

Washington County Museum  
Oral History Interview with Toshio Inahara  
At Toshio Inahara's house  
October 24, 2011

Informant: Toshio Inahara

Interviewers: Beth Dehn

Transcriber: Jeff Millen

TI = Toshio Inahara

BD = Beth Dehn

**BD:** This is Beth Dehn with Toshio Inahara at his house, and we are recording an oral history interview for the Washington County Museum on October 24, 2011. Would you say your name for us?

**TI:** I'm Dr. Toshio Inahara.

**BD:** When and where were you born?

**TI:** I was born in Seattle, January 9, 1921.

**BD:** How did your family come to Washington County?

**TI:** Well, we lived in Tacoma, Washington. My memory goes back to about 1924, although my parents lived there from about 1919. We moved from Tacoma to Oregon to a place called Hillside out in the country west of Forest Grove in 1931.

**BD:** What did your family do in Forest Grove at the time?

**TI:** Oh, my father decided to take up farming, and he was entirely unfamiliar with farming. His main work was . . . he was trained as a confectioner, and he made Japanese confections – trained in Japan. So, he had a business in Tacoma. Had his own store. But he decided to forgo of the business to raise his children out in the country. And that was the main reason why we moved to Oregon.

**BD:** What were his experiences like as a new farmer?

**TI:** It was very difficult. As I say he was not a farmer, and he had to learn by experience, the hard way. Fortunately, he had a friend who lived in Banks, and he was sort of a guide who led us to move to Oregon. So, we rented a farm [in] a place called Hillside. We rented about thirty acres and began growing strawberries.

**BD:** Was it common to grow strawberries at that time?

**TI:** Yes, yes. Strawberry was raised throughout the Banks and Forest Grove area. There were many

farmers, and most of them farmed berries but also other crops, you know, like potatoes, and cabbage, and cauliflower. Things like that.

**BD:** What are some of your earliest memories of being on the farm and living in Hillside?

**TI:** Hillside is about six or seven miles out of Forest Grove. Well, the main change from Tacoma was living in very primitive conditions. We had no electricity, and our running water was from a tank by gravity flow. We had to heat by wood stove and cook by wood stove, too. So things were quite different. Of course, being on a farm you had an outdoor lavatory. And we had to get our groceries by going several miles into town. So, it was quite different. Initially, we had very few playmates. Of course, I had three brothers at the time, and, then later, my youngest brother was born in Forest Grove. So, we experienced an entirely different kind of living from the city. Of course, we adapted to it by necessity.

**BD:** I think in the previous interview you told Lisa about your experiences having a baseball team.

**TI:** Yes. Our school was a one room grade school. We had about thirty students from first to the eighth grade with one teacher. Since I was interested in baseball, even in Tacoma, when I was a boy, we organized a baseball team. It was whatever players we could gather from the thirty students. So, we ended up with three of my brothers being the main part of the team. I was the pitcher, my brother was a catcher, my other brother was a shortstop. So, we recruited other kids and even had three girls in the outfield. And this was our baseball team.

**BD:** Were you good?

**TI:** We were very good. We managed to play home and home games with other grade schools which was Thatcher and also Gales Creek. We did well. We managed to win most of the games. It was a lot of fun. The grade school had a large playground. It was two acres. At the one end was the school, and the other end was a church. So, in between, we had a wide playground. We also had a play shed, because of so much rain here, we had to play indoors.

**BD:** How would you describe the Hillside-Forest Grove area at that time?

**TI:** Well, of course, it was all farming, and mainly dairy and prune orchards. And so we got jobs picking up prunes in the fall. This was the way we earned our little expenses for school like buying books, clothes. We would go pick up prunes after school hours.

**BD:** We've been doing some interviews, and we were told that there was a Japanese school in Forest Grove. Is that something you're familiar with?

**TI:** No, the school was in Banks, because there was quite a number of farmers in the area, and so the school was held in Banks. It was only once a week on Sundays. The teachers came from Portland. Although we had one teacher who lived in Banks. But there were probably about thirty to forty students.

**BD:** Did you attend that school?

**TI:** Yes. My brothers and I went to school on Sundays. I would drive from Hillside to Banks which was about six or seven miles.

**BD:** How old were you when you were driving?

**TI:** I started driving, actually, when I was ten, on the farm. That was by necessity, because my father was not a very good driver, and he also had a hard time driving a truck. So, I had to start driving, and by the time I was twelve, I was driving nearly everywhere – without a license. But at twelve, I did get a license saying I was sixteen, and so I did have a driver's license. But later, of course, I had to retake the exam and give them my right age [laughs]. But this was by necessity. I felt it was justified to help the family, you know.

