

Washington County Museum
Oral History Interview with Toshio Inahara
At Washington County Museum
September 13, 2011

Informant: Toshio
Interviewer: Lisa Donnelly
Transcriber: Emily Pfeifer

T= Toshio
L= Lisa

L: My name is Lisa Donnelly and I am interviewing at the Washington County Museum on September 13th, 2011 and I'm interviewing Toshio Inahara? Did I say that correctly? Okay and we're going to be talking about the Japanese American experience in Washington County, Oregon. And if you would one more time state your name for the interview.

T: Uh, yes, I am Toshio Inahara and our residency in Washington County began in 1931. Our family moved from Tacoma, Washington and this was our first introduction living on a farm. We, uh... Our first farm was located in a place called Hillside which is about four miles out of Forest Grove toward Gales Creek which is on the east side of the mountain from Gales Creek. It's a beautiful little farming area; it's at the end of a valley, sort of U-shaped, and it was surrounded- Hillside was surrounded with dairy, prune orchard, walnut orchard, and, uh, dairy farms and we were the first to start farming there raising strawberries. My father had not farmed before and this was an entirely new experience because he was trained as a Japanese confectioner or a baker, you might say, of Japanese confections. Trained in Japan, he gave up his business to come to Oregon and the main reason was that he had four sons and he wished to have them to grow up in the country rather than the city. So, he gave up his profession and his business to make that sacrifice. You know, it was quite amazing and I always am very thankful to him to see that far ahead.

L: Mhm.

T: At any rate, uh, when we first moved into Oregon, we stayed with friends that my father had in the Banks and fortunately they had a large house but they also had a large family of six children and we were four children at that time. But, anyway, we stayed there until our house was ready at Hillside. Well, we moved into our house and uh, this was newly built but it was built out of ship lant and the lumbar was raw and you know when it dried out, we had kind of a porous [chuckles], not weatherproof house and it was really cold in the winter. We had to fill the cracks with bits of cotton, you know, cotton cloth. At any rate, my father started raising strawberries on a 30 acre tract and we all began to learn how to farm and of course we were still going to grade school at the time and our school was a one room schoolhouse, one teacher who taught all 8 grades. And I had just transferred out of a central grade school in Tacoma, which was a big school, to this little school that had about 25 students. There was quite a change. But, anyway, we got along fine and in time, we became accustomed to the new lifestyle and made

new friends and eventually we were able to form a baseball team for the school and imagine me trying to put 9 players out of 25 kids; we had 6 boys and 3 girls on our team [laughs]. But, we managed to play home and home games with Gales Creek Grade School and Thatcher Grade School and, you know, we did very well. We won most of our games and my brothers, my two brothers and myself we were the core of the baseball team.

L: Now, how old were you when you came here then? You said you were in grade school?

T: Yeah, I was just 10.

L: You were 10. Okay.

T: So my younger brother was the catcher, one brother was a short stop, and I was the pitcher [laughs]. The amazing thing about it was that when we went to Gales Creek or to Thatcher to play them, I drove them all to these places. I used my father's truck which had **sakes** on the sides, you know? And everybody got on the back of the truck and I drove them and it's an amazing thing that no one said anything about it, no objections. Fortunately nothing ever happened but to this day I'm just amazed that this was allowed. At the time I was 16, I got a license but I was driving by necessity when I was ten years old to help my father. At any rate, we had a great time at the grade school. Eventually I graduated and went to Forest Grove High School for the first year.

L: What was the name of the school you went to then? The one room...? What was the name of the one roomed school that you went to?

T: Oh, Hillside.

L: It was Hillside School. Okay.

T: Hillside. It was built on a two acre plot donated by, I think the Clapshaw family.

L: Okay.

T: Because they had a farm across the road. And on this two acre plot was a church on one end and the school on the other end so there was a large vacant lot in between that was used as our baseball field. She also had a big playpen of course that was our only place to play in the winter time.

L: So you went to Forest Grove High School for one year and did you go somewhere else after that or did you drop out to work on the farm or...?

