

Oregon Cultural Heritage Commission Oral History Interview

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YOUNG: This is our interview with Nellie Saito on April 17, 2013, at the Four Rivers Cultural Center in Ontario, Oregon. Can you start by telling me your full name, including your maiden name?

SAITO: Nellie Aramaki Saito.

YOUNG: And where were you born?

SAITO: Seattle, Washington.

YOUNG: And what did your parents do when you were growing up?

SAITO: Oh, um they were farming, truck farming.

YOUNG: Around Seattle?

SAITO: Bellevue.

YOUNG: In Bellevue. And did you have siblings?

SAITO: Pardon?

YOUNG: Do you have any brothers or sisters?

SAITO: Oh, yes. I have two brothers and three sisters.

YOUNG: That's a good-sized family.

SAITO: Oh, yeah.

YOUNG: And they were truck farming, so what sort of crops did they grow?

SAITO: Strawberries maybe, cauliflower, celery, tomatoes, and cucumbers.

YOUNG: Did you live in Bellevue until evacuation?

SAITO: Yes, right, uh huh.

YOUNG: And where did you go? Where were you evacuated to?

SAITO: Well, we voluntarily evacuated because we were asked that any families that want to go to Zone Two, we'll sign up. We thought maybe—Mother wasn't well enough, we didn't have any idea what camp life was going to be. So we decided we'd go voluntarily to Zone Two, in Quincy, Washington. That was in March of '42.

YOUNG: And where did you live? What were the housing conditions?

SAITO: Oh, the housing was very poor, but it was livable. We did truck gardening, like raising asparagus, harvesting asparagus, uh, making carrot seed. Where they did that, was drive a carrot seed and then put a canvas on the ground and pound it, and got the seed that way. Very primitive.

YOUNG: Did you stay in Quincy during the whole war?

SAITO: Yes, our oldest brother had to stay back because he had a patch of lettuce to harvest, and the evacuation took—we left the twentieth or somewhere in that neighborhood for Quincy. But he stayed back because his lettuce was about to harvest, and just before harvesting, they ordered him to leave. So he had to leave the field of lettuce without harvesting. And that was sad. He evacuated with a bunch from the valley and Seattle to—I guess he went to Pinedale, instead of Puyallup fairgrounds. The people in Seattle area all went to Puyallup.

YOUNG: And you were about twenty when you evacuated?

SAITO: Uh, let's see. I was nineteen, I guess, um hm.

YOUNG: So you had graduated from high school?

SAITO: Um hm.

YOUNG: And were you going to go to college, or were you in college?

SAITO: Well, I didn't know what I was going to do. I was—my father wanted us to be a seamstress. "A woman never go to college," that's what he said, "You should go and be a homemaker." But I didn't want to go. So my sister went, so she got her degree in sewing, um hm.

YOUNG: And after the war, did you stay in Quincy, or did you move?

SAITO: My brother wasn't able to come out of the camp, and we didn't know how to get together. And so it ends up later Quincy was considered zone one; we had to move out of Quincy, but we didn't know which way to go. They told us to Lotus Lake, which was about forty miles away, in the zone two area. But we had nothing to do there. And so they said, well, in order to get him out, we'd have to come into camp. So we went to Tule Lake, where he ended up, after Pinedale Assembly Center, and that was the way we got into camp Tule. From there, they gave us a chance to go to Heart Mountain or Minidoka. And we had relatives—my brother in the meantime got married to a lady that had relatives in Minidoka. So he wanted to go to Minidoka with his wife and be with her family, so that's where we all went. We took this train that was terrible. We thought, "Where in the hell are they taking us?" And we saw a lot of sagebrush and that's where we ended up, in Minidoka, about half a foot deep of dust, dirt. And that's where we ended up, in Minidoka.

YOUNG: Did you make friends in Minidoka?

SAITO: Oh, yes, yes. In fact, I ran around with a good friend of my husband, that was before our time, but that's how we—she wanted him to go meet me in Boise, when I moved to Boise eventually. That's where he came in to meet me.

YOUNG: What were you doing in Boise?

SAITO: I was a seamstress, working for a dress department store.

YOUNG: And you met your husband—

SAITO: Yeah, he came to see me, meet me. That was quite a coincidence.

YOUNG: What year did you get married?

SAITO: Uh, '47.

