked in the northwest woods as a you know, a lumberman or a logger and fielding trees. He was really good at that. Yeah.

YOUNG: Did you work in the sugar beets fields?

FUJII: Yes. Sugar beet harvesting is hard work. Yeah, it's hard work. And, you more or less got paid not by the hour but by piecework and so it was yeah, it was a hard, hard job. All that work was hard work. Picking potatoes and topping onions, those were, yeah, those were hard work times. The harvesting potatoes was hard work but a lot shorter day buy very early in the day. I think sometimes we travelled twenty-miles to get to the field to the farmer's field and it was usually about 4 o'clock in the morning. Sometimes you're riding on the back of the truck and that was cold in the early morning hours but usually by noon you were through for the day. But because of the heat, so that's kind of what I remember about harvesting potatoes.

YOUNG: And then you'd have a sack, right? You'd have to put the potatoes in a sack?

FUJII: Yeah. Right, yeah you had a potato belt and you had a couple of hooks back here where you'd hook all the empty sacks to and then you had a board in front that you hooked your potato bag to and then you know, until you filled the bag you never really stood up. That's really a hard job and you had to fill the bag because again, it was piecework and most of the time the bag, the sack had to be filled at least two-thirds of the way.

YOUNG: It sounds like for sugar beets, potatoes, and onions you're just bent over the entire time.

FUJII: Oh yes, in harvesting, yeah, that's right.

YOUNG: Why did you have to top onions?

FUJII: Well in those days they didn't have a topper and so, they just top, you had to cut the tops off and uh...

YOUNG: When you're harvesting them, is that when you top an onion?

FUJII: Yeah.

YOUNG: Okay.

FUJII: Yeah.

YOUNG: And then sugar beets you have to thin them and top them later...

FUJII: Yeah when you harvest them, they'll dig them up with a digger, loosen them so you come along with this, almost like a butcher knife that had a hook on the end of it. And you stab it and you grab the end of the sugar beet, it comes to a point, so you grab the small end of it and then you top it. And sometimes when you're topping it, you get pre-occupied with the process and you know, and sometimes

you make a mistake and you'll come close to your knee and the hook on the end, it would sometimes strike you in the knee.

YOUNG: Well you and your family were experienced farmers; these were crops you weren't used to working with.

FUJII: That's right, that's right, yes.

YOUNG: It must have been... I heard from some of the Morishita family that they had never seen sugar beets and they thought they were spinach, they were so strange.

FUJII: Yeah! They, the tops of the sugar beets look like either spinach or chard or... but they weren't too edible. That's right.

YOUNG: Do you remember the weather or the environment? It was so different from where you were coming from.

FUJII: Yeah, it was on the average, it was hotter in the summertime and colder in the wintertime. Yeah that's right that was a significant change.

YOUNG: Do you have any memories of people who lived in the tent camp? Friends that you made or Azalia Peet, the missionary.

FUJII: Uh, yes. Most of my friends I had grown up that I played with and so we used to rig up ways to entertain ourselves with playing baseball or football or basketball. Ping-Pong, if we had a Ping-Pong table and then sometimes we'd have developed new friends from different areas. There were people also from Wapato and you know Yakima Valley, Toppenish and yeah, we became good friends with a lot of those people. One that I remember really well is, he lives on the coast. You know, right now I can't remember his last name, but his first name was Sam. And, he's been on the coast, he's been a teacher, he's been a fisherman for sometime and, yeah.

YOUNG: Do you remember, I read a Pacific Citizen article that said there was a baseball diamond near the camp. Do you remember that? Or did you have to go to Nyssa High School to play baseball?

FUJII: You know, I don't remember that. But the camp had, Adrian, the CCC camp at the Adrian had an open area in the middle. It was kind of like the barracks were built, designed where there was a gathering area in the middle and that was, I think that was our playground. For everything.

YOUNG: Would you ever go into town? Into Nyssa, what would you do there?

FUJII: Yeah we'd either go the movies or shop or yeah.

YOUNG: Jack Naganuma told me yesterday that there was a bowling alley and that was the first time I've ever heard of someone...

FUJII: Yeah. There, right, yeah, in fact we sometimes would set pins and that was a paying job. That was really kind of interesting, I think I did it a few times. I think it was kind of interesting and challenging. Because you had to really be, you had to be quick otherwise you'd get hit by the wall or the pins.

YOUNG: You said that one reason that your parents wanted to go to the Nyssa camp was so that you would get a public education.

FUJII: Yes.

YOUNG: So what do you remember about going to school in Nyssa?

FUJII: Well I remember having developing some pretty good classmates there, like Jerry Bellen and Dean Sites and Don Lowe and later, after I started going to Oregon State, Don Lowe in fact came to Oregon State after I graduated from Gresham High and he was still, and he graduated from Nyssa and it was really interesting. And also they had regular football program in grade school, which was still through eighth grade. So when we first started going there, I was in the seventh grade and played football in grade school that was really fun. And we had regular uniforms, which we didn't have if I would've been going to Troutdale at the time; I don't think we had any, any equipment like that there. So that was interesting and we played basketball and baseball, yeah.