T: No, we had to move our farm. Our next farm was located at Lorraview which was south of Hillsboro and because of that I had to move to Hillsboro High School for the last three years. The farm for two or three years at Lorraview and then, in the meanwhile we also had a smaller farm south of Cornelius in a place called Irish Hills.

L: Okay.

T: And then after 1936, we moved to Helvetia and started a farm there on a place owned by a Swiss farmer by the name of Fred Ruthner. He had a dairy and he decided to give up his dairy and rented his land to us. We then had 60 acres of strawberries there. Then we also rented another 30 acres at another farm just close by so my father had 90 acres of strawberries and this was back in- from 1937, 38, 39, 40 and of course in 1941 we also farmed there and then in the spring on 1942, we had to abandon the entire crop and we just had to leave in May of 1942.

L: Donna told me that your family left; you didn't go with the internment.

T: Yes, that's correct because I had learned despite the curfew, if we obtained what's called a travel permit, we could move. And, so I went to Portland nearly every day in May- no in April trying to obtain this permit and we were one of three families that were able to get it, to get the permit. And the requirement was that we had to have a destination. So we were able to obtain a farm release in Vail, Oregon and on this farm the three of us we were able to travel to there, to the place.

L: The three of you, who would those three, be? Was it you and your parents that went?

T: No, three families all together.

L: Oh, three families. Okay. I'm sorry.

T: Yeah, three families. But it was not our intention to farm with them, or work with them so we went on to Ontario and found a rental and immediately got settled and began working as farm laborers.

L: Oh wow. It sounds like your dad was very successful then, at farming even though he had not been trained.

T: Yes he was. Of course I wouldn't say he was successful until about 1937, you know, when the depression years...

L: Oh yeah, that's true.

T: Yeah, it was really very very bad. We didn't make any money. We just had to go off and work just to earn our living.

L: So what did you do then? You said you went to school, you played baseball, you worked, how did you make all of that fit in one day? Or many days?

T: Oh, well, of course many days. That's throughout the whole year. Yes. But every year after strawberry harvest, we just needed to make any money and so my father and I went to other farms to work as just laborers. And I remember several years we went to Salem, or south of Salem, place called Independence.

L: Yeah, I know where that is.

T: They had many hop farms there and we picked hops in the fall until school started.

L: And then you... Wow, that's a lot of work. What did you do then? Did you stay in Ontario through the whole war? During the entire World War II or were you able to come back? What did you...?

T: No, we stayed there during the entire war, until it was over. And my parents returned to Hillsboro where they had a home in 1946.

L: Okay. And someone held the home for them? Because we hear so many stories that people came back and whatever they had left had been taken over.

T: Well this home was not on the farm. It was built on North Plains Road; North First Street and uh, we had to purchase it in 1937, we had to purchase a five-acre plot right on that highway. And we cleared a portion of it to build a new home. That was back in 1939. At that time, I had attended University of Oregon one year: 1938-39 and I dropped out of school just to build this home for my parents. I acted as the general contractor, and I hired the carpenters, and I got the subcontractors to come in and do, you know, plumbing, electricity, and so on. But by the time we finished our home, we were just cleaning up the yard and getting things in order to move, I remember on a nice beautiful Sunday afternoon on December 7, our neighbor across the road by the name of Bill Phillips came over to tell us about the Pearl Harbor. We were just dumbfounded. We could not- it just came out of the blue. And we were not aware that things like this had been happening because we just weren't informed enough to know what was going on in this world.

L: But it really- Did they then help hold onto the property for you? Or how did that-?

T: Well, we owned the property and the home so we leased it to a friend. We used to work for Shello Company and the couple lived there during the time that we were away.

L: And kept it for you. What was their name?

T: Their name was Bill, and [pause] I have forgotten their last name- Bill Vandenburg and I've forgotten his wife's name.

L: That's fine. Well that sounds like a good place to stop. That's a lot of material for us to work with possibly and then to set up another interview. So thank you very much. We appreciate it.

T: Thank you.