YOUNG: And what was he doing?

SAITO: He'd just come out of the service.

YOUNG: And he served in the 442nd?

SAITO: Yes, for fifty-one months. He didn't go overseas because he was training the replacement of the 100th Battalion. And so he volunteered to go overseas with the bunch he trained, but they wouldn't let him leave with them, so he had to stay back and train the others. And they were mostly Hawaiian boys that he trained.

YOUNG: Where was he stationed?

SAITO: Oh, different places, I think. I can't remember what the camps were, Camp Crowder, I think he said. Anyway, eventually, they asked him if he would go to—be interested in going to OCS, officer's training. He says, "Well, I didn't graduate high school. I'm not qualified." But they said your test that he had taken qualified you to go. That's where he—he was able to go to Officer Candidate School.

YOUNG: What do you know about his family's early history in the area?

SAITO: All I know is he's from western Oregon. He's a lifetime Oregonian. They had a little truck gardening in Clackamas County.

YOUNG: And then they moved to the Ontario area?

SAITO: Yes, his dad was invited to visit Ontario, and he picked up some pretty good-sized onions and took it home. And he said, "This is the place where we want to go." 'Cause they got that—I forgot what river it was that just flooded their place several years in a row. It was time to move. So 1934, they trucked over to Ontario.

YOUNG: It was the two parents and then three boys?

SAITO: Uh, yeah, three boys.

YOUNG: And Joe was the oldest.

SAITO: Oldest, um hm.

YOUNG: And there weren't many Japanese living in the area when they moved here, or as many.

SAITO: No, but there's several families that his dad was acquainted with that came from the same area in Japan, and so it was a community of that bunch.

YOUNG: Do you remember some of their names?

SAITO: Yes, Satos, Yaganumas. They were all from Fukushima, Japan. That's where that earthquake and tidal wave was.

YOUNG: When did you and Joe move back to the area?

SAITO: I came in from Tule, I mean Minidoka.

YOUNG: And then you met Joe in Boise.

SAITO: Yes.

YOUNG: And you got married.

SAITO: Um hm.

YOUNG: Did you get married in Ontario, or did you get married—

SAITO: Seattle.

YOUNG: In Seattle. And when did you both move?

SAITO: Oh, he was here, settled already after the war.

YOUNG: Okay.

SAITO: And so that's why he started to farm with his brother and his folks.

YOUNG: And did you work on the farm as well?

SAITO: Oh, yes. In fact, we hired a babysitter for my girls. It was worth it for me to weed onions than it was to stay at home with the children, so.

YOUNG: Did they primarily grow onions?

SAITO: Onions. We had a few acres of lettuce at the time.

YOUNG: Did they grow sugar beets as well?

SAITO: Yes.

YOUNG: Do you know if the Saito family ever hired the Japanese Americans, who had come to Malheur County, during the war, to work on their farm?

SAITO: Well, we had—if I recall, there were a lot of German prisoners. I'm not sure if they helped farm on our farm or not, but that's the only ones I knew. I didn't know any others from the camps. I'm sure there were quite a few of them out there, harvesting beets. But I don't recall any of that. I think most of them had already gone.

YOUNG: Right. And were you familiar with Cow Hollow, the camp that was there?

SAITO: Yeah, our son played baseball on that field, and that's about all I know. I don't know anything about the Nyssa camp.

YOUNG: Had you heard of the Nyssa camp, though, at some point having lived in the area?

SAITO: I didn't.

YOUNG: Okay. You and Joe, did you live in Ontario or Nyssa?

SAITO: Just Ontario.

YOUNG: Just Ontario. And what—

SAITO: Same place as we are now.

YOUNG: Oh, yeah?

SAITO: Sixty-six years. (laughs)

YOUNG: What was Ontario like after the war, after you got married?

SAITO: Well, let's see. I lived in Ontario—my brothers came to Ontario to farm on the earlier farm. And so I helped them on the farm weeding onions, that was before I got married. My family had come in from Reno. They had volunteered over to Reno and started some farming because my brother's friend had the equipment and my brother had the money. So they both went into raising onions, but they couldn't get any weeders. They had the Indian crew out there, but they weren't very good farmhands. So then they lost their crops. The weeds got the best of them. And so they let that go and finally came to Ontario to work for the (inaudible) farm. That's where we got settled. That house was on Fourth Avenue, right across from the hospital. I said, "Oh, my word, there's the hospital. I'll probably be the first one there." I got in in May, and I was the hospital for appendicitis. That was horrible, but it was good. That was the year before I met Joe.