**BD:** What other memories do you have of the Japanese . . . Was it called the Japanese school?

**TI:** Yes.

**BD:** What other memories do you have of the lessons or the type of activities that you participated in?

**TI:** Well, extra activities at school were annual picnics. This was held mainly after the berry season, probably in July. We would have picnics and outings at places like Roamers Rest. That was in Tigard on the Tualatin River. And at Gales Creek, there was a park on the Gales Creek stream. This was an outing that we all looked forward to. But other than that, it was a pretty routine school. Although I must say, we weren't too diligent in learning Japanese.

**BD:** Did your family have traditions that they continued to keep alive in the Japanese tradition?

**TI:** Oh, yes. My parents spoke Japanese, so that was the language at home. Our customs were all Japanese. As a matter of fact, when we still lived in Tacoma, when I started grade school, I could not speak English. I had to struggle the first year or two. I even had a tutor for English. . . . Then I started high school at Forest Grove. I was there for the first year. Because of the nature [of] farming berries, we had to change the land, so we moved from one place to another after three or four years. We eventually, moved from Hillside to Laurelview, which is south of Hillsboro. I changed schools to Hillsboro High School because of that. Later we moved to Helvetia which is still in the Hillsboro district. So we moved around the valley several times.

**BD:** Was that so that you would have more nutrients in the land?

**TI:** Yes. After three or four years, the berry plants . . . production is down, and so we have to start with new plants and new land. We took our berries initially to Banks and sold them to a company called, Bodal and Company, and I used to watch them process the berries. And at that time all the berries were packed in fifty gallon barrels with sugar, and these were then refrigerated. Later, as we moved to the Hillsboro area, we took our berries to, at that time it was called Ray Mayling, and subsequently it became Birdseye. And that's when they started freezing berries.

**BD:** What year was that?

**TI:** That was about 1934, 35. And when we moved to Helvetia, that was back in 1936. And we remained there until 1942.

**BD:** Can you describe how you learned about the attack on Pearl Harbor and what you remember that time to be like?

**TI:** Yes, to go back a little, in 1937, for the first time, we had a great crop of berries, and we paid all our debt, and we were once again solvent. So we had purchased five acres of land just outside of Hillsboro, and on this property we built a home in 1939 . . . no 1940, 41. And the house was just being completed for occupation in December 1941. My father and I were at the house cleaning up, getting ready to move in. I remember that Sunday afternoon; it was a nice warm afternoon. Our neighbor across the road, a fellow by the name of Bill Phillips – was a dairy farmer, he came over to tell us about the Pearl Harbor attack. Now we were just stunned. We could not believe what had happened. And, of course, being farmers, being out of touch with the news around the world, we were entirely unaware that something like this could happen. But any rate, we moved into our new home in January of 1942, and, unfortunately, we lived there only six months. We had to move out the first of May. During that period from January to May, we were restricted in our travel, we met all kinds of prejudices, and we were not allowed to travel after dark. Nearly every day, I drove to Portland to one of the Federal offices to seek a permit to travel as we wanted to move to eastern Oregon. The order came out that Japanese ancestry people had to move east of Highway 97. So, of course, we found a place that we could move to in Vale. We were very fortunate in obtaining a permit to travel. Very few permits were issued, and as I recall, I think only three or four families were give permits. So, on May the second, 1942, we loaded up our big truck with all the furniture and whatever we could load, and then I drove a truck with my brother . . .

[phone interruption]