YOUNG: All your brothers went to Nyssa High School too?

FUJII: Uh, Jack and Jim did, yeah. Ed had graduated from Gresham the last year prior to evacuation.

YOUNG: Did he leave to go... did he register for the draft when you were in the Nyssa area?

FUJII: Yeah, but he wasn't actually drafted until we returned to Troutdale, then he was drafted soon after we returned to the farm that spring.

YOUNG: When you were in Eastern Oregon do you remember interacting with some of the Japanese families that lived in the area before the war?

FUJII: Yes, the Hashitanis.

YOUNG: Right, the Hashitanis is one, the Wadas, Atagis another family. There were I think about thirty families who had lived there since the 1930s so they were affiliated.



FUJII: Oh I see. Yeah, you know I don't remember most of those in the area except the Hashitanis.

YOUNG: And I think they were pretty close I think to the tent.

FUJII: Yeah.

YOUNG: Area.

FUJII: They interacted you know and vice versa, we interacted with them. They had a son by the name of Roy Hashitani.

YOUNG: Do you ever remember experiencing discrimination? Going into town, at school, any instances of...

FUJII: You know, I don't know, I don't really remember too much discrimination you know? I had a couple of classmates that were, during the boxing season, the winter time I had a couple of brothers that were boxing and they were, they lived with their family on the farm probably about half way between the Adrian Camp and the, Nyssa and anyway when we had events that were beyond the school hours, I would catch a ride with them. Half way, which would be half way to the Adrian Camp and then I'd walk from there, which was about seven miles. But that's the way life was.

YOUNG: So your family moved to the CCC Camp in Adrian and any memories of that camp? Different living conditions you would think being in barracks.

FUJII: Oh yeah, well it was getting cold to live in the tent camp and that's why they moved us probably like, this time of year and that was a good move. It was getting cold in those tents. Because we weren't prepared for wintertime living in tents.

YOUNG: Was there a way to keep the tent warm at all?

FUJII: Well yeah, but there's no insulation in a tent.

YOUNG: But there were maybe like, wood burning?

FUJII: Yeah, well.

YOUNG: Fire place or stove?

FUJII: Stove, yeah. But you had to keep them supplied with coal all night long.

YOUNG: So your family lives in the barrack in the CCC camp and you were explaining to me earlier how they divided that up, could you tell me that again?

FUJII: Yeah, they divided up the barracks with canvas partitions and we probably had the equivalent of 10x10 or 15x15 foot areas and we had one like that for the family and in the barracks next to us there was more or less an open barracks for bachelors and my brothers and I lived in there. So there was only the youngest one, Tad lived in the family unit.

YOUNG: Were the bachelors all ages? Were there older bachelors?

FUJII: Yes. There would be people that would come from Minidoka for the summer to work in the fields. They, for some reason they preferred to come to the Nyssa, what we called the Nyssa but the Adrian camp and so that was kind of interesting. In fact, the guy that I was trying to remember earlier, Sam, Sam Sakamoto his family is from Toppenish, Washington.

YOUNG: And he was at the CCC camp, right?

FUJII: Yes.

YOUNG: I think Aya has photographs of him. And he was a good friend of yours?

FUJII: Yeah, yeah. And I've...

YOUNG: Do you still keep in touch with him?

FUJII: No, I the last time that I knew he was still alive was when they were establishing running some of these emergency tsunami evacuations on the coast down by, oh gosh I was trying to think of where that was, Pacific City, I think it's Pacific City and anyway... yeah, I saw Sam on the TV, news, TV, News. Yeah, he was on TV. News.

YOUNG: So your family eventually returned to Gresham, when was that?

FUJII: In February of 1945.

YOUNG: So were you at the CCC camp until then or somewhere else?

FUJII: No, we were farming on that farm that was located about a mile in a half west of the Malheur Butte, yeah in the Vale area.

YOUNG: Right, you were going to school in Vale.

FUJII: Yeah that's when I was going to school in Vale.

YOUNG: What was Gresham like when you returned before the war ended?

FUJII: Well there was a lot of hostility as far as the stores were concerned but as far as my classmates and you know going to school and so forth there was no hostility. There was... in my opinion there was no hostility. I played all the sports and so forth and at that time you know, there was a lot of people that were, that had moved for the shipyards in the Portland area and so forth to support the war effort and there was a lot of people that had come from the mid-west and so forth. They were my friends, they were really, God, they had no desire to be hostile. I was kind of disappointed when the war ended because they left; they left to return to the mid-west. And a lot of people, some of the people that I grew up with were kind of indifferent for awhile and eventually, you know it kind of reverted back to what it was like before the war and so we were all good friends after that. Yeah, I think the indifferences because we just didn't know what was going to happen here, you know.

YOUNG: Would your parents ever talk about what happened to your family during the war later, in later years?

FUJII: Not a whole lot, no. They just went, you know, life goes on. That's kind of the way it was. And so it was, it was something, I guess I would say, that some people would say, you didn't talk about it because it was a shameful period. But, yeah, well, if it was a shameful period then you just kind of move on, you know. You still have a future and you try to do the best you can and one of the, one of things that you know, we all used to say is that, you want to make sure you behave yourself because you might be punished by the authorities if you did something wrong but you'd probably get more punishment when you got home! That's kind of the attitude that we lived with.