YOUNG: What was the Japanese American community like after you met Joe and you got married?

SAITO: Oh, it was wonderful. Joe got involved in the Japanese American Citizens League. They had the convention shortly after he became Intermountain officer. And so they had their convention held in Weiser, Idaho, and it was very successful, very good convention.

YOUNG: And were you involved in the Methodist church as well?

SAITO: No.

YOUNG: He was.

SAITO: He became a Baptist in Indiana, so I turned to the Baptist church.

YOUNG: What other sorts of activities were you and Joe involved with?

SAITO: Oh, you name 'em. He's been in every club. He started with the Legion, and I was Auxiliary, and wines club. I can't remember it, when he became a chamber—I think he'd been a chamber member at least fifty years. He'd been a fifty-year member of the Legion. And I'm sure we were in there twenty years or more as ambassadors for the chamber.

YOUNG: And how long did Joe farm?

SAITO: Until he turned sixty-five. He retired at sixty-five. He's what? Ninety-five? Thirty years.

YOUNG: And he owned the farm?

SAITO: Yes, um hm.

YOUNG: Did he own it by himself, or also with his brothers?

SAITO: Well, he was with his brothers and they split. Eventually they found some farm in Weiser area, so they split. Two of his brothers farmed Weiser area and Joe took over the Ontario farm.

YOUNG: What is the Japanese community like now, has it changed since you've been here for sixty-plus years?

SAITO: I think it has.

YOUNG: In what ways?

SAITO: Well, we're all accepted very well, and I think everybody enjoyed the community. Some of the Japanese people has like they're getting involved with silly organization. Joe is the one exception.

YOUNG: What made him want to get so involved? Everyone speaks very highly of Joe. Why was he so active in his community?

SAITO: Well, the reason he started Legion is because some of the things that went on with Legion clubs, like the Hood River had a very—well, it took the fellows that were in the service off the honor roll. He heard about that when he was in the service, so when he came out, he says he was going to do something about it. So he joined the Legion and really worked toward

that. They finally—the headquarters told them if they don't put those names back on they're gonna raise their charter. And so they did. I think Joe worked real hard with that.

YOUNG: Were there other examples of discrimination that you or he ever experienced, or were trying to work against in the community?

SAITO: I didn't get any here. I did in Boise when I was in Boise, and in restaurants we went to was turned down. We sat in there waiting to be waited on, and they wouldn't wait. Then we went into a cigar store looking for—my sister wanted some licorice. We went in there and they thought we were Filipino, so they didn't say anything, they just served us. But it wasn't too bad.

YOUNG: And you and Joe had children?

SAITO: Oh, yes, we had two girls and a boy.

YOUNG: And what do they do?

SAITO: Well, we have teachers and ministers. Our daughter is a—she works with the youth program. She's a youth pastor, and her husband is associate pastor. Our son was in the service for twenty-seven years as a chaplain's assistant, and he retired from the service, Army. Let's see. Our children, they're kind of scattered, one in Nashville, one in Birmingham. Our closest one is in Hood River, Oregon, a beautiful place.

YOUNG: Yeah, Hood River's beautiful.

SAITO: Um hm.

YOUNG: Is there anything else that I should know? You and Joe just seem like such pillars of the community as I'm trying to understand—

SAITO: He's received so many awards, it's amazing. But he's worked hard for the community. He believed in the community. They were so good he wanted to return what he can to the community. So he's received honors after honors. Yeah, it's been wonderful. You couldn't ask for a better community. We've enjoyed every year of this life over here.

YOUNG: Well, that sounds like a great place to stop.

SAITO: It is. Our children all graduated from college and they all went to TVCC. My husband was on the board for thirteen years. He was one of the first board members who started this college. Now it's fifty years old.

YOUNG: Did he help start Four Rivers, this center?

SAITO: Uh, he's never been—he's been a member here, but he's never has much to do here. His baby was the college, and it's come a long ways, wonderful.

YOUNG: Great! Well, I think that's great. Thanks for sitting down with us.

SAITO: Well, thank you.

END OF INTERVIEW

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