We had so much prejudice and so much hate that we faced that we were afraid to drive on the main road to eastern Oregon. That was Highway 30. It goes through Pendleton. We elected to go the back way through Bend and Burns. We left, as I recall, about mid-afternoon. Our truck loaded; the cars loaded, and the whole family. We started driving toward Bend. I also loaded the truck with a fifty gallon drum of gasoline for fear that we would not be able to buy gas – they would not sell it to us. Fortunately, that did not happen. So we arrived in Vale the following morning about six A.M. Because there were two other parties on this property they had leased, we moved on to Ontario and found a house immediately. Actually, it was not a house but a building that was used as a chicken hatchery. It was one long building. It was about, I'd say, fifty feet long, and it was right on the highway. We rented this place and made our home out of it. And immediately after we settled we began working as farm laborers. We worked for a year. When we left Hillsboro, we left our farm. At that time, that was like, as I say, in May. My father had ninety acres of strawberries at that time. And the crop was ready to harvest. We had put in all the expenses and effort to this point and we had to walk away from it. We lost everything. So we were broke, and we had to work. And, so the whole family worked together to meet our immediate needs. But after a year, we decided to begin farming for ourselves, and we managed to rent a place just north of Ontario – it about seven or eight miles – and began farming. . . . The farming there is entirely different than the farming in the Willamette Valley. It's all irrigated. Crops are different. They were growing potatoes, sugar beets, and onions, things like lettuce and celery. So our farming had to change entirely; we had to learn all over again. But we managed somehow, and we expanded our farming to about sixty acres in a couple of years. At that time, also, because of the war, it was difficult to buy equipment. We were very fortunate to be able to buy one new tractor, and we looked around at used equipment and was able to get by. So, we ended up buy a John Deere tractor and a Caterpillar tractor, plows and discs, and all kinds of equipment that was necessary. So, from 1942 to 1944, I was pretty much in charge of farming and marketing. During that period my younger brother decided to go back to school, and he enrolled at University of Michigan. The following year, I wanted to get back to school. I applied at University of Wisconsin and was accepted. But because of the responsibility of the farm, I was very hesitant to leave. Not until the very week before school started

did I decide that I would go. At that time we had, like, sixty acres of farm that was in crops, and I wasn't sure that my father and younger brother could manage. But nevertheless my father encouraged me to go, and so I left for school and did not return for three years. But my family did well. My brothers took over. I did come back after graduation and worked during the summer before enrolling at the University of Oregon Medical School. I was very fortunate in being accepted. So, that started my medical career. So, that started my medical career. One of the factors that I chose this career was that, when I first enrolled at the University of Oregon, my father suggested that I become a lawyer. However, for the first years of schooling, I noted that the sciences were my favorite. So, that factor, and also the fact that during the war I noticed that everyone was being drafted into the service regardless of what their occupation was. So, I thought being a physician would be . . . you could be a physician in civilian life as well as the military. So, those two factors made me decide that I would go into medicine. And I'm very pleased that I did, because eventually I finished my training and practiced here in Portland.

**BD:** Can we rewind a little bit and ask you about how do you think your family was able to get this permit, because it seems you had a really exceptional experience during World War II?

**TI:** Yes, well I think the reason was that . . . I think met the criteria for issuing the permit and that we could pinpoint a place where we could relocated to. I had made the application and repeatedly checked with them about the regulations, and for some reason we were fortunate in getting this permit. As I say, only three other families were able to get this. We moved about three days before all the Japanese population in the valley were placed into a holding camp. It was at the livestock pavilion in north Portland. And that's what it was – livestock holding pens. From what I've heard, all they did was put wooden floors over the ground where the livestock had been kept, and, I guess they partitioned rooms with drapes. And the whole Portland community, the valley people, were herded into this camp, and they stayed there until . . . this was in May . . . about September, October. And they were transferred to Idaho to Minidoka.

**BD:** So, because your family was outside of the Portland area, did your geographic location exempt you from having that experience?

**TI:** No, there was no such exemption. It was inclusive. All Japanese people were . . . .

**BD:** How did your family escape that experience?

**TI:** Well, because we were able to move. And, I think it's just because I made a greater attempt to do this whereas others did not.

**BD:** At that time did you have news or word about what was happening in Portland? Were you aware of the other families being put in the livestock pavilion and taken to Minidoka?

**TI:** Well, we knew we were going to be placed into camps – prisons actually, but we didn't know when – the dates. As I say, we were restricted in many ways. Everyone had to abandon their business, their livelihood, lost everything.

**BD:** When the war ended, it sounds like you came back and were in medical school at that point. How did your family transition back to life . . . . Did they come back to Washington County, and how did they do that?

**TI:** Yes, my father and mother came back in 1945 after they ended the war, and they lived in Hillsboro in their home. During the war period, we rented the house to a couple who we knew, and rented this four bedroom house – two story, beautiful new home – for \$35 a month. They looked after the property, of course. So, my parents moved back from Ontario. The farm in Ontario, my brother stayed and continued. To this day, one of my brothers is still in Ontario.

**BD:** What changes have you seen in the county after the war? What were your experiences coming back? What was the atmosphere like?

**TI:** Well, I think it was certainly less hostile, although I was pretty well isolated being in school. The medical school was very demanding. I had no time except maybe a Saturday afternoon to be away from my studies. So, I was pretty well isolated from the public.

**BD:** Do you have other memories that you would like to share from that time – other things you think are important for the museum to know about?

**TI:** Well, I can certainly say that from my boyhood until the present Washington County has changed dramatically. When we came to Portland back in the 1930s, T.V. Highway through Beaverton was a narrow two-lane road, and there were farms all along this road – even in the town of Beaverton. I recall Beaverton consisted of a few stores on Main Street, and the north side of T.V. Highway were all farms and farm houses. And then beyond, a little north of that, was an airport where small planes would come in. The other road that we used was the . . . Cornell. We used to come in on Cornell Road, and this was also a very narrow two-lane road. It was nothing but farms all the way. So, to think of that as . . . Washington County was just all farms. It's such a dramatic change now. It's hard to believe. Just to come to Portland was really a big trip for us to come to the big city.

**BD:** Did you have other families that you reunited with when you returned to Washington County?

**TI:** Oh, yes. My parents knew a lot of families that from before the war. But the farming community in Banks really did not go back to the number of farms that they had before the war. People just didn't come back.

**BD:** Now you said your family had rented the house. Were they able to get the house back?

**TI:** Oh, yes. We owned the property.

**BD:** Seeing your daughter's artwork has been really great for the museum. Do you have anything you'd like to say about that?

**TI:** Well, I am very pleased that my . . . Sharon especially has taken an interest about art. The past, what has happened to the Japanese community during the war, post-war. In that regard I try to keep ties with our relatives in Japan. And I have taken all of my family, my children and my grandchildren, to Japan to visit, so that they would at least know what Japan is like and also to make contact with their relatives. Of course, they don't speak Japanese, and it's very difficult to teach and to retain foreign language here in the States. As I say, when I started grade school, I was unable to speak English, because I had spoke only Japanese. But fortunately to this day I'm still bilingual. I keep in touch with my relatives by phone quite often.

**BD:** What part of Japan is your family from?

**TI:** From the central part, mainly from the area Nagoya. I'm still in touch with my maternal side and also my paternal side. And they have come to visit me here.

**BD:** Has it been difficult to talk about this part of life with your children and grandchildren, or is this something you share with them?

**TI:** No, I share with them whatever whenever I can, but the curious thing about it is that my grandchildren don't seem to comprehend what had transpired. They don't seem to be curious as to what we experienced. And I think it's sort of human nature, because when I was growing up I never questioned my parents of their past. And, of course, you look back on that and say, "You know, it's really too bad that you didn't think about talking to them about their past." Perhaps it the nature of young people that they don't think about the past; they think only of the future.

**BD:** I'm wondering, as a final thought, what you think you would like to share with young people about Japanese internment, what happened during World War – if there's some sort of final message that you would like to share?

**TI:** Well, I think that . . . like any other country, people who might immigrate from say Europe or other foreign countries, Japan included, they tend to forget their culture, and as the generations progress they lose even more. So they know very little about the history, very little about how their predecessors lived and survived, what they did. I suppose this is inevitable, but it's . . . maybe recording of history is probably a good thing, if they would refer to it. My grandchildren certainly cannot speak the language. My children speak a little and understand more. But I think they are losing the culture.

**BD:** Well, thank you for sharing with us today. If you have any final thoughts we're happy to have them.

**TI:** Well, I think it was a great effort on the Washington County Museum to do this kind of thing. I appreciate all of your efforts to record the history of the Japanese in this county. It's a great thing.

**BD:** Good. Well we're happy . . . . And we will send you a copy of the interview so you can have it for your family. And of course your always welcome to come to the museum, and we can do that for you.

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Terms:

Agriculture

Baseball

Communities—Oregon--History

Dairying

Farms--Oregon

Second World War, 1939-1945

Strawberry

Hillside, Oregon  
Forest Grove, Oregon  
Tacoma, Washington  
Seattle, Washington  
Banks, Oregon  
Thatcher, Oregon  
Gales Creek, Oregon  
Roamers Rest, Tigard, Oregon  
Laurelview, Oregon  
Hillsboro, Oregon  
Helvetia, Oregon  
Pearl Harbor, Hawaii  
Vale, Oregon  
Pendleton, Oregon  
Bend, Oregon  
Burns, Oregon  
Ontario, Oregon  
Willamette Valley  
Idaho  
Minidoka

Tualatin Valley Highway  
Cornell Road

University of Michigan  
University of Wisconsin  
University of Oregon Medical School

Japanese school  
livestock pavilion  
Japanese relocation