YOUNG: Did you tell your children about going to Eastern Oregon and working in the labor camp?

FUJII: Yeah, they pretty well know what was going, what had happened to us. But you know, their frame of reference is kind of difficult to imagine that, that had occurred but...

YOUNG: Is your wife Japanese?

FUJII: Yes.

YOUNG: And what happened to her family during the war?

FUJII: Her family went to Minidoka, they were interned there during the war.

YOUNG: So your children have the two different wartime experiences.

FUJII: Yes, yes, very much so. That was very difficult for them because they couldn't go, you know, they were my wife and her brother were born and raised in Japan

Town before the war and they eventually returned to Japan Town after the war and, but their father was able to lease a hotel and run it. Run it for a number of years and eventually he retired and just like everybody else and that's the way it was.

YOUNG: What sorts of memories do you have of Nyssa? Are they positive? Are you angry of Nyssa or Eastern Oregon?

FUJII: No, we had, I have good memories of Nyssa and the people there. In my opinion there was no hostility. We did our work and we got a chance to go to school, you know. Just be like normal people. Yeah.

YOUNG: Well this is wonderful; I think that's all I need.

FUJII: Good!

YOUNG: Yeah! This is great! Yeah it's interesting when the two families have the two experiences, I heard from you June Morishita, her son, his father's side of the family went to Minidoka and the mother side went to Nyssa and he thinks that the family that went to Minidoka actually had in some ways a more positive experience during the war because you had such a strong Japanese community. That you might not have gotten in the Nyssa Camp.

FUJII: Yeah, right.

YOUNG: Because it was so spread out and working so hard. Yeah. Well this is wonderful, thank you very, very much Tom for...

FUJII: Okay, great!

YOUNG: Coming over and for sharing everything.

FUJII: Yeah I'm sure that you'll probably get, I'd be interested in knowing your experience about how attitudes different in your interviewees.

YOUNG: Yeah most people, um,... is it called, shikata ga nai? I can never pronounce it right.

FUJII: Shikata ga nai.

YOUNG: Yeah, I've been told that a lot, this is just what happens and you're...

FUJII: Yeah, that's the way it was, yeah.

YOUNG: Yeah, they're not going to complain, most people have not been angry, um I've heard from some people, that people complain too much about civil liberties

today and that you should do what your country tells you to do. That's been a kind of common theme.

FUJII: But it wasn't that, I have to tell you it wasn't really that clean.

YOUNG: Yeah.

FUJII: There were people that were pretty bitter. When you know, yeah.

YOUNG: Yeah. I would've been, if this had happened to me, I think I would've...

FUJII: Yeah, when you talk through the backdoor, you really get their true feelings.

YOUNG: Yeah and I have heard from some people that their parents were very angry because they lost property and for those families who didn't get the farm back after the war and would come back and they were renting the land and someone else was living there.

FUJII: Yeah.

YOUNG: And they had no rights. So I think there aren't that many people living who were teenagers, young adults, those that were a lot angrier about it than the people who were children,...

FUJII: To me, that's pretty puzzling because you know if you're buying a place, you know, it's yours, as long as you keep up the payments even after while you're gone, it's still yours. But when people are renting and they come back and they thought it was theirs, I just don't quite comprehend that. But, at that time, you know that was their feeling that, that was theirs. As long as they kept paying the rent. But I have no idea what those arrangements you know, really were.

YOUNG: Right, and I think a lot of people that I've spoken with hated the assembly center, they thought it was degrading for those who were adults because you were living in converted horse stalls, so.

FUJII: Yeah.

YOUNG: The living conditions were terrible, one person spoke of seeing a man shot to death at the assembly center who was trying to leave without permission to do so and that was really shocking and it was much better to get out of that to Nyssa.

FUJII: Sure, oh yeah. That was probably, that's probably right. But the only thing is that you had to understand that was primarily just an assembly center, temporary quarters until they knew where you wanted to go or where to send you.

YOUNG: Right.

FUJII: Because that's just the way it was.

YOUNG: Yeah.

FUJII: You were no longer in charge of your own destiny. So, that was kind of difficult time, very difficult time.

YOUNG: Yeah, and what I've been studying the development of everything and the Nyssa Camp was the first camp of its kind, the first of these labor camps in the whole country.

FUJII: Oh, is that right?

YOUNG: Because Oregon wanted to do something different with internment and they wanted to have Japanese residences in Oregon to live in CCC camps and do work.

FUJII: Sure.

YOUNG: So, the only one that happened was the one in Malheur County.

FUJII: Oh yeah. That's interesting.

YOUNG: Well thank you very, very much, do you want me to email you a CD of the images?

FUJII: That would be great, sure.

YOUNG: Okay, I'll do that, and then you could just look through them and if you see anyone and about fifty of them you'll be able to see people's faces a little bit better than some of the other ones

FUJII: Sure.

YOUNG: Great, I think we are done.

END OF INTERVIEW